

# **Correlation, Conversation, Contrast: Applications of an Australian contextual theology**

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## Synopsis

*Correlation, Conversation, Contrasts: Applications of an Australian contextual theology.*

This thesis proposes that an effective conversation between theology and culture in the Australian context will concentrate on the elements of contrast between them. This emphasis will give theology the ability to “hear” the real voices of culture and to work towards consensus with culture in the articulation of theology grounded in the Australian cultural context.

Contextual theology in Australia is in danger of seeking to answer questions that the culture is not asking anymore. A sense of spiritual meaning in Australia is now more likely to be found in cultural forms self-consciously dissociated from the traditional religious institutions. Theology that seeks to appropriate cultural voices in order to give cultural credibility to traditional theological ideas is focussed only on itself. Theology that attempts genuine conversation with cultural forms is more likely to adequately engage the cultural context. The analogy used to describe the difference between these two approaches is that of playing in the backyard. The former approach is said to be theology playing in its own backyard. The latter approach is said to be theology climbing over the back fence and playing with the neighbours.

The question of how to engage culture in an adequate theological conversation is addressed by developing a method of *contrast-in-conversation*. When theology listens to culture speaking out of its own depth and attempts to reach consensus with it then theology is engaged in a more authentic conversation with culture.

The contrast-in-conversation method is applied to the cultural contributions of indigenous artist Lin Onus, post-punk artist Nick Cave and immigrant philosopher Raimond Gaita as a means of testing the hypothesis that a focus on contrasts between culture and theology will enable conversation. The voices of these three cultural expressions are then applied to the tasks of theology. In these cases the cultural voices lead to a reconsideration of incarnational theology in the Australian context. Themes of the implicit embodiment of spiritual meaning in each of the three cultural expressions suggest that in the Australian context the idea of incarnation is challenged by the idea that divine life and spiritual meaning are essentially carnal realities. The application of the contrast-in-conversation method to the three cultural expressions and to the reconsideration of incarnational theology is found to demonstrate a valuable development of the idea of conversational correlation in the task of writing contextual theology.

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## Introduction

Australian contextual theology, if it is to be continually responding to the dynamic change inherent in its cultural context, must be readily attentive to that culture and the questions inherent in its expressions. One of the great dangers for theology in Australia is that it will be a largely irrelevant attempt to answer questions that nobody in its cultural context is asking. It is therefore pertinent for theology to address the challenge of engaging with contemporary culture in a meaningful and appropriate way.

In this thesis we will test the hypothesis that theology must genuinely listen for and hear the real voices of Australian culture by engaging specifically with those voices that are in contrast to its own. Theology has shown the tendency when engaging cultural expressions to appropriate only those elements that suit its own preconceived ideas about how culture illuminates the Christian message. Theology has also shown a tendency to assume that the broader culture is interested in the things that theology has to say about God, faith, spirituality and the world. In this thesis we will undertake to demonstrate that Australian cultural expressions frequently dissociate themselves from traditionally dominant religious expressions of cultural life and that theology can adequately apply itself to hearing and valuing the contrasting cultural voices that arise from that self-conscious dissociation.

The goal of the thesis is to exercise a methodological humility in such a way as to allow cultural expressions to emphasise their differences with theology and thus to invite the resulting contrasting cultural voices to speak into the theological process and participate in forming Australian notions of God, spirituality and meaning. By applying a *contrast-in-conversation* methodology to a cultural expression theology will attain a clearer understanding of its cultural context. Furthermore, on the basis of its clearer understanding theology will be able to reach consensus with the cultural expression and speak more

appropriately about God, faith, spirituality and meaning in the Australian context. We will apply the contrast-in-conversation method to three Australian cultural expressions; the art of urban indigenous artist Lin Onus, the writing and performance of post punk singer and writer Nick Cave and the moral philosophy of Raimond Gaita.

We will survey a range of existing approaches to theology in the Australian context in the first chapter of the thesis. The hypothesis that theology must genuinely listen for and hear the real voices of culture by engaging specifically with those voices that are in contrast to its own must be tested in the full knowledge of the developments in Australian theology since the 1970s. The survey will include an analysis of the different approaches of theology and spirituality to the understanding of Australian ideas about God and experiences of faith and sacred meaning. The analysis of these different approaches will lead to the conclusion that there is a movement in Australian culture away from the religious institutions whilst developing, in new cultural forms, elements of the traditional religious faith perspectives.

We will identify the development of traditional religious understandings of faith and spirituality in cultural forms outside of the religious institutions as the *religious spirit* in Australian culture. We will show that theology has concentrated predominantly on appropriating cultural forms for the purposes of illuminating traditional theological ideas. The approach of spirituality, on the other hand, has concentrated on the development of the *religious spirit* in cultural forms that often explicitly dissociate themselves from religious forms. There are some key exceptions to this situation, however, and the chapter will focus on the development of conversational theology and postcolonial theology as examples of theology that is attempting to engage the culture more authentically and effectively.

In this chapter we will introduce the metaphor of the “backyard” space to differentiate between theology that seeks to use culture for its own purposes and theology that seeks to learn from the development of the religious spirit beyond itself. Where theology restricts

itself to the appropriation of cultural forms for the illumination of its own ideas it will be said to be theology that is playing in its own backyard. Where theology seeks to identify and learn from the *religious spirit* in cultural forms it will be said to be theology that is climbing over the back fence to play with its neighbours.

The development of conversational theology in the Australian context will be our focus in Chapter Two. Based on the brief analysis of the work of Australian theologian Frank Rees in Chapter One and his call for a new correlative conversation between culture and theology, a call based on the development of the cultural theology of Paul Tillich, Chapter Three will provide an extensive analysis of Tillich's method of correlation in order to outline the basis of Rees' suggested development of conversational method. The chapter will outline Tillich's understanding of depth, correlation and the courage to be and ask whether his understanding is sufficient for Australian theology today. The conclusion will lead the thesis back to the call of Frank Rees that Tillich's method of correlation must be developed into a *correlative conversation* if theology is to hear and respond to Australian culture now.

Conversational correlation as a method for contextual theology is developed in Chapter Three. The critique of Tillich's method of fixed correlations leads to an analysis of the dynamics of conversation and dialogue and how those dynamics might be applied to the conversation between theology and culture about the religious situation, or the religious spirit as it is called in this thesis. The key aim of the chapter is to outline clearly a method for theology to apply to the task of authentically allowing culture to have a voice in the conversation and effectively hearing that voice while applying it to the formation of an Australian theology. The method that will be suggested in Chapter Three will be called the *contrast-in-conversation* method. Implicit in the name of the method is the centrality of attention to contrast between theology and culture that may form the basis for real and effective conversation.

The contrast-in-conversation method will be applied to three Australian cultural expressions in chapters Four, Five and Six, in order to test whether or not a form of conversation can be achieved through the application of the method. Each cultural expression has been chosen according to the criterion that it be able to demonstrate the value of contrast between cultural voice and theological voice. The work of urban Indigenous artist Lin Onus will be the first cultural expression to which the method will be applied, in Chapter Four. The method will then be applied to the literature, songs and performances of Nick Cave and finally the method will be applied to the philosophical writings of Romanian immigrant to Australia Raimond Gaita.

Each cultural expression will reveal its own concrete context, perspective and in particular its own contrasting elements with theology that make clear its self-conscious demarcation from the religious traditions of colonial Australia. The art of Lin Onus will reveal a cultural voice from the perspective of Australian Indigenous post-colonial identity reconstruction. Onus' work demonstrates an understanding of identity and spiritual meaning that is constructed by means of a synthesis of spiritual heritage and cultural experiences that he argues each person is able to "pick up" along the way, as a bower bird picks up items for its nest. The use of this synthesis challenges the dominant theological perspective, which seeks to unify all spiritual meaning in the one theological narrative of the gospel. The music, literature and performances of Nick Cave will reveal a cultural voice from the perspective of the post-punk movement. Cave's determined focus on the imagination as the divine power in human beings, eros as the divine irrationality and human transcendence of the mundane through a cthonian delving into the dark secrets of Australia culture, demonstrates an understanding of spiritual meaning that challenges traditional theology. And finally the philosophy of Raimond Gaita will reveal a cultural voice from the perspective of moral philosophy in the Australian context. Gaita's understanding of the inherent and irreducible

mystery of common humanity revealed in the reality of good and evil challenges traditional theology's understanding of the divine as the ground of relational being.

The careful engagement of these three cultural expressions will enable theology to use their perspectives in the rethinking of incarnational theology in the Australian context. The final chapter will outline directions for incarnational theology in the Australian context that arise directly from the contrasting contributions of each of the three cultural voices. This chapter will seek to demonstrate how theology might be able to include the voices of culture that represent the *religious spirit* in culture, that is, those cultural voices that self-consciously dissociate themselves from the religious traditions and yet carry the depth and meaning of the Australian cultural and historical context within themselves.

The thesis concludes with this demonstration of theology in conversation with Australian culture. It will show that where the *contrast-in-conversation* method is applied by the theologian it gives to theology, at the very least, the methodological tools needed to engage culture in a real conversation, allowing the voice of culture to speak for itself, as opposed to being appropriated to speak for or on behalf of traditional theology in the Australian context. As a positive outcome of this approach, theology itself is enriched by its engagement in conversation with culture as a bearer of the religious spirit beyond institutional religion. It is able to put into practice the element of humility in engagement with the radical other and it is able to articulate its understanding of God in the Australian context on the basis of a significantly deeper understanding of Australian cultural perspectives.

## Chapter One

### *Over the Back Fence: Developments in the Religious Spirit*

It doesn't take long when reading the available material on the general health of the Australian Christian churches to realise that the consensus amongst those who research these things is almost unanimous in the conclusion that church attendance at least is in significant decline.<sup>1</sup> But does that mean that the spiritual life of Australians in general is also in decline? This is a question that underlies the central thesis of this essay, which is that Australian theology must embrace the fact that Australian culture is worth listening to if Christians are to gain a sense of how Australians experience and talk about God.

Before we begin the task of asking just how Australian theologians might listen to expressions of Australian culture in the process of writing theology for the Australian context we need to take a look at how Australian theology has developed and how it relates to Australian culture. Australian culture is a diverse collection of expressions of meaning in the Australian context. It is difficult to talk about Australian culture as a singular phenomenon. From the myriad expressions of indigenous meaning through to the ever diversifying expressions of what it means to come from another place and live in Australia as Australian people, culture in Australia has always been and continues to be the expression of our collective spheres of meaning. In order to see how Christian theology has participated in this we will spend a very brief time acknowledging key elements of Australian theology that have already shaped our understanding of theology in the Australian context before turning our attention to the question of the role of culture in the spiritual life of Australians.

Clarifying an important term that will be used in this approach will help us understand exactly what we mean when we talk about the 'spiritual life' of Australians. In the coming

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Peter Kaldor, *Who goes where? Who doesn't care?* (Melbourne: Lancer, 1987), 21-27. Also Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

chapter we will engage in the debate about the nature of ‘spirituality’ and its relationship to theology. As will become apparent there are very different views about the relationship between the theology of the Christian churches and Australian spirituality. Some see spirituality as the practical outcome of theology and thus very much part of the theological process. Others see spirituality as an alternative to theology and still others see spirituality as a continuous development of traditional theology outside of the religious institution and embedded in the forms of culture. I will call this last approach the development of the ‘religious spirit’ in the cultural life of Australians outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions and communities. The term ‘religious spirit’ attempts to acknowledge that spirituality that forms part of the culture outside of traditional religion may nevertheless be a continuous development of the theology of those traditional religions even where it appears as a clearly contrasting or critical ‘voice’ that speaks against traditional theology. Thus, the term ‘religious spirit’ is critical for our understanding of the relationship between religion and culture. It is not adequate to make clear distinctions between religion and culture. Very clearly religions are inextricably tied to the cultural life of most people groups. They participate in the shaping of the spheres of meaning shared by people groups everywhere. It is not right then to place religion over and against culture as if religion and culture are separate spheres of meaning. Recognising the idea of the ‘religious spirit’ acknowledges that even when specific religious cultures are clearly distinct from the wider culture there is always an underlying continuum, or relatedness, that cannot be ignored. The reality is, however, that some elements of culture will always seek to differentiate themselves from religion and certain elements of religion will always seek to differentiate themselves from what they see as secular culture. Paul Tillich has suggested that faith is ultimate concern for that which is ultimate and that ultimate concern does not recognise the differentiation of sacred and secular elements of culture and

religion.<sup>2</sup> From Tillich's perspective then, ultimate concern will plumb the depths of all spheres of life in the quest for the eternal meaning present.

The meaning of the term 'religious spirit' comes then from the theology of Paul Tillich. Paul Tillich speaks of the "religious situation" as the relation between the human situation and the eternal dimension of life. The eternal dimension of life is the "essential meaning" of every human situation in time. Every element of the human situation, not just the human religions, "bears witness" to the essential meaning of the human situation. Thus, the whole reality of a human culture participates in the "religious situation".

Every spiritual phenomenon of a period expresses its eternal content and one of the most important characteristics of a time has been defined when we have discovered which of the various aspects of culture is most expressive of its real meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Here Tillich acknowledges that culture, even and especially when it is not obviously defined by the institution of religion, is potentially the most important bearer of eternal meaning for a given time in human history. If so, the culture expresses with most power the religious situation of a given time in history. It is on this basis that I use the term 'religious spirit' to refer to the manifestation of eternal meaning in culture that is not obviously related to institutional religion yet remains a witness to the religious situation of a cultural group.

In this chapter we will begin by attempting to take a glimpse of the development of Australian theology from the perspective of the Christian Church and academy. The special analogy of 'playing in the backyard' portrays the sense of *theology for the Church*. The boundaries of the fenced backyard provide a safe and familiar space within which to play and work. By applying this analogy to the contextual theological enterprise I am suggesting that there is an element in the history of Australian contextual theologies that has not attempted to extend its conclusions beyond the safe and familiar territory of well-established interpretations

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 41, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 37.

of Church doctrine and biblical analysis. There is a valid place for such theology in the church. There is a question that grows more urgent for the Christian faith in the Australian context, however, the more we refuse to play anywhere other than in our own backyard. The question of culture and spirituality is the question of the manifestation of religious spirit outside of the established religions. In other words it is the question of acknowledging the underlying relationship between religion and culture. This question will lead us in this chapter to ask the question of spirituality and its relationship to theology and culture and articulate the basis upon which we will proceed to explore a method for theologians to hear the religious spirit in the secular culture. The spatial analogy we will apply to this question is ‘over the back fence’, an analogy that invites us to consider what the cultural neighbours of the Christian religion might be saying about faith, spirit and God.

### **Australian theology: playing in the backyard**

Rather than attempt our own mapping of Australian theology we should acknowledge and use the excellent work done by others who have written comprehensive historical surveys and gathered more detailed collections of Australian theologies and spiritualities that suffice to paint the picture of Australian theology during the period leading up to the turn of the century and in the years leading up to the present time.<sup>4</sup>

Theology in the Australian context is both ancient and recent. It is ancient if we take a view that is broader than Christianity and its relationship with the colonial story that characterizes recent Australian history and accept that indigenous cultures were intrinsically theological. When we do take this broader view we acknowledge that theology in the Australian context is at least forty thousand years old.<sup>5</sup> But such theology is ‘over the back fence’ and is

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<sup>4</sup> Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: themes and methodologies into the third millennium* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 2000) and Peter Malone ed. *Developing an Australian theology* (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

not often acknowledged as part of the Australian contextual theological enterprise. Gideon Goosen acknowledges it, however, in his book *Australian Theologies* that summarizes the history of Australian contextual theology and offers a sketch of some methodological directions for Australian contextual theology into the twenty first century. Theology in the Australian context is usually seen to be a recent phenomenon, however, when we define theology as the self-consciously methodological task of the academy, which we generally do.

If we speak of theology in terms of having something to say about God and saying it in a reasonable and coherent manner that employs a method, in other words a pattern of applications of critical thought that yield related conclusions, then we must conclude, according to Goosen, that self-consciously Australian theology has only really been developing since the late 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Goosen reports a rising spirit amongst Australian Catholic theologians in the 1970s of “wanting to do theology for ourselves”.<sup>7</sup> Much of this early Catholic contextual theology is found in two outstanding volumes of essays edited by Peter Malone that gathered up early voices and their later developments.<sup>8</sup> This desire amongst a few theologians in both Catholic and Protestant traditions was a response to the theological criterion gaining traction in the later parts of the twentieth century that theology must express itself in the language that speaks to its hearers.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on the importance of the context of theology followed the Vatican II Council, the arrival of a number of key theological journals in Australia with a focus on Australian theology and the more general post-rationalist paradigm shift that increasingly embraced pluralist acceptance of the diversity that accompanies attention to particular

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 76, 77. Goosen draws this understanding of methodology from Bernard Lonergan whom he quotes here. He acknowledges the understanding of methodology that emphasizes the tasks, criteria, sources and themes of theology but relies primarily on Lonergan’s emphasis on pattern in method in his assessment of what constitutes successful Australian theology.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Malone (ed), *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 1988) and *Developing an Australian Theology* (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 1.

contexts.<sup>10</sup> The great developments in theology during the twentieth century that were a response to the liberal theologies of the nineteenth century also began to break down the denominational boundaries in theology that had often restricted theology to the task of interpreting denominational doctrines for the church.<sup>11</sup> Goosen mentions these broader theological developments in the world because for him they show how the development of contextual thinking in Australian theological academies in the 1970s was "...a natural historical development in synergy with other developments around the world."<sup>12</sup>

Plurality characterises the rise of contextual theology in Australia and for contextual theology to thrive this plurality must be accepted and acknowledged. Accordingly, Goosen refers always to "Australian theologies" rather than the singular "theology" when surveying the historical movement in Australia. His summation of the history of contextualisation in Australian theology is based very much on the embrace of the diversity of theological methods and conclusions that emerge from the attempts to do theology self-consciously in the Australian context.

Goosen surveys the historical landscape and draws attention to the variety of contextual theologies that have emerged in the Australian context over the last four decades. He sets forth his understanding of the basic criteria for successful Australian theologies by offering three basic criteria at the beginning of his study. Firstly, Australian theology must be written in Australia.<sup>13</sup> This assumes that the Australian cultural experience is best reflected upon from within the national geographical and territorial boundaries. Given the prevalence of the expatriate Australian in a globalizing world society I think it is questionable whether this criterion can now be seen as absolute. Certainly it is an important consideration in evaluating Australian theologies but need not necessarily exclude a theology written from the expatriate

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 62-67. See also Robert J. Schreiter's *Constructing local theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 26.

perspective. In fact, Schreiter has alerted theologians to the fact that in a globalizing world, context is no longer truly defined by territory. Rather, due to the levels of movement of peoples between territories, many territories increasingly include multiple fragmentations of cultures. Schreiter argues that in this situation context is defined by boundaries of difference rather than territory.<sup>14</sup> This raises the question of who should be writing Australian contextual theology. Schreiter addresses this question by analysing the role of the community as collective theologian, of the professional theologian, the prophet and poet as theologian and the differing roles of insiders and outsiders as contextual theologians. The common thread in Schreiter's analysis is that each of these aspects of the local context has a role to play in the construction of local theologies as long as none of them dominate the process. Thus, contextual theology must be a true collaboration of all elements of the situation, a fact that Goosen acknowledges in his list of criteria for Australian theologies of the future.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, in the context of globalization, the expatriate Australian's voice should be included in the collaborative undertaking of Australian theology.

The second criterion offered by Goosen for an Australian theology is that Australian theology must take into account Australian culture. And thirdly, Australian theology must use Australian vernacular. In other words, language is important if Australian theology is to speak to its potential hearers.<sup>16</sup> These criteria directly respond to the situation of local communities who need to make sense out of their faith when "faith does not seem to speak to them anymore."<sup>17</sup> Faith that is imported from a foreign culture lends itself to being 'above' the lived experience of the receiving culture. Thus, the criteria that Goosen suggests are directed at ensuring that theology from above gives way to theology from below, or from within the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: theology between the global and the local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 16-20.

<sup>16</sup> Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

culture itself. And this need not isolate Australian theology from the global context. In fact, as Frank Fletcher suggests in his brief comment on the impact of John Henry Newman's writing, theology that is grounded in its context may touch universal themes "...because of, not in spite of, its concreteness."<sup>18</sup>

Goosen lists the needs of a culture that has lost connection with imported theology. Firstly, there is a need to make sense of one's faith in one's own cultural context. Secondly, there is dissatisfaction with classical theology. Thirdly, there is a desire to see theology as dynamic. Fourthly, there is a desire for local churches to express their unique identity within the universal church. Fifthly, there is a need to incorporate one's own physical world in theologizing. And sixthly, there is a desire for new ways of seeing revelation and God.<sup>19</sup> Goosen's focus on the needs and desires of the local context demonstrates how spirituality may give rise to new theology in dialectical reaction to current theological frameworks. Praxis asserts the role of context in the evolution of theology.

In addition to the collections published by Peter Malone a number of theologians in Australia have made serious attempts to do precisely what Goosen has described as the task of Australian contextual theology. Cavan Brown in his book *Pilgrim through this barren land* explores the power of the space and landscape within which Australians are situated to shape our faith and more particularly to help us recognise the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in our own place. In Brown's view the silence and barrenness of the Australian desert are taken as powerful experiences that draw out of Australians a sense of God that is unique to this landscape. The desert empties Australians of hubris and thus identifies them with the crucified God discovered in Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Brown draws from Patrick White's classic Australian novel *Voss* in which Voss the explorer in a sense discovers the poverty of his humanity in its

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Fletcher, "Drink from the wells of Oz" in ed. Peter Malone, *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Homebush: St Pauls Publications, 1988), 61.

<sup>19</sup> Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Cavan Brown, *Pilgrim through this barren land* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1991), 218, 219.

dependence on God under the influence of his exposure to the relentless Australian landscape. Contextual theologies of this type tend to assume that Australian contextual experience will necessarily enable Australians to identify with the Christ story as it is classically told according to the Christian creeds. For those with a well-established sense of the Christ of the Christian church this is undoubtedly true. Goosen would classify this method of contextual theology as “Transcendental” theology that places the knowing subject as the one who shapes the reality of their experience.<sup>21</sup> In this case, however, it might be argued that Brown’s transcendental theology is only available to those who already perceive the world around them in terms of its relationship to the Christ of the Church. Thus, the landscape within which the knowing subject finds herself will always be related to the Christ of the Christian creeds in her perception of things.

Another Australian theologian, Tony Kelly, applies a similar method that places the knowing subject in the centre of an analogous relationship between the gospel story and the world of knowledge. In his *Expanding Theology*, Kelly argues that the knowledge of the knowing subject can be brought into analogous relationship with the perception that all things are universally related to God. Kelly suggests that in a time of new knowledge such as this time (and not unlike the time when the works of Aristotle were opening minds to new questions and ideas) theology must take the whole cosmos, in all its evolutionary complexity, as an analogy of the universal and expansive nature of God.<sup>22</sup> A theology that is expansive in vision will be well placed to speak of God in the analogies of ecological challenge, evolutionary process, scientific endeavour, feminist self-discovery and perhaps more recently, social media revolutions and global movement of peoples across traditional national borders.<sup>23</sup> Kelly urges theology to recognise the analogous connections that can be made between the central elements

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<sup>21</sup> Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 79-83.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Kelly, *An expanding theology: faith in a world of connections* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1993), 1-4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 4-6.

of traditional Christian faith and the expanding fields of human experience and knowledge. In a theology that is situated in the concrete context of the knowing subject whilst expanding to embrace the whole of human knowledge as analogous to traditional creedal theology, Kelly offers the church a way to reconcile its ancient perspectives with what we know about the world today. If analogy is the relationship between the gospel and world the church has an endless methodological resource for acquiring the world of knowledge in the pursuit of its own message based on ancient creedal statements. Again, this is a theological method for the established church that provides Christians with an expansive means of engaging with the world of knowledge.

In a quite different approach to that of Brown and Kelly, Geoffrey Lilburne, in his outstanding study into the significance of place in Christian theology delves into the Christological questions that surround the apparent universalising of faith found in the messages of the New Testament. How is place significant if Christ is universal?<sup>24</sup>

Lilburne argues against the idea that the New Testament Christ universalises the sacred in a way that is transcendent and disdainful of concrete earthly places. Rather, he argues that places become sacred when they are associated with the New Testament Christ. Using a term that he takes from W.D. Davies, Lilburne refers to the “Christification of holy space”; a term that states unequivocally that Christ bestows sacredness by association with place, a theory that relies on a Christian understanding of incarnation. “...new places became holy by virtue of their association with Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Every place in every time has the potential to be sacred *if* it is associated with Christ.

The potential problem with this sense of the “Christification” of space is that it may easily be seen as acquisitive. Lilburne situates the presence of the resurrected Christ in the gathered

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey R. Lilburne, *A sense of place: a Christian theology of the land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

community of Christians, which is a position that is profoundly supported by his reference to Matt 18:20 and yet leaves the modern church open to the error of assuming that Christ may not be found anywhere other than within the church. Lilburne argues that to suggest that Christ is universally present is a trivialisation of the biblical message.

It is not so much that the cosmic Christ is present universally, for stated in that way the meaning of Christ's presence undergoes a nonbiblical dilution and trivialisation. Rather, the Spirit of the risen Christ is present wherever communities gather in Jesus' name.<sup>26</sup>

A Christology that limits the Christ to gatherings of Christians however, runs the risk of overlooking clear biblical evidence that Jesus himself was prepared to acknowledge faith when it appeared in the lives of people who were not part of his faith community. Jesus shows humility in his engagement with the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28) and the Centurion (Matt 8:5-10), on both occasions displaying his preparedness to recognise faith outside of his own religious tradition. In reality, to say that Christ is only present where two or more disciples are gathered together is to say that Christ is only present within the Christian church. To say that leaves us struggling to explain what it is that we recognise when we witness Christ like behaviour in those who are strangers to the Christian religion. What is it that we recognise as Christ in the social, cultural and political world outside of the church if it is not *Christ*?

Lilburne's insistence that place is sanctified through the gathering of the Christian church leaves it open to the perception that it is acquisitive and therefore blind and deaf to all appearances of the Christ outside of the traditional religious sphere. The idea of Christification is a profound theology for the church perhaps, yet it remains questionable whether this idea is sufficient to respond to the growth of spirituality and cultural spheres of meaning outside of the Christian religion. This is a particularly pertinent question for colonial cultures where the Christian religion is often seen to have colluded with the colonial dissolution of indigenous

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 102.

culture and spirituality. It is no longer an adequate response from the church when it suggests that Christ is not present in the spirituality or culture of the society outside of the church. This observation begs the question, how should Christian theology engage with culture and spirituality outside of the church without succumbing to “nonbiblical dilution and trivialisation”?

### **Spirituality as Development: Over the back fence**

The question of engagement between established religion and culture outside the established church demands that we first endeavour to determine how theologians and sociologists view spirituality in the Australian context and more particularly how culture is viewed as a bearer of meaning. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter culture as a bearer of meaning should be understood as an element of the religious spirit (or religious dimension) in any given society. Accordingly, if theology is able to understand culture as an element of the religious spirit the question of how theology will engage culture as an element of the religious spirit must be answered. The question of theology and culture lies at the heart of this essay.

Goosen makes a distinction between theology and spirituality. He essentially distinguishes the two from each other by arguing that theology belongs primarily to the thought life of the church whilst spirituality belongs to the practical living out of the Christian life.<sup>27</sup> It is questionable whether this is an adequate distinction to make or whether it is a definition that takes adequate account of spirituality that emerges outside of the Christian church and community. To address the question of whether the distinction between thought and practice is a right one to make we can turn to theories of praxis.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 38.

Theories of praxis in theology have highlighted the cyclical dialogue that must take place between the thought processes or theoretical ideas of theology and participation in collective human experience in the life of the church.<sup>28</sup> Theology must be defined by this dialogue between theory and participatory experience for without it theology remains in the category of ideology. This begs the question of whether theology and spirituality should be distinguished at all or of whether Goosen's distinction has missed the mark. Robert Schreiter's definition of theology holds reflection, the critical thought life of the mind, together with circumstance in a way that recognises that theology is always situated. Praxis demands more than reflection in a particular circumstantial situation however. Schreiter's definition of theology as "...the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances..." might be rendered as "... in light of their (*participation*) in their own circumstances..." by the demand in praxis for reflection to be grounded in dialogue with activity.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless Schreiter's definition challenges the idea that theology is pure thought as distinct from spirituality, which is the experience of life and faith. Clearly the two are indelibly linked in a correlation that is dynamically expressed in the dialectic of praxis.<sup>30</sup> It is plausible to argue therefore that at least within the Christian Church theology and spirituality are indistinguishable on the basis that they form a cohesive cycle of praxis.

What about spirituality outside of the Christian Church or any other religious institution? How can spirituality that is embedded in culture that distinguishes itself from organised religion, be understood by contextual theologians? Contextual theologian Tony Kelly has sought to describe such culturally embedded spirituality. Kelly characterised some of his contextual writings as moving "towards an Australian spirituality". Contrary to Goosen's

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<sup>28</sup> Alfred T. Hennelly, SJ. *Liberation Theologies: the global pursuit of justice* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 14, 144. Hennelly surveys the views of Gustavo Gutierrez and Alan Figueroa Deck on the dynamics and role of praxis in theology.

<sup>29</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 91-93.

definition Kelly suggests that in the Australian context the term spirituality actually has connotations of retiring from the active world into a world of private and individualistic reflections on those elements of experience that are mysterious to us.<sup>31</sup> Whilst he sees this as a largely negative connotation he argues that there is no real alternative for the word spirituality and that its value for us resides in its suggestion of a wordless mysteriousness within us that is largely neglected in common language.<sup>32</sup>

Kelly weds the term spirituality with the term imagination and envisions that a wholesome spirituality for Australia might be discovered through the cultivation of what he calls an “ethical imagination” that, using humour and empathy, always “keeps looking for the face of the suffering other”. Thus, for Kelly, spirituality is distinguished from theology, or in his words, “... a fully expressed faith...” by virtue of the fact that it is far more closely related to the questions that arise in our consciousness under the conditions of human suffering.<sup>33</sup> In this understanding of spirituality, theology relies on spirituality for the questions it seeks to answer in theological language. Theology without reference to spirituality is abstract and unrelated to the real lived questions at the heart of human experience. Thus Kelly declares, “There is nothing so ridiculous as the answer to an unasked question.”<sup>34</sup>

The difficulty for Australians in Kelly’s reading of the situation is that the experiences that provoke the questions of depth in us, and indeed the emerging questions themselves, are very difficult for us to articulate and are invariably shrouded in a “sacred silence”.<sup>35</sup> The formation of an Australian spirituality that is articulated in language and art then, is dependent on the ethical imagination being *present* to the depth of sacred feeling that occurs when Australians “...experience...the transcendent in the ordinary.”<sup>36</sup> Out of the sacred silence that

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<sup>31</sup> Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: towards an Australian spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990), 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 8, 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 25, 26.

surrounds such experiences may come language and art that “serves” the silence by returning to it and upholding its sacredness.<sup>37</sup> The language and art that Kelly writes of is a language that exudes a form of humility by not filling up the silence with religious talk and over confident answers to the emergent questions. Kelly’s understanding of spirituality then is considerably different to Goosen’s.

There is a significant problem with Kelly’s otherwise profoundly pertinent observations. The problem is one of imposition. It is just too easy for Australian theologians formed and shaped by the Australian Church academies to assume that language and symbols used for centuries by the Church will continue to be adequate for the spirituality of the secular culture outside of the Church. Thus categories like ‘the sacred’, ‘transcendent’ and even ‘ethical imagination’ appear to be imposed upon a cultural spirituality that has self- consciously placed itself outside of those traditions. Kelly appears to be willing a spirituality upon the Australian culture that is basically shaped like the Catholic tradition of spirituality.

Sociologist John Carroll’s argument in his book *Ego and Soul* would suggest that it is too late for the traditional religious traditions to attempt any kind of shaping of the wider cultural sense of spirituality. For Carroll, the traditional churches have let the religious spirit leak out from their religious structures and into ‘everyday life’.<sup>38</sup> The Protestant Reformation is largely responsible for this situation in its emphasis on the discovery of faith in the midst of work, family life and the exercise of the autonomous individual conscience.<sup>39</sup> The Reformation coincided with two other great shifts in the western world-view, namely, the rise of Humanism, which was an integral part of the Renaissance with its focus on reason and the individual and the shift in western art to depict “...an earthly tragic picture of the human condition.”<sup>40</sup> These

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>38</sup> John Carroll, *Ego and soul: the modern west in search of meaning* (Scribe, 1998), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>40</sup> John Carroll, *The western dreaming: the western world is dying for want of a story* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2001), 15.

three great shifts in western thinking represent, for Carroll, the last midrash, or reforming, of the archetypal stories that shape the western world-view. Carroll suggests that what was once ritualized in the traditional religious symbols of meaning is now present only in stories that though intrinsically present in the culture are rarely told as the explicit bearers of meaning. This situation has left the bulk of the western population with the popular culture rather than traditional sacred story as the primary bearer of meaning. For the vast majority of western people vocation and family are the location of ancient values like trust, nurture, protection of the innocent and helpless, honesty and courage. But the popular culture as a bearer of meaning, whether it be through sport or commercialisation, is unlikely to satisfy the depth of need for meaning in western society.<sup>41</sup>

Popular culture, according to Carroll, is failing to fulfil its role as the bearer of meaning. Popular culture is failing to touch people with a sense of how their own stories intersect with the ancient stories that formed and shaped meaning for the western life. Carroll describes the real role of culture in his use of the story of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) in which Jesus walks as a stranger with two travelling disciples and ignites in them a recognition of the truth.

A range of energies surface in the story – firstly the panic that drives the men away from Jerusalem, then the burning in the heart when the stranger speaks, the shock and awe around the table, and finally the resolve to return to the site of the horror. But ‘energy’ is a feeble word for the demons that arrive. What the third man *does*, if he does anything that will endure, is to arouse ‘sacred rage’. Sacred rage is the energy of truth. It is the fire that burns within, waiting to be piped forth by the music of *aletheia*. It is the stranger’s medium.<sup>42</sup>

It is this ignition of ‘sacred rage’, the ‘energy of truth’ that represents meaning for the western soul. For us today the stranger who comes among us to ignite the energy of truth comes among us in the form of story.

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<sup>41</sup> Carroll, *Ego and soul*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Carroll, *The western dreaming*, 5.

If that story is told in the right way, painted or sculpted in the right form, composed in the right key, and the people on their own road to Emmaus are receptive – the story cryptically intersecting with their own – then the very foundations of being may be illuminated by the light of Truth. That is what culture does. It may be the one thing that saves, that taps the sacred rage.<sup>43</sup>

Culture is supposed to be the bearer of that which ignites the sacred energy of truth. If a culture does not facilitate the intersection of individual stories with the ancient stories then it is failing in its primary role, for this intersection is where the ignition of the sacred energy of truth takes place. Hence the subtitle of Carroll's *The Western Dreaming: the western world is dying for want of a story*. Carroll has his own ideas about how current cultural phenomena invite intersections with sacred story and his is a discussion that we do not have the time to engage in here. Nevertheless, Carroll has posited a theory about the nature of the religious spirit outside of the traditional religions and embedded in secular culture that demands from theology a considered method of engagement. The religious spirit is emerging in new forms 'over the back fence' and is now situated far more predominantly outside of the church's 'backyard'. Is Carroll right to suggest that popular culture is not wholly sufficient to the task of igniting the energy of truth in modern western society? Theology has sometimes argued that this is the case. Theology often argues that culture is critiqued and corrected in reference to Christ. But the Christ of theology is traditionally the Christ of the Christian Church. If, as Carroll suggests, the power of the Christ story to transform culture now lies in the hands of the culture itself, should theology be engaging culture in conversation in order to discover there the nature of Christ in culture and if so, how does such a conversation take place?

Paul Tillich's understanding of culture as the bearer of eternal meaning for the given situation seems to challenge Carroll's scepticism about current popular culture. Perhaps Carroll is not looking deeply enough into the meaning of popular culture. Perhaps Carroll's assumption that the relatively meaningless elements of popular culture are the only cultural elements

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 6.

available to most Australians in the quest for meaning is in error. Sport and consumerism are certainly high cultural priorities for Australians but they do not represent the complete cultural sphere of most Australians. Music, literature, art, gaming, travel, politics and a whole host of other cultural pursuits form a diverse field of potential cultural bearers of meaning for Australians in the current situation. Tillich's understanding of all cultural spheres as bearers of eternal meaning stands as a direct challenge to Carroll's lament for the loss of meaning in popular culture. What may be lacking is the depth of conversation required to understand the religious situation as it is revealed in the popular culture.

A good place to start looking at how Australian theologians have tackled these questions is the debate taking place amongst indigenous Australian theologians about the place of indigenous culture in forming theology that emerges from the indigenous cultural context. This debate reveals something of the struggle of faith to discern ultimate meaning in the conversation between Christian faith and culture.

### **Australian Aboriginal Theology**

The context of postcolonial Aboriginal identity reconstruction and theological explorations is central to the idea of an Australian theology, particularly if Australian theology wishes to engage culture in conversation as a primary source. What follows in this section is a glimpse of some key voices in the cautious emergence of Aboriginal theology that rightly raise more questions than answers as they begin what will be a long process of sifting through the myriad questions of identity, sovereignty, syncretism and culture.

Patrick Dodson's article "The Land our Mother, The Church our Mother" in *Discovering an Australian Theology* is a striking early contribution to self-conscious Australian theology by an indigenous theologian. It is really a challenge to the ecclesial self-understanding of the Australian church in light of the indigenous history and situation in the

1980s. What is most challenging in the reading of this article in the year 2013 is just how pertinent Dodson's challenges to the Christian Church remain.

Dodson writes with a three-pronged approach to the situation, as he understands it in 1988. Firstly, he draws the attention of the reader to the central importance, little understood by colonial culture, of the collective spiritual power of the ancient indigenous 'law' or 'dreaming' that is "...a coherent and all-encapsulating body of truths which govern the whole of life..." in indigenous Australian cultures.<sup>44</sup>

"The Dreaming" or "The Law" includes the past and ongoing activities of creative and life-giving forces which always retain a sense of immanence and transcendence, of the actual and potential. Western understandings of time are beautifully confounded by these concepts.<sup>45</sup>

An understanding of this concept of time, spiritual presence, and life forces, is essential for any who would understand indigenous Australian identity. The Dreaming is rooted in the land and the spiritual nurturing the land provides for the life of indigenous communities. It is the land that defines the story and identity of the people. This ancient cultural and religious way of being is brutally swept aside by colonial forces who have no spiritual connection to the land but who nevertheless claim ownership over it. And this leads us to the second prong in Dodson's article. Colonialism has from the very first incursion into The Great South Land given moral and ethical ascendancy to the cause of national economic growth at the direct expense of severing indigenous communities from the very land that nurtures them spiritually, culturally and physically.<sup>46</sup> Indigenous communities have not generally been beneficiaries of this economic growth and are therefore not in a position to exercise influence over government policies or voter opinions in the fight for recognition of their ongoing connection to and legal right to the land of their ancestors.

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick Dodson, "The Land our Mother, the Church our Mother" in ed. Peter Malone, *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Homebush: St Pauls Publications, 1988), 83.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 85-87.

The third prong of Dodson's argument is a direct challenge to the Australian church that is summed up in some of his final words in the article. "The Church is being asked to love until it hurts."<sup>47</sup> Whilst indigenous peoples are dispossessed and disempowered in Australia the Church is most certainly not loving until it hurts. The Church *is* in a position to define itself as a prophetic advocate for indigenous peoples and their cry for justice and Dodson challenges it to do so in eight ways that still hold considerable weight now three and a half decades later.

The eight challenges are,

"1. ...to recognise the land rights struggle as a primary spiritual issue for Aboriginal people. 2. ...to accept the fundamental link between faith and justice. 3. ...to open her eyes to the poverty in which so many Aboriginal people live and to accept the challenge offered by Jesus' special love for the poor. 4. ...to read what the second Vatican Council has to say about the non-Christian religions and to read what pope John Paul II said to Aboriginal people at Alice Springs in 1986. 5. ...to promote Aboriginal culture and to develop a missiological education of those ministering to Aboriginal Christians. 6. ...to improve the theological, philosophical, and missiological education of those ministering to Aboriginal Christians. 7. ...to educate all Christians to a deeper appreciation of White Australia's black history, of the damage that has been done and of the richness that remains. 8. ...to help free non-Aboriginal Australians from the greed, ignorance, guilt and insecurity which cripple their response to Aboriginal suffering."<sup>48</sup>

Dodson's article is an example of ecclesiological vision that emerges from the theological will to ensure that cultural context is taken seriously and is allowed to participate in the shaping of our theology. The Australian church that remains aloof from the situation of indigenous Australians ceases to be the prophetic church of the New Testament vision, one that is rooted in the gospel of Jesus as the Christ. When Dodson was writing his article the legal battle for recognition of Aboriginal land rights was taking place in the High court between Eddie Mabo and the Queensland government. In the very year that Dodson's article was published in *Discovering an Australian theology*, Australia celebrated the bicentennial of European settlement and legislation that the Queensland government had passed in 1985 that would

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 87,88.

undermine the Mabo case was finally overturned by a decision taken in the High Court that deemed the legislation to be a contravention of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.<sup>49</sup> Dodson's article was calling the church to engage fully in issues of immediate political and cultural relevance. Since Dodson's article a number of key events, including the Mabo decision that set aside Terra Nullius in 1992 and granted Eddie Mabo the land rights he had fought for, and the national apology to the stolen generations delivered by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008 have changed the cultural landscape and introduced new questions for the Christian church. Nevertheless, Dodson's challenge remains largely relevant and the wider Christian church continues to avoid its redefining call.

Nearly a decade after Dodson's call the Rainbow Spirit Theology project took shape in Crystal Creek, a small community in northern Queensland. Norman Habel facilitated two workshops that brought together a significant group of indigenous Christian elders, ministers and theologians, to identify distinctive elements of theology when it is allowed to arise from the perspective of indigenous peoples. The theology was self-consciously a theology in process that opened itself up to critical conversation with the wider indigenous Christian community.<sup>50</sup> It was theological processes like these that sought to take up Dodson's challenge to allow the ancient cultures of indigenous peoples to shape contextual theology in Australia.

Dodson's call had situated the indigenous spiritual connection with land firmly in the political and legal battles for land rights justice. The Rainbow Spirit Elders also placed connection to land at the heart of their process but addressed the connection from a more specifically theological perspective. And in the same way that Dodson placed 'The Dreaming' at the heart of his description of indigenous connection to the land, so to the Rainbow Spirit

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<sup>49</sup> "Mabo v Queensland (1988) HCA69" Accessed January 8, 2014, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/HCA/1988/69.html>. The Queensland Coast Islands Declaratory Act 1985 was defeated in the High Court clearing the way for the Mabo case to continue. To view the original act go to <http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLATION/ACTS/1985/85ACO27.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: towards an Australian Aboriginal theology* (Melbourne: Harper Collins Religious, 1997), preface.

Elders undergird their whole theology with their understanding of ‘The Dreaming’ which they describe as, “...a spiritual dimension of reality that has existed from the beginning.”<sup>51</sup> The place of land in indigenous religion and culture is spelt out by the Rainbow Spirit Elders for the sake of colonial church that generally does not associate spirit with land and the natural world in the same way. In traditional indigenous songs the religious significance of creation is completely implicit. The land and all of creation outside of the human sphere is animated with the life force of the Creator Spirit. Incarnation is implicit in indigenous religions.<sup>52</sup> The implicit radiance of spirit in creation and its religious power for indigenous peoples is partially demonstrated in the words of this song of the Wonguri-Mandjikai people of North-East Arnhem Land.

Up and up soars the Evening Star, hanging there in the sky.  
Men watch it, at the place of Mist, of Lilies and of the Dugong.  
The Lotus, the Evening Star, hangs there on its long stalk, held by the Spirits.  
It shines on that place of the Shade, on the Dugong place, and on to the Moonlight clay pan...  
The Evening Star is shining, back towards Milingimbi, and over the *Wulamba* people...<sup>53</sup>

The song poetically reveals the rhythmic religious participation of the people of the land in its natural cycles. It is a song that is rooted in ancient Dreaming stories that are part of the present spiritual reality of the people as they participate in natural cycles.<sup>54</sup>

This understanding of eternal spiritual reality and presence in creation is claimed by the Rainbow Spirit Elders as part of their understanding of revelation both pre Jesus as the Christ and as part of their Christology. Rainbow Spirit Theology draws on four key sources that are correlated with the four points of the compass. North represents the ancient wisdom of Hebrew and Christian scriptures and the story of church history. South represents the inner truths that

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, preface.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>53</sup> Wonguri-Mandjikai people, “Three songs from the Moon-Bone Cycle” translated by R.M. Berndt, ed. Les Murray, *Anthology of Australian religious poetry* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986), 37.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 35.

are derived from the ancient indigenous culture and religion. East represents the gospel of Jesus as the Christ and West represents the strength of indigenous people to embrace and reclaim their future.<sup>55</sup> All of these sources are drawn together and the theological method identifies correlations between ancient wisdom, culture, gospel and current experience.

Each of these four sources is drawn upon primarily from the perspective of how they relate to the land and the people of the land. Thus, using comparisons with the creative Spirit of the Genesis accounts of creation, Rainbow Spirit Theology re affirms both the presence of the Rainbow Spirit (which is said to be the “life-giving power of the Creator Spirit present in the land”) in the land and the responsibility of the peoples of the land to cooperate with the Creator Spirit in the care and renewal of the land.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the spiritual bond with the land that is a religious partnership between the Creator Spirit and the peoples of the land is broken by colonial power and the Creator Spirit is lamenting the cutting off of the life-forces of the land and people.<sup>57</sup> Later in the book this brokenness is correlated with biblical ideas of sin, and Rainbow Spirit Christology is very closely linked to the redemption of the land and its peoples by the renewal of the divine-human partnership through care of the land.<sup>58</sup>

Rainbow Spirit Christology outlines the belief that what was partially revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Indigenous cultural Law or Dreaming, is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Firstly, Jesus is seen as the Creator Spirit camped in and with indigenous land and culture, thus affirming the revelatory power of land and culture. Rainbow Spirit Theology emphasises the incarnation of God in indigenous land and culture by claiming that Christ came for all peoples in all times and therefore he has camped in indigenous culture from the beginning. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the redemption of the divine-human

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<sup>55</sup> *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 31, 32.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 42-54.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

partnership as mentioned above. “Through Christ, the land and the people are reconciled with the Creator Spirit.”<sup>59</sup>

Rainbow Spirit Theology represented the early theological voices amongst indigenous Christians who were increasingly prepared to lay claim to the correlative relationship between colonial Christian theology and the ancient culture and religion of their ancestors. Its main critics generally suggest that it fails both Christianity and indigenous religion on the basis that it is syncretism that delivers a theology that is neither one nor the other.<sup>60</sup> Such a view assumes that syncretism is fundamentally disadvantageous to religions and indeed that the Christianity that arrived in Australia with the colonies had not previously been subject to the evolution of syncretistic interaction with cultures and religions. That syncretism is an existing phenomenon in the inevitable contact between cultures and religions is an established fact. What remains for theology is the question of how well it is undertaken and how carefully and respectfully it attends to both the contextual needs of the culture and the core theological elements of the religion.<sup>61</sup> The recognition in Rainbow Spirit Theology that the religious symbols of indigenous religion and the religious symbols of the bible and Christian theology are often correlative means that it is well placed to claim that its syncretism respects both and retains their unique truth in the synthesis that has emerged. Another critique of the Rainbow Spirit theology is made in regard to its inclusion of the wisdom of the Church in the time since the scriptures became the principle guiding source of Christian theology. This critique declares that such inclusion asks indigenous theologians to continue to defer to the invading colonial culture. Such a critical voice comes from radical protestant theologian, Graham Paulson.

It is precisely the question of the integrity of both Christianity and indigenous cultures that frames Graham Paulson’s essay “Towards an Aboriginal Theology” though he specifically

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>60</sup> See the statements of Pr Paul Albrecht Lutheran Missionary, Producer Roger Bayley, “Compass Transcript”, accessed May 2, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s946237.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 144-158.

names the question as one of the integrity of identity for both Christianity and indigenous culture and religion.<sup>62</sup> Rainbow Spirit Theology specifically names the ancient wisdom of church history as a key source, though one to be received critically.<sup>63</sup> Paulson, writing a decade later, questions whether accepting Western Christian tradition as a source for theology will truly enable indigenous Christians to interpret the gospel of Jesus through the lens of their own culture. In his view it is a major impediment for indigenous theology that Christianity is “inextricable from its Western cultural frameworks and... therefore undermines the integrity of Aboriginal identity and cultural expression.”<sup>64</sup> A second related impediment is named by Paulson to be the nature of Christian spirituality as that which demeans the rootedness of indigenous spirituality in the land. Paulson boldly names the indigenous sense of spirit and land as animistic and therefore inherently subject to the demeaning and belittling transcendent spirituality of Christianity.<sup>65</sup>

Paulson’s suggested route around these impediments as he sees them is distinctly ‘protest-ant’. He suggests that indigenous people who wish to engage with the gospel story should take ownership of their own animistic spirituality and then engage it directly with the biblical tradition, reading the bible with indigenous animistic spirituality as the only cultural framework for interpretation.<sup>66</sup> Thus, in the spirit of the reformation, Paulson demonstrates how the biblical text makes room for animistic understandings of spirit, ancestors and sacred sites and bypasses the Platonic tradition of Western Christianity that situates spirit in that which is said to be transcendent of the physical reality of the world.

Kevin Gilbert demonstrates this ‘protest-ant’ method in a memorable essay that was first delivered as a speech to the ‘First National Conference on Aboriginality and Perceptions

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<sup>62</sup> Graham Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology” *Pacifica* 19 (October 2006): 310-321.

<sup>63</sup> *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 20, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology”, 310.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 311-312.

of Christianity' in South Australia in 1990. Gilbert essentially claims that Western Christianity has misinterpreted the gospel, a fact that is apparent in the fruits of its colonial culture, and that Aboriginal culture in fact embodied a more complete fulfilment of the gospel vision demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Gilbert sees direct parallels between indigenous culture and the Genesis depictions of the Garden of Eden.<sup>67</sup> He rejects the Western idea that indigenous people have only inhabited the land for forty thousand years and claims that the time of Creation is the foundation of their connection to the land. In doing so he claims for indigenous culture an equal authority as that invested in the bible by Western Christianity and thus establishes the authority of indigenous direct interpretation of the bible in correlation with culture. Calling for the establishment of a new "Aboriginal Church of Healing" Gilbert suggests that indigenous communities must accept the challenge of teaching white people with their roots in Western Christianity and culture the real meaning of Jesus in order to bring about the healing of the peoples and the land. It is a compelling pre-figuring of Paulson's 'protestant' methodology that would require significant humility on the part of colonial Christians if it were to begin to shape Australian thinking about the gospel.

Quite apart from being a prefigure of theologians like Graham Paulson Gilbert also represents an early emergence of a new spirit of post-colonial identity reconstruction that sought to claim back the task of defining indigenous identity from the white cultural elites in the cities. This spirit of identity construction was emerging not only in theology but also in the arts and in politics. The art of Lin Onus, that is the subject of chapter five of this essay, is a clear example of indigenous people claiming the right to construct their own identity on the basis of their own cultures and experience.

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<sup>67</sup> Kevin Gilbert, "God at the campfire and that Christ fella" in *Aboriginal Spirituality: past, present, future*, edited by Anne Pattel-Gray, (Melbourne: Harper Collins Religious, 1996), 55-65.

These examples of Australian Aboriginal theology that are determined to approach the biblical text from outside the western Christian tradition challenge ideas of spirituality that understand it only as a practical aspect of that tradition. The spirituality of Indigenous cultures instead approaches the biblical text with its own interpretive cultural frameworks and a very different synthesis emerges between text and culture when the western tradition is left out of the equation.

In the next section of this chapter we will look at what some theologians have said with regards to the religious spirit in Australia when it is recognised within the wider culture as opposed to exclusively in the Christian church.

### **Australian Spirituality**

The history of contextual theology in Australia includes those who have understood that culture is also the bearer of the religious spirit. A brief survey of some of these theological voices will help us to answer the question posed earlier in this chapter of whether or not culture is adequate to the task of bearing the religious spirit and if so how does traditional theology engage in an effective conversation with culture in order to interpret the religious spirit for our context today? What is the Australian religious spirit, does it include a belief in a theistic God and need it necessarily be related to an established religion? These are questions that wonder about the religious spirit as it is experienced in Australian culture without necessarily referring to the traditional religious symbols of the established religions. They are essentially questions of the nature of Australian spirituality. The following analysis will hopefully lead us to some clues as to how we can engage with these questions.

Australian church historian Ian Breward published his Bi-Centennial lectures under the title of a question, Australia, “the most Godless place under heaven?” The title quotes James Denney, a Scottish Presbyterian theologian who was lamenting what he saw as the poor state

of religious observance in the colonies.<sup>68</sup> Breward answers his own question by essentially suggesting that despite a dubious start as part of the penal structure of the colony Australian churches largely succeeded in taking part in Australian culture and will continue to play a role in public life through the manifestations of both their weaknesses and their strengths.<sup>69</sup> In short, despite its unpromising beginnings colonial Australia defied Denney's lament and, in the 1980s at least, despite clear challenges that included declining church attendance and a failure to embrace a synthetic attitude to Aboriginal culture and religion, showed ongoing signs of an active religious spirit.<sup>70</sup>

Beward's lectures focussed primarily on the state of the Australian Christian churches but Anglican theologian Tom Frame has more recently approached the question of the Australian religious spirit from the basis of a study into the growing societal trend towards "unbelief", by which he specifically means the trend away from religious belief.<sup>71</sup> Like Beward, Frame argues that the Christian religion did take tentative hold in early colonial Australian life and was further established in reaction against the state atheism of the communist countries in the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> Frame then begins to track the early foundations and then greater development of the significant rise in unbelief that he argues began in the late 1950s and continues to flourish.<sup>73</sup> Frame's book does, like Beward's lectures, include some sobering challenges for the Christian churches in their attempts to respond adequately to the growth of unbelief in Australia. What is most interesting for our questions about the nature of the Australian religious spirit is the way Frame relates the decline in theistic belief in Australia to a growth in spirituality.

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<sup>68</sup> Ian Breward, *Australia, "the most Godless place under heaven?"* (Melbourne: Beacon Hill Books, 1988), 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 93, 94.

<sup>71</sup> Tom Frame, *Losing my religion: unbelief in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 291

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

If God were critical to religion, the removal of God made religion obsolete and opened the way to an authentic spirituality whose primary focus was not transcendence but integration, in which identity and destiny were linked by a desire for working values that encourage consistency in thought, word and deed.<sup>74</sup>

This observation seems to offer a very positive view of spirituality except that it is qualified by Frame's sweeping judgement that spirituality is about "human fulfilment and personal liberation" whilst Christian faith is primarily about "moral excellence and community compassion", the former being predominantly introspective and requiring no ethically based personal transformation. Frame characterises spirituality as therapy rather than religion.<sup>75</sup> It is questionable whether Frame's characterisation of spirituality in Australia as being largely correlative with unbelief in God and necessarily introspective and therapy based is as broadly applicable as he seems to suggest. No doubt there are some forms of Australian spirituality that meet these characterisations, however writers on spirituality and religion like Rachel Kohn and Gary Bouma have suggested that emerging spiritualities in Australia are often based on a deeply committed reworking of old beliefs and thus have great continuity with the religious traditions.

Rachel Kohn observes that religion is by nature always responding to the critique of its host culture and has therefore exhibited greater dynamics than it is often accredited with. Thus, in her view, spirituality that Frame might see as a form of personal therapy, may well have developed from a careful and valid cultural critique of the religion and thus represent a valid religious development.

Religion has always been tested and always found wanting, which is why it has never stood still, but has been a hotbed of controversy, innovation and striving like every other aspect of human endeavour.<sup>76</sup>

Kohn interprets this dynamic nature of religion positively suggesting that true spiritual wisdom is situated in the "...open and enquiring mind" that is at home in the "hotbed of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>76</sup> Rachel Kohn, *The new believers: re-imagining God* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003), 2.

controversy” and the refusal to rest in supposedly complete answers to the questions at the heart of this dynamic and ongoing upheaval.<sup>77</sup>

It is true that the current attempts to reshape received traditions and mint new spiritual practices to accord with the improved social status of women, the latest discoveries in science, the fresh encounters with exotic traditions and the awakened ecological awareness of our planet’s needs reflect genuine efforts to sanctify and give meaning to a changed world.<sup>78</sup>

Kohn paints a picture of religious transformation based on real social, cultural and scientific concerns that appears to be far from mere personal therapy and much closer in nature to a movement as profoundly transformational for religion as the historical movement of the Protestant Reformation.

Writing from a sociological perspective Gary Bouma argues that religion and spirituality, far from declining or succumbing to a secular unbelief, have simply responded to the inherently diverse post modernity in Australian culture after the 1950s and shifted away from the profoundly modern influence of the traditional religious institutions. Modernity, Bouma argues, was characterised by the quest for the one best way in social, political, religious and cultural life, dichotomous thinking (black verses white), and the grand meta-narrative.<sup>79</sup> The Australian context is implicitly resistant to these modern ideals on the basis of its diversity. “Australia is multicultural and multifaith. Being consciously multifaith is part of being a postmodern society.”<sup>80</sup> According to Bouma, this implicit post-modernism in the Australian context is not only evidently manifested in multiculturalism but in the ongoing emergence of the religious spirit outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions.<sup>81</sup> This emergent religious spirit is safeguarded by the secular culture that provides the public space within which to validate and protect the plurality of spiritual developments in response to cultural questions.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Gary Bouma, *Australian soul: religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 5.

Therefore, in Bouma's view, spirituality is partly defined by its nature as a spiritual development that transcends the boundaries of traditional religion. Furthermore, religion can only be said to be in decline if by religion we mean the traditional religious institutions. It is reasonable to argue, if one accepts the views of Kohn and Bouma, that the religious spirit is often retained in the development of spiritualities outside the traditional boundaries of institutional religions and that a great deal of Australian spirituality can be said to be both a discontinuation of the traditional religious institution and a continuation of the religious spirit.

The idea that the genuinely religious spirit is alive and well in Australia in forms that are beyond traditional institutional forms and yet demonstrate significant continuity with institutional forms is an important idea in the context of this essay. It is an idea that suggests that theology may need to include the wider culture in its audience and its source material. For the religious spirit, when it transcends the boundaries of the traditional religious forms, will embed itself in elements of cultural life where that cultural life can be distinguished from religious forms. The Australian cultural context is particularly open to the possibility that the culturally embedded religious spirit may not only distinguish itself from traditional religious forms but also manifest itself in spiritual insight that is in profound contrast to the spiritual insight of traditional theologies whilst maintaining its character as the religious spirit.

Therefore, Australian theology must find it amongst its tasks to engage in conversation with the self-conscious developments of traditional religion that have emerged in the form of new 'spiritualities' embedded in the Australian cultural life. Theologians like David Tacey, Tony Kelly, Mark Brett and Frank Rees have for some time sought to articulate theological method that embraces the development of the religious spirit outside of the traditional religious structures.

Theologians like these are peering over the back fence as it were and exploring what faith might look like outside the bounds of traditional institutional religion. Movements such

as the post-Christendom movement explore the nature of Christian faith in light of pre-Christendom Christianity and emerging Christian communities that are attempting to shrug off the ‘top down’ nature of religion that is closely wedded to the political state. Whilst such movements found an audience in colonial outposts like Australia it is questionable whether the whole ‘post-Christendom’ hypothesis ever really related to the Australian context. One could well argue that the nature of modern Australia as a colony means that questions of post-colonial faith that take into account the culture and religion of the region prior to colonization are of greater importance than to contexts formed by the colonial nature of the empires of European nations in the last five hundred years. These post-colonial theologies invite theologians to ‘climb over the back fence’ and ask a list of questions that includes, what does faith look like without religion in a post-colonial secular culture?

Veronica Brady contests the view that Australian society is utterly utilitarian in its secularity and invites us to recognise the presence of God and themes of faith that emerge time and time again in Australian literature. Drawing insight into the themes of faith from great Australian authors such as Marcus Clarke and Patrick White, Brady uses the ‘post Christian’ label to describe the persistent mood in Australian literature and society.<sup>82</sup> For Brady, Australian literature has offered the suggestion that the old religion is dead and the Australian spiritual task is to find itself on a journey of seeking religion that will enable Australians to know themselves as part of the ultimate mystery in their own context. In taking this broad perspective Brady places herself as one who is prepared to take faith over the back fence, leaving the old God in the sanctuaries and liturgies of the old religion and exploring the Australian spirit as one of the unfinished quest to find the new God.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Veronica Brady, *A crucible of prophets: Australians and the question of God* (Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981), 90.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 112-113.

Finding this ‘new’ God is often a task that is related to Australian’s relationship with the land. Much of this reflection on land, place and space however comes from a non-indigenous perspective and in Veronica Brady’s view reflects a fear of the land that only conveys a sense of silence and melancholy at best or dread and fear at worst.<sup>84</sup> Non-indigenous Australians must learn from indigenous Australians that there is a deep history of spiritual calling in this land.<sup>85</sup> Rather than interpreting the spirit of the land according to our own western fears the spirit of the land interrupts us.

“There can be no doubt that there is in our culture a great reservoir of tears as yet untapped: the sorrows accumulated around the settlers who went into the interior only to fail and to retreat into the cities...”  
Our deepest need... is to enter the land to find the sacred place where we can enter into the mystery of God and thus of ourselves and of the land.”<sup>86</sup>

Brady describes an approach to place and culture that pre-dates western colonial presence that is profoundly humble and open. It is an approach that assumes that the presence of God is always in place before our arrival.

In a markedly different approach to the question of the religious spirit in Australian culture Bruce Wilson attributes the ‘religion’ of most Australians to influences that are derived predominantly from the process of industrialisation. Industrialisation changed the nature of human work from production for consumption to production for the impersonal market. The key consequence for people in industrialised societies is that their identity is no longer rooted in their work. Work has now become largely about getting money so that we can ‘live’. Living is done in our leisure time and it is what we do in our leisure time that constructs our identity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Veronica Brady, “Called by the land to enter the land” in *Creation, Spirituality, the Dreamtime*, ed. Catherine Hammond, (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1991), 41.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce Wilson, *Can God survive in Australia?* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1983), 81-86.

This change in the situation of identity is accompanied by a decline in belief in an afterlife and therefore a renewed commitment to finding meaning in the rhythm of everyday life. It is in this quest for meaning in everyday life that Wilson finds evidence of ‘new gods’.<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately Wilson sees the ‘gods’ of everyday life as false gods and a “reversal” of traditional religion. For him, religion outside the traditional forms is idolatry.<sup>89</sup>

‘Progressivity’ or “the pursuit of happiness” is one of these new secular gods. Another is ‘individuality’, which is apparently manifest in subjective self-interest to the exclusion of a moral vision for the world. A third of Wilson’s secular gods is sex. Sex, in his view, has become a sort of mystical alternative to true religion, one that is apparently only effective whilst the blood of sexual arousal is actually up. In this extremely truncated view of sex that has religious significance Wilson dismisses what is potentially the most important religious development in modern history, that is, the development of sexuality as an outcome of the religious spirit that is no longer so tightly tied to one’s personal identity and is now far more likely to be a full and free expression of the joy of being alive.<sup>90</sup> A fourth secular god that takes the place of traditional religion is the family. Where once meaning in life was derived from work, religion and the family, now the family is expected to provide a level of personal meaning in life that is satisfactory without the help of religion and work, an expectation that places too much demand on something that was never meant to give us what God gives us. Both of these later spheres of meaning, those of God and work, have been lost to the industrialisation of the west according to Wilson.<sup>91</sup> Wilson concludes that the religious spirit of Australians outside the Christian religion, at least in the 1980s, was a “synthesis between firm commitment to life in the everyday world as the ultimate reality, and a vaguer sense of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 95-97.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 99-100.

God and the whole supernatural dimension of traditional religion.”<sup>92</sup> His argument that Australians hold on to a vague sense of God and the supernatural was based on the relatively high percentage of Australians having religious funerals in the 1980s a situation that has changed considerably in the last 30 years with 60% of Australians choosing a civil funeral.<sup>93</sup>

Wilson’s analysis of Australian spheres of meaning that provide what used to be present in traditional religion, though dated, is a valuable example of how to look at secular society and outline spheres of meaning. His argument that such spheres of meaning are necessarily idolatrous is contestable and one of the most important voices in the conversation that contests the idolatry hypothesis is David Tacey.

Tacey really begins his argument by acknowledging the ‘post-Nietzsche’ spirituality of modern Australian life.

The vast majority of educated, contemporary people have, like myself, experienced Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’ and we are unable to pretend that the intellectual enlightenment, modernism, and now post modernism, have not taken place... A world-view based on the human element alone lands us squarely in the prison of the rational ego, where soul and spirit are banned, repressed, and ignored. Ironically, our secular ‘humanism’ has made us less than human, because a large part of the mystery of being human includes the needs and desires of that within which is *other* than human, that inside us which is archetypal, nonrational, and religious.<sup>94</sup>

In spite of the many voices that would argue against the re-discovery of archetypal, non-rational and religious elements of our humanity, Tacey believes that Australia is a primary candidate for rediscovering these elements of our humanity well and truly outside the boundaries of traditional religion, though with due respect and dialogue with those ancient traditions.<sup>95</sup>

Tacey describes the Australian descent from the culture and psyche of the ‘mother countries’ into a bare confrontation with the ego and the abyss. The abyss is usually projected

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>93</sup> “Funeral Celebrant Training” accessed on October 24, 2013, [www.australiancelebrations.com.au](http://www.australiancelebrations.com.au) .

<sup>94</sup> David J. Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: transformation in Australia* (Melbourne, Harper Collins, 1995), 2.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 4, 5.

onto the harsh Australian environment that is essentially the reason for the loss of mother culture and the descent into survival mode that takes place in the event of migration.<sup>96</sup> This descent has often been interpreted negatively as a descent into barbaric behaviour.<sup>97</sup>

“No one likes to be told, not even by a well-meaning therapist, that depression is good for them. But in Australian society a bout of depression is precisely what is required in order to lower the threshold of consciousness and to organically link it with the deep unconscious. Only from this psychocultural depression can the essential connections be made that will revivify the nation and restore integrity and self-regard to its citizens. We are dissolving slowly into the landscape, but it is a necessary dissolution that ought not be resisted or willed away by resorting to the outworn heroics of the past. We are experiencing what Freud might call a regression for the sake of advancement.”<sup>98</sup>

It will become apparent to us in this essay’s conversation with cultural expressions that this idea of psychological descent is profoundly present in the Australian culture today. There is unfinished business in our past but there is also an entire religious history that has sought to distract us from ourselves and focus us on the imagined ‘next life’. Australian culture is rejecting this distraction as demonic and asserting that the true mystery of life is discovered not in transcendence but in descent.

According to Tacey the Australian experience has been the reverse of romanticism. Nature has never been the great Mother nurturer for the Australian migrant. Quite the contrary, for Tacey an embrace of the spirit of sacrifice is what is needed. The spirit of sacrifice is the consciousness that the sacred other has a claim on our lives. This has often emerged in Australian consciousness involuntarily (Gallipoli) but when Australians are consciously able to recognise the sacred demand of the other on our lives we will be beginning the descent into the sacred centre. Given that the other has been demonised and projected onto the landscape (as pictured in the Patrick White novel *Voss* (pg89-107 in

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 35-41.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 62.

Tacey), it makes sense that the landscape will represent the focus of Australian opening up to the spirit of sacrifice.<sup>99</sup>

This demonising sense that is the experience of immigrant Australians is the opposite of indigenous experience. Whilst for immigrant Australians the land is barren, threatening or worthy only of exploitation, for indigenous cultures the land is alive with the anima of spirits.<sup>100</sup> Tacey envisions the soul as that crossing over between matter and spirit and it is therefore the situation in which the re-animation of the demonised other occurs.<sup>101</sup>

It is evident that in Tacey's view, the acceptance of post-institutional spirituality is actually crucial to the restoration of the Australian religious spirit. Thus, it is far from idolatry, it is salvation. In his later writings Tacey recognises the oversimplification of the distinction between established religion and spirituality. The characterisation of religion as rigid and institutional is an overreaction against it and a failure to recognise that religion has always been institutional *and* personal/individual.<sup>102</sup> Thus,

...spirituality is not all that it is made out to be. Authentic spirituality involves loss of self, displacement of the ego, and sacrifice. While spirituality may lead to a deep sense of connectedness to the sacred, and thus to deep security and spiritual confidence, it also comes at considerable cost to our self-centred lives and our innate narcissism...

...Will religious tradition allow itself to be reshaped by the zeitgeist or spirit of the time or will it argue that significant change is destructive to faith and an assault on its core values and visions?<sup>103</sup>

This is precisely the question that must lead theology to explore how it will engage the religious spirit embedded in culture in a conversation that is open to the transformation of theology and thus the church.

Mark Brett's exploration of directions for post-colonial theology leads us definitively in this direction. We do not have the space to do justice to the breadth of Brett's argument in

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 154-160.

<sup>102</sup> David Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The new Australian spirituality* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2000), 212, 213.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 214-222.

this essay however in his outlining of the features of post-colonial theology Brett introduces some key biblical ideas upon which a theological conversation with post-Christian spiritualities and the wider culture might be based. The first of these ideas is the idea of the *kenotic* or self-limiting nature of the life of God. Based firmly on creation theology drawn from the Hebrew bible's account of God creating space for other beings through self-limitation and giving *ruach* (breath) to beings other than God's self (see Psalm 104:29,30), this idea of kenosis is linked to the Trinitarian idea of hospitality.<sup>104</sup> The Trinitarian life of God is a life that implicitly makes space for the stranger to enter into that life.

The second of these ideas is necessarily linked to the first in order to avoid the fatal error of demanding that vulnerable creatures, cultures and national groups be self-limiting to their own detriment.<sup>105</sup> This is the Pauline idea (Gal 3:27-29) of *mutual self-giving*, or mutual self-limiting. Where there is mutuality in self-limitation there is space created for hybridity. In other words, differences are embraced and included in a hybrid identity rather than erased. Whilst in Galatians this idea is accompanied by Paul's "...if you belong to Christ", which seems to suggest that this state of affairs may only exist within the church, Brett's presentation of the idea as a relational outworking of love suggests that if the church loves the world as God does then it will be self-limiting in order to create space for life to emerge beyond its identifying boundaries.

As in any relationship constituted by love, the practice of biblical faith presents a *dialectic* of self-regard and self-abandonment.<sup>106</sup>

The third of these ideas is found in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25). This idea is the idea that Christ may be secretly present within the stranger, and particularly in the stranger that is needy or oppressed. Similar to the idea found in Hebrews that the

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<sup>104</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: the bible in the tides of empire* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2008), 34, 35 & 182, 183.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 184

stranger might in fact be an angel, the judgement of God falls in favour of those who extend radical hospitality to one who appears to be utterly bereft of ‘godliness’.

...the secrecy of Christ’s presence amongst the oppressed implies that no limit can be placed on the praxis of solidarity.<sup>107</sup>

Brett argues for a theological stance in the post-colonial church that is both respectful of its own identity and radically open to the other.<sup>108</sup>

The fourth of Brett’s ideas arises from the application of the first three. When Christian theology opens itself up to conversation with other cultural perspectives it must avoid merely identifying cultural concepts that correspond with its own theological concepts. This idea is related to the inherent risk that Christian theology will define the ‘foreign’ culture in its own image.

...interpretation will often need to work with ‘perspicuous contrasts’ in order to avoid cultural *imposition*.<sup>109</sup>

Cultural imposition is an error equal in danger for Christian theology as that of acquisition. These four biblical ideas will be crucial in the formation of a theological method that allows theology to retain its relationship to the church whilst engaging culture in a meaningful and transformative conversation.

Without question however, the Australian theologian who has most recently and, in my view, most adequately challenged theology to engage with the questions inherent in the cultural step away from the institutional church is Frank Rees. Rees’ theology of a conversational God outlines the elements of divine nature that invite open conversation with the other. An in depth analysis of Rees’ argument will be undertaken in chapter three and its development will form the foundation of the method suggested in this thesis. For Rees, the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 195.

voice of the “Other” is crucial to any real conversation and it is in God’s nature to welcome the “Other” into the conversation.

...the “Other” is welcomed and respected, with forbearance and love, for without the contribution of each and all the conversation is truncated and impoverished. Here there is a genuine acceptance of plurality, a community of difference.<sup>110</sup>

Rees’ theological embrace of the “Other” is to a significant extent drawn from Paul Tillich’s idea that culture, even culture that defines itself as “Other” to the religious traditions, always has the potential to be the bearer of eternal meaning and thus to reveal the religious situation of a given period in cultural history. Whilst Tillich envisioned a correlative relationship between the depth of culture and the depth of religion that calls theology into a largely apologetic role, Rees emphasises the *otherness* of the “Other” and calls theology to create space for that otherness in authentic correlative conversation. This approach not only emphasises Tillich’s distance from John Carroll’s cultural scepticism but develops Tillich’s methodology into theological pathway of ongoing conversation and consensus between religion and culture. To do this is to respond to David Tacey’s call to the religious traditions to allow themselves to be shaped by the religious spirit of the times.

In this chapter we have taken a ‘snapshot’ of the contextual theology written in Australia in the last fifty or so years. In doing this we addressed directly the role of spirituality in shaping Australian contextual theology. In response to the question, “What is spirituality?” we considered the idea that spirituality may be the religious spirit present in Australian culture, both traditional religious culture and the wider culture. Religion and culture generally participate in the revealing of eternal meaning in the situation and thus carry the religious spirit. Contextual Australian theology is therefore invited to draw from the wider

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<sup>110</sup> Frank D. Rees, *Wrestling with Doubt: theological reflections on the journey of faith* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 163.

culture as conversation partner in the formation of a theology that is grounded in the Australian context. Australian theologians who are prepared to engage the wider culture in conversation are depicted analogously as those who climb over the back fence and start engaging with their cultural neighbours.

The remaining chapters of this thesis are devoted to the task of outlining a suggested method for contextual theologians to engage culture in conversation. Frank Rees has opened a door for conversational methods in the Australian context. Using Paul Tillich's method of correlation Rees has outlined the basis of conversational methodology by developing the idea of conversational correlation, a theology based on recognising the true otherness of the "Other" in conversation. What happens when conversational method is applied to theology in conversation with culture? The answer to this question will be sought in the following chapters.

In the next chapter we will begin the process of applying conversational method to Australian culture. To achieve this we will explore Rees' conversational theology and its roots in Tillich's method of correlation more fully. Having gained a clear understanding of the development of conversational theology we will carefully outline the specific methodological course we will take in applying conversational method to examples of Australian cultural expression.

## Chapter Two

### *Depth, Correlation and Ontological Anxiety: The foundations of conversational theology*

In the first chapter we considered the possibility that spirituality in the Australian context may be understood as the presence of the religious spirit in Australian culture self-consciously differentiated from the traditional institutional religions. Whilst acknowledging that religious traditions are very much a part of the Australian culture, we focused our attention on those elements of culture that for various reasons, including post-colonial and post-Christian identity reconstruction, choose to differentiate themselves from traditional religion. We explored the idea that a cultural expression that specifically chooses to identify itself as an alternative cultural voice to traditional religion may well contain the development of the religious spirit outside of those traditional religions. We suggested that this development of the religious spirit outside of traditional religion was, at least in part, what is known in Australia as spirituality.

The contention of this thesis is that if there is to be an Australian contextual theology it must be grounded in the acknowledgement of such developments of the religious spirit as valid voices in a real conversation. A 'real conversation' is one that informs the development of theology in the Australian context without the cultural acquisitiveness we have identified as a characteristic of some of the contextual methods applied historically in the Australian context. Chapter One briefly acknowledged a number of Australian theologians who are attempting to write contextual theology that acknowledges the religious spirit in culture generally and who are seeking to avoid the acquisitive tendency in theology's approach to culture. I suggested that one theologian in particular, Frank Rees, has concentrated on developing a distinctive

theological method that enables theologians to engage with the religious spirit in culture in a dynamic correlative conversation.

Rees' contention is that God is a God of conversation, who seeks out conversation with all people. We must be clear on this point. Rees does not merely suggest that *theology* itself is conversational in that it enters into conversation with God. Such a conversation would be limited to those within the traditional bounds of the Christian church. Rees suggests that God invites conversation with *all* people.<sup>111</sup> Theology, therefore, must acknowledge this universal element in the divine conversation by creating space for the voices of people and cultures that have the potential to be bearers of the developing religious spirit in spite of, or perhaps because of, the self-conscious demarcation of their identity from traditional religion.

In order to explore these possibilities Rees develops what he calls a *theology of divine conversation*.<sup>112</sup> Rees draws on various sources in the formation of this conversational theology. To gain a full appreciation of the potential of a conversational theology, as Rees develops it, it is necessary to examine critically one of the central sources he uses, namely, the cultural theology of Paul Tillich. This chapter will examine Tillich's theology of culture, in particular his method of correlation. It will then introduce Rees' essential critique of Tillich's approach in terms of the question: Does Tillich's method of correlation include room for the 'voices' of culture to speak independently of the correlative relationship between theology and culture that Tillich envisions? In other words, whilst Tillich's theology takes account of culture, is culture free to speak with its own voice or does theology determine the role of culture in the correlation? The answer to this question determines, for Rees, the need or otherwise to move beyond Tillich in the development of a truly conversational theology. The next chapter will

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<sup>111</sup> Frank Rees, "A conversational theology for a conversational church," *Asia Journal of Theology* Vol 21, no. 1 (April 2007): 36.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

attend to some of the critical issues that arise from this appropriation of Tillich's theology of culture and will stress the need for the element of *conversation* in correlative theology. On this basis the chapter will then propose a method for the application of correlative conversation to the cultural context in Australia.

It could be argued that such an appropriation of Tillich's method of correlation is misconceived, not because the voice of culture has no place in theological formulations but because culture is inherently infused with divine significance. According to such a reading of Tillich, the critique raised above is unnecessary and inappropriate. In order to examine these issues we must turn, then, to a careful exposition of Tillich's method of correlation as a basis for the development of a conversation between theology and culture.

Paul Tillich is most notable for his apologetic approach to theology, which he based on the ontological correlation between culture, which he said poses the ontological question of being and non-being, and the Christian message, which delivers the answers to that question. Thus, Tillich examines the theological significance of such elements as anxiety, despair, doubt and finitude. In his exploration of the nature of doubt and its relationship to faith, Rees draws attention to Tillich's understanding of faith as a universally human trait.<sup>113</sup> Regardless of whether one has a religious belief, the questions inherent in one's experience of existence as conflicted imply that there is an answer to those questions. When a human person holds the answer to those questions as their ultimate concern, faith is present according to Tillich. For Rees, the analysis of this element of Tillich's theology has implications for the way we understand doubt as part of the questioning concern of faith. He uses Tillich's theology to

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<sup>113</sup> Frank D. Rees, *Wrestling with doubt: theological reflections on the journey of faith* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 96, 97.

highlight the creative potential of doubt as an element of faith that engages with God in dynamic conversation.<sup>114</sup>

For Tillich, the correlation of the questions inherent in human existence with the answers inherent in the Christian message is not only situated in the doubting faith of the individual person but in the historical situation expressed through culture. Tillich argued that within all such historical and personal situations there is a quest for meaning, leading to what he called 'the ultimate' or 'the ultimate question'. The ultimate question is the question of being itself eternally defeating the threat of non-being. It is the ontological question. The cultural expression of the ultimate question and the shaping of a culture around the expression of the ultimate question is, for Tillich, the very definition of the religious situation. "Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit."<sup>115</sup> By "depth" Tillich means the impact in human culture of the ultimate question and the cultural search for the ultimate answer.

The potential difficulty with Tillich's method of correlating cultural questions and theological answers is that it describes an encounter between theology and culture that is always determined by theology. In other words, Tillich's method of correlation asserts that culture always asks the questions and theology always provides the answers. Theology always determines which way the correlation flows in the sense that the questions always imply the answers and the answers always imply the questions. For Tillich this is a matter of ontology.

One of the great criticisms of Paul Tillich's method of correlation is that theology, by determining the form of the cultural questions through its philosophical analysis of the cultural situation, runs the risk of misapprehending exactly what the culture is really expressing. John Heywood Thomas complained that Paul Tillich was not aware of the character of philosophical

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7.

methods or endeavours after the 1950s.<sup>116</sup> Thomas claimed that because Tillich's theology was fixed in the rigid systematic approach of philosophical theology that had its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it failed to respond to the changing situation of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>117</sup> It therefore made the error of seeking to answer questions that nobody was asking anymore. It is certainly true that Tillich was attempting to keep alive the philosophical and theological questions of the late nineteenth century and to rescue these questions from what he saw as the devastating Barthian critique of the twentieth century.<sup>118</sup> That Tillich's rootedness in the nineteenth century rendered his correlations obsolete might be seen as a devastating blow to his whole system. John P. Clayton, however, describes this obsolescence as a deliberate feature of Tillich's method. For theology that is written in answer to the questions of the situation is by its very nature condemned to obsolescence as the situation changes.<sup>119</sup>

If we accept Clayton's argument that obsolescence is intentionally inherent in Tillich's theology, then we are able to make an important distinction between Tillich's method, along with its specific theological outcomes (for example his focus on anxiety in the mid twentieth century), and what we might call 'Tillichian method'. Tillich's method and its specific theological outcomes are bound to the historical situation that gave rise to that particular set of correlations. The changing historical situation demands that theology engage the task of developing Tillich's method in response to the current historical situation. Any theology that is a development of Tillich's method of correlation in response to the current historical situation may be called a Tillichian method.

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<sup>116</sup> John Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich, and appraisal* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 30.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-176.

<sup>118</sup> The question of the relation between Tillich and Barth is a much wider one than we can discuss here. For further reading on this question see Paul Tillich, "What is wrong with the "Dialectic" theology?" *The Journal of Religion* 15, no. 2 (April 1935), Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 204-5 and John P. Clayton, "Questioning, answering, and Tillich's concept of correlation" in *Kairos and Logos: studies in the roots and implications of Tillich's theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1978): 121-140.

<sup>119</sup> John P. Clayton, *The concept of correlation: Paul Tillich and the possibility of a mediating theology* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1980), 5-8.

In this chapter we will examine Tillich's method of correlation, its sources and purpose and its potential as a foundation for theology as a correlative conversation. Having examined Tillich's own method we will then turn to the critical voices that demand a development of Tillich's method for the changing historical situation.

### **The religious spirit as depth**

In Chapter One, we adopted the term 'religious spirit' to refer to an element of Paul Tillich's theology that he described as the "religious situation".<sup>120</sup> Tillich defines the religious situation as any concrete historical situation in which the expressions of culture, society, politics or religion reveal its "essential meaning". This idea, that all spheres of existence can and do reveal the essential meaning of existence, is a crucial one for us to understand if we are to appreciate Frank Rees' development of Paul Tillich's theology of correlation into a theology of correlative *conversation* and apply it to the Australian context.

Tillich's view was that if theology is to become aware of the religious situation in its historical context it must begin with a philosophical analysis of the concrete cultural, social, political and religious expressions of that situation. In this way theology could discover the existential limits of these expressions that drive towards their essential meaning. Tillich called this analysis *the analysis of depth*. Understanding this concept of depth is essential for us if we are to be clear about the basis upon which theology may engage culture in correlative conversation.

In this chapter, then, we begin by outlining the claim Tillich makes for depth and its impact on the human psyche through the experience of what he calls "ontological anxiety". As

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<sup>120</sup> See pages 2 and 3.

we articulate the meaning of depth it will become apparent that this philosophical concept is closely related to Tillich's theology of revelation, which he calls the "quest for revelation".

Given that our focus is the development of the religious spirit in the Australian cultural context and that culture is an expression of the concrete historical situation, it will be most helpful to approach Tillich's concept of depth from what he calls the historical perspective. Tillich explains history as having both end (aim) and beginning. The beginning point of history is the "moment in which existence is experienced as unfulfilled and in which the drive toward fulfilment starts".<sup>121</sup> It is vital to note, however, that Tillich's description of depth from the historical perspective has ontological roots. The experience of existence as 'unfulfilled' is rooted in the sense that being is eternally threatened by non-being. It is this ontological understanding of depth that forms the centre of Tillich's theology and his method of correlation.

The experience of existence as unfulfilled is posed as the primary human question, the ontological question, which unites all forms of human experience and enquiry. It is this question that is the depth of reason, being, existence and life in Tillich's theological system (forming the first part of each of the sections in his *Systematic Theology*, the 'existential' side of the correlation). All expressions of human existence and enquiries into the nature of human experience, including religious and secular, arise out of the question of being as it is threatened by non-being. The ontological question therefore provides the opportunity for the correlation of religious and secular expressions of human life in the dimensions of society, culture and reason. Given that Tillich asserts that the drive towards fulfilment, or the quest for revelation, arises from the human 'self-awareness' of its own being as it is threatened by non-being, a preliminary question needs to be asked. Is Tillich in fact making a logical 'slide' here, from the conceptual to the ontological, without adequately showing how they are related? How is the

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<sup>121</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol 3* (First published by University of Chicago Press, 1951. For the purposes of this essay we will quote from the combined three volumes, London: James Nisbet, 1968), 58.

concept of the *existential* drive towards fulfilment related to the *ontological* question of the threat of non-being? It might be suggested that Tillich does not adequately show how the ontological is connected with experience. These questions suggest the need for a closer look at the way Tillich relates the experiences of ‘the threat of non-being’ and his ontological claims about being and non-being.

Tillich argues that in order to discover the nature of depth we need to make ‘being’, and not non-being, the object of theological analysis. The pre-rational statement, “there is something and not nothing” points us to the philosophical assertion that being (something) is the basis upon which we describe non-being (nothing). Without the something, the definition of nothing as the absence of something would not exist and is incomprehensible. Therefore, non-being (and thus the awareness that existence is unfulfilled) depends on being for its definition and power.<sup>122</sup> Non-being does not have any power in itself. It derives all of its power and qualities as a reflection of the being it negates. An example of the awareness of non-being is found in the revelations of Lady Julian of Norwich who speaks about sin, a form of non-being, in the same way. She cannot ‘see’ sin in her revelations. The only evidence of the presence of sin is the suffering that is present in human experience. She says sin has “...no sort of substance nor portion of being...”, therefore, it has no power in itself and is felt only as the possibility of the collapse of being.<sup>123</sup> This philosophy suggests that ‘non-being’ is not a spiritual entity that influences us from the outside. Non-being has power only in our experience of its threat to the being we know and in which we live. In Tillich’s thought this ‘self-awareness’ of non-being is experienced both as a question, dealt with in philosophy and theology, and as a psychological state that is usually felt as a particular type of anxiety. To be

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1952), 48, 49.

<sup>123</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Originally written shortly after 1373. London: Penguin Books, 1998), 79.

human is to be aware of the sting of non-being and it is this awareness that produces the question at the heart of Tillich's ontology. This brings with it the realization of both our *relatedness* to being itself (God) and our *estrangement* from being itself, that is, our situation as finite beings in existence threatened by non-being. Thus, the ontological is inextricably connected with the conceptual and the existential. We will now outline in more detail Tillich's ontological question in its systematic form and deal later in the chapter with its manifestation in human behaviour as ontological anxiety.

This analysis of being and existence, and his theological response, forms the bulk of Tillich's systematic theology. Already, however, a question might be raised about Tillich's approach to the analysis of being. Is Tillich proposing that such an analysis is the task of philosophy or the task of theology? By using the category of ontology he seems to be implying that the task is fundamentally the analysis of the structure of being by the philosopher. Yet terms used by Tillich to describe the depth of being such as "ground of being" and "power of being" seem to precede the objective structure of being. Such terms imply something that determines being without itself being subject to the structure of being. It is claimed that such language is symbolic and therefore theological in nature.<sup>124</sup> Tillich's position on this question is clear. Philosophy is the "cognitive endeavour in which the question of being is asked".<sup>125</sup> As such, philosophy plays a part in every cognitive capacity to grasp and shape reality, including the religious. For Tillich, the theologian who claims to do theology without reference to philosophical terms and categories misunderstands the nature of human reason. Theology and philosophy are inseparable in the quest to understand being and in the drive towards the depth of being that ensues.<sup>126</sup> It follows that reason itself, and the structure of being that it grasps and

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<sup>124</sup> John Herman Randall, "The Ontology of Paul Tillich," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall eds., (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1961), 160,1.

<sup>125</sup> Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the search for ultimate reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 5-8.

shapes, drive irresistibly towards their depth where theology and philosophy are united in apprehending that which precedes being and which creates the structure of being without being subject to it, *being itself*.<sup>127</sup> As we have already stated, this occurs when the structure of being, that is, in existence as lived experience, is discovered to be ambiguous, finite and conflicted. It was these dynamics that led Tillich to speak of ontological reason.

### **Ontological reason as depth**

Tillich speaks of the threat to being in terms of inner conflict, irreconcilable polarities and ambiguity.<sup>128</sup> Conflict is addressed as part of the inner structure of reason under the conditions of existence. Tillich distinguishes between “ontological reason” and “technical reason”.<sup>129</sup> Ontological reason is the “structure of the mind which enables it to grasp and to shape reality”.<sup>130</sup> The mind grasps and shapes the structure of being by using every aspect of the human person’s capacity to perceive and respond to what is experienced, including “...cognitive, aesthetic, practical and technical functions of the human mind”. Even the emotional life is included in this view of reason. Ontological reason has an inner aim that is to drive always to transcend ambiguity in search of perfect union with the perfect good. In Tillich’s view, ontological reason in its essence is the goal of all human reasoning. Technical reason, the “capacity for reasoning”, is a reduction of ontological reason to the cognitive realm in isolation from the other aspects of the human capacity to grasp and shape reality. Technical reason seeks out means for particular ends, or in some cases means without ends. Ontological reason determines its end prior to determining its means. It will become apparent that technical reason, though important in itself, in Tillich’s view is merely a part of the inner conflict of

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, see discussion in pages 5-10.

<sup>128</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol I, 92-99, 193-201. Vol II, 72-73. Vol III, 34, 53, 92.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, Vol I, 80, 81.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 83.

ontological reason when it is universalized. It is the conflict within ontological reason that prevents technical reason, as Tillich defines it, from becoming ontological, that is, from taking on the inner aim to transcend ambiguity in search of the perfect union with the perfect good.

Reason under the conditions of existence, that is, in ordinary human life as we know it, has three conflicts that arise out of what Tillich calls “the polarity of structure and depth within reason”.<sup>131</sup> The structure of reason is reason under the conditions of existence. The depth of reason is the ontological question within reason that pushes beyond the conditions of existence towards transcendent unity or revelation. What, then, are these conflicts which may lead ordinary reasoning towards its depth, into ontological reasoning?

### **Conflicts in reason under the conditions of existence**

The first conflict in the structure of reason is the conflict between *autonomy and heteronomy*. Tillich describes autonomy as reason that affirms its own structure under the conditions of existence without any reference to or acknowledgement of its own depth. Autonomy is the acceptance of and indeed the embrace of reason under the conditions of existence. We might call it ‘unselfconscious reasoning’ in that it is simply reasoning as such. In the autonomous movement of thought, things are accepted for what they appear to be and no attempt is made to transcend them.<sup>132</sup>

Autonomous reason resists the imposition of any suggestion that reason has a goal or aim outside or beyond what is given in existence. Such an aim would be defined as heteronomy. The irony of heteronomy is that it is ‘outside’ of reason yet it forms the depth of reason.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 93.

Heteronomous reason is the awareness that reason has an inner conflict and must always quest for the transcendence of this conflict.

Reason under the conditions of existence is in a perpetual state of struggle between the poles of autonomy and heteronomy. Tillich envisions that this conflict will only ever be resolved in what he calls *theonomy*. Theonomy in reason is the ultimate union of autonomous reason with its own depth and as such can never take place fully under the conditions of existence.<sup>133</sup> The quest for theonomy is the quest for revelation. It is reason driving into its own depth and asking the ontological question and it is towards this goal that ontological reasoning is directed.

The second conflict Tillich identifies within reason under the conditions of existence is the conflict between *relativism and absolutism*. Tillich asserts that reason in its essential nature “unites a static and a dynamic element”.<sup>134</sup> He defines the ‘static’ element as that which gives identity and absolute validity to reason beyond the concrete and the contextual. Tradition and academic processes can come under the category of the static element of reason, especially when given absolute validity. He defines the dynamic element as that which enables reason to function in the processes of life, including the very particular and concrete situation. Each element cannot hope to function without the other, yet Tillich asserts that under the conditions of existence they are estranged from each other and in perpetual conflict. Tillich says that the static element of reason under the conditions of existence is manifest in two forms of absolutism. Both the absolutism of tradition and the absolutism of revolution manifest the static element of reason under the conditions of existence. Tradition insists on the absolute structure of reason based on the received methods of grasping and shaping reality. Revolution insists on

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 96.

establishing a new absolute method at the expense of the traditional. Both are deemed ‘static’ due to their imposition of an absolute method.

The dynamic element of reason, according to Tillich, is manifest in relativism of either the positivistic or cynical forms. Positivistic relativism, like traditional absolutism, receives what is ‘given’ (not unlike autonomy). Unlike traditional absolutism, it places no absolute criteria on what is received. It accepts what it receives as ‘given’ and resists the application of absolute laws or criteria to what is given. Cynical relativism, according to Tillich, is a polar reaction to the imposition and failure of utopian absolutism. It adopts an attitude of cynical indifference to any absolute structure, denying its claim on any concrete situation.

According to Tillich, the critical attitude towards both absolutism and relativism in philosophy and all other forms of ontological reason has been adopted to try to overcome the conflict between them. Criticism seeks to empty the static element of any specific content and to identify its pure form. Such an attitude relies on the concrete situation to provide the content of reason while adopting the pure form of reason as the underlying principle. Tillich asserts that criticism failed (as a philosophical movement or method) and that eventually either absolutism or relativism seeks to dominate.<sup>135</sup> The solution to this conflict in reason, as it is with the conflict between autonomy and heteronomy, is impossible to achieve under the conditions of existence. On this basis Tillich unerringly declares that the quest for revelation, the ontological question, lies at the core of the human capacity to grasp and shape reality. He thus concludes that only revelation, the grasping of reason by its own essential being, can resolve the conflict in reason.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> The critique of ‘criticism’ here is a claim involving a wide range of issues in modern philosophy from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which are well beyond the scope of this thesis. Our purpose here is not to enter into these issues, but simply to note the basis of Tillich’s approach to theology, in his development of the concept of ontological reasoning and his focus on ‘depth’ as a theological method.

<sup>136</sup>Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol I, 99.

The third conflict that Tillich identifies within reason under the conditions of existence is the conflict between *formalism* and *emotionalism*. Tillich says that formalism is the exclusive emphasis on the formal element of each function of reason and on the strict separation between the functions of reason. Such an emphasis in the cognitive function of reason leads to an understanding of knowledge as controlling knowledge only. It implies a knowing subject, who had possession of knowledge about an object, the known. It excludes any understanding of knowledge as the union of subject and object, a knowledge that Tillich describes as “intellectual love”.<sup>137</sup> One of Tillich’s great conversation partners, Martin Buber, describes the difference between intellectualism as formalism in the cognitive realm, and “intellectual love” as the difference between what he called the “I-It” relationship and the “I-Thou” relationship. The “I-It” describes a knowledge that remains at the intellectual and objectifying level of relationship. Such knowledge is an indispensable aspect of all functions of reason. Yet when it is given absolute status, to the exclusion of the I-Thou relationship, it reveals itself as reason in conflict with itself.<sup>138</sup> Buber’s ideas will be discussed in more detail later but here it is important to note that Buber’s understanding of the I-Thou union of subject and object does not imply that the subject and object lose their individuality. Buber’s work, more explicitly than Tillich’s, describes union as dialogue. The importance of this will become apparent in Chapter Three.

Tillich offers an analysis of formalism in the aesthetic realm, in which he says that the form of art is valued at the exclusion of its depth and meaning; similarly, in the legal realm, where he says the structure of a legal system becomes divorced from the way it actually shapes the social reality it is meant to shape; and in the communal realm, in which he says the conventional methods for forming the social reality of the given context are vigorously

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>138</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 3-34.

defended, often at the expense of the creative initiative of the social group. In all of these realms of reason, form is valued while experience is devalued or excluded.

Emotionalism, according to Tillich, is usually a reaction against formalism. It reveals the conflict in reason by resisting the necessity for form in all realms of reason. Tillich asserts, however, that emotionalism is justified in its demand for the unifying element in reason.

Tillich also argues that formalism creates a conflict between the grasping and shaping functions of reason. This conflict, Tillich says, is most easily identified in the conflict between theory (grasping) and practice (shaping). When one of these functions is over-emphasised at the expense of the other, reason is in conflict with itself. Tillich asserts that theory can easily fall into an exploration of infinite possibilities without ever taking the risk of decision to act despite the presence of theoretical uncertainty. The other risk of this conflict is practice that excludes theory and that, Tillich argues, does so out of a sense of superiority over theory. The greatest risk of practice without theory according to Tillich is the vacuum that opens up in the situation and the risk that the vacuum is filled by extreme and even demonic theory.

Despite attempts to overcome the conflict between formalism and emotionalism Tillich maintains that it is impossible to do so under the conditions of existence. It stands therefore, according to Tillich's method, that the quest to overcome the conflict between formalism and emotionalism is a quest for revelation.<sup>139</sup>

In light of this analysis of reason under the conditions of existence we can conclude that Tillich is asserting that any theology that is prepared to attempt a conversation with a concrete and local situation must recognise that its own process of reason and its application of method is itself subject to the conditions of existence and must recognise the fundamental

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<sup>139</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 103.

conflicts in its own application. This understanding forms the basis of Tillich's argument with *Kerygmatic* theology, which, according to Tillich, seeks to assert that revelation comes only through the bible as witness to God's self-revelation in Christ and this only under the influence of the Spirit at times entirely determined by God.<sup>140</sup> For Tillich, such a view of biblical interpretation is problematic. Tillich maintained that whilst this view of biblical interpretation is crucial for theology, in that it saves theology from the danger of identifying itself with revelation, it cannot escape the reality that it is itself subject to the conditions of existence and within the realm of all other attempts, including philosophy, the sciences and the arts, to transcend the perceived conflict in reason as the means of grasping and shaping of reality.<sup>141</sup>

By describing the nature of the historical situation as an existential conflict between polar elements, Tillich has identified the conditions for the historical situation to become aware of its end (aim). All of the functions and forms of reason including theology, according to Tillich, are part of the response of reason to this awareness. Reason drives towards the essential unity of all polar conflicts. By claiming that essential unity cannot be achieved under the conditions of existence Tillich suggests that reason comes to its own limit. This limit inherent in reason leads to reason asking the ultimate question of the resolution of its own inner conflict in essential unity. It is precisely in this limit space that reason reaches into what Tillich calls depth. *Depth* is evident when the ultimate question is asked or implied. When this happens reason in all its forms has engaged in the quest for revelation.

This understanding of depth is central to the development of our understanding of the religious spirit in Australian culture. Whilst the *content* of Tillich's understanding of depth may

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<sup>140</sup> In Tillich's own time, the principal exponent of this theology was Karl Barth.

<sup>141</sup> Paul Tillich, "What is wrong with "dialectic" theology? *The Journal of Religion* Vol 15 No 2 (April 1935): 133-134.

be considered largely obsolete in our current context, the idea of depth in itself is alive with possibility for those who find evidence of the religious spirit in culture, society and politics.

The description of this conflict in reason is the basis upon which Tillich understands the primary task of theology as apologetic. The task of theology is to enter into an apologetic dialogue with all social, political and cultural expressions of depth. This is done by embracing the apologetic method, which listens for questions in all dimensions of life and seeks to offer answers that reflect the experience of revelation, an experience for which all human life is questing by way of its awareness of the conflict in its inner life.<sup>142</sup> We must, therefore, outline Tillich's understanding of what revelation is before we proceed with a description of Tillich's apologetic method.

### **Revelation and the religious spirit**

On the basis of the quest for revelation in culture and theology's role in responding to that quest, Tillich insists that theology must determine a specific meaning for the word 'revelation'. According to Tillich, the difficulty in determining one specific example of revelation, that can demonstrate what revelation is in all other examples, is that revelation necessarily occurs in a concrete and local context that is unique.<sup>143</sup> Revelation is a 'unique embodiment of something universal'.<sup>144</sup> Tillich rejects the idea that one revelatory experience may provide the example by which all other revelations are defined. Instead, he claims to approach the idea of revelation from the perspective of phenomenology. Phenomenology, he claims, must take a critical and an existential approach. Critical phenomenology, according to Tillich, deals with the question of the experience of revelation by using an example of

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<sup>142</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 35.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 118-177. This section in Vol 1 deals thoroughly with the concept of revelation.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 118.

revelation that has been received by a community and considered to be final. Tillich uses the word 'final' not in the sense of such a revelation being last in a linear sequence of events, but in the sense that such a revelation is the fulfilment of all other experiences of revelation and functions as the critical criterion on which all other experiences of revelation are judged. The receiving of this revelation is the existential aspect and the finality is the critical aspect of the phenomenological approach to the experience of revelation. This final revelation must avoid abstraction by being both absolutely concrete and absolutely universal. For the Christian community Jesus as the Christ is the definitive example of a final revelation.

The final revelation is called "classic" by Tillich.<sup>145</sup> David Tracy has sought to apply this term to literature, art, science, philosophy and theology that *transcends* the context in which it was created and becomes *universally revelatory*, or is at least accepted as having universal meaning for aspects of human society that Tracy calls "publics".<sup>146</sup> Although we cannot here pursue the details of Tracy's distinctive appropriation of Tillich's idea it provides an interesting example of the difficulties Tillich sees whenever an event or element in human experience is considered to be a final revelation. One such difficulty is that the final revelation comes to be seen as an abstraction, as if abstractness rather than particularity is what provides the universal or final significance of that revelation. But for Tillich a 'final' revelation must be both absolutely concrete and absolutely universal. In other words it is not by transcending its context that a revelation becomes a 'classic' but rather by fulfilling the criteria that it be absolutely concrete as well as absolutely universal.<sup>147</sup> Thus, for Tillich, a classic revelatory event is precisely something that speaks from its concrete context into the wider or universal

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>146</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 99-135.

<sup>147</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 119, 120.

context. To take the specific or concrete elements from it, into abstraction, is to destroy its revelatory power.

For Tillich, Jesus as the Christ, is the example of a final revelation and therefore forms the final critical criterion for the meaning of revelation. To remove the historical human Jesus from the universal Christ would be to destroy the revelatory nature of Jesus as the Christ.

Revelation is, according to this view, an experience of the absolutely universal in an absolutely concrete situation, person, thing or event. In Tillich's thought it is closely linked to mystery. The broader meaning of the word revelation is to 'remove the veil'. This can be applied in many ways to the revealing of things hidden, but in the narrower sense, the sense in which it applies to theology, revelation as the removing of the veil refers to the partial apprehension of that which is essentially mysterious.

There is also a broad and a narrow use of the word 'mystery'. When Tillich uses the word mystery he does so in the narrow sense. Broadly speaking mystery can refer to the hidden element of a story, a language or a social phenomenon. In the narrower sense, the sense in which Tillich uses it, mystery refers to the very essence of something. If something is essentially a mystery it "would lose its very nature if it lost its mysterious character".<sup>148</sup> Mystery, in this sense, cannot be reduced to language or knowledge, for such things belong to the subject-object relationship. Essential mystery precedes the subject-object relationship in its very nature. Tillich asks whether the Christian claim that God, who is infinite mystery, reveals God's self is a contradiction in terms and therefore a paradox. His own answer to this question is that the Christian faith does indeed make this claim, but that it does not involve a contradiction. For Tillich revelation does not mean the dissolving of mystery into knowledge.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 120.

Rather, revelation means that within the context of ordinary experience something more becomes known of the infinite mystery. This occurs in two primary ways according to Tillich.

First, its reality has become a matter of experience. Second, our relation to it has become a matter of experience. Both of these are cognitive elements. But revelation does not dissolve the mystery into knowledge. Nor does it add anything directly to the totality of our ordinary knowledge, namely, our knowledge about the subject-object structure of reality.<sup>149</sup>

According to Tillich's theology, then, mystery is encountered when reason (including all of the cognitive realms within ontological reason) is confronted with the question of being as it is threatened by non-being, or, as we have already described, when reason reaches its own end and encounters the question of the unity of all polar conflicts under the conditions of existence. This question drives reason into its own depth where it experiences both the threat of non-being or abyss, which Tillich calls the negative side of the mystery, and the presence of the ground of being or "being conquering non-being," which Tillich calls the positive side of the mystery and our "ultimate concern." Thus we come to the central idea in Tillich's theology, that revelation is the "manifestation of what concerns us ultimately".<sup>150</sup> Ultimate concern, being grasped by concern for that which is ultimate, namely the ground of being, becomes part of the human experience when reason is driven into its own depth by the acknowledgement of the question of being as it is threatened by non-being. Thus, the moment of revelation is the moment when all of the conflicts within faith and reason are "conquered" and "...estrangement is replaced by reconciliation."<sup>151</sup> Christian theology declares that the revelation of being defeating non-being is the event of Jesus as the Christ. As such, Jesus as the Christ is the "ultimate" in ultimate concern, or the genuinely ultimate.

Such an interpretation of revelation is, in a crucial sense, strongly subjective. Revelation does not occur generally. Rather, revelation only occurs when a real subject is grasped by it in

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 122-123.

<sup>151</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 79.

a concrete situation. This interpretation leads Tillich to assert that, “There is no revelation if there is no one who receives it as his ultimate concern”.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, Tillich is clear that revelation must involve both subjective and objective sides, a position that acknowledges depth while rejecting the dominance of heteronomy. A person is grasped by revelation on the subjective side of the event, and yet something else must happen, an event must take place that causes the person to be grasped by revelation. For Tillich it is the event that is the objective side of revelation. Tillich describes the subjective experience of being grasped as ecstasy and the objective causal event as miracle.<sup>153</sup>

Such a view of revelation has led Tillich into disagreement with many theologians. Much has been made of the differences between Tillich and Karl Barth on this precise point. Barth insisted that revelation in the Christian sense of the word is entirely transcendent and occurs as an outside reality revealing itself as something completely new in the human situation.<sup>154</sup> Barth’s emphasis on the transcendent nature of revelation put him, at one time, in direct disagreement with Tillich’s statement that there is no revelation without the subject who receives it as ultimate concern. According to Tillich, Barth insists on making the event of revelation entirely independent of the realm of human experience and insists that it rests only on an act of the Holy Spirit in transforming the words of scripture and the preaching of the church into the means by which we gain our understanding of Christ as God’s self-revelation.<sup>155</sup> It may be debated whether this is what Barth really meant, though the wider subject of Barth’s doctrine of revelation is a topic well beyond the scope of this present discussion. It is perhaps enough to say that until now Barth’s view of revelation has enjoyed a predominance in Systematic Theology. Yet I am asserting that Tillich’s view of revelation provides much greater

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<sup>152</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 123.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 124-131.

<sup>154</sup> Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post War Writings 1946-52* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 205-214.

<sup>155</sup> Tillich, *What is wrong with the “dialectic” theology?*, 133,134.

opportunity for conversation between theology and culture and that it is, therefore, the theology that will form the basis of postmodern and contextual theologies in the future. The critical issues of depth and revelation and their role in the dialogue between theology and culture will be addressed in Chapter Three as important elements in the development and application of a conversational theology for the current Australian context.

### **Theology and the religious spirit: Tillich's method of correlation**

We have seen that in Tillich's thought theology uses the tools of philosophy to analyse existence. Tillich's analysis concludes that reason under the conditions of existence, in other words the human capacity to grasp and shape reality, always reaches its own limit that drives it to quest for its own essential unity. This quest is experienced in the form of the ultimate question. Having reached this conclusion about the conditions of existence, Tillich describes the task of theology in response to the ultimate question as it is expressed through cultural, social and political life. Tillich claims that theology has always used an apologetic method to respond to the ultimate question, which he calls correlation. In his view the method of correlation

...explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.<sup>156</sup>

It is helpful to pause here and define the term 'correlation' in a general sense before we summarise Tillich's specific use of the term in theology. When one thing correlates with another it means that in speaking of the one thing we imply the other, thereby bringing the two

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<sup>156</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 68.

things into a mutual relationship. Two things have a reciprocal relationship and they naturally occur together where there is a correlative relationship.<sup>157</sup>

Tillich asserts that correlation occurs in three ways. There can be a correlation between different sets of data or information, between different concepts based on logic (here Tillich uses his example of the logical interdependence of polar concepts as in the discussion of polar elements within reason) and between real events or things within the structure of existence.<sup>158</sup> Theology, Tillich asserts, uses all three occurrences. Firstly, there is a correlation between religious symbols and that which they symbolise. Secondly, there is a correlation between concepts of the human and concepts of the divine. Thirdly, there is a correlation "...between man's ultimate concern and that about which he is ultimately concerned".<sup>159</sup> Here again Tillich is aware of the criticism that there can never be a correlation between the human person and the Divine.<sup>160</sup> His answer defines two aspects of God. Tillich concedes that in God's "abysmal nature" God is not in any way dependent on humanity. In the process of God's "self-manifestation", however, God is totally dependent on humanity's ability to receive that self-manifestation. In this Tillich makes a distinction between the essential mystery of God and the revelation of God. Mystery remains essentially mystery, while revelation is, by definition, mystery entering into a correlative relationship with human existence. Tillich avoids the possibility of reducing God to an existential concept totally reliant on human experience in his very specific argument that the existential and the essential are two necessary and interdependent aspects of human life. One cannot be without the other, yet they are clearly in

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<sup>157</sup> Graham Johnston, ed. *The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976), 183.

<sup>158</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 68.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> For example, Karl Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," in *A Reader in Contemporary Theology*, ed. John Bowden & James Richmond, (London: SCM Press, 1967), 32. Originally published in Karl Barth, *Against the stream: shorter post-war writings 1946-52* (London: SCM Press, 1954). "...the God of Christianity cannot appear in any imaginable human conception of the world."

polar tension under the conditions of existence.<sup>161</sup> This understanding of a correlation between the divine mystery and the existing human is said by Tillich to be a real encounter, whereby both human and divine grow and change together as they encounter one another. Such an understanding of God is dynamic and relational and in contrast to the theistic dominance of God in kerygmatic theology.

Correlation as theological method is specifically concerned with correlation between God and human life under the conditions of existence. Here Tillich's own words are most clear:

Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence.<sup>162</sup>

Tillich asserts that it is precisely the circular nature of this process that denotes the correlative nature of theology. For in this circular process the questions implied in existence and the answers implied in the divine self-manifestation become inseparable. They are truly interdependent. Tillich is careful at this point to argue that this interdependence does not belong in time. In other words it is not part of the subject – object structure of reality but is part of the depth, or essential unity, of human life. It is the point where the existing human approaches unity with what is essentially human in the ground of being. This assertion stands against Macleod's assertion that there is a logical flaw in Tillich's use of both "ontological question" and "ontological quest" to refer to the drive towards depth in experience.<sup>163</sup> For Tillich, question and quest are inseparable aspects of humanity's being under the conditions of existence. We can say that for Tillich, human existence *is* the ontological question. Thus,

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<sup>161</sup> Paul Tillich, *Ultimate Concern, dialogues with students* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 56.

<sup>162</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 69.

<sup>163</sup> Alistair M. Macleod, *Tillich, an essay on the role of ontology in his philosophical theology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 31-41.

human beings ask the ontological question that is implied in their being. The asking as it is apparent in culture is the quest and existence is the question.

We may now look back to the analysis of reason and revelation as Tillich's first application of the method of correlation in his systematic theology. The correlation of reason with revelation is not a surface coupling of two aspects of the structure of grasping and shaping reality. As Frank Rees asserts, it is not a simple "this goes with that" relationship.<sup>164</sup> Rather, in a full analysis of reason, Tillich argues that one becomes aware of elements of reason that are in conflict. He calls this reason under the conditions of existence. He goes on to argue that the elements of reason are in perpetual conflict and that they give rise to the demand within reason itself for revelation. Revelation is the breaking in of the essential nature of reason in which there is a resolution of the conflict in reason. Correlation, therefore, is the detailed analysis of the structure of being under the conditions of existence, the discovery of polar conflicts that inherently drive towards the perfect unity of all polar elements and the revelation of the potential for perfect union that is only grasped through the language of symbol. This last element of the correlation of reason and revelation is described by Tillich as the "breaking in" of their essential unity: revelation discloses the depth to which reason has been pressing and questing. By affirming the essential unity of the polar conflicts found in the structure of being under the conditions of existence a correlation is discovered between existential conflict and essential unity, between human existence and God. Tillich demonstrates precisely this in his analysis of being and its subsequent correlation with God, his analysis of existence and its subsequent correlation with Jesus as the Christ, his analysis of life and its subsequent correlation with Spirit, and his analysis of history and its subsequent correlation with the Kingdom of God. In every case the conflicts encountered in existence are found to be resolved

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<sup>164</sup> Frank D. Rees, 'Beating around the bush: Methodological directions for Australian theology,' *Pacifica* 15 (October 2002): 285, 286.

in their essential unity. In each case essential unity is spoken of in terms of Christian symbolism, a fact which speaks again of the correlation between philosophy and faith, which Tillich refers to most potently in his essay entitled *Biblical religion and the search for ultimate reality*.

Tillich's description of the apologetic method of correlation was a deliberate attempt to restate one of the key questions of 19<sup>th</sup> century modern theology, the question of the possibility of a 'mediating theology'. Friedrich Schleiermacher was the theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who most effectively attempted to articulate a mediating theology, reconciling historical Christianity with modern scientific consciousness.<sup>165</sup> Convinced that theology must continue attempting to fulfil Schleiermacher's quest, Tillich saw the idea of depth as the quest for the ultimate and revelation as the state of being grasped by the ultimate. He proposed that the category of the ultimate provides a way to understand Schleiermacher without falling into the trap of faith as mere subjective feeling, leaving it languishing in the realm of psychology.<sup>166</sup>

### **Conversation in Tillich's theology**

Having outlined Tillich's understanding of the religious situation, the quest for revelation and correlation we must now ask how all of this may become the basis for a theology of conversation.

Tillich's understanding of revelation and of the correlation between the questions inherent in existence and the answers implied in the revelation of the essential unity of being has been subject to extensive critique. Confining the apologetic nature of theology to the correlation of ontological categories at the level of *depth* runs the risk of obscuring the meaning

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<sup>165</sup> Clayton, *The concept of correlation*, 7.

<sup>166</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol I, 47, 48.

of theology and holding it captive in ontological philosophy. Furthermore, Tillich's method of correlation appears to be one sided in favour of Christian theology. Theology always has the answers and existence, expressed through culture, always asks the questions. What then has culture to contribute apart from a statement of the dilemma of existence? It is at this point that Frank Rees' question, outlined earlier in this chapter, becomes a crucial element in our analysis of Tillich's cultural theology. Is culture free to speak with its own voice or does theology determine the role of culture in the correlation?

Tillich is aware of the demand for a correlative theology to acknowledge the contribution that existence, and therefore culture in its depth, may make to the revelation of essential unity. His awareness is outlined in his theology of the participatory potentiality of the divine life and in his expansive work on the psychological presence and impact of what he calls ontological anxiety. We will deal with the psychological aspects later but here it is important to note his philosophical attempt to include the voice of existence in the theological conversation.

Tillich's language of symbolism and its drive into the ontological depth of all elements of existence is an attempt to place the theologian in a relational engagement with culture, society and politics. Tillich uses his ontological polarities to assert exactly how God is present in every element of existence and exactly how every element of existence has a free and participatory role in its relationship with God.

God is the principle of participation as well as the principle of individualisation. The divine life participates in every life as its ground and aim. God participates in everything that is; he has community with it; he shares its destiny.<sup>167</sup>

That God should share the destiny of all beings does not mean that God is subject to destiny and therefore not free. What Tillich suggests is that each human being, each society,

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<sup>167</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 272.

each culture, has the potential to affirm and participate in the ongoing creativity and self-transcendence of being itself, the divine life. So whenever a human person, both as individual and as participating member of society, is able to affirm being in spite of the threat of non-being, that person is understood to have fulfilled, to a greater or lesser extent, the potential of human being. Being itself takes this fulfilled potential into its own dynamic self-transcendence. The human life, in all of its expressions, is born as pure potentiality. Living through the estrangement of existence, this potentiality is fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent and returns in this fulfilled state to the origin of its potentiality. In this way the potentiality of the divine life is continuously fulfilled and transcended through participation with existence. For Tillich, these acts of human life and affirmation are expressions of the divine life, the life of being in which human life participates, albeit its potentiality is only partially fulfilled. God, the power of all being, is alive in and participates in the processes of all life. Any claim that God is static and without growth and potentiality, is for Tillich a claim that God is dead.<sup>168</sup>

Tillich states his case for conversation in these terms of ontological participation. It is clear, therefore, that the idea of conversation is implicit in Tillich's theology though still in terms of ontological categories that are in danger of obscuring the meaning of conversation in his theology. Though he can see the need to demonstrate that human existence and its manifestations in culture, politics and society is able to participate freely in being, ultimately his concept of the ontological unity of all existence in being-itself means that this *theological* understanding determines the significance of all elements of culture. Thus, Rees' question remains potently urgent. How can a theological conversation allow cultural, social and political elements to speak with their own voices, without reducing them to ontological categories that predetermine their theological significance?

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<sup>168</sup> Tillich, *Systematic theology* Vol 3, 450.

Another approach, however, to the relationship between theology and culture begins with the existential and psychological *experience* of depth, as a means of demonstrating the existential realities referred to in the philosophical analysis of depth. This solution was offered by Tillich himself in his lectures on biblical religion and the quest for ultimate reality and in his extensive psychological study of ontological anxiety in *The Courage To Be*.

### **The Courage To Be**

Tillich has incorporated his full awareness of the question raised by Frank Rees in his discussion of the existential impact of non-being in the human life. He has done so by drawing our attention to the human experience of ontological anxiety that leads to faith. His answer is couched in terms of the correlation of philosophy and theology at the point of their shared existential concern for the defeat of non-being by the power of being itself. In the following discussion we will outline Tillich's approach to this question in both his lectures entitled, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*<sup>169</sup> and his extensive work on ontological anxiety in his lectures published in the book *The Courage To Be*.<sup>170</sup>

In his lectures on the apparent conflict between biblical religion and philosophy Tillich makes us aware that if each is allowed to speak freely and with its own voice there is an apparently irreconcilable difference between the two disciplines. Biblical religion is personal and dynamic, according to Tillich, whereas the philosophy of ontology tends predominantly toward the universal and static idea of ultimate reality. The greater part of Tillich's published

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<sup>169</sup> Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion And The Search For Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

<sup>170</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1952).

lectures on this topic pose the question of the profound differences between the two and it is only in the final chapters that Tillich offers his resolution.

Tillich asserts that the philosophical quest for ultimate reality and the ultimate concern of faith in the religious sense have the same object of concern. In both disciplines a question is implicit. For the person of faith God is the ultimate question and the one for whom faith is engaged in the ultimate quest. For the person of faith God is and must be the ultimate truth in everything. For the philosopher the question or quest is for ultimate reality. The philosopher is bound to know that if such a thing as ultimate reality can be discerned in human experience the ultimate in personal relationship must be implied within it. Thus, Tillich suggests that it is the existential condition of ultimate concern, that is necessary for both theologian and philosopher, that creates the correlation between the two.<sup>171</sup> It is at this existential level that the strictly apologetic nature of Tillich's system leaves room for the development of a conversational correlation such as the one suggested by Rees. Before we attempt to show how this might happen by means of the development of a theological method, we must outline more clearly Tillich's attempt to offer philosophy the right to formulate answers in conversation with theology.

In Tillich's book *The Courage To Be* he outlines his understanding of the existential psychology that leads a person either to the state of ultimate concern as philosopher, or to the state of ultimate concern as person of faith. The ontological question, or *depth*, is experienced by the human person as ontological anxiety. Ontological anxiety drives the human person into a confrontation with depth, or as Tillich describes the experience, with the abyss of non-being as a threat to being. Ontological anxiety is that element in a person's experience that drives one to choose between despair and courage in the quest to live with the awareness of one's own

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<sup>171</sup> Tillich, *Biblical Religion*, 58-62.

depth. Tillich argues that the response of courage is a direct correlation with faith, which Tillich describes as *ultimate concern*.

This is the question of the courage to *be*. This moment in the development of the journey of faith is what Johannes Metz describes when he says the human being, "... does not possess his (sic) being unchallenged, he cannot take his being for granted as God does..."<sup>172</sup>

The most universal root of ontological anxiety, according to Tillich, is the immovable unalterable fact of human mortality. Death and the trail of separation that it leaves behind it resides always just beneath the urbane surface of the human psyche. The reality of the humanness of death is possibly never so confronting to us as it is in times of war and injustice. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of world war and the flood of existentialist art and literature that expressed the question of non-being with renewed energy was a challenge to the optimism of modernity and a demand to humanity to face up to the fearful reality of its own finitude. Given the real presence of the threat of non-being, how does the human person face it? Tillich says that the pre-rational statement, "There is something and not nothing" points us to the philosophical assertion that being (something) is the basis upon which we describe non-being (nothing). Without the something, the definition of nothing as the absence of something would not exist. Therefore, non-being depends on being for its definition and power. Non-being has power only through our experience of it as a threat to the being we know and live in. Here we can see that the ultimate question, or depth of human existence, that is the object of philosophical analysis is a distinctly personal and existential phenomenon: ontological anxiety, or the anxiety of non-being. "Anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible non-being."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>173</sup> Tillich, *The courage to be*, 44.

To be human is to be aware of the sting of non-being, and ironically it is this awareness that gives us the vitality that is needed to live at all. It is this awareness that brings with it the realization of both our relatedness to being itself (God) and our estrangement from being itself, that is, our situation as finite beings in existence threatened by non-being. This situation is described in the Genesis story of 'creation and fall' (Gen 1-3).

Ontological anxiety is more than the fear of death, however. The anxiety of being and non-being is more complex than the simple confrontation with mortality, even if this confrontation is a foundational element of anxiety. The complexity of this issue brings us to Tillich's existential study of the nature of ontological anxiety.

Tillich identifies three types of ontological anxiety that he says are always present in the human condition and that are a part of human self-consciousness. Each type has been more prevalent during a period of Western history. It is not surprising then that Tillich argued that the historical situation of the early twenty first century produced its own particular type of ontological anxiety. Such a development demonstrates the inherent obsolescence of Tillich's theological conclusions though not of his theological method.

The first type of ontological anxiety is the anxiety of *fate and death*.<sup>174</sup> This type of anxiety is foundational to all anxiety and is the root of all other anxiety, an idea that the author of the letter to the Hebrews describes as a form of human slavery to fear (Heb 2:15). Death is known existentially as the complete loss of self with the extinction of the physical body. Fate is the realization that we are finite. For example, we live in this time and not any other time. When we choose one course of action we automatically forfeit countless other possibilities.

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<sup>174</sup> Tillich, *The courage to be*, 50.

Fate, therefore, refers to our finitude, a situation we cannot escape. This situation suggests that humanity is never universally free.<sup>175</sup>

The second type of anxiety is the anxiety of *emptiness and meaninglessness*.<sup>176</sup> This type of anxiety is part of humanity's spiritual life. Tillich describes the spiritual self-affirmation of the human person as the ability to participate in all of the different 'spheres of meaning' in existence. He calls this our spiritual creativity, the ability to love what we are participating in and also to love ourselves for participating. For example, the scientist loves what it is that she is observing, and she loves herself for observing it. The root of the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is doubt. Doubt is the normal and healthy response to our finitude. A person cannot participate in reality universally, therefore questions arise. Meaninglessness occurs when doubt overtakes participation. The person withdraws because existence in its entirety evokes only questions and unknowing (of the destructive kind) and therefore undermines the capacity to participate. For Tillich, the anxiety of meaninglessness refers to the loss of any sense of the overall or universal meaning of existence. This can be called, in existential terms, the loss of ultimate concern. The anxiety of emptiness refers to the loss of participation in the concrete forms of meaning, such as, faith community, symbols, ritual, etc. Tillich asserts that this anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness is the anxiety of the modern age, the age into which he was born and that ended in the early part of the twentieth century, and a historical situation in which he fully participated. That situation had its roots in the Romantic reaction to modernism. Romanticism held that nothing contained the essence of meaning in and of itself. All things pointed beyond themselves to their depth, or universal meaning, similarly to Plato.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 50-53.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>177</sup> Paul Tillich, *History of Christian Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1967), 367-384.

The third type of ontological anxiety is the anxiety of *Guilt and Condemnation*.<sup>178</sup> Every human person, according to Tillich, exists in a situation of “finite freedom”. This situation of finite freedom means that the human being is able to make decisions that affirm her own being. Accordingly she is also able to make decisions that negate her own being. The reality of being human is that both of these possibilities occur within the human life. Being is either affirmed or negated in the form of free decisions that are mingled in the human experience. This situation leads each person to experience guilt, the sense of having negated oneself in a concrete action or moral decision. The experience of condemnation is the extreme, or universal, sense of having lost one’s own destiny through self-negating decisions. In both of these experiences the judge is one’s own conscience.

Each of these three forms of ontological anxiety is, according to Tillich, intermingled within us and creates in us this state of anxiety. This anxiety can lead us to despair, when we turn towards it and face it without the shields of our childhood or our religion.

Ontological anxiety is not only ontological in that it is implied in the structure of being. It is also existential; in other words it is implied in our existence. This can lead us to the feeling of hopelessness that comes when we consider that this is just who we are and there is no other alternative, no matter how much we desire it. Nonetheless, Tillich argues that even here there is the basis for courage:

Non-being is felt as absolutely victorious. But there is a limit to its victory; non-being is *felt* as victorious, and feeling presupposes being.<sup>179</sup>

This is the despair implied in the human situation. There is just enough being for us to be aware of the overwhelming threat of non-being. Tillich also describes this anxiety of the threat of non-being as self-estrangement. The existing self is estranged from the essential self

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<sup>178</sup> Tillich, *The courage to be*, 58.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

necessarily, for that is what existence is. This self-estrangement is experienced as the inner conflict between the existing self and essential self and, for Tillich, this inner conflict may only be overcome with the courageous affirmation of one's essential being in spite of the concrete reality of the existing self. This is what Tillich means by "the courage to be", which takes various forms. It involves accepting the reality of ontological anxiety and thus affirming oneself in the face of that anxiety. The courage to be in spite of self-estrangement enables the person to approach integration as a centred and healthy being. The courage to be is thus the event or expression of the 'victory' of being over non-being, even when it takes the form of acceptance of anxiety, guilt, meaningless and so forth. This way of describing ontological anxiety attracts both the admiration and critique of theologians seeking to apply the answers of psychology to the formulation of a new theology for the post-modern era.

Tillich asserts that when a person faces their own ontological anxiety, and looks into the abyss of their own finitude, they embark on the primary task of the human person.<sup>180</sup> It is the task of facing anxiety with courage that initiates the process of the transformation of the person into an integrated, centred person of faith:

... to become whole and integrated is painful, it is a process which involves conflict and crisis, and all spiritual direction is involved with the crisis of the soul.<sup>181</sup>

The experience of healthy integrated faith that enables the human person to live fully despite the presence of ontological anxiety is a boundary line experience. A boundary line experience implies that a person lives between alternatives, acknowledging the truth in both and the flaws in both, courageously choosing to live in the light of both alternatives.<sup>182</sup> In ontological terms it means neither a flight from non-being, nor a plunge into despair. It means

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<sup>180</sup> Tillich, *Biblical Religion*, 85.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 104-105.

<sup>182</sup> For a full discussion of the boundary line experience see Paul Tillich, *On the boundary* (London: Collins, 1967).

affirming being without seeking the means to escape the threat of non-being. It is a journey with being and non-being, an embracing of both our poverty and our existence; it takes the courage to be.

Examples of the Christian awareness of this kind of courage to be on the boundary line of despair and acceptance are present in the history of theology and Christian spirituality. Jurgen Moltmann discovered that the lament of the Psalmist (Psalm 39) gave voice to his own lament in a World War Two prisoner of war camp.<sup>183</sup>

I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; (in Luther's German, 'I have to eat up my suffering within myself') my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: "Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is... my lifetime is nothing in your sight. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up and do not know who will gather.

In the traditions of Christian mysticism the earliest Desert Fathers implied the human state of anxiety of being and non-being in their teaching on prayer. For Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) and John Cassian (365-435) the prayer of "no thinking" and "passionlessness" was a form of embracing the boundary line situation of humanity before God.<sup>184</sup> This was a radical turning towards the threat of non-being in order to be utterly open and dependent on the one in whom we have our being. This prayer of negation stands in contrast to the human tendency to flee towards fear and participation that seeks to mask the reality of the human situation.

The unknown author of the 13<sup>th</sup> century classic of Christian mysticism *The Cloud of Unknowing* articulates the relationship between apophatic prayer (the prayer of unknowing) and ontological anxiety by declaring that until a person becomes aware of their own existence, that is, the fact that they exist over and against God, they are unable to achieve a state of

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<sup>183</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>184</sup> William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The science of love* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 17-19.

contemplation. It is the abiding sorrow of the realization that we exist and are therefore estranged from God that leads us ultimately towards God.

Everyone has something to sorrow over, but none more than he (sic) who knows and feels that he is... When this sorrow is genuine it is full of holy longing. Without such longing no one on earth could cope with it, or endure it.<sup>185</sup>

This venture to confront our humanity with the desire of contemplation is full of risk, and is an indication of a fundamental difference between the approach to ontological anxiety between Christian mysticism and post-modern existentialism. Existentialism tends towards despair, mysticism towards desire.

According to Tillich, a great proportion of our living, not only our spiritual musings, involves an implicit flight from this despair. We seek objects of fear against which we can struggle and thus affirm our being. We shield ourselves with religion and the demand for certainty. We participate in each other and in life, only to be overtaken by the growing realization that even as we participate doubt rises within us. We contemplate suicide and realize that this would only be the courage *not to be* and would not deliver us from the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, meaninglessness and emptiness. One of the greatest dangers of religion is that it can actually serve to shield us from the realization that we exist, and thus become an unhealthy flight from God and life.

Tillich explores the human experience of *courage* as a faithful response to ontological anxiety. He makes a clear distinction between the courage of *faith* and the courage of *pathological religion*, which is a form of courage that is ultimately insufficient for the task of living with ontological anxiety and which is recognizable by its refusal to allow existential questioning and doubt in the individual (hegemony). He describes the *courage to be* as the way

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<sup>185</sup> Author unknown, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Originally written in about 1370, translated by Clifton Walters (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 104.

in which the human person looks honestly at the threat of non-being and says ‘yes’ to their own being despite the threat of non-being.<sup>186</sup>

Every ‘type’ of the courage to be seeks to transcend the conditions of existence and find what Tillich calls “...the power of being itself and a courage to be that is beyond the threat of non-being.” Though this is a quest doomed to failure within the conditions of existence, it means that all forms of the courage to be have what Tillich calls a “...religious root.” The ‘depth’ of the courage to be is the quest for being itself.

Tillich describes two main ‘types’ of the courage to be that he argues are based on the symbolism inherent in the very structure of existence. Tillich asserts that the “...polar interdependence of participation and individualization”<sup>187</sup> symbolize the structure of our existence. The courage to be can be, and has been throughout history, manifested through both *participation* and *individualization*.

The courage to be as *participation* seeks being itself through the quest for total identification with being itself. This is the goal of mysticism. The self is affirmed through the courage to lose oneself in total identification with being itself (*esse ipsum*). Identification with being itself is self-affirmation because the true self, that self which in Zen Buddhism is the true inner “I” as opposed to the false external self, and in Christianity is the “New Human” in Christ, as opposed to the “Old Human”, is identical with being itself.<sup>188</sup> The truly courageous part of mysticism, according to Tillich, is the human ability to evade the appearance of meaning and being in the structures of existence. Therefore, the mystic courageously affirms self as utterly identified with being itself. The mystical courage to be is most developed in the eastern

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<sup>186</sup> Tillich, *Courage to be*, 152.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>188</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: notes on contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 8-9 & 41.

religions. Mysticism is present in all religions, however, where being is acknowledged as the depth, or ground of all existence. Clearly it is not only religion that holds being to be the ground of existence. These are ontological, and therefore philosophical, terms that are valid for philosophy and present in the way cultures and societies speak about their own existence. Thus, a correlation exists at the level of the courage to be as it is manifest through the drive for participation.

The courage to be as an *individual* seeks being itself as a relationship that affirms the being of the individual in relation to being itself. Thus Tillich talks about the “divine-human encounter as courage to be.”<sup>189</sup> The image here is of the human person who is able to affirm their own existence *despite* death/fate, emptiness/meaninglessness, guilt/condemnation, because they have had a personal relational encounter with the source of being which gives them courage and confidence in the power of being over non-being. Albrecht Durer epitomizes this individual confidence in his classic engraving “Knight, Death and the Devil”, in which the human person is shown as a knight in armour accompanied through the anxieties of life by death on one side and the devil on the other, courageously looking forward despite his threatening environment.

Tillich argues that this type of courage, the courage of an *individual*, is not the complete individualization of existentialism, which teaches the affirmation of the self by the self. This courage to be as an individual is greater in that it affirms the self-based on an encounter with one that transcends the self, namely, the ground of being. Hence, Tillich’s famous rewording of Luther’s reformation experience, “One could say that the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.”<sup>190</sup> Courage in this form is the

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<sup>189</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to be*, 156.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

courage of participation, which does not include identification. Paradoxically, then, there is an inter-dependence between the courage of an individual and the courage of participation.

Martin Luther, in whom Tillich suggests the courage to be as oneself in the encounter with the ground of being is at its highest expression, also experienced the *breakdown* of this form of the courage to be. There were times in his experience where everything became meaningless, even his theology. These moments of utter despair were later embraced by the existentialists and they formed the basis of much of the meaninglessness of Tillich's historical situation. Tillich suggests that a courage to be that was sufficient for his historical situation had to be a courage that accepts both mystical participation (union) and individual participation (relationship) and transcends them both. This courage to be he calls *absolute faith*.

The idea of faith is not entirely fulfilled in either participation or individualisation according to Tillich. Faith must be able to respond to the current state of meaninglessness that both mysticism and participation have never fully achieved. Absolute faith, in Tillich's view, is the state of knowing oneself to be accepted whilst being in the grip of despair in the face of meaninglessness. In this case one may not fully realize the power of being itself unless one is gripped by its acceptance of oneself in the midst of the despair of meaninglessness. When a person knows the state of despair to be a state of knowing, then the person is able to say "yes" despite the despair. In a sense, for Tillich, one is only gripped by the full power of being when one fully realizes the complete absence of meaning in existence. One must accept meaninglessness to come face to face with being itself. In this *absolute faith*, mystical union and relational participation are accepted and transcended. This is the moment of grace that powerfully underlines the state of utter dependence on being itself. It includes both union and relationship with being itself. The "I" is found in the moment of its own loss.

...the acceptance of despair is in itself faith and on the boundary line of the courage to be.<sup>191</sup>

In this argument we have arrived at the central element of Tillich's acknowledgement that existence, as it expresses itself through religion, culture, society and politics, has a 'voice' in the theological correlation. The idea of absolute faith expresses the courage to 'voice' the human existential situation. Tillich implicitly acknowledges that without this self-aware perspective into the human situation faith is not expressed and certainly revelation has no audience. Thus, the cultural voice is determinative for the interaction of faith with revelation. The acceptance of the self is an act of faith that represents the voice of the existing being. And yet, for Tillich, it remains an act of faith that occurs under the influence of revelation, the encounter with being-itself and the revelation of acceptance in spite of unacceptability. The greatest answer to the ontological question is the acceptance of faith, yet that faith can still only come into being under the influence of revelation.

Does Tillich, then, really answer Rees' critique? Can the human person or the human society and culture under the conditions of existence ever speak without the prior impact of revelation? Tillich's insistence that a correlation occurs in a cycle of interdependence shared by the questioner and the respondent points to the importance of careful consideration and evaluation of Tillich's method of correlation and Rees' suggestion that it precluded a real conversation, in which the human condition is able to speak with its own independent voice.

The analysis of Tillich's attempt to demonstrate that the theology of correlation extends beyond ontological philosophy and into the real existential experience of human beings has shown that Tillich understood that a real correlation needed a human contribution that could potentially be more than just a question or quest. Nevertheless, his theology of correlation does not allow for genuine *conversation* in which all participants have a mutual contribution.

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 170.

Paul Tillich was outstanding amongst 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians in his attempt to take full account of human culture in his theology of faith. He was, as he wrote himself, attempting to respond to the failure of Schleiermacher's project of reunification, in which it was hoped that faith and the modern mind would be reunified.<sup>192</sup> He was not alone in this 20<sup>th</sup> century response to the height of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal theology. Karl Barth is the most notable theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to respond to Schleiermacher and he did so by offering the devastating critique of Liberal theology in his Kerygmatic theology. Tillich and Barth debated long and hard about the appropriate response to Schleiermacher with Tillich coming down firmly on the side of human existence, and therefore culture, as the starting point for understanding faith and revelation in the modern world.

In a theological career that lived on the boundary between two centuries, divided by the two world wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the boundary line of two cultures, German and American, Tillich devoted himself to the analysis of culture and the participation in culture as the human receptacle of revelation. From his early studies in the philosophy of F.W.J Schelling, that laid the foundation of his views on the relationship between the existential and the essential elements of being, his experiences as an army chaplain in the First World War to his great systematic attempt to correlate existence with the essential dimension, Tillich was devoting himself to the "establishment of the place of theological work within the whole of science" in an attempt to anchor the modern rational mind in ultimate concern, or, faith.<sup>193</sup> He did this as a teacher of theology and philosophy and through the publication of many of his lectures. His great attempt at reunification was also present in the publishing of three volumes of outstanding

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<sup>192</sup> Paul Tillich, *A history of Christian thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 386-410.

<sup>193</sup> Jerome Arthur Stone, "Tillich and Schelling's Later Philosophy" in *Kairos and Logos: studies in the roots and implications of Tillich's theology* ed. John J. Carey (Mercer:North American Paul Tillich Society, 1978), 14,15. And Paul Wiebe, "From System to Systematics: the origin of Tillich's theology" in *Kairos and Logos: studies in the roots and implications of Tillich's theology* ed. John J. Carey (North American Paul Tillich Society, 1978), 109.

sermons preached in college chapels across America and in the great work of his life, the publishing of his *Systematic Theology*.

Without Tillich the 20<sup>th</sup> century reaction to Schleiermacher would have been overwhelmingly negative. Tillich, whilst acknowledging Schleiermacher's limitations, kept alive the vision of theology holding its place in human reason and understanding, and passed on to the generations that were to follow him the task of always attempting and reattempting what Schleiermacher proposed. It is because of this vision that we have the modern foundations of a post-modern conversational theology.

Yet at the very heart of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before Tillich had even fully realised the breadth of his own attempt at Schleiermacher's challenge to answer the question posed to religion by modernity, his attempt was named as a failure by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he mused in prison about the response of religion to modernity. Bonhoeffer claimed that Tillich and the religious socialists had sought to interpret the "evolution of the world in a religious sense", that is, that they had tried to interpret the shape of the world as essentially religious.<sup>194</sup> Bonhoeffer claimed that to do so was to interpret the world against its own will and to misunderstand the world. Thus, Bonhoeffer famously claimed that Tillich was among those who had "sought to understand the world better than it understood itself".

This criticism of Tillich is more penetrating than the suggestion that the content of Tillich's theology was subject to obsolescence. The assertion that Tillich sought to understand the world better than it understood itself is the suggestion that Tillich may have misunderstood that the world had developed well beyond the need for an understanding of itself as essentially

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<sup>194</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison* ed. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, and Renate Bethge, with Ilse Todt; English edition edited by John W. de Gruchy; translated by Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 424-431.

religious. If this is so it means that the world may well have an understanding of itself that is fundamentally beyond and independent of the religious.

Bonhoeffer's critique of Tillich was part the formation of ideas about the place of the religious in human culture that were interrupted by his untimely death at the close of the Second World War. The critique and the questions that arise from it, however, are directly related to Rees' question about the possibility of culture having a real voice in a real conversation with theology. The potential of such a conversation is clearly that culture in, conversation with theology, will offer an interpretation of *itself* that will inform that understanding theology's interpretation of the world and may possibly critique that understanding.

Here it is helpful to consider, as an example, the work of pastoral theologian Donald Capps. Capps critiques Tillich's method in the context of his discussion of shame and narcissistic behaviour. He asserts that Tillich was the only theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that did not deal patronizingly with psychology. Tillich, he argues, put forward the case of the divided self (a psychological term describing the division between the 'true' self and the 'false' self, the latter being a division between the real self and the idealised self) coherently and meaningfully for both psychology and theology. Tillich, argues Capps, spoke of human self-estrangement, which meant the self, estranged from its essential self. Capps quotes Tillich's essay "Estrangement and reconciliation in Modern Thought" where he argues that the self that is estranged from itself, or divided within itself, is suffering from self-hate. The self that is able to reconcile the division within itself moves towards a centred cohesion that manifests as self-love.<sup>195</sup>

While Capps applauds Tillich for his identification of the psychological situation of the divided self, he argues that Tillich's theology of reintegration of the self is grounded in a dated

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<sup>195</sup> Donald Capps, *The depleted self, sin in a narcissistic age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 90-94.

understanding of psychology that is no longer applicable. Capps argues that Tillich approached the healing of the self from the perspective of a theology of guilt.<sup>196</sup> According to Capps, Tillich describes the divided self in terms that give different moral value to the different aspects of self. The aspects of the self that reject radical Christian freedom and seek to escape themselves in “law, conformity and convention” are neurotic. The neurotic self is described as the worst part of the self. The re-centring of the self is achieved by courageously accepting the worst part of one’s self, in spite of its neurotic tendencies. This is a re-statement of what Tillich, using ontological and existential terms, calls the defeat of ontological anxiety by the courage to be. Capps argues that this approach sets up an internal hierarchy of selves. In this state, one is always aware through the experience of guilt, that one has a neurotic self that must be accepted in spite of its neurosis.

Such a theology of guilt no longer reflects the experience of most people. Guilt, while still a relevant and appropriate emotion where it is clearly applicable, is not the predominant emotion governing the self-awareness of the modern or postmodern person. In response to psychology ‘speaking back’ to theology, *a theology of shame* and its different approach to sin and the healing of the divided self is needed if theology is to respond appropriately to the current psychological situation.

According to Capps, the emotion of *guilt* occurs when the self has failed to act appropriately in relation to another person, societal structure or collective moral expectations. Thus, the emphasis of the emotion of guilt is on what the person has *done* and how it affects others or how it impacts on the human relationship with the divine as the case may be.<sup>197</sup> Capps argues that *shame* occurs when the self fails to live up to its own expectations. This occurs within the context of the divided self and its psychological impact bears no relation to the

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 91.

wrong done to others, other than in the way it constitutes the self-perception of having failed to live up to the ideal self. Raimond Gaita may clarify this to a certain degree though not entirely. “Guilt focuses on what one has done. The moral focus of shame is on what one has been revealed to be in doing it.”<sup>198</sup> Capps would add, as Gaita does later in his book, that shame is not only related to one’s own actions, but also to the way the actions of others reveal us to be less than we had idealized ourselves to be.

Capps offers an alternative way of healing the shameful and divided self to Tillich’s courageous self-acceptance “in spite of.” The experience of shame, according to Capps, leads to the ill-fated attempt of the divided self to heal itself. The resulting behaviour causes the person to see herself as an end. Her behaviour becomes exclusively focused on the self. Such behaviour is identified by psychology as narcissism. Narcissism in the psyche of the individual and the society is the behavioural symptom of the self-attempting to heal itself of the experience of shame. Rather than reinforce the divided self by identifying its false fragment as a failure of self and therefore within the framework of guilt, Capps argues that the false self must be valued as an authentic self and affirmed for what it is. When the true self and the false self-acknowledge each other and embrace each other’s existence as crucial for the constitution of the centred (or essential) self, there is opportunity for the false self to begin to reconcile with itself and with the true self. This mutual affirmation of selves is called “positive mirroring” in psychology.<sup>199</sup> Rather than acceptance of the false self in spite of its evident fragmentation, an approach which implies the moral dominance of the true self and the guilty, tolerated presence of the false self overcome by courage, Capps argues that theology must embrace shame as the basis for human self-awareness. Positive mirroring, based on an understanding of the dynamics of shame, is understood to be the most applicable method in psychology for the current

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<sup>198</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A common humanity: thinking about love and truth and justice* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 1999), 34.

<sup>199</sup> Capps, *The depleted self*, 91, 92.

generation, and theology must learn from psychology in its articulation of the human situation now.

The importance of this argument for this thesis is that Capps is asking theology to reconsider its default reliance on a theology of guilt and to listen to what psychology is saying today about the dominance of the experience of shame rather than guilt in our society. We could argue that Tillich was drawing on the psychology of his day in order to conclude that guilt was the driving emotion of his time. We could also assert that Tillich was simply not aware of developments in psychology because he was allowing his own theological and philosophical position to dictate the correlation. Capps argues the latter and asserts that it was easy and natural for Tillich to apply such an answer to his theology for theology had used guilt as its framework for the discussion of sin and salvation since its beginnings. Capps rightly wonders if theology is able to listen to psychology when it departs from the well-entrenched emphasis on guilt. In other words, was Tillich really prepared to allow psychology to ask its questions or did he correlate guilt with the existential fragmentation of the self, having predetermined that guilt was common ground for both disciplines?

A comprehensive exploration of the issues raised in Capps' critique of Tillich no doubt requires significantly more time than we can devote to it here. Our brief attention to it has provided an example from the twentieth century, however, of the perspective, articulated by Bonhoeffer, that Tillich sought to understand the world better than it understood itself and in doing so failed to understand the nature of human existence and the need for a greater openness to *conversational* correlations. This example and the question raised by it lead us directly back to Frank Rees' question about the nature of conversation and the assertion that in order to develop a conversational correlation theology must at least draw close to reflecting the real situation of existence as the world experiences it. Such a theology must be developed on the basis of a conversational method that builds on Tillich's unparalleled work as a theologian who

dealt with existence and its role in faith with absolute seriousness. The goal of this essay is to develop a method of conversational theology, present it as a hypothesis of conversational theological engagement with culture and to test it in conversation with three examples of Australian cultural expression.

In this second chapter we have undertaken a thorough examination of Tillich's theological position and his method of correlation that sought to demonstrate how human existence is directly correlated with revelation. We did this in order to explore the roots of Frank Rees' suggestion that Tillich fell short of providing a methodological approach that clearly heard the real 'voice' of human culture. The chapter, having detailed Tillich's understanding of revelation and his method of correlation, considered the critique that Tillich's method of correlation demonstrated an incapacity to engage adequately with the culture. If theology is said to be *the* answer to the questions of existence then it will manifest the tendency to cease listening to the answers that culture itself may posit in response to its own questions and thus miss the opportunity for a real conversation.

## **Chapter Three**

### *Critical Voices: An Exploration of Method*

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter we carefully analysed the theology of Paul Tillich as a basis for the development of a conversational theology that could be applied to the Australian context. In this chapter we will look more specifically at Frank Rees' critique of Tillich's theology of correlation. Using Rees' critique as a starting point we will draw a number of other critical voices into the discussion and will then formulate a methodological hypothesis for how to engage theology in a more effective conversation with culture. The goal of this chapter, then, is to outline a methodological approach to correlative conversation that will enable theology to 'hear' the real 'voice' of cultural expressions it engages in conversation.

Having suggested a methodological hypothesis the chapter will prepare us for its application in conversation with a selection of Australian cultural expressions in order to test whether or not the proposed method actually does enable theology to engage culture in real conversation.

#### **Critical Voices**

As we have alluded to in the previous chapter, Frank Rees has suggested that Tillich's use of the method of correlation leaves him open to the criticism that the theologian is always in control of the analysis of being and existence and is therefore dominating the choice of subjects to which the method of correlation is applied and pre-determining what meaning the

analysis of the subject will yield in theological terms. If the theologian determines the subject matter from the given culture for theological correlation and determines the meaning of each subject in the correlation, how can one adequately say that a culture has its own voice in the correlation?<sup>200</sup> Rees suggests that in order for the cultural context to truly have its own voice the theologian must add the element of conversation to the method of correlation. He suggests that the theologian must take on the stance of *humility* and allow both the language of theology and the language of culture to speak openly to each other in a mutual questioning and answering conversation.<sup>201</sup> Rees claims that Tillich's argument that all cultural and religious elements have a symbolic significance has a "reductionist impact on those elements."<sup>202</sup> By seeing all cultural elements as symbolic theology can potentially suggest that they have a theological meaning.

In an attempt to allow cultural elements, both religious and secular, to escape the reductionism of symbolism, Rees suggests that theology should rather assume that culture might have a voice that is not necessarily symbolic of some deeper theological or ontological essence. Using the idea of "correlative conversation", Rees suggests that in such an approach to contextual theological analysis both religious and secular elements of culture are "permitted their own self-expression and are subject to critique and questioning by others". This does not assume that what is said always correlates symbolically with presumed theological truths.<sup>203</sup> The apologetic nature of the method proposed by Tillich implies that the elements of existence ask the question of being, the ontological question, and theology proposes answers to those questions under the impact of revelation. By adding the element of conversation to the apologetic element in Tillich's correlation, Rees is suggesting that it ought to be a criterion of

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<sup>200</sup> Frank D. Rees, "Beating around the bush: Methodological directions for Australian theology" *Pacifica* 15 (October 2002): 285, 286.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 284, 285.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

correlation that theology demonstrate the capacity to formulate open questions and that elements of culture be looked to for answers that do not necessarily symbolise an eternal theological truth but have a real contribution to make to the formulation of an evolving contextual theology.

This method, according to Rees, introduces the element of *humility* into the work of the theologian. It adds to Tillich's ontological quest the "humble affirmation of the presence of God in all aspects of our experience", a presence that may be discovered in the unique character of the cultural expression rather than in its presumed symbolic correlation with an eternal theological truth. The claim for humility does not negate Tillich's concept of depth. Rather, it posits the possibility that culture may possess within it essential elements of being that are not yet apparent to Christian theology and it demands that theology formulate both answers and questions in a true conversation with culture that recognises that fact with humility. In order to do this with integrity the fact that the theologian operates within a theological framework must be acknowledged in an act of humble subjectivity, or self-awareness, as the questions for culture are formulated and as theology prepares itself to be changed by the conversational encounter with culture.

Rees argues that this humble affirmation is a "seeking" of God's presence and a responding to God's invitation, which he says is implicit in culture, society and politics. This assertion does not do away with the voice of theology. As mentioned above, theology stays self-consciously within the theological circle and formulates questions for existence in full awareness of its subjective pre-suppositions. A humble, conversational stance enhances this self-awareness. The question that arises now is whether or not Rees has offered an adequate method for theology to formulate free and authentic questions and whether he has offered an adequate method that allows culture to formulate its answers. In an attempt to outline the methodological direction for theology that seeks correlative conversations, Rees suggests that

correlation should be joined with the element of *imagination* allowing the theologian to ‘hear’ the voice of the cultural element and its impact on the conversation. Rees asserts that imaginative engagement with culture in a theology of correlative conversation will drive further than mere analysis of culture and will, again with humility, open itself up for transformation and reformation as a culturally engaged theology.

In order to analyse Rees’ conversational method we must turn to his broader exploration of the method in his book on the role of doubt in the journey of faith.<sup>204</sup> In this book Rees offers a method for allowing the voice of the *biblical* witness to speak freely in theological conversation. By “freely” he means without the need to interpret its voice by means of Tillich’s method of discovering the ontological depth (or symbolic significance) implicit within it. We will see that Rees offers a plausible method with regards to the voice of the biblical witness. Does he, however, offer a method for theology to allow *culture* to speak freely in the conversation he proposes?

With Walter Brueggemann, Rees suggests that we must recognize ontological questions in the biblical witness, but only as implicitly present, not explicitly present. By not referring explicitly to such questions, which for Tillich constitute ontological depth, the theologian is free to let the biblical witness speak with its own voice. Here we see Rees’ determination to suspend the reductionism of symbolism in culture and in the biblical witness. With the ontological question in ‘brackets’, the biblical witness is liberated from the probing analysis of philosophy and reveals for us a dynamic conversationalist God. Rees demonstrates the rich conversationalist nature of God in the biblical witness and suggests a Trinitarian structure for

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<sup>204</sup> Frank D. Rees, *Wrestling with doubt, theological reflections on the journey of faith* (Collegville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), Ch. 7.

its impact on theology. The biblical conversationalist God is *invitation, explorer and gatherer*, incorporating the personal aspects of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in corresponding order.

Rees has “bracketed” Tillich’s ontological question in a bold attempt to move contextual theology from an emphasis on form to an emphasis on dynamics. Yet, his assertions about conversational correlation primarily address the freedom of the biblical witness to speak with its own voice, and only allude to the equal freedom of cultural elements to speak with their own voices. Rees has not, in my view, adequately demonstrated how the theologian can set aside the prior concern of revelation as that which closes the theological circle, in order to hear the authentic voice of the cultural element that is invited into conversation as a potentially transformative element. Only in his category of God as gathering Spirit has Rees come close to doing so. Yet, even here his language is that of desired inclusiveness rather than concrete method.

### **Conversational Theology**

Rees’ approach to developing a conversational theology begins with a portrait of the biblical God as “God the conversationalist.” In this portrait he explores, as part of his theology of doubt, the ideas of God as invitation (Father), God as exploring (Son) and God as gathering (Holy Spirit).<sup>205</sup> Whilst the description of God as invitation and explorer have a great deal to say about the conversation from the perspective of theology, it is from Rees’ description of God as *gatherer* that a way opens up for the construction and attempted application of a method of correlative conversation that is open to hear the answers of culture. Rees suggests that the foundational theological idea of the Holy Spirit is that of God’s “continuing creativity within

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<sup>205</sup> Rees, *Wrestling with doubt*, 157-165.

human beings, our society and culture, and the whole creation...”<sup>206</sup> He develops this idea from his theology of God as invitation. The idea of God as invitation includes the understanding of God as one who is yet to realise the full potential of divine life and growing and developing in relationship with human beings.<sup>207</sup> This understanding of God is found in Tillich’s theology of the dynamics of the divine life and is developed by Rees to outline a theology that sees God as open to growth through relationship with all the risks that implies.<sup>208</sup>

This open *telos* of the divine life constitutes the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is the openness to grow through relationship that Rees suggests forms part of who God is in connection with the world. This openness to growth through relationship forms part of who God is in connection with the world. It is in this dynamic view of God that we may find the first clues for the construction of a truly open correlative conversation.

Rees uses the notion of *consensus* to describe the dynamics of the divine life as gatherer. He proposes three distinctive features of consensus gathering that may be applied to the conversationalist God. Firstly, a consensus attempts an agreement between all participating parties as to a “proposed direction or viewpoint.” This agreement leaves no room for an “enforced solution,” whether by the strength of one participant or by coercion. Secondly,

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 162-164.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>208</sup> Tillich’s theology of the divine life as, essentially, uniting and transcending the dynamic and the static elements of existence is central to his understanding of the fulfilment of existence *in* divine life. Primarily in the first and third volumes of his systematic theology Tillich describes the divine life as that which eternally transcends itself in dynamic growth and is in eternal conquest over the elements within itself that work against growth and transcendence. Thus, as Tillich outlines the nature of reason and its ground in being itself in volume one of his system he describes being itself in these terms. “Like being itself, reason unites a dynamic with a static element in an indissoluble amalgamation... Both the rational structure of reality and the rational structure of the mind possess duration within change and change in duration.” Thus Tillich describes a divine life that is the ground of both dynamic change and openness to the future and the form of existence. This can be described in the language of change and fulfilment. The key to this thinking, however, is that this unity and transcendence of dynamic and static elements in the divine life is eternal. Divine life eternally unites dynamics with form and transcends them both. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1*, 86.

The implications of this understanding of the divine life are outlined in Tillich’s theology of eternal life. Eternal life is not characterised by a static blessedness but by the eternal conquest of non-being by being itself. For, Tillich writes, “... there is no blessedness where there is no conquest of the opposite possibility, and there is no life where there is no “otherness.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 3*, 450.

consensus seeks to incorporate the “needs and goals” of all parties without resorting to compromise unless it is mutually agreeable to do so. In order to reach such a consensus a willingness to change needs and goals, in light of what others need and aim for, must be part of the consensus reaching dynamics. And thirdly, consensus itself is not seen as an end. Rees argues that consensus is, “...a decision to work together, with a heightened degree of awareness of each other’s needs and contribution.”<sup>209</sup> Thus, Rees argues that a relationship or conversation built on consensus *uses* consensus as an ongoing resource to build relationship, mutual understanding and peace. In this Rees sees consensus as a way of living together, rather than merely a way of conflict resolution.

If indeed the notion of consensus applies to the concept of God as gatherer, how does it do so? Rees suggests the metaphor of God as an open ended conversationalist. God invites and initiates conversation, God offers and embodies the possibilities of life as conversation in Christ, and God seeks to gather a “consensus community.” The conversation does not end with Jesus as the Christ. God is committed to the development of an ongoing relationship of conversation and consensus.<sup>210</sup>

Therefore, in this conversation both questions and answers are truly open in that they are questions that seek real answers and answers that offer a genuine response to the questioner. An important distinction between conversation about beliefs and genuine conversation in faith has been made by Noel Rowe. In the genuine conversation in faith, no agendas or convictions are hidden and the conversation partners commit themselves to a genuine self-awareness and self-disclosure.<sup>211</sup> The object of the conversation is not to convince the other to agree with me. Rather, the object is to offer to each other a genuine, open account of the experience of faith,

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>211</sup> Noel Rowe, “Are there any angels in Carlton? Australian literature and theology.” *Pacifica* 6 (June 1993): 160.

and a genuine open readiness to understand and accept what the other is sharing. The level of risk to those protective of long held doctrines is readily apparent in this model; but, unless such a risk is taken, no dialogue or conversation between theology and culture can genuinely take place.

Rowe warns us against a superficial attempt at such consensus gathering if theology is to be truly open to culture. In the last few decades there have been a number of attempts to engage culture in contextual theology in Australia that are superficial.<sup>212</sup> Rowe suggests, however, that would-be contextual theologians have been selective in their reading of culture and their selectivity is based on the theological agenda they carry with them. In his view, the contextual theology attempted in Australia so far is most definitely not a conversation between equal partners. Using Australian literature as an example, Rowe suggests that theologians have read Australian literature with a set and hidden agenda that has meant they are blind to any element in the literature that does not support their own agenda. This selective reading effectively silences the true voice of culture. Australian contextual theology “has made up its mind before exploring its heart.”<sup>213</sup> One of the key failures of contextual theology in Australia, according to Rowe, is its reticence to acknowledge that what Australian literature really has to say may be found in the dark and negative themes it explores rather than the easily accessible themes of love and redemption. Theology must “reconsider its alliance with the angels”.<sup>214</sup> It must be prepared to look for meaning in liminality and ambiguity. Dialogue must be authentic,

...without superiority, preconceptions, hidden motives or convictions on either side,  
...dialogue must happen at a level deeper than dogmas and at the risk of dogmas, and  
...it must involve genuine conversation in faith...<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>213</sup> Rowe, “Are there any angels in Carlton?” 141.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 160.

If Rowe is right, the selection of cultural expressions with which theology may have a correlative conversation must not occur on the basis of their capacity to illustrate or comment favourably on received theological tradition or dogma; nor must the analysis of the selected cultural expressions focus only on similarities with theology and readily identifiable correlations with Christian symbols. Rather, the selection of cultural expressions with which theology wishes to converse must pay attention to the capacity for *contrast* with received theology within the cultural situation and the capacity for the exploration of themes of ambiguity and liminality within those cultural expressions. Such criteria for the selection of cultural expressions may reveal a genuine desire for conversation rather than a thinly veiled desire to find support for received dogma in modern culture. These criteria, together with Rees' application of the concept of consensus gathering, will form key elements of the method that can be applied to the formation of an Australian contextual theology.

We have been considering the dynamics of *consensus gathering* and *dialogue*. To these two dynamics we are now going to add the dynamic of *relation* and the dynamic of *humility*. Humility operates in and through each of the other dynamics as their central element. These dynamics may have the potential to pay due attention to the presence of real contrasts between theology and its formulations and other expressions of culture. The dynamic of relation becomes part of the equation when we include the perspective of philosopher Martin Buber. (We shall consider Buber's ideas of relation in some detail shortly.) Each of these dynamics requires an attitude of humility. It is only in an attitude of humility that theology can genuinely engage with culture in its own right. As such, humility is an all-pervasive element that allows the other dynamics their power. These four dynamics of a conversational theology that respect the cultural and therefore contextual particularity of any given society, *consensus gathering*, *dialogue*, *relation* and *humility*, may combine to emphasise the element of attention to *contrast* in a real conversation. In other words, theology must be able to truly respect and acknowledge

the questions and answers apparent in culture as real and viable contrasting alternatives to its own voice, otherwise humility will be lacking and no real conversation will take place. Attention to contrast ensures that the theologian is sufficiently aware of the cultural voice as *other* voice. We must, therefore, spend some time gaining an understanding of the dynamics of consensus gathering, dialogue, relation and humility in the attempt to equip theology with the methodology to pay sufficient attention to contrasts with its own voice in the voice of the conversation partner.

We have stated that humility is the key dynamic that enables the theologian to engage in a correlative conversation that is characterised by consensus gathering, dialogue and relation. What then are the dynamics of humility in a correlative conversation?

Humility must be an element in both the process (conversation) and the content (correlation) of theology. We must be sure that we understand the nature of the word 'humility' as we intend it to be used. Humility understood as obsequiousness is an inappropriate approach to a conversation that seeks mutual engagement and respect, one that will enable the continuation of the conversation and that will enable the discovery and revelation of a correlation or relationship in the points of contrast between two conversation partners. If the theologian approaches the analysis of an element of culture obsequiously the conversational voice of theology is lost and no possibility of mutuality remains. The theologian becomes merely the student of culture and no more. Thus, humility must mean something other than obsequiousness. Humility must mean that both participants in the conversation have 'space' to represent themselves and their own contribution to the conversation. Humility for a conversational theology, therefore, must mean that theology, whilst maintaining its own voice, is able to create space for the voices of culture and to commit itself to a truly respectful process of listening to those voices and accounting for their claim to have something to say into the consensus space.

The dynamics of humility create the basis for genuine consensus gathering, dialogue and relation in conversation. To explain what we mean by 'relation' here, it is helpful to consider briefly Martin Buber's philosophy of relation. Buber has distinguished two types of human relations within the world of human experience. *I-It* relations are subject - object relations. The "I" is the subject experiencing the "It", which is the object. Yet Buber points out that the *I-It* relationship takes place wholly within the subject. The object in no way participates in the relationship other than allowing itself to be experienced. Thus, no matter how self-aware the subject is, when it experiences the world as object, as it unavoidably does, the experience is limited to the experience of the subject. Buber places the *I-It* in the realm of *experience* rather than relation.<sup>216</sup> For the purposes of developing a method for the application of conversational correlation, the *I-It* experience must be recognised for what it is and given secondary significance in the conversation. Conversational humility in a method that embraces contrasts in the conversing voices will mean that each conversation partner will define the conversation not as an experience (*I-It*), but as a relationship. Relations, in Buber's terms, are defined by the primary word *I-Thou*. The speaking of *I-Thou* is a matter of will and grace.<sup>217</sup> To know oneself to be in relation to another person or creature is to know the other as a whole being rather than the sum of its parts. It is to place *relation with* the other above *experience of* the other. Will, according to Buber, is the openness of the "I" to relationship with the whole. Grace is the moment in which relation comes to us. This gracious element means that *I-Thou* relation cannot be attained by the will, only prepared for. In this Buber differs significantly from Bernard Lonergan, who argues that all the different stages of consciousness are "... successive stages in the unfolding of a single thrust, the eros of the human spirit."<sup>218</sup> For Lonergan, the eros of the human spirit is the drive to know both the objective reality and the transcendent reality in

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<sup>216</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 3-12.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>218</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 13.

which it participates. I suggest that Buber would place this all in the category of experience and it would therefore situate every level of consciousness entirely in the subject. Buber's argument for the speaking of *I-Thou* invites us to consider that not only do I know the other, but that by will and grace I may be conscious of being known by the other. Such a consciousness requires the suspension of the quest for knowledge and the reception of relations.

Grace is the moment in which relation comes to us. We do not achieve relation through the drive to know but as a gift to the one who is open to relation. In the moment of relation I relate to the tree or person for example, not as an object of my experience but as a whole and ultimately unknowable being over and against myself with whom I relate. This *being over against* is central to the nature of humility in theology and as such is essential to the attention to contrasting voices that will determine that the exchange is actually a conversation. By conceding that the other is far more than the object of my experience I humbly concede that I must relate rather than analyse and reduce the parts of the whole to a level of applicability to my own needs and experience.

Neil Pembroke surveys two main objections to Buber's I-Thou philosophy.<sup>219</sup> The first, put by K. Plant, is that the experience of Thou is a necessarily fleeting and short lived element in any relationship, unsustainable at the level of daily living and therefore it must leave us with the bulk of experience in the I-It category. According to Plant, I-Thou is a marginal element in human relationships and certainly not at the centre of human life. The practical result, if this is indeed the case, is that I-Thou is reduced to a momentary encounter, a mystical glimpse, of utopian essence that is largely inaccessible to people in daily life. Buber, however, is not commenting on a mystical glimpse. For Buber, I-Thou is prior to and instrumental in any possibility of true relation. For Buber, true relation is an everyday occurrence. Buber does not

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<sup>219</sup> Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 38-40. Pembroke's source for Plant's critique is, K. Plant, "The two worlds of Martin Buber", *Theology* 88, no. 2 (July 1985), 282-287.

think in terms of a dichotomy between I-It and I-Thou. Rather, I-It and I-Thou are bound together in a closely related polarity. The human person does not relate universally. Here we are reminded of Tillich's emphasis on the finitude of existence, the inability to participate universally based on the concrete and particular nature of the person. For Buber there is in life a movement, a flux between reserve (I-It) and receptiveness (I-Thou) that enables concurrent participation with the person in front of you (I-Thou) and the multitude (I-It). I-Thou, as we said above, can be willed, but can never be produced by the will. I-Thou is a grace that may occur between two beings and relies on the collision of receptiveness in each being for its event. In this it is seen as a true dialogue between beings, a dialogue that Buber asserts may occur even without words.<sup>220</sup>

The second objection that Pembroke surveys is put by Emmanuel Levinas, who criticizes Buber for creating a philosophy that neglects the immediate and physical demands of the suffering person. The implication here is that Buber's philosophy is applicable only to the well fed and clothed, the healthy and wealthy. Pembroke argues, however, that Buber never understood I-Thou to be exclusive of the daily uncertainty of life and reserved for the comfort and privilege of philosophical and existential conversations. Buber's I-Thou is the will to relate to the whole and real person. If the other person is suffering and I do not respond practically to that suffering, then I-Thou has not been spoken.<sup>221</sup>

Neil Pembroke himself raises two criticisms of Buber's philosophy himself. Firstly, the apparent polarity between I-It and I-Thou in Buber's thinking seems to be too simplistic to describe the many nuances in human relationships. This over-simplification is in danger of presenting a distorted view of human nature. Secondly, in his initial description of I-Thou,

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<sup>220</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Collins, 1947), 19, 20.

<sup>221</sup> Pembroke, "The Art of Listening", 40-41. Pembroke's source for Levinas' critique is, Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber and the theory of knowledge" in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

Buber gives “no specific guidance” about relationships. The criticism is that Buber’s description is abstract in its ontological terms, whereas what is needed is a tangible psychological analysis of the plausibility of I-Thou in the day to day reality of human relationships.<sup>222</sup> Buber responded to these criticisms by developing his thought on relations to include a more specific emphasis on relational *dialogue*. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber becomes increasingly nuanced and practical in his description of the way a person perceives another person. He makes a distinction between three personal stances that determine the nature of relation, ‘Observation’, ‘Looking On’ and ‘Becoming Aware’. *Observation*, according to Buber, is the stance of “taking note” of the other, intensely noting everything about the other. (Buber does not place this in the same category as scientific observation). *Looking On* is a more passive stance, a stance of waiting to see what the other will deliver to me. There is little expectation and something like suspense or wondering in the stance of looking on. *Becoming Aware* Buber describes as a stance altogether more demanding of the subject. The first two stances could perceive the other without feeling demand from the other on the self. No response is required. When one becomes aware of the other, one senses, not in any “objective way”, that the other has something to say to me in more than just the verbal sense. “...it means (the other) says something *to me*, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life.”<sup>223</sup>

I would argue that Buber’s philosophy of relation and its careful working out in relational ethics contains the dynamic of humility. Equally important is Buber’s clear articulation of the humility of being open to the other, over and against ourselves, who has something to contribute to us or may expect something of us. A theology of conversational correlation must approach cultural elements with this kind of humility, in conversation that has

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<sup>222</sup> Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 41, 42.

<sup>223</sup> Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 26.

as its key element the will to relate rather than merely experience, in the sense that Buber has described it. It is precisely the humility of being open and receptive to the otherness of the other that is leading us to suggest a conversational method for theology that concentrates on identifying points of contrast with cultural conversation partners. Such a method of contrasts-in-conversation will seek to allow these points of contrast to define the conversation and inform the consensus space, as an expression of the humility of being open to the wholeness of the other. Here the theologian must run the risk that the conversation will reveal a whole cultural expression that has little to offer theology in the way of similarity but much by virtue of its strangeness or otherness. It is relation with otherness that may in fact challenge theology to explore beyond its own tradition for ways to be open to relationship with culture.

There is, however, an inherent limitation to the level of otherness that may be attributed to culture in the outline of such a method. Theology is itself part of the culture it relates to. Historically theology participates in the formation of culture and culture in the formation of theology. This is both the basis for and the limit of a conversation between theology and culture that seeks to acknowledge the otherness inherent in each. It is the basis for the conversation, since the acknowledgement that theology is indebted to its cultural context actually makes an authentic conversation possible. It is the limit of the conversation in that the otherness that exists between theology and culture is often difficult to discern due to the fact that theology is always situated within its cultural context.

Whilst remaining aware of the limitations of theology's task of recognising the otherness of the culture of which it is part, we are still able to acknowledge the dynamics of relation in the formation of a methodology based on consensus gathering, dialogue, relation and humility. Frank Rees' suggestion that conversation should take on the nature of consensus gathering contains the notion of relation. In particular, the suggestion that a consensus is an open agreement to continue the task of consensus gathering on the basis of relationship rather

than the will to conclude the conversation demonstrates Buber's understanding of relation as openness to what the other may have to contribute. The conversation as relationship takes precedence over any desire to reach a conclusion, however mutually beneficial that might be. Humility takes on the character of the commitment to non-conclusiveness and readiness to form an ongoing partnership in conversation.

Significant insight into the plausibility of openness to being non-conclusive and to new perspectives may be found in Walter Brueggemann's discussion of the unsolicited testimony of Israel in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>224</sup> Using the image of the court room that is so prevalent in the Hebrew Bible, Brueggemann describes the role of the witness in giving testimony to the court. Usually, he argues, the witness is carefully prepared by the legal representative to only provide testimony that is helpful to the case being represented. This preparation of the witness involves careful coaching on exactly what and what not to say in response to the questions. Likewise the legal representative carefully crafts the questions to be asked in order to avoid any testimony that will lead to unexpected changes to the case. Such testimony is labelled "unsolicited testimony" by Brueggemann and is viewed as dangerous to any legal representative arguing a particular line. A witness will sometimes offer unsolicited testimony to the court and Brueggemann poses three reasons why this might happen. Firstly, the witness may simply want to be the "centre of attention". Secondly, the witness may feel that it is helpful to the case. Thirdly, "...it may well be that the witness is peculiarly insightful and discerns connections between matters that no one else in the court has yet noticed."<sup>225</sup>

Brueggemann bases his theology of the Old Testament on the question, "How does Israel speak about God?" Such a question places Israel in the position of the witness in the

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<sup>224</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 407-410.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, 407.

courtroom drama. Much of the Hebrew Bible does contain Israel's testimony concerning Yahweh. Yet Brueggemann argues that a great deal of the testimony given by Israel is not constrained by that single question. "Without taking an extra breath, without a pause, in the very same utterance, Israel continues to talk about many other matters beyond what has been asked."<sup>226</sup> Brueggemann argues that such sayings are unsolicited testimony that often impact on Yahweh's actions and character. Brueggemann discerns that Israel's motivation for such testimony can be found in all three of the reasons given for unsolicited testimony to occur in the court room. According to Brueggemann, a great deal of Israel's unsolicited testimony is in the category of making insightful and discerning connections. These connections are usually to do with Yahweh's relational character and in particular Yahweh's relationships with partners who have a direct impact on Yahweh's character and actions. Yahweh is understood as "Yahweh-in-relation" in the Hebrew Bible. As such Yahweh does not stand aloof from the world but always in active relation to it. Such relations, between Yahweh and history, have almost always been seen exclusively as a relationship between God, the all-powerful subject, and history, the object upon which God enforces relations. Yet Brueggemann argues that Israel's testimony shows that the partners with God in history cannot be easily fitted into the category of receptive objects. There are times in Israel's testimony when those who are understood as partners with Yahweh become active.

The partners in turn break out of the role of object and, on occasion, become an active subject and agent face-to-face with Yahweh, and so impact Yahweh in ways that cause Yahweh to be different from the way Yahweh was prior to the contact.<sup>227</sup>

From this brief glance at Brueggemann's thesis we can glean two important points that illuminate our argument that conversation should be open and relational in the sense that it be

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 408.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 410.

always open to inviting contrast-in-conversation. Firstly, Israel as Yahweh's partner was free to offer unsolicited testimony that impacted on the understanding we now have of Yahweh from the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, other partners were free to "stand face-to-face" with Yahweh and change Yahweh in the process. On this basis, the very nature of Yahweh as witnessed to in the Hebrew Bible is one of actual and open relationship that allows the 'other', in this case Israel, to be a full partner in the unfolding drama of Yahweh's relationship with history.

But is Yahweh's engagement with Israel in this way enough biblical evidence to suggest that Yahweh would also engage with critical and contrasting voices outside of the partnership with the people of Israel? To rephrase the question in terms relating directly to the dynamics of contrast-in-conversation, it could be asserted that Yahweh accepts the unsolicited testimony of Israel on the basis of the covenant relationship between them, thus limiting Yahweh's openness to critique and transformation to the conversation Yahweh holds with Israel. Is Yahweh open to conversation with the *radically* other? This is an important question for us to answer precisely because we are seeking to characterise culture as the potentially radically other who presents a view or views in clear contrast to the voice of theology. How would Yahweh respond if someone outside of the covenantal relationship with Israel raised a critical voice, a voice of contrast-in-conversation?

Mark Brett suggests that Yahweh *is* open to conversation with the radically other in his interpretation of Job 12:8 "Speak to the earth, and she will instruct you". Brett makes a number of points about the contribution of the book of Job to the idea that Yahweh engages in conversation with the voice of wisdom outside of the "legal, prophetic and national traditions of Israel".<sup>228</sup> Brett describes the character of Job as a "non-Israelite exponent of sceptical

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<sup>228</sup> Mark Brett, "'Speak to the earth, and she will instruct you' (Job 12:8): An intersection of ecological and indigenous hermeneutics" (Yet to be published), 1.

wisdom”.<sup>229</sup> It is Job’s identity as an outsider who argues on the basis of wisdom as an alternative to the usual theological traditions of Israel that makes his voice so important for the idea of contrast-in-conversation. Job’s ethical approach to life is based on his relationship to the natural created order. Brett highlights the fact that Job’s ethic, which appears to fulfil even the most demanding of Israel’s law based ethics, presents a radical alternative to the traditional basis for ethics in Israel. The character of Job is given “extraordinary license” to speak from his own perspective in stark contrast to the voices of his friends. Not only does Job assert the efficacy of his own ethical position on the basis of natural wisdom, he also dares to accuse God of falling short of an ethic that is just and beneficial for everyone.<sup>230</sup> Though in the end “God charges Job with ‘speaking without knowledge’” (Job 38:2), God also declares about Job’s friends that they “have not spoken firmly established truths about me, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7-8) implying that at some level Job has understood things better than his friends. So “Job has spoken both rightly and ‘without knowledge’” and according to Brett this most likely means that he has “drawn the wrong conclusions from the right premise”.<sup>231</sup>

What Brett is describing is a conversation between a “non-Israelite exponent of sceptical wisdom” and God. Though Brett’s purpose in the article is the intersection of ecological and indigenous hermeneutics, for the purposes of our argument his observation seems to suggest that God is not merely open to the unsolicited testimony of the people of Israel, with whom God has a covenant enshrined in law, but with a radical voice outside of the Israelite traditions and, furthermore, to attribute a level of truth to such voices. In our consideration of the place of contrast in conversation between theology and culture this is an important indication that humility in conversation must bear the characteristics that God reveals

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 2. Here Brett quotes Norman Habel in ‘Design, Diversity and Dominion: Biodiversity and Job 39’, *Interface* 7.1 (2004), 57.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 8.

in conversation with Job. That is, humility enables theology to enter a conversation with cultural voices that speak in contrast to its own traditions with the full expectation of encountering truth in those cultural voices.

The example of God's conversation with Job again draws our attention to the four biblical elements of Post-colonial engagement between theology and culture that we drew from Brett in the first chapter. The *kenotic* humility of God (Philippians 2) who makes space for the radically other (in this case Job) to be is shown to be a mutual *self-giving* or a "*dialectic* of self-regard and self-abandonment".<sup>232</sup> God does not allow God's own voice to be silenced by the other but makes room for Job's voice, regarding it as worthy of life and characterised by wisdom and truth, whilst speaking boldly in conversation with it.

God's engaging in mutually self-giving, kenotic conversation with Job the 'other' also demonstrates the divine readiness to discover truth and wisdom compatible with God's own truth and wisdom in the stranger, a dynamic of divine life that Brett highlights in his evoking of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats from Matthew 25. Together God and Job plumb the potential depths of Job's argument despite its grounds in wisdom that is in contrast to the traditional wisdom of law and prophets.

Brueggemann and Brett have demonstrated that the dynamics of *consensus gathering*, *dialogue* and *relation* are present in the Hebrew understanding of the divine life and, in Brett's case, also in the New Testament understanding of the divine life with and through divine *humility* that is best understood as a dialectic of self-regard and self-abandonment. Here, the four elements that were briefly outlined in Chapter One need to be recalled: The kenotic provision of space for the other, mutuality in self-giving and self-limiting, the acknowledgment

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<sup>232</sup> Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 34, 35 & 182, 183.

of the implicit, or secret, presence of God in the radical other, and attention to the elements of the other that are in clear contrast to the voice of theology.<sup>233</sup> A dialectic of self-regard and self-abandonment will employ these four elements to recognise and converse with a religious spirit that resides firmly ‘over the back fence’, in other words, with the religious spirit as it is embedded in secular culture.

The argument that God is a God of conversation, as proposed by Frank Rees and outlined by Walter Brueggemann and Mark Brett in their analysis of the relevant texts, also has some implications for the nature of theology. We could say that both theology as insider, or ‘in the back yard’, and culture as outsider, or ‘over the back fence’, rightfully stand as conversation partners with God and have the freedom to offer unsolicited testimony about God and faith in ways that potentially change who God is and change the understanding of the nature of faith. Further, if God is able to engage the testimonies of theology and culture in this conversational way then theology must also be able to stand in such a relationship with culture. Culture must be allowed to break out of the role of object and be received by theology as a valid conversation partner, with a voice of its own that has the potential to cause the very nature of theology to change in the conversational encounter. What we are suggesting is that theology in conversation with the cultural context has the potential to facilitate the *evolution of theology*.

It follows that theology may not enter the conversational relationship with culture with the hidden agenda of rhetorical persuasion, nor with the hidden agenda of subject-object analysis in order to reduce the whole to its parts and select the parts that achieve the hidden ends of theology. In such a situation the theologian lacks humility, even if the intention is noble. By keeping such agendas and keeping them hidden, the conversation partner is reduced to an object of the theologian’s experience and observation and is engaged only for predetermined

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<sup>233</sup> See footnote 104, Chapter One, page 38.

ends. As such there would essentially be no real conversation. Theology must enter the conversation with theology as genuinely open to its own evolution and therefore genuinely open to the otherness of the conversation partner.

Herein lies the heart of the methodological challenge. How does theology accept the radically other voice of its conversation partner in such a way that theology itself is opened up to its own evolution? Noel Rowe suggested poetically that it is time for theology to “reconsider its alliance with the angels”, implying that it is time for theology to consider an alliance with the demons of culture. Rowe named these demons as the liminal and ambiguous places in Australian culture, the darker shadows in our collective self-consciousness. Frank Rees suggested that such an alliance will require a “consensus space” in which mutual agreement to keep a potentially contentious conversation going may be reached. Mark Brett suggested that attention to “perspicuous contrasts” will help to avoid “cultural imposition” and we have argued that such attention in theology will help to avoid *theological* imposition.

*Contrast is at the heart of these suggestions.* The establishing of a consensus space shared by theology and any given cultural expression is based on the idea that two contrasting points of view are able to converse with mutual benefit in a way that does not necessarily require them to set aside their particular perspectives. Brett’s naming of “perspicuous contrasts” as the focus of attention in the conversation demands that clear identification of the contrasting perspectives of culture and theology must be made before any attempt at consensus, synthesis or transformation can occur. This elevating of the role of contrast in the conversation is the methodological key to ensuring that the voice that is radically other to that of theology is heard for what it is, without the tendency for theology to engage it acquisitively and equally to give theology a clear understanding of what the voices of culture are inviting it to in terms of its own evolution. Thus, Rowe’s poetic imagery of theology forging an alliance with demons

is a compelling one to guide the formation of a methodological approach that we can apply to the Australian culture.

### **Method: Contrast-in-conversation**

A method that applies itself to listening to particular cultural voices, or expressions, necessarily emphasises the value of culture as present and knowable in its specific and concrete forms, as opposed to an emphasis on a sense of the *essence* of culture as such. At the very least, an analysis of culture must start with its forms and only speculate or at best hypothesise about its essence or general meaning for a given society. This perspective of culture demands that theology first engage in a constant and ongoing conversation with particular cultural expressions and only then speculate and hypothesise about their meaning for a society in general and in our case their meaning for theology.

Contrast-in-conversation as a method of contextual theology will repeatedly engage the endless plurality of cultural forms in conversation that pays attention to the contrasting elements of that specific form of culture in its particularity. It will do so in order to understand how that cultural form interprets its own 'religious spirit' over and against the cultural forms of institutional religion, such as the Christian church, as it is represented by theology.

When H. Richard Niebuhr published his study of the historical ways in which Christ and culture have interacted in human thought and practice he highlighted five distinct though not unrelated understandings of the relationship. Christ the person, Niebuhr acknowledges, is now necessarily only represented by the testimony of those who believe him to be Lord, a testimony that is troublingly disparate and diverse.<sup>234</sup> Acknowledging that all attempts to define

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<sup>234</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1951), 13-14.

the relationship between the Christ of the Christian church and culture are limited and evolving, Niebuhr highlights these five understandings as “stopping points” along the way that give us some sense of the historical encounter of Christ and culture.<sup>235</sup> The first relationship is defined as Christ *against* culture, a relationship in which Christ is understood as the critic of culture.<sup>236</sup> In this relationship Christ is the critical end (telos) to which all culture must conform itself in rejection of itself. The second relationship is defined as the Christ *of* culture, a relationship in which Christ is the crowning achievement of culture, the telos of culture and at the very least a dynamic expression of the values of culture.<sup>237</sup> The third relationship is defined as Christ *above* culture, a relationship that affirms Christ as Lord and affirms culture as necessarily part of God’s ordered creation and seeks to synthesise the two whilst maintaining the separate and transcendent nature of Christ who is Lord of all.<sup>238</sup> The fourth relationship is defined as Christ and culture in *paradox*, a relationship defined by the dual authorities of both Christ and culture. Culture is the realm of humanity whilst Christ is the realm of God. This dualist approach seeks to live under the authority of both realms, holding them in tension. The grace towards human things of the reconciling act of God in Christ is the primary basis of the relationship between the two realms.<sup>239</sup> The fifth relationship is defined as Christ the *transformer* of culture, a relationship defined by Christ over and against culture, but here Christ is the hopeful converter of culture as opposed to the Christ who withdraws from culture.<sup>240</sup>

Contrast-in-conversation as a method of contextual theology will take its place in the historical responses to the question of Christ and culture. The relationship between the two that is defined by the idea of Christ in *conversation* with culture. The application of a contrast-

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 83, 84.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 120,121

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 150,151.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 190, 191.

in-conversation methodology that emphasises the importance of contrast in order to achieve the dynamics of dialogue, relation and consensus gathering, each characterised by the stance of humility, will draw elements from the five historical responses to the question of Christ and culture that Niebuhr outlines. An emphasis on contrast in the conversation will necessarily imply something of the historical emphases on Christ over and against culture as judge and as transformer. Similarly, however, because the emphasis on contrast is made in order to facilitate the will to relate and the desire to reach consensus with humility, contrast-in-conversation will imply that the historical emphasis on Christ *in* culture, and Christ in *synthesis* with culture is also relevant and part of the conversation. In this way a method of contrast-in-conversation will keep the conversation between theology and culture open and dynamic both ‘in the backyard’ and ‘over the back fence’. Such an approach will be dynamic enough to take account of the inherently relative nature of historical interactions between theology and culture. Such interactions have, according to Niebuhr, always been relative to the individual situation.

They depend on the partial, incomplete, fragmentary knowledge of the individual; they are relative to the measure of his faith and his unbelief; they are related to the historical position he occupies and to the duties of his station in society; they are concerned with the relative values of things.<sup>241</sup>

In a similar and much more recent analysis of contextual models of theology, Stephen B. Bevans outlines six approaches to the task of doing theology contextually. He argues that no single model is ever adequate without the others and that a flexibility in the application of contextual models in cross cultural contexts is required for a theology to do justice to the context within which it is constructed.<sup>242</sup> Bevans’ firstly presents what he calls a “Translation model”, in which he says the traditional meaning of the gospel is retained and protected whilst translating its meanings in culturally appropriate ways. This, according to Bevans is the oldest

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>242</sup> Stephen, B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), Introduction.

and most common understanding of contextual theology.<sup>243</sup> He then proceeds to outline what he calls the “Anthropological model”, which places its emphasis on protecting the cultural identity of the Christian person and discovering the gospel inherently present within the Christian’s existing culture.<sup>244</sup> The “Praxis model” is presented as a model that is dynamic and responsive to change in culture through theological reflection on the active participation in culture by the theologian.<sup>245</sup> The “Synthetic model” seeks to draw all voices, contextual, global, traditional and new, into an ongoing conversation.<sup>246</sup> The “Transcendental model” emphasises the importance of acknowledging the converted, knowing subject in the process of understanding the gospel within a particular context, and the “Counter Cultural model” identifies elements of cultures that are antithetical to the gospel and calls them to conform.<sup>247</sup>

Bevans has rightly stated that contextual theology must recognise all of these models in its flexible pursuit of a truthful and dynamic gospel in any cultural context. In the same way that we saw elements all of all Niebuhr’s models present in the contrast-in-conversation method, we can see how Bevans’ models are all at least partially present. The will to communicate meaning (translation model) is present. The participatory element in the praxis model is evident in the respect accorded to the culture to fully express itself. The demand upon the contextual theologian to be cognisant of the self as knowing subject is evident in the emphasis upon dialogue in the contrast-in-conversation method. The emphasis on contrast acknowledges the presence counter cultural movements in the conversation. The two models that Bevan’s presents that have the strongest relevance for the contrast-in-conversation method are the anthropological and synthetic models. The emphasis on protecting cultural identity and

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 38, 39.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 89, 90.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 103,104 & 118, 119.

giving voice to all parties in a conversation are most evident in these two models and are profoundly important for the contrast-in-conversation method.

In the next three chapters, we will apply the method of contrast-in-conversation to selected Australian cultural expressions. The method, as it will now be outlined, is applied in order to test the hypothesis that theology is able to hear the ‘voice’ of culture adequately in its construction of contextual theologies. It is not that theology selects the sources or cultural expressions it seeks to use, but rather that theology must be open to and converse with those voices which contrast with its own perspective. Rebecca S. Chopp, in her work on theology and the poetics of testimony, summarises succinctly the importance of attending to theology’s interaction with diverse cultural testimonies.

Theory should give voice to particularity and difference, instead of ordering jarring witnesses into pluralistic expressions of one experience, or ruling them as irrational exceptions to true human consciousness.<sup>248</sup>

Thus our intention is to engage with the particularities of three cultural expressions, in order to test the validity and value of the proposed method.

The contrast-in-conversation method will be applied to the conversation with each cultural expression in four steps.

### 1. *Self-disclosure as humility (Creating space for the other)*

The first step in the contrast-in-conversation method is full disclosure of the theologian’s allegiance to the Christological event, the circle within which the theologian operates and the reasons for initiating the conversation. In this step the theologian openly acknowledges differences between their own perspective and the stance of the conversation

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<sup>248</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, “Theology and the poetics of testimony” in (ed) Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney & Kathryn Tanner, *Converging on Culture: theologians in dialogue with cultural analysis and criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64.

partner at least as perceived by the theologian at that point. With the limits and distinctiveness of the theologian disclosed, the will to relate is made effective and the conversation may begin. This first step may involve the attempt to disentangle the cultural expression from past attempts by theologians to acquire its particular and contrasting ‘voice’ or testimony and re-establish its place as a distinctive and contrasting element of the culture. In other words, to use the analogy of the back yard, in this step we acknowledge that the ‘space’ the theologian occupies is defined by certain Christological boundaries (Tillich’s theological circle) or ‘fences’ that mean the normal sphere of theology is in the ‘backyard’ of the Christian church. The crucial step of self-disclosure determines the theological ‘self-awareness’ of peering over the ‘back fence’ when engaging the cultural context on the basis of seeking contrasts. Therefore, this step is crucial in order to engage in conversation with contrasting cultural voices in the full awareness that we do so as theologians who are climbing out of the church’s backyard into the next door neighbour’s backyard to engage in conversation. This acknowledgement also allows the particular cultural expression to define where they stand, what their unique voice is, and how their perspectives determine the subject of the conversation. In other words, the neighbour gets to define the conversation because we are in the neighbour’s ‘backyard’.

## *2. Analysis as humility (the will to relate).*

The second step in the contrast-in-conversation method is the full engagement with the expression of culture. This step might previously have been called an ‘analysis’ of the cultural expression by the theologian. The process of analysis, however, implies the “I-It” that Buber asserts places the interaction in the realm of the experience of the subject rather than authentic relations. In an analysis the theologian acts as the arbiter, determining which parts of the cultural expression are suitable for use in the formation of a contextual theology. This is precisely the error that we wish to avoid in the application of the point of contrast method.

How then does the theologian discover the ‘other’ in the cultural expression without analysis in the scientific sense? Analysis must be joined with humility. If humility is the “will to relate” then humble analysis must be an expression of the “will to relate.”

In practical terms this may be achieved by the theological embrace of all aspects of the cultural expression and in particular those aspects that appear to be in stark contrast with the received doctrinal basis of the theology engaged in the attempt at conversation. If possible this is where the theologian is able to respond to Noel Rowe’s suggestion that theology must “reconsider its alliance with the angels.”<sup>249</sup> As discussed above, Rowe’s primary criticism of Australian contextual theology is that theological analysis too often hides an agenda to preferentially select elements of cultural expression that affirm our traditional doctrines and theologies. By reconsidering our alliance with the angels we commit ourselves to receiving cultural elements as whole expressions of the culture from which they emerge. This will mean that the theologian must “will to relate” with elements of culture that apparently oppose or undermine received theology by virtue of their contrasting difference or even opposition. The embrace of contrasting elements is the will to relate with the cultural element as a whole, rather than in part, on a covert selective basis.

Thus, whilst analysis necessarily forms the basis of this research it is joined with humility and becomes engagement. The analysis is no longer the will to experience affirmation of the subject, but the will to engage with the whole and to consider how it may transform the subject by virtue of its otherness. Engagement understood in this way will hopefully yield a more honest and complete picture of the cultural expression. It will be a picture that reveals for the theologian the ways forward in the formation of a contextual theology. The example of the

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<sup>249</sup> Noel Rowe, “Are there really angels in Carlton?”, 142.

contrast between a psychology of guilt and a psychology of shame is a primary case in point as previously discussed.

### *3. Identifying Points of Contrast (The will to relate in dialogue).*

The consideration that the other may be wholly other, and that by virtue of relations with the wholly other theology may grow and be transformed, is the next step in the contrast-in-conversation method. This step follows closely on from engagement and identifies both points of similarity and points of contrast between theology and the cultural expression. Whilst holding the points of similarity as valued indicators of shared culture and history, the theologian highlights the points of contrast as the aspects of culture that determine its otherness and that generate questions for theology.

Here it is helpful to ask whether highlighting any aspects of the cultural expression reduces us necessarily to the realm of subjective experience. This is a constant threat to the theologian's "will to relate" and can be met by the determination to see the contrasting elements in that cultural expression as characteristics of its authentic otherness.

In doing this the theologian is committed to knowing the strangeness of the other and embraces this knowledge as the creative relatedness that gives rise to theological questions. In this theology humbly acknowledges the authentic voice of culture over and against its own voice. Real conversation and the building of a consensus space may now take place.

### *4. Consensus gathering: grounds for continued conversation.*

In what would normally constitute the conclusion of an analysis we place the gathering of a consensus about the way forward in the conversation. Theology must accept the gathering of a consensus as the sharing of questions and answers that lead both theology and culture in a new direction. This consensus is not the same as seeking to gather all culture into the orthodox

Christian fold. What it does, in effect, is acknowledge that the depth of culture is distinct from the depth of theology in its primary concerns and that its distinctiveness may have the ability to draw all of us closer to the truth. In this we may show the presence of a 'religious spirit' in culture that speaks back to the 'religious spirit' of theology. That is the possibility and potential which we seek to explore through the method of contrast-in-conversation.

In this chapter we have considered some of the critical questions that can be applied to the methodological development of Paul Tillich's cultural theology in the contextual method of conversational theology suggested by Frank Rees. Having outlined the critical issues we have then asked the next methodological question, of how to apply Rees' suggestion that theology must listen to and hear the voice of culture in the conversation. The answer in this chapter has been put forward as a hypothesis. The hypothesis is that if we apply a method that emphasises points of contrast between theology and culture as conversation partners we will gain a clearer understanding of the culture and of the 'religious spirit' in that culture.

Having outlined the four steps of the contrast-in-conversation method we will now apply the method to three Australian expressions of culture. Chapter Four will apply the contrast-in-conversation method to the visual art of Lin Onus. Onus was an urban Indigenous artist from Victoria, Australia, who explored the boundaries of identity between Indigenous culture and European colonial culture. Chapter Five will apply the contrast-in-conversation method to the songs, novels and performances of Nick Cave, an Australian post-punk artist from Melbourne, Australia. Chapter Six will apply the contrast-in-conversation method to the philosophical writings of Raimond Gaita, an Australian philosopher whose experience of Australia is as a European immigrant. These three applications of the contrast-in-conversation method to Australian cultural expressions will enable us to assess the efficacy or otherwise of the points of contrast hypothesis. It may well be asked why we have chosen these three expressions of culture in particular and not attempted to engage a more broadly representative

selection of expressions in conversation. Engaging particular expressions of culture in conversation will always be an exercise in setting limits. Regardless of which expressions of culture we choose to engage in this study there will be others, who represent diverse expressions of Australian culture, who cannot be part of this particular conversation. A key criterion of the contrast-in-conversation method is that it be applicable to each and every particular conversation. Testing the hypothesis that a focus on contrasts will enable the cultural voices to be heard is the primary purpose of our thesis. It is one of the delightful elements of contextual theology that the subjects for conversation are as prolific and diverse as are the cultural voices. Given that it is not our purpose to write a representative ‘Australian theology’ but to test the hypothesis of contrast-in-conversation method, these three cultural voices have been chosen for their potential to demonstrate the value of contrast with received theology. Any other cultural expression might have been equally important and valuable in the process of testing the contrast-in conversation hypothesis and it is my hope that the method as it is applied and tested here will lead to its application in a wide range of cultural conversations. The final chapter of the thesis, Chapter Seven, will draw some conclusions that will attempt to define a consensus space in which to engage in continued conversation with Australian culture.

## Chapter Four

### *Bower Bird Theology? The Art and Life of Lin Onus*

Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside of their own history,  
and unable to retrace their steps because their  
footprints had been swept away.

*Arundhati Roy*

#### **Acknowledgement and Disclosure as Humility: the theologian and the Australian urban aboriginal artwork**

This chapter engages theology in conversation with the art of Australian artist Lin Onus, born William McClintock Onus at the Cummeragunja station near Barmah on the Murray River. His mother, Mary McLintock Kelly, was Scottish and his father, Bill Onus, was Aboriginal of the Yorta Yorta people.<sup>250</sup> Lin was schooled briefly in Echuca but primarily spent his younger years in the inner Melbourne suburb of Deepdene with frequent visits to Cummeragunja. It was during these visits to Cummeragunja that he received his grounding in the Aboriginal culture to which he belonged. Onus experienced racism from an early age in the schoolyard at Deepdene and this, in part, led to his lifelong political activism and community engagement in the town of Upwey on Melbourne's eastern fringe. Onus' parents were active participants in the Communist Party and his father Bill was a leader in indigenous political affairs in the south east of Australia.<sup>251</sup> The activism of his parents grounded Onus in a strong social conscience. Gary Foley writes that Onus' political activism focussed almost entirely on the struggle of Aboriginal people in the face of colonial power.<sup>252</sup>

Part of a generation of Aboriginal activists who were becoming better organised and

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<sup>250</sup> Margo Neale, "Urban Dingo" in (ed) Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000), 13.

<sup>251</sup> Gary Foley, "A personal/political memory" in Margo Neale (ed) *Urban Dingo*, 33.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

more vocal, Onus campaigned on the issues of land rights, self-determination and economic independence.<sup>253</sup> Ultimately, Onus channelled his political activism into his art, holding his first exhibition at the Aboriginal Advancement League hall. Many of his later works were openly political and highlighted the determination of Aboriginal Australia to claim full equality and to determine their own identity. Paintings such as “We have survived”, which shows a dynamic pattern of Aboriginal footprints covering a rapidly diminishing urban road map with the Aboriginal flag and colours symbolically displayed in the top left hand corner, were increasingly part of Onus’ body of work.<sup>254</sup> Whilst political subject matter remained prominent in his work, it was Onus’ artistic style that made the loudest statement in Australia and internationally and the most powerful rebuff to colonial definitions of indigenous art.

Onus’ familial situation placed him in relation to both indigenous culture and colonial culture. The history of Australian assimilationist policy has demonstrated a clear desire to ensure the complete assimilation of children with a white parent and an indigenous parent into white colonial society. Lin Onus can be seen as an early example of the urban Aboriginal who stands between two cultures and refuses to be marginalised by either, nor assimilated by either, but lays a claim for a new synthesis that is grounded in his very existence. He did this primarily as an artist rather than a political activist.

While the subject matter of Onus’ art deals often with the tension between cultures and the infatuations of colonialism with fences, sheep and toilet cleaner, the *style* of Onus’ art reveals his ability to synthesise the polar cultures he stands between. This determination to create a new synthesis between the cultures of his heritage marks Onus as an important contributor to the current cultural conversation in Australia. Edward W. Said, one of the early post-colonial scholars, describes the situation of belonging to two cultures as the “pluri-

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 36. Plate 5.

cultural life” that carries with it a special responsibility for those in that situation who possess the means to interpret their situation and give it voice.<sup>255</sup> Onus, without any explicit reference to the emerging academic discipline of post-colonial discourse, gave voice to his situation in his art, challenging Australian culture with the question: Should Australians, both indigenous and non-indigenous, construct an Australian identity out of the history of colonial invasion and domination and indigenous heritage, as opposed to allowing one element of the cultural clash to assimilate the other, and if so, how? A consideration of the art of Lin Onus will reveal that his vision was one that pre-empted the intellectual movement of post-modernism and implicitly embodied the post-colonial perspective by demanding space within the world of art to construct a new identity for Australians, using the bits and pieces of cultural heritage available to him as the nation emerges from the trauma of its colonial period. The direction of Onus’ vision for Australian identity construction places him in a position of contrast with traditional Christian theological views that are unavoidably linked to colonial domination.

The first step in the contrast-in-conversation method is *Acknowledgement and Disclosure as Humility*. This step involves subjective reflection as the immediate task of becoming aware of the difference between theologian, who in this conversation represents a voice of colonial power and cultural expression.

Upon first seeing the installation entitled, “Fruit Bats”, my reaction as an observer seeking conversation is somewhat puzzled.<sup>256</sup> It is not immediately apparent to me what I am seeing. The most striking element in the installation is the colour and pattern, which immediately evoke in me a sense of the desert. The colours remind me of the ochres, red, brown and yellow, which I have seen on the various aboriginal artefacts that I have around

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<sup>255</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 2003; Preface to the 2003 edition, page 17.

<sup>256</sup> Observations of artworks will be referred to in the present tense throughout the thesis in order to convey the sense of a current conversation.

the house, memoirs of previous travels into the Australian desert. The patterns mean very little to me, although I recognise them as representing Australian Aboriginal culture in some way. In this acknowledgement I encounter the first significant ‘strangeness’ between the artwork and me.

Now looking through the colour and pattern I begin to see the actual object, an object that is very familiar to me. A ‘Hills Hoist’ clothes drying line forms the main structure of the installation. Instead of the usual adornments of underwear, jeans and T-shirts, however, a group of Fruit Bats are hanging, patterned wings folded about their small bodies, from the numerous yellow plastic cords threaded through the familiar four arms of the Hills Hoist. Colourful and mysterious patterns adorn the outward facing surface of the bats' wings and the liberal smattering of bat droppings that cover the stem of the hoist and the ground beneath it. The droppings render the hoist distasteful to me and I cannot imagine myself using the hoist for its original purpose. It has clearly been commandeered for the bats' purpose and I am excluded on the basis of my own distaste. The bats and droppings are alive, however, with an energy that emanates from the patterns connecting the bats with their excrement. They stand as a challenge to my distaste.

A Hills Hoist, hung with Fruit Bats vibrantly patterned in a representation of Aboriginal culture is unexpected, funny and puzzling all at once. It is the familiar draped with the unfamiliar, the foreign. It is the ‘Aussie’ draped with the ‘indigenous’ and I am wondering what the relationship between the two is supposed to be in this installation. One thing is clear, I have a greater sense of connection to the Hills Hoist than I do to the Fruit Bats. I am an urban, white male who grew up with a Hills Hoist in the back yard. My clothes hung from its arms and I swung from its spinning edges. As a small child I marvelled at the mechanism of the winder and spent a great deal of time winding it up and down. It is clear from this installation that the Hills Hoist has been commandeered for the Fruit Bats' purposes

and is no longer available to me for its original use. I can sense a vague irritation at that realisation. Yet I also sense admiration for the Fruit Bats that have clearly taken an opportunity regardless of convention. The Aboriginal patterns give me the clue that there is something in this remarkable image inviting me to consider the intersecting point between two cultures and what might occur there.

This same intersection of seemingly established colonial existence with Aboriginal cultural symbols occurs throughout Onus' body of work. Another classic example of this is seen in the synthetic polymer painting "Jimmy's Billabong", which shows what would be considered a landscape in the European style of painting overlaid with the same symbolic Aboriginal pattern.<sup>257</sup> I am struck by the painting's concurrent accessibility and inaccessibility to me as a white urban male. I understand the artistic language of the landscape but the Aboriginal overlay creates a cultural intersection that needs further exploration.

Stronger responses that continue to demand self-awareness from me come from my contemplation of a painting by Onus entitled "And on the eighth day...", which depicts two angels clothed in the British flag flying over a vast Australian landscape that seemingly moves with the wave-like motions of still water after a thousand pebbles have been dropped into it. One of the angels carries a Bible in one hand and a bottle of Toilet Duck cleaner in the other. The other angel carries a revolver in one hand and cradles a lamb and a roll of barbed wire with the left arm. The title of the painting situates it in relation to the biblical stories of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible and immediately demands that the white Christian be identified with the corresponding imagery in the painting. The fact that the pristine earth beneath the angels is vibrant with movement is totally foreign to me. I must grasp for its meaning and I

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<sup>257</sup> Plate 22 in Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000), 74.

find that I am caught in the perception of earth as dead object. This image demands from me that I consider the earth prior to colonial invasion to be a living and vibrant being. I am identified with the colonial imposition of religion, sheep, fences, violence and an obsession with cleanliness that acts as a deep fissure between me and the place I have come to. As a theologian the image of the bible attached to what is obviously a colonialist event leaves me with the unpalatable truth that Christianity, despite the complexities of the history of missions in Australia, was and is a colonialist tool in a pitiless invasion of a deeply spiritual land.

The images of Fence, Sheep and Toilet Duck are recurring themes in Onus' work. "Fences, fences, fences" shows a billabong painted in European style, with an overlay of cyclone fencing.<sup>258</sup> The impression I get is one of separation from the landscape. Land is locked away and inaccessible. "Ground lice" depicts the pastoral grazing of sheep in an ordered fenced environment.<sup>259</sup> The land is marred by a deep scar or fissure that cannot fail to give the impression of a wound. Underlying the pasture is the familiar Aboriginal pattern giving the impression of the resilient earth and its spirituality. Clearly the colonial view that Australia came to greatness on the sheep's back is not shared in this painting. "New age toas" is a painting of the desert landscape, seemingly in the evening with a stormy sky overhead.<sup>260</sup> Wedged into the speckled desert sand, bottles of Toilet Duck stand at various angles leaving the white urban viewer puzzled, amused and not without some regret. That Toilet Duck could somehow become a meaningful part of the new Australian landscape seems absurd. What is Lin Onus saying in this painting?

In this brief encounter with only a small selection of Onus' paintings, I have been driven to a devastating self-awareness. As a white male theologian I have come to the

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 74. Plate 22.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 84. Plate 32.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 83. Plate 31.

realisation that I represent a religion and a culture that is violently invasive to the first peoples of the land. I am, at a fundamental level, different to the land I live in and to the indigenous culture colonialism devastated in its march to ascendancy over the land. Yet the image of the Fruit Bats hanging on the Hills Hoist somehow assures me that I am not completely alienated from indigenous culture. I feel as though a suggestion has been made for a new way forward that does not allow the power of the colonialism of the past or the present to define Aboriginality or the new peoples of the land, of which I am one.

The presence in Onus' art of conflict between two foreign cultures, one of which is aggressively colonial in its domination and the suggestion that there might be a way to allow that historical conflict to become the creative ground for a new shared identity in Australia, might be heard as the "unsolicited testimony", spoken of by Brueggemann, of the new pluri-cultural element of Australian society. The cultural voice of Onus' work as unsolicited testimony speaks back in direct contrast to the universal claims of the colonial church and must be acknowledged as a valid cultural voice. To acknowledge the validity of Onus' art as a cultural voice of contrast to historical Christianity and to disclose my own position as a theologian representing the historical colonial Christian tradition is the act of humility that is central to the first step of the contrast-in-conversation method. The resultant conversation must hold difference and unsolicited testimony as the creative place through which consensus must be attempted. To assume that we can ignore it in a futile attempt to make right what is wrong is assimilation. The work of Lin Onus defies all attempts at assimilation and demands consensus on the basis of a conversation between two equal but always different cultural groups.

### **Analysis as humility: the will to relate**

Having acknowledged that Onus' voice is a valid and contrasting voice of pluri-cultural Australia that speaks back critically to historical colonial Christianity and having disclosed our own situation as representatives of that colonial Christianity, our role shifts to that of more careful analysis as the will to relate to the contrasting cultural voice.

The theologian takes the role of observer and participant rather than critic. Karen Stone, in her book *Image and Spirit: finding meaning in visual art*, begins with the question: "What do you expect from art?"<sup>261</sup> Stone is writing in response to what she claims is the most frequent answer to that question, that is, that people expect "...some understanding, some insight, some connection with the world of spirit."<sup>262</sup> Usually, Stone argues, the language of *meaning* is used to approach the category of spirit. Stone hopes to illuminate the process of discerning meaning in the encounter between the artwork and the observer/participant. Her primary goal is to open this possibility to those other than the trained art critics, or artists for that matter. Stone is concerned with the vast majority of viewers of art, those seeking meaning through the visual encounter.

Therefore we may distinguish what we are doing from art criticism. Whilst we will pay attention to the art critics in our encounter with the work we are not writing a critique of the art for art's sake. We are seeking to discern what the meaning of this or that particular artwork has to say *to theology*. Our theological method dictates that we must suspend the potential bias in our encounter with the artworks towards only perceiving that which is favourable to theology and to rigorously pursue that in the artwork which stands in contrast to theology.

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<sup>261</sup> Karen Stone, *Image and spirit: finding meaning in visual art* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), preface page 8.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, preface, 8.

Stone's method of encountering meaning in visual art will assist us in the task of staying true to our theological method. She begins by emphasising that visual art engages the senses. It allows meaning to be perceived without reducing it to written and spoken words and as such it situates meaning not merely in the reasoning intellect but in the spirit, the centred and inter-related whole of our being.<sup>263</sup>

What the visual image can do is to "make concrete what language and especially religious language cannot: that intangible private or communal moment when we encounter being."<sup>264</sup> Here Stone draws on Paul Tillich's concept of depth to articulate this opportunity to encounter being through our sensing of the 'concrete' image before us.<sup>265</sup> We are invited to be aware that the academic process of art criticism, for example the linear sequence of "Observe, Describe, Analyse, Interpret, Evaluate," is only partially applicable in the process of perceiving depth.<sup>266</sup> In order to perceive depth fully we are invited to consider that,

There is a point when we need to enter the work, or allow it to enter our own reality. For we perceive the literal, ontical facts about the work; but we are grasped by the ontological. We give in to the image, and it reveals itself to us.<sup>267</sup>

This is necessarily a subjective process and enables the theologian's acknowledgement of the subjective effect of the 'other' on theology, and indeed of the way in which our theological world-view has an effect on the way we perceive things. John Berger has written about the way our belief systems and emotions affect the way we see and perceive with the simple examples of the doctrine of hell and of the perception of the beloved by the lover. The strong belief in hell as a literally real place in the middle ages evoked a strong link

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 4-10.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 50.

between the image of fire and eternal damnation. Equally, the emotional state of the lover distinguishes the way she looks at the beloved from the way others would see him.

Furthermore, the decision to look and see is in the first place a decision of the seeing subject. It is this decision, according to Berger, that brings the object of our gaze into our reach, to “situate oneself in relation to it.”<sup>268</sup>

The assertions of Stone and Berger illuminate something of the mechanism of the *will to relate*. The will to relate, however, includes the process of *analysis* of the objective nature of the cultural expression and the known facts about the work itself and the artist. This stage in the method, therefore, will seek to reveal a well-balanced, objective portrait of the artwork and the artist within his cultural situation that will allow us to identify aspects of the work that stand in contrast to theology as it is perceived by the cultural and artistic perspective of Lin Onus.

Margo Neale sheds a penetrating light on the power and meaning of Onus’ work in her recollection of his self-proclaimed membership of the “Bower Bird School” of artists, those who go around “...picking up bits and pieces, here and there...”<sup>269</sup> The analogy of the prolific collecting behaviour of an Australian Bower Bird was both humorous and insightful, in keeping with Onus’ style, and revealed what Neale asserts was the unenviable plight of the urban Aboriginal artist in the late twentieth century. According to Neale, the history of relations between white Australia and black Australia had caused urban Aboriginal artists to be “locked into an ‘in-between’ space... and deemed to have no place.”<sup>270</sup> The Aboriginal artist from the desert, or remote community, who was creating artworks deemed to be ‘traditional,’ was afforded the place of ‘Aboriginal artist’ by the predominantly white art

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<sup>268</sup> John Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 8.

<sup>269</sup> Margo Neale, “Urban Dingo” in Margo Neale (ed), *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000), 12.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

establishment. Such a traditionalist view placed the urban Aboriginal artists outside the formal definition of Aboriginal art whilst also marginalising them from the mainstream urban art scene. Finding no place within the traditional world of mostly desert Aboriginal art and no place in the world of white urban art the urban Aboriginal artist was in an invisible in-between place in the Australian perception of art. Lin Onus epitomised, in his life and work, this in-between space, the void left in the gulf between the world of white and black art in Australia. Accepted in neither world, Onus and other urban Aboriginal artists gathered bits and pieces from both worlds and began to construct a new place, a place that, Margo Neale writes, set them free

“...to borrow from many places, writing their own narratives, creating their own myths, inventing and reinventing themselves, with sources drawn from intersecting, parallel worlds.”<sup>271</sup>

The Bower Bird analogy highlighted the self-appointed artistic and political task of constructing a kind of synthesised vision of how to be fully human in a racially polarized culture, not only for Aboriginal Australians, but for all Australians.<sup>272</sup> The installation, “Fruit Bats”, is a humorous and highly accessible image of this new in-between space, the intersection of two cultural worlds, in polar tension and in synthesis.<sup>273</sup> Onus experienced this complicated dialogical relationship between polarity and synthesis by virtue of his own family situation, being of both Scottish and Yorta Yorta heritage, and his works reveal a very

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>272</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 2003 preface, 17. Said described this kind of cultural identity reconstruction when he outlined one of the key tasks for the critic of colonial representations of “oriental” cultures. Addressing the reductionist tendency in colonial representations of indigenous cultures, a tendency to reduce in order to dominate, Said demanded a post-colonial *complication* of indigenous cultures and *dismantling* of “...the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience...” Without any formal or intentional relationship to the emerging academic field of post-colonial textual criticism, Bower Bird artists like Lin Onus were demanding that the Australian art establishment set aside its reductive formula for identifying indigenous art in a way that excluded any urban evolution of art that took the form of pluri-cultural identity reconstruction.

<sup>273</sup> Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo*, 40.

real identification with the negative and dominating impact of colonial power on Aboriginal culture and land. Nevertheless, Onus' work also aims for this 'in-between' synthesis rather than a complete rejection of the new, largely colonial, urban world. Onus belonged socially, culturally and ethnically to both colonial and indigenous worlds and his life and art were a courageous attempt to find a place in-between them both that was creatively open to the synthesizing of a new Australian identity.

Ian McLean asserts that Onus' ability to give voice to what Said has called the "pluri-cultural" perspective from an 'in-between' place, which was developing in his art during the 1970s, announces Onus as an early postmodernist in complete independence from the intellectual postmodernism that was arriving in Australia at the time.<sup>274</sup> McLean argues that the categorization of Onus as an Urban Aboriginal artist is too narrow and that he should be recognized for a unique brand of postmodernism based on his personal experiences that helped to "...infiltrate issues of aboriginality into everyday Australian life."<sup>275</sup> Australian colonialism was a situation in which Aboriginal people groups fled colonial 'protection' and oppression, resulting in the loss of cultural traditions, religious connection to place and subsistence connection to place and language. McLean argues that indigenous peoples who survive such exile become very good at building a new cultural situation by 'picking up' things.

Their relationship to identity and place becomes shifting, hybrid, pragmatic and inclusive... In other words, they become all those things that postmodernists try to be.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Ian McLean, "One mob, one voice, one land: Lin Onus and Indigenous postmodernism" in Margo Neale (ed) *Urban Dingo: the art and life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*, 41-47.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, 43.

The art of Lin Onus is a concrete expression of the pluri-cultural ‘in-between’ place by virtue of his development of an artistic palimpsest of western and indigenous art styles. It is a place that is ‘inhabited’ by most indigenous Australians and is increasingly identified with by the diverse range of ‘new’ Australians. Onus’ art is an expression of spontaneous, experienced-based, postmodernism that provides a thoroughly contextual Australian voice and refuses to be categorized according to colonial reductionism.

It is not sufficient though to reduce Onus’ work to the category of postmodernism when clearly, as McLean has highlighted, it emerged not from the global intellectual enterprise called postmodernism, but from the experience of the loss of identity in the wake of colonialism. To do so would be to demonstrate the colonial propensity for reductionism that Onus sought to challenge in the art establishment.

Bill Ashcroft argues that in the work of Lin Onus we find a very particular and context-specific resistance to and transformation of “dominant forms” that is lost if we simply categorize it as postmodern, but is highlighted if we see its similarities to what Ashcroft calls the “transformative resistance projects of post-colonial production.”<sup>277</sup> Ashcroft introduces the term “hybridity” and applies it to Onus’ work, to describe the inherent process of resistance to dominant narratives within the Bower Bird synthesising of European and Aboriginal artistic styles. In post-colonial research, the term hybridity has come under the significant criticism that it assumes the synthesis of two equally powerful entities rather than the reality of post-colonial power imbalance.<sup>278</sup> Another criticism of the term that Ashcroft identifies is the perception of hybrid productions as impure and inauthentic. It was this second criticism that was directed at Onus by the art establishment

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<sup>277</sup> Bill Ashcroft, “Hybridity and Transformation: the art of Lin Onus” in *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 8, No 1 (2013) viewed at, <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1706/1516>, 3:25pm 30/06/2014: 2.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

and earned his work the death dealing label of 'kitsch'. Ashcroft, whilst recognising the dangers of the term hybridity, insists that when applied to Onus' work it highlights the way he used hybridity to resist the binary discourse of colonial thinking and to challenge concepts of purity and authenticity in the pursuit of identity.<sup>279</sup> Hybridity, the intersection and synthesis of western and indigenous styles, is the artistic technique that resists the colonial discourse inherent in the reduction of indigenous art to 'pure' desert art. Onus used hybridity as a contextually specific postcolonial strategy and he was aiming for a culturally transforming outcome.<sup>280</sup> In this postcolonial reading of Onus' art, what might otherwise be understood as the reactionary necessity of 'picking up pieces' is understood as deeply intentional interpolation. Thus, by creating an artistic collage, or palimpsest, Onus appealed to the popular culture whilst subverting the dominant colonial discourse.

Ashcroft describes how, in his view, Onus achieved his resistant hybridity by challenging the assumptions about how we see and what we see. Ashcroft asserts that how we see reveals something of our ideology. Thus, by subverting the dominant ways of seeing the landscape, Onus' work became transformative by disrupting ideological assumptions and constructing new ways of seeing that synthesize Aboriginality and modern culture in a post-colonial revolution. In Ashcroft's view then, Lin Onus is first and foremost post-colonial and is only to be termed 'postmodern' if we want to indulge the European disposition towards reductionist narrative.

Lin Onus himself, in a rare piece of published writing, described the process that taught him how to embrace the right to pick up pieces of cultural reality from all aspects of

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 5.

his experience and bring them together in a dynamic new intersection of cultures in his art.<sup>281</sup> It was a process that was emerging amongst Aboriginal artists in the 1970s of so called ‘traditional’ artists beginning to mix with urban artists and fashioning new art forms. This movement challenged the white art establishment that Onus suggests assumed ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art would “remain static” and unsullied by outside influences. For Onus the experience would be reversed. Growing up and living in Melbourne he felt the loss of the Yorta Yorta language and culture deeply and despaired of ever picking up the pieces of his lost Aboriginal heritage.<sup>282</sup> It took what he called a “deeply emotional and cathartic event” to enable him to bring together his European style with a newly found Aboriginal identity.

A life changing trip to Maningrida, Arnhem Land, led to a friendship with artist Jack Wunuwun and his son Terry Ganadila.<sup>283</sup> Jack Wunuwun adopted Onus into the Wunuwun family and worked hard on his spiritual development. It was during this trip that he was given permission to use the family *rarrk*, the patterns we have observed as part of many of his paintings. These *rarrk* signified clan affiliation and became for Onus the symbol of “indigenised space ... denoting membership, kinship and belonging.”<sup>284</sup> Similarly he used the idea of the *toas*, which were traditional direction markers used by some Indigenous peoples to both bring indigenous meaning into his paintings and humorously, as in “New age toas”, suggest that the waste of the urban society could be recycled to bring new direction to Australian culture.<sup>285</sup> Margo Neale argues very clearly that this gift of indigenous identity offered to Onus on his trip to Arnhem Land was not an exercise in becoming more ‘authentic’ as an Aboriginal artist. Rather,

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<sup>281</sup> Lin Onus, “Language and lasers” in Michele Grossman (ed) *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 92-96. Originally published in *Art Monthly Australia* no 30, May 1990.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>284</sup> Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo*, 19.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

...he was acknowledging and coming to terms with his dual roles as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and acknowledging the historical reality that 200 years of colonisation has led to a greater recognition of divergent and multiple Aboriginal identities.<sup>286</sup>

The trip to Arnhem Land reaped a rich harvest of new cultural identity for Onus. Not only did he gain language and symbol as marks of identity, Wunuwun also taught Onus new ways of seeing as an artist. For example, Onus had spent many hours trying to perfect the European obsession with capturing the reflective light of the surface of still water. It was under the influence of Wunuwun, however, that he began to see and paint not only the water's surface, but also what was beneath the surface. Wunuwun taught him to see not only the panoramic landscape but the actual marks left in the earth by people and animals and to see what was in a tree by standing beneath it and looking up. Onus reflects that these ways of seeing gave a greater spiritual depth to his ideas of landscape and a greater sense of humour in the process.<sup>287</sup>

The humorous, insistent and accessible ways that Onus used his art to claim equality for the urban indigenous person eventually gained broad recognition. It took some blatant and controversial art works to get the message across. In "Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub", Onus appropriates a classical image from eighteenth century Japanese artist Hokusai.<sup>288</sup> Riding Hokusai's well-known wave are two of Onus' artistic creations, X, a male dingo, and Ray, a female stingray. Ray becomes a surfboard and X stands alert on her back surfing Hokusai's wave. The appropriation of Hokusai's wave makes the loudest statement for Onus' point that nothing is sacred in the creating of a new synthesis for Aboriginal people in Australia. In effect he is claiming that the old ways were stolen; assimilation into the

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>287</sup> Lin Onus, *Language and lasers*, 94, 95.

<sup>288</sup> Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo*, 20.

dominant culture is out of the question; eradication of the old cultures is out of the question; a new way of being will be forged that will claim the right to appropriate elements of cultural identity from the plurality of global cultures.

As viewers and interpreters of Onus' art who are seeking to *relate* with it from the perspective of theologians seeking a conversation we are invited to experience the ontological depth of a postcolonial perspective. It is a perspective that refuses to accept the colonial discourse of reductionism and demands that Australian cultural identity be formed by the diverse and even chaotic complexities of 'Bower Bird' hybridity and synthesis. The theologian who represents and interprets the traditional Christian perspectives that are perceived by Onus and others like him to be indelibly linked with colonial dominance and reductionism must not fail to be challenged by Onus' art as a voice in radical contrast to the voice of traditional Christian theology. In relating with Onus and his art we do so as those who are the direct objects of his cultural critique and we must accept that place in the conversation.

Much more could be said about Onus' political life and his campaign on behalf of indigenous artists that led him to engage in global conversations about the validity of new urban styles in indigenous art. Our analysis has concentrated on Onus' artistic style and subject matter and his personal and social situation. All other aspects of his contribution to Australian culture are related to these foundational elements of his life and art. Therefore, enough has been said to allow us to move forward in the conversation to the third stage of our contrast-in-conversation method that enables us to demonstrate our preparedness to accept our place as the objects of Onus' critique.

## **Identifying points of contrast as humility**

Having attempted through acknowledgement, self-disclosure and analysis to reveal something of the independent voice of the art of Lin Onus our task now is to identify any true contrasting elements existing between it and theology. Given that theology is such a wide and diverse field we need to define what we mean by it before we can determine whether or not something stands in contrast to it. To complete such a task comprehensively is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. It is, therefore, the cultural expression itself that declares at the very least a perceived contrast between its own voice and that of the dominant theological presence with which it shares cultural ‘space’ in Australia.

The first contrast worth noting is the assumption in Onus’ work that the Christian religion was and is synonymous with colonial invasion. The subject matter of “On the eighth day” is the clearest statement by Onus that the English god is a colonialist god and therefore guilty of dispossession, oppression, violence and assimilation. Theology has wrestled for centuries with the question of its relationship to the state and therefore its complicity in state matters. Despite what Christian churches may now be doing in relation to indigenous issues, the question remains for theology, how does it construct itself in response to the accusation of colonial collusion?

The second contrast between theology and the art of Lin Onus relates to the inherent task of theology to act as an apologist for truth, which is all too often expressed as apologetics for orthodoxy. We might also say that the tendency to defend orthodoxy in theology is akin, in Onus’ view, to the tendency in colonial discourse to reduce and simplify ideas of first peoples in order to dominate them. Inherent in Onus’ artistic style is the rejection of dominant orthodoxies that are in any way related to the reductionist narratives of

colonialism. In fact, any orthodoxy that claims authority over the individual's right to construct identity in collaboration with global cultural plurality is rejected in Onus' art.

The art of Lin Onus emerges out of the void left in the lives of those whose culture, religion and language has been fractured or eradicated by a dominant orthodoxy. The question Onus' work demands that theology ask is, "is theology able to embrace the "in-between" place of the culturally displaced?" Is it possible for theology to be formed in the "Bower Bird School" of the culturally displaced? Would theology be accepting syncretism if it were to allow the post-colonial and post-modern elements of the Bower Bird approach to identity construction? And more to the point, can it ever be in the interests of theology to embrace what Edward W. Said called the "complication" of post-colonial narratives in order to "dismantle reductionism".

Is syncretism necessary in Australian culture if a faith and spirituality are to grow in a multicultural nation? Is it possible for theology to willingly complicate its own narrative in the interests of post-colonial identity reconstruction that deconstructs reductionist narratives? With these questions we begin to perceive that Onus' art is relevant not only for urban Aboriginal people, but for second generation immigrants and for all young Australian born people struggling to find a spirituality that has some meaning in a culturally and religiously diverse nation. These two contrasts will now be explored in detail as we begin the move towards a consensus space within which to continue the conversation with Onus.

That Christianity played a dual role with the British state in the colonization of Australia is historically certain. The question as to whether this role was due to a truthful and adequate understanding of Christian theology, or due to a distortion of theology, will be part of this examination of what theology might have to say in response to the unsolicited testimony of Lin Onus. Firstly, we must verify the testimony of Onus in his painting "On the

eighth day...” that Christianity, symbolized by the bible, came to Australia as a tool of colonial invasion. John Harris has stated that “It is one of the great tragedies of the recent history of Australia that *true Christianity* was for so long so very difficult to discern in the life of this outpost of a distant nation which called itself Christian.”<sup>289</sup> From statements like this we may glean the reality of early colonial Christianity. The problem was not simply which brand of Christianity was brought here but that those who purported to be Christians, indeed even the churches and many missionaries hardly differed in their view of Aboriginal Australians from the majority of colonists, were so deeply colluding with colonial, reductionist, views of first nations peoples as to be virtually indecipherable from them in their own views. On the issue of discernible differences between secular European and Missionary views about Aboriginals in Australia Harris says,

It was convenient to deny Aboriginal people immortality, and it was at this precise point that popular opinion and missionary opinion divided. The belief that Aborigines indeed possessed immortal souls, ‘the vital spark of heavenly flame’, was to become the final, non-negotiable tenet of missionary belief about the Aborigines. They possessed a soul. They were human and therefore capable of salvation. Beyond this, however, most missionaries’ views on Aborigines were not clearly distinguishable from those of the rest of the community.<sup>290</sup>

If indeed this basic admission of humanity was the only real discernible difference between Christian ideas and colonial ideas, we need to ask in what ways Christianity, and indeed Christian theology, became so enmeshed with colonial ideology that it lost its “true” essence as Christianity. We also need to ask whether or not Christianity did indeed lose its true nature to colonial ideology or whether reductionism to orthodox theology is inherent in Christianity as a religion that seeks universal authority in matters of faith.

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<sup>289</sup> John Harris, *One Blood: 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity: a story of hope* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1990), Introduction.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

There can be no doubt that many Christian missionaries acted with compassion and a real sense of justice when making contact with Aboriginal people. J.B. Gribble, a well-known missionary in New South Wales reports his own sickness of heart at seeing the plight of Aboriginal people and their suffering at the hands of white people who called themselves Christian. It was this heartsick encounter that led to Gribble's sense of call to provide a safe mission for Aboriginal people suffering at the hands of white Christians.<sup>291</sup>

Whilst many missionaries acted with this sense of compassion for Aboriginal humanity and despaired at supposedly Christian whites' behaviour towards Aboriginal people, the actions of missionaries in the missions betrayed their basic assumptions about the ascendancy of European culture and religious practice. Many of the practices of settlers who were driven not by missionary compassion but by colonial and capitalistic zeal had very similar outcomes to the practices of missionaries when measured in terms of their negative impact on Aboriginal culture and clan relations.

Henry Reynolds writes about the complexity of responses in Aboriginal communities to European, including European Christian, invasion. Some Aboriginals sought to join colonial culture. They did so, Reynolds suggests, on the basis of the assumption that their cultural laws of reciprocity would also apply in European culture. "They had no experience of the extremes of wealth and poverty which existed in European society." They assumed that participation brought implicit equality with it.<sup>292</sup>

Age affected the level and impact of contact with European culture also. Young people, traditionally under the authority of the elders were more likely to respond to

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<sup>291</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Dispossession: black Australians and white invaders* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 156-159.

<sup>292</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1981), 129.

European culture, being not yet fully initiated into their own culture. This dynamic was effectively a challenge to the elder's authority. Where European violence occurred however, younger people were more likely to submit themselves to the elder's authority.<sup>293</sup>

Sex was also a factor in the corruption of indigenous culture with young Aboriginal men seizing the opportunity to steal women otherwise meant for older men and seeking refuge from their clan with European settlers. This left elders without the care of the young and again undermined the authority of the elders who traditionally decided who would marry who.<sup>294</sup> The dynamics of white contact with black culture that caused the corruption of indigenous cultures, were actively encouraged by white settlers and the colonial government. Christian missionaries were just as aggressive in encouraging the decline of indigenous culture and relational systems. Accounts of missionaries actively discouraging Aboriginal converts from participating in traditional ceremonies are evidence that for most missionaries Christianity was synonymous with European culture. Missionaries encouraged Christian education, marriage, burial and language to be taught to young Aboriginal people and converts as a way of extracting them from their traditional cultures.<sup>295</sup>

Whilst it is evident that Christianity, from the point of view of Aboriginal people, was indelibly part of the colonial invasion, there are voices that suggest that Christianity was not just colluding with colonial feeling but in fact had helped to *create* the basic attitudes of racism and ascendancy that led to such reckless discarding of Aboriginal culture and language.

Anne Pattel-Gray identifies "Christian racism" as a clear and historical form of racism that acts in and through European colonialism. According to Pattel-Gray, Christian racism

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, 133, 4.

<sup>295</sup> See accounts in Henry Reynolds, *Dispossession*, 160-166.

has its basis in the intolerance of the conflict between Christianity and Islam in the middle ages. Christian racism arose from the increasing theological exclusivity that led to classifications of “us and them”, classifications that referred to growing Christian intolerance of and competition with all other ‘heathen’ faiths.<sup>296</sup> Religious exclusivity is a powerful enough force on its own. Yet Pattel-Gray suggests that when it became increasingly enmeshed with the power politics of colonial expansion it developed into a vicious and deliberate racism that chose to manipulate theology for the interests of white colonial invasion.<sup>297</sup>

In this view it was the very collaboration of Christianity with colonial power that gave rise to Christian racism. Pattel-Gray makes a very important distinction however in her interpretation of Christian racism. In her view, the identification of Christian faith with a racist attitude *is* in fact a “theological error”. She quotes the World Council of Churches, “...behind every discriminative action, if accepted and justified as a Christian mode of behaviour, there lies some hidden heresy.”<sup>298</sup> Therefore, in Pattel-Gray’s view, the brand of Christianity that landed in Australia was tainted by colonial racism and inherently heretical. It deviated from the biblical view of Christ and his teaching. Racism led to a failure on the part of Christianity to consider that Australian Aboriginal culture may indeed have contained the elements of truth that Christianity claims reside in its own faith narrative. Pattel-Gray quotes Alice Briggs as saying, “...our people’s way of life was based on Christianity. They knew Christ long before white people ever come to Australia.”<sup>299</sup> Such a statement rings with the tragedy of colonial Christianity’s failure to listen carefully to existing culture and its seemingly wilful and complete disregard for the ‘other’. That disregard had become implicit

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<sup>296</sup> Anne Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood: racism in Australia* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>298</sup> WCC 1975:15 quoted in *The Great White Flood*, 12

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

in Christian theology as its collusion with state ideologies grew to define its very character as a religion.

“The Australian Church contributed to racism through its roots, heresies, theological imperialism, hypocrisy, collusion with the government, and its tacit and often active support of racist institutions, individuals, theology and teachings, and violence.”<sup>300</sup>

Such is Pattel-Gray’s comprehensive testimony against colonial Christianity, a testimony that disputes John Harris’ claim that Christian missionaries brought the knowledge of Christ with them into Aboriginal cultures that knew of God but not of Christ.<sup>301</sup> Indeed, if Pattel-Gray is right, the Christ that early Christian settlers did bring with them to Australia was not the Christ of the gospels but a false Christ of the colonial state.

Pattel-Gray is specific in her testimony against Christian theology. Taking the definition of theology offered by S.C. Guthrie as an example, that theology is “the quest for the ultimate truth about God, about ourselves and about the world we live in,” Pattel-Gray argues that Christian theology, in the case of the colonial invasion of Australia, set aside its central task, “the quest for ultimate truth.” It set aside this task in favour of its allegiance to colonial power and the racism that it was based upon. According to Pattel-Gray, theology failed to recognise the truth about God in Aboriginal culture, the truth about itself and the “quasi-theological rationalisations” that led to Christian collusion with colonial power, nor about the “world we live in” because its vested interests were firmly identified with the ascendancy of the colonial empire and with the claiming of ecclesial jurisdiction in colonial lands.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>301</sup> Harris, *One Blood*, 19.

<sup>302</sup> Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 121, 122.

Continuing to use Guthrie as an illustrative example Pattel-Gray focuses on five areas of theology and how they specifically failed Aboriginal people and culture in the context of colonial invasion. Charges are brought against christology, biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, ecclesiology, missiology and praxis.

The charge against Christology is that it failed to bring the Christ of the bible to Aboriginal people. The Christ of Galatians 5:1-6 was not taught and in its place was built the dividing wall referred to by the author of the New Testament letter to the Ephesians (2:14-18), a wall that the true Christ abolishes. Pattel-Gray charges theology with bringing an anti-Christology to Aboriginal people.<sup>303</sup> The dividing wall of Ephesians Chapter Two was experienced by Aboriginal people as a colonial process that reduced them to the status of a primitive sub-human group that was rightfully subject to colonial domination. Christian missionaries defined Aboriginal people as human, something most other settlers declined to do, yet it is evident that they did so in order to assimilate them into the Christian church and into the colonial culture. “Saved”, as it was used by the missionaries, turned out to be, “saved from Aboriginality”, and their Aboriginality was defined by white people as inferior, heathen and barbaric.<sup>304</sup> Michael Dodson has identified this kind of reductionism, as it was undertaken by settlers both Christian and otherwise, as a key element in the suppression of Aboriginal people and culture. Self-definition, in his view, is a key to “re-finding” Aboriginality.

Indigenous peoples throughout the world recognise that, at the core of the violation of our lives as peoples, lies the desecration of our sovereign right to control our lives, to live according to our own laws and determine our own futures. And at the heart of the violation has been the denial of our control over our identity, and the symbols through which we make and remake our cultures and ourselves.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid, 122, 123.

<sup>304</sup> Reynolds, *Dispossession*, 5.

<sup>305</sup> Michael Dodson, “The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality” in *Blacklines*, 31.

This important statement applies absolutely to the way the white Australian art establishment used a reductionist definition of Aboriginal art in the mid to late twentieth century. Lin Onus rejected the white definition of Aboriginal art and also their definition of Australian contemporary art as having to be free from Aboriginal elements. What was happening in the art world then has been happening in the Christian theological world, according to Pattel-Gray, since Christian theology landed in Australia. Instead of theology presenting a God who was open, inclusive, humble and conversational, theology *defined* Aboriginal culture, language and spirituality as “heathen” and unfit for God or life in the growing colony. Christ was presented as a dividing and reductionist wall to Aboriginality. Pattel-Gray’s testimony against Christology goes to the heart of Aboriginal people and the freedom to be self-defined. Colonial Christology declined this freedom, instead applying the walls and definitions of the laws of European philosophy and prejudice.

The charge against biblical exegesis is that it deprived Aboriginal people of both the ancient traditions of reading the bible and the recent power of biblical criticism. Biblical theology instead offered colonial Australia and Aboriginal Australia biblical passages interpreted to justify oppression of black people and to protect the ascendancy of white people. Pattel-Gray offers the example of the ‘curse of Ham’ in Genesis 1:28 and the way in which one obscure interpretation of this passage was used to subjugate black people all over the world, including in Australia.<sup>306</sup>

The charge against Ecclesiology is that on the basis of its own racism and greed for religious influence it suppressed the possibility of an independent Aboriginal church. The charge against Missiology is that it could not separate conversion to Christ from conversion to European culture. The charge against discourse and praxis is that while theology thought it

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<sup>306</sup> Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 123-125.

was acting out of the fruits of the Spirit it was in fact merely supporting a colonial system that delivered the exact opposite of the fruits of the Spirit to the Aboriginal people.<sup>307</sup>

The charges brought by Pattel-Gray go deeper than history; they extend to the present day. She emphatically states that racist Christianity is still the dominant form of Christianity in Australia today. Ecclesial silence on matters of land rights, the refusal to stand with Aboriginal people in their fight for equality, land ownership, “questionable remorse” for past wrongs and “questionable actions” in the present to address failures all add up to a praxis of racism in the current Australian church in Pattel-Gray’s view.<sup>308</sup>

If indeed Pattel-Gray’s testimony against theology is sustainable, and evidence collated by Henry Reynolds would seem to suggest it is, then a key element in the conversation between theology and Lin Onus must be the addressing of the failure of theology in Australia. Pattel-Gray’s testimony against theology correlates directly with Lin Onus’ artistic perception of Christianity and colonialism being products of the same spirit. They were, in Onus’ art, equal and colluding partners in the wholesale destruction of Aboriginal culture, language and community.

The charge that Australian contextual theology has still not responded to this failure is a direct challenge to the theological process we are engaged in. Clearly, due to vested interests, European philosophies and collusion, theology came to Australia with very little of the one element that is the key to our method, humility. The point of contrast between theology and Lin Onus is precisely this point, that when theology landed in Australia it was a tool of colonialism and taught the god of invasive oppression. Theology, on the other hand, would like to suggest that theology was merely in error and though it needs to correct its

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 125-131.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, 148-153.

errors it has a valid place in the process of post-colonial identity reconstruction. This position leads theology to ask itself, how do we re-construct a theology that has been so bankrupt for Aboriginal people?

Lin Onus' answer is clear, we do not *re-construct* colonial theology we *construct* a new cultural identity, including religious identity, by using the "Bower Bird school" method. Onus' artistic style claimed the freedom to embrace or reject elements of both European colonialism and Aboriginal culture. Australian theology must perceive the importance of Onus' work for post-colonial identity reconstruction in Australian culture and respond by embracing a *constructive* theology that enables it to participate in the "Bower Bird" process of letting go of its own limiting elements, the dividing walls of colonial dogmatics, and embracing the synthesis of 'picking up' elements of Aboriginality in the crafting of a new theological collage that has a place in the post-colonial identity of Australians.

How does one begin such a task when even the most foundational of Christian theology's sources, the bible, has been so deeply implicated in the colonial use of theology in its suppression of Australian Aboriginals? Is the bible fundamentally colonial and exclusivist? We need to discern how the bible might be extracted from the matrix of manipulation it has been caught in throughout the history of theology in Australia.

It is at this point that the perspective brought by Mark Brett continues to be useful for theologians seeking to address the wrong use of the bible as a justification for colonial activity. Across the world dominated by Christian colonial powers the Bible was used differently though for the same purpose; domination. Spanish Catholicism justified the colonial domination using the image of Jerusalem as the centre of God's life in the world (Isaiah 41-66).<sup>309</sup> In North America the 'Pilgrims identified themselves as the 'chosen

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<sup>309</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: the bible in the tides of empire* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2008), 14.

people' who had a right to claim their 'promised land'.<sup>310</sup> When one reads the stories of the way the indigenous people of the promised land of the Israelite people in the Hebrew bible one may begin to understand the biblical justification for such barbaric and oppressive behaviour in New England.

The use of the bible in the colony of Australia was different again according to Brett. The biblical justification of deeply held views of racial and social superiority, well-practised in the British class system, was the more predominant practice in Australia. The interpretation of Gen 9:20-27 as the 'curse of Ham' applied to all black people and the subjugation of black people to all white people was an attempt by class based societies like colonial Britain to use the bible to justify racism, the exclusion of culture, language and spirituality on the basis of their perceived racial superiority.

Colonial readings of the biblical text can and should be challenged as ideologically corrupt and enmeshed in the politics of domination. Post-colonial theology will, according to Brett, need to embrace repentance from the collusion of past colonial practices, which must include the determination to, "resolutely resist new temptations to exercise mastery over others."<sup>311</sup> Such repentance needs to be based around the *kenosis* found in the Philippians 2 hymn to the kenotic Christ. By way of further example Brett calls on the language used by Jurgen Moltmann of the "self-limiting life" of God that is inherent in the relational theology of the Trinity that seeks always to create space within its own life for the whole of creation.<sup>312</sup> Brett coins the term *kenotic hospitality* to apply this repentant principle to post-colonial peoples.<sup>313</sup> Kenosis does not imply "self-extinction", something the qualification of hospitality guards against. Kenotic hospitality creates space for the "strangers" the ones who

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 183.

are different from the accepted 'norm' in theology. In kenotic hospitality the 'self' of theology asserts itself in dialogue with the stranger, the other. Brett's contention is that if kenosis in this way forms a basic task of theology, theology will necessarily resist the temptation to read power domination into the biblical text and assert power over others and force them into submission and assimilation. The determination not to allow kenotic hospitality to unwittingly impose theological norms onto other cultures, Brett argues, will demand from theology the need to work with "perspicuous contrasts" between cultures in dialogue.<sup>314</sup> Theological work done on this basis has the greatest opportunity of arriving at a new "cultural hybridity", a term used by Graham Paulson.

The proposed commitment to "kenotic hospitality" and "cultural hybridity" must be brought in to the conversation with Onus' "Bower Bird School" of artistic and cultural identity. The way for theology to approach consensus between theology and Aboriginal post-colonial identity reconstruction is to engage in a creative response to the Bower Bird approach, to offer it the space it can rightfully demand in the contextual theological conversation and to work towards understanding what it will mean for theology to recognise God in the embrace of cultural complexity and diversity rather than reductionist conformity in the guise of orthodoxy.

Aboriginal culture experienced theology as a colonizing force. One of the tasks of an Australian contextual theology is to discard what is in error and affirm the complex and fluid nature of what is in relation to human identity, culture and experience. Australian contextual theology must explore the dynamics of openness to constructive creativity that will mean developing new ways of speaking about God that are expansive and inclusive of complex realities.

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid, 195.

This brings us to the second stated contrast between theology and Lin Onus, that being the contrast between the synthesizing activity in Onus' art verses the universalising tendency in Christian theology. Synthesis implies the acceptance of detailed and complicated reality whilst universalism implies the reductionism inherent in all narratives of power and domination. Lin Onus has asserted the rights of the 'in-between' people, the ones who have lost their grounding in culture, to construct a new culture by picking up pieces of different cultures and synthesizing them as identity. These rights are claimed as the way out of the ashes left after colonial domination. His artistic style must not be read as a kitsch plasticity, which it has been by many critics, but as a deeply self-critical affirmation of elements of culture deemed to be essential for being grounded in post-colonial identity. Far from being a careless discarding of some elements of culture and a consumerist collecting of others, Onus's art portrays the deep agony of the forced loss of culture and spirituality and the equally deep affirmation of a new way to preserve what was lost and use it to construct a way that invited all Australians to participate. Donna Leslie has said that Onus' work had a "depth and breadth" that encompassed not only Aboriginal experience of land, tradition and colonization but, "an acute awareness of the need to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians."<sup>315</sup> In Christian theology the term used to describe the blending of elements of different cultural identities and religious identities into a new form of culture and religion, thus, undermining the universal message of Christianity, is *syncretism*.

The universalizing tendency in Christianity goes deep into its own roots in Judaism. The dynamics of worship in the various traditions of the Hebrew Bible reveal a tension between the centralised worship of the temple in Jerusalem and the dispersed worship of local communities at the sacred high places that had their roots in pre Israelite indigenous sacred sites (1 Kings 3:2-4). The Genesis tradition allows for significant interaction between Abram

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<sup>315</sup> Donna Leslie, "Coming home to the land" in *Eureka Street*, March-April 2006: 30-31.

and the indigenous religions of Canaan. Abram recognised indigenous sacred sites as having religious significance for his own worship of God and indeed he even took part in an indigenous sacred ceremony and acknowledged the Canaanite God (El) in his naming of God (Genesis 13:18; 14:18-23). There is clear evidence in a number of traditions that an open attitude to the dispersal of worship to places that were of sacred significance for a range of cultural and religious groups declined and was then actively discouraged (2 Kings 18:4; 18:22; 2 Chronicles 31:1). The command given by Moses to destroy all indigenous sacred sites upon the conquest of Canaan can be contrasted with Abram's peaceful and open perspective in the Genesis tradition (Exodus 34:11-14). These traditions indicate the move in early Israel away from an open, somewhat pluralistic religious practice towards a universal and centralised religious cult in Jerusalem.<sup>316</sup>

Christianity has broadly adopted this universalising tradition as a fundamental understanding of its place amongst the religions of the world. The Christian religion has made a claim to be the only religion with access to the truth about God and all others who wish to have access to that truth must conform to orthodox Christian theology and ritual (John 14:6).

Yet it can also be argued that Christianity has allowed cultural and religious traditions that are foreign to its original forms to shape its expression and even its understanding of God. To consider this as a possibility is to consider that Christianity has held in tension its universalising element with its ability to adapt when it encounters difference. It could therefore be right to say that Christianity is at least in part a syncretistic religion and that this element in its nature and theology also has biblical roots. Such an assertion is arguably

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<sup>316</sup> That the final editors of the Genesis tradition sought to oppose and resist this universalising and centralising tendency in Hebrew worship and practice is the subject of Mark Brett's study of Genesis, *Genesis: procreation and the politics of identity* (London: Routledge, 2000).

demonstrated in Paul's readiness to recognise the religious spirit of the Athenians in his conversation with them at the meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34).

A religious tradition that understands itself to be universally true and a unique expression of the religious spirit will assert the alternatives of assimilation or obliteration, either now or in a transcendent eschatological future: those from any other culture or religion who do not become part of this tradition will at some point be 'lost'. Syncretism and the universal claim to truth seem to be at odds with each other. Onus' postcolonial construction of a new identity that is potentially available to both Aboriginal and other Australians is, it could be argued, a form of syncretism that challenges the universalistic claims of Christianity. Syncretism, when used as a negative term by those with an orthodox view of theology, has generally posed a threat to Christianity rather than been a positive element within it. Onus' art is challenging theology to engage a form of syncretistic hybridity. When read from a postcolonial perspective, however, Onus is demanding much more than mere syncretism. His art demands a perpetual movement towards complexity and diversity within cultural and religious construction for postcolonial cultures. If theology responds positively by engaging in conversation with such challenges, it may be accused of failing in its apologetic task. Alternatively, such a positive response might be seen as a call to more diligently pursue the religious spirit in a postcolonial Australian context.

Robert Schreier has argued that in fact syncretism is not so much a theological question as a question of religious practice and applies to what he calls "the entirety of the religious sign system."<sup>317</sup> Rather than engaging in theological definitions, Schreier examines three common examples of syncretistic religion and uses them to identify three roughly corresponding categories of syncretism in the Christian tradition. The first type of syncretism

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<sup>317</sup> Robert J. Schreier, *Constructing local theologies* (New York, Orbis Books, 1985), 157.

he describes is an amalgamation of Christianity and an indigenous religion in such a way that Christian saints and symbols are identified with and subsumed by Indigenous spirits and symbols. The second type he describes as a blending of Christian and non-Christian elements with a heavy emphasis on retaining the central Christian symbols. The third type he describes as “highly selective in its appropriation of Christian elements” and often contains selected elements from multiple religions.<sup>318</sup> Most helpfully, Schreiter argues that to understand these situations as theologically problematic would be to mis-apprehend the situation. The syncretistic religious situation is, in his view, a symptom of an indigenous culture, itself more often than not a subtle blend of religion and culture, attempting to accommodate an invading culture or religion, and thus involves, most likely, a combination of the two. At the heart of this encounter lies a struggle in both religious systems and both cultures to maintain structure and identity in the face of the inevitable cultural and religious change that accompanies intercultural contact. Schreiter suggests that the different dynamics related to the various examples of syncretism “are related to the resilience of the local culture.”<sup>319</sup> Importantly for us, as we seek to respond to the challenge in Lin Onus’ artistic hybridity, Schreiter argues that the way contextual theology deals with the questions of the syncretism at the heart of the struggle between indigenous culture and invading culture is one of the most significant issues in contextual theological enquiry.

Contextual theology must ask itself whether it is really serious about allowing Christian theology to be contextualized in a way that will, it seems, inevitably encounter new forms of syncretism, as the cultural context seeks to accommodate the new signs and symbols of the invading religion.<sup>320</sup> This understanding of syncretism is based on the view that the phenomenon of syncretism is the outward sign of how the receiving culture is responding to

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid, 146,147.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 144, 154.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid, 150.

the invading culture. It is a way of seeing the situation through the invaded culture's eyes, if such a thing is possible for the invader. Some cultures are completely overridden and very little evidence of indigenous culture and religion remains after colonisation. Other cultures are more resilient and claim space and sacredness for their own indigenous signs, symbols and sacred narratives. In this latter case, syncretism is inevitable and, it could be argued, desirable if contextual theology is really going to be contextual.<sup>321</sup>

It should not be lost on us what remarkably resilient and diverse cultures and religious practices are held in custody by the indigenous peoples of Australia. The invading culture and religion was philosophically committed to obliterating all traces of indigenous culture and religion. For culture, religion and language to have survived at all is remarkable. It would seem that at the very least a new syncretism must be embraced, as it has been in the art of Lin Onus. The question now is one for Christian theology. Can Australian contextual theology engage in a syncretistic conversation with indigenous religion and culture? Can contextual theology play a role in the practical outworking of such syncretism in the daily religious life of Australian people?

Engaging in a syncretistic conversation would, however, be only one aspect of an adequate theological response to the voice of Lin Onus. The real challenge to Christian theology is the challenge to deconstruct the narratives of reductionist orthodoxy and reconstruct the Christian religious spirit as a spirit that is open to and embraces the random complexity at the heart of real cultural situations. Any contextual theology that attempts to embrace such a challenge will need to revise its commitment to static elements in its own narrative and emphasise the dynamic elements as crucial determinates of contextual theology. For example, the Christian commitment to a static portrayal of God, expressed in words such

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 155.

as *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever* (Hebrews 13:8), may need to be carefully revised and our interpretation of Paul's quoting of the Greek poets, *In Him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:18) may need to be carefully emphasised in light of the postcolonial perspective that real life and truth is perpetually diversifying and made up of an astonishing complexity.

It is not at all apparent that orthodox theology would be able to respond adequately to the contextual challenge of Lin Onus in order to at least remain in open conversation with his artistic cultural voice. It is definitely possible, though, for *contextual* theology to respond with the careful self-analysis and revision of emphasis required to become a dynamic and complex religious reality that shares Onus' Bower Bird qualities, in the reconstruction of an Australian theological identity. Indeed, Australian contextual theology, if it wants to be worthy of the name, must do so.

### **Humility as consensus gathering: grounds for continued conversation**

The syncretistic hybridity in Lin Onus' art is an invitation to any theology that seeks to perpetuate a conversation with it, to venture into the potentially capricious world of the Bower Bird subversive. For theology to be truly contextual, to avoid the hazard of the discourse of colonial power, it must be prepared to become a player in the struggle for identity that occurs in the culturally vacuous aftermath of colonial invasion. Onus' art is an invitation to all Australian people, new and ancient, to embrace cultural hybridity, religious syncretism and dynamic complexity in the construction of a new Australian identity. Theology must engage with this if it is to be at all contextual in Australia.

A question that grounds this assertion in Christian life is put by Lyndel Robb to the Australian churches: *Is there any room for Aboriginal Spirituality in today's church?*<sup>322</sup>

Framing the question in this way asks theology to engage the two significant elements of contrast we have discussed as means to redefine Australian Christian religious life.

Firstly, in order to allow Australian indigenous religious and cultural practice to begin to define our reconstruction of Christianity in the Australian context, the churches must consider distancing themselves from the centres of colonial power that still define Australian national identity and instead align themselves with the diverse religious traditions of indigenous peoples. Such a shift in identity within the Australian cultural landscape would definitely require considerable time and work to build mutually respectful relationships between orthodox Christianity and indigenous communities from the ground up. There is no point in merely talking about reconciliation. There has never been a mutually respectful relationship to be reconciled. A consensus space within which the Christian churches and Australian indigenous peoples consider how their respective traditions may equally contribute to a new Australian religious identity would need to be undertaken on the basis of *conciliation*. Such a view calls for consensus as conciliatory action (the constructing of mutually respectful relationships) that includes the conscious Christian relinquishing of colonial privilege and status in modern Australian society and the aligning of theological perspectives and ecclesiological practice with what is predominantly animistic indigenous religion.

Secondly, if the churches and theology are prepared to consider this fundamental realignment of their place in Australian society and culture, they must be prepared to do so by embracing a new dynamics of perpetually complex reality and syncretistic spirit. By this we

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<sup>322</sup> Lyndel Robb, "A homeless Spirit!" in Anne Pattel-Gray (ed), *Aboriginal spirituality: past, present, future* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1996), 113.

mean that religious ‘truth’ will need to be approached as something that is endlessly complex and given to change and that as such Australian theology must operate with the mindset of an evolving reality that combines a multiplicity of cultural and religious perspectives.

The question that arises from the challenge to embrace syncretism and complex cultural realities is about the capacity of church communities to build mutually respectful relationships with local indigenous peoples and thus gain permission to partner with those communities in the constructing of new patterns of sacred ritual and worship. Whether existing churches are capable of worship and theology that includes the ancient and modern animistic spiritual stories, characters and characteristics of the Aboriginal people in their local area is a key point of discernment to be attended to within the consensus space. It may well be contentious, as it will not only be Aboriginal people seeking a spiritual identity rooted in their own Aboriginality but will also involve the Australian churches, in all their diversity, seeking a theology and spirituality grounded in the Aboriginality of their local area. Churches will continue to fail in the task of contextualising Christianity in Australia if they remain unable to embrace Aboriginality as a central source for theology and worship.<sup>323</sup> Robb applies this demand to the high level of displaced and homeless Aboriginal youth in Australia’s cities.

Unless the churches begin to journey into an Aboriginal existence ... and begin to answer some of these questions validly, sincerely and honestly with their actions, then God will always appear to the street kids as a God for non-Aboriginals.<sup>324</sup>

The syncretising hybridity of Lin Onus’ art invites theology to see God in Australia differently to the way the colonial theologians did. It invites theology to consider that for Aboriginal Australia, God is deeply rooted in place and the way we *see* place, and that is

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 118.

crucial for the way we understand God. Whilst in some respects Aboriginal people understand spirit to be universal, such ways of thinking are not as important as understanding spirit in relation to place, relationship and myth. Thus, as Graham Paulson describes, Aboriginal spirituality is animistic, a concept of spirit that seems to be the polar antithesis of Christian transcendent universalism. Lin Onus hybridized the European concept of place and the Aboriginal concept of place, in his artistic blending of European landscape with Aboriginal animistic sensibility. Graham Paulson suggests that a way for the churches to indigenise worship and theology is for an ongoing process of hybridity between universal and animistic spirituality that is prepared to include Aboriginal forms, myths and symbols.<sup>325</sup> This could be the basis for the gathering of a consensus. A consensus could be formed between animistic spirituality and transcendent universal spirituality in the formation of a truly contextual theology in Australia.

Further opportunity for consensus is grounded more specifically in the capacity for theology to bring its own orthodoxy into perpetual contact with complex cultural realities. This thesis is one attempt to do precisely that and Paulson's assertions that a reformation-like protestant turn towards the biblical text, bypassing the history of European Christendom and maintaining a seriously critical gaze on orthodoxy, is an application of the principle of theological response to contextual complexity for indigenous Christians. If Australian theologians can dwell in the place of ready openness to changing contextual complexity we will effectively be dwelling in the consensus space that Frank Rees called for, while fulfilling the call in Onus' art for the critique of static forms and the embrace of dynamic spirit.

This chapter has engaged the life and art of Lin Onus in conversation with the focus of the conversation being an attempt to identify points of contrast between theology and the

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<sup>325</sup> Graham Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal theology" in *Pacifica* 19 (October 2006): 310-320.

cultural voice of Lin Onus. By progressing through the four stages of the contrast-in-conversation method we have succeeded in identifying two key points of contrast that offer the opportunity for theology and Onus to dwell together in a consensus space. The contrast between Onus and theology on the question of Christian collusion with and active participation in violent invasion and cultural dispossession provides the possibility of consensus over the renewal and reconstructing of theology in the Australian context. The contrast between Onus and theology on the question of the dynamics of Bower Bird behaviour as postcolonial resistance provides the possibility of consensus over the criterion that any Australian contextual theology must attend to mutually syncretistic conciliation and the dynamics of perpetual responsiveness to cultural complexity.

In the final chapter of this thesis we will attempt to show in more detail how these conclusions can be applied to the Australian theological context in order to chart a course towards contextual theology as consensus in Australia.

## Chapter Five

### *Erotic Theology and the Music, Literature and Art of Nick Cave*

#### **Acknowledgement and disclosure: The theologian and the art of Nick Cave**

In the previous chapter we applied the four step contrast-in-conversation method to the work of Australian artist Lin Onus. In this chapter the method will be applied to the work of Australian musician and writer Nick Cave and some of the creative partnerships he has engaged in throughout his career so far.

Born in the rural Victorian town of Warracknabeal in September 1957, Nick Cave spent his childhood in another rural Victorian town, Wangaratta where both his parents taught at the local school. Somewhat ironically Cave's childhood was a mixture of devotion to the Anglican Church choir and various forms of misbehaviour at school and out of school. At the age of 12 Nick was sent by his parents to the private boarding school Caulfield Grammar. Never settled at school and always recalcitrant, Cave increasingly turned to his love of art and rock music as the expressions of his own creativity.<sup>326</sup>

In this chapter we will bring theology into conversation with a balanced selection of Cave's work in the hope that we will understand the full implications of his creativity for theology. The creative work of Nick Cave presents theology with a profound temptation. On face value, it is easy to find themes, ideas and myths in Cave's work that are not only highly

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<sup>326</sup> For more extensive biographical details about Nick Cave see Ian Johnston, *Bad Seed: The biography of Nick Cave* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 25-31.

compatible with Christian theology but indeed derive much of their power from the Christian and Hebrew scriptures.

This means that conversation between Christian theology and the work of Nick Cave may easily be less about contrasts and more about continuity, with many junctures, resonances and opportunities for apologetic correlations. Cave's understanding of God as "the imagination taken flight" actually stands in contrast, however, to the carefully reasoned God-being of the church. It is true that much of Cave's inspiration comes from the Bible, yet Cave reads the Bible from the perspective of one who has rejected the church, which he claims seeks only to bind up the imagination in law, and thus to kill God.<sup>327</sup> "I'm not religious... 'Religious' seems to suggest that I'm connected to some religion, which is in no way the case."<sup>328</sup> The contrast-in-conversation method will embrace the creative, erotic and violent elements that characterise Cave's work and thus explore the contrast that becomes apparent between theology and what I will argue is the determined embrace of Eros as the spirit of his creative expression and cultural voice.

One of the mistakes that the theologian can make when engaging Cave's work is to project onto it the role of theology. This mistake is usually accompanied by a too disproportionate and too literal focus on his written lyrics, a criticism that has been made of much of the work published about Cave.<sup>329</sup> When the theologian identifies the meaning of Cave's cultural significance with a literal interpretation of his song lyrics and then projects onto him the role of a fellow theologian, the greatest error in hearing his particular cultural voice has been made.

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<sup>327</sup> Nick Cave, (audio) *The flesh made word* (London: King Mob, 1999). Originally written and performed for radio broadcast by BBC Radio 3 Religious Services, London, 1996.

<sup>328</sup> Nick Cave, quoted in Mark Dapin, "Sowing new seeds," Judith Whelan (ed), *The Age, Good Weekend* (Melbourne: Fairfax Media, August 1, 2009):13-19.

<sup>329</sup> Tanya Dalziell & Karen Welberry (eds), *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the work of Nick Cave* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 4.

Before we can proceed to our own discussion of Cave's work, it will be helpful to examine some of these other studies, both to see what can be learned from them and to clarify what we shall identify as the inadequate methodology of these approaches.

One example of theological projection is found in an essay by Anna Kessler that attempts to outline Cave's apparently theological ruminations on the Divine-Human encounter.<sup>330</sup> Kessler's sources are drawn exclusively from Cave's lyrical and written works and various quotes from interviews given to the press. Lifting elements of Cave's words out of context and often ignoring the multilayered interaction between the written word, the sung and spoken word, the musical and the theatrical performance of the songs, the realisation of written ideas in film and the literary reflections on the evolution of Cave's own thought, Kessler's essay is a good example of theology with very little ability to hear the 'voice' of the cultural expression as 'other'.

It needs to be said that Kessler's focus on the written content of Cave's work is in some part justified, in that Cave does deal extensively in the written word as his art form. Nevertheless, her treatment of Cave's written word does not allow its cultural influence to 'speak' more widely than the theological comparison she is attempting. Cave is reduced to the role of popular theologian through a one dimensional reading of his lyrics.

Kessler makes it clear from the first paragraph of her essay that she is primarily interested in the religious "subject matter" found in Cave's lyrics.<sup>331</sup> It appears that Kessler takes Cave's lyrics on literal face value without ever really allowing for the presence of the humour, irony, sarcasm and recalcitrance that have always been a trademark of Cave's

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<sup>330</sup> Anna Kessler, "Faith, doubt, and the imagination: Nick Cave and the divine-human encounter," in Michael J. Gilmour (ed), *Call me the seeker: listening to religion in popular music* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 79-94.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

creative life.<sup>332</sup> Having boldly cordoned off Cave's lyrics from other elements of his creative expression, Kessler makes the assertion that amongst the many religious themes and issues he has dealt with Cave has "extended significant effort" towards the theological task of sorting out "the issue of the nature of the biblical God and how the divine and human spheres interact."<sup>333</sup> The interaction of the divine and human spheres is certainly present in Cave's work, yet to claim that this is the conscious object of his art is reductionist. Kessler supports her assertion by lifting one of Cave's most famous lyrics, "I don't believe in an interventionist God", out of its lyrical context and using Cave's later literary comments on the nature of the love song to construct a 'Nick Cave theology' that explores the role of human subjectivity in relation to the divine.<sup>334</sup> Never mind the fact that the song from which this lyric is taken, "Into my arms", the first song on the album "The boatman's call", goes on to imagine what it would be like if there *was* an interventionist God and how the lover would appeal to such a God to intervene and direct the beloved into the lover's arms, a paradoxical irony that Roland Boer immediately recognises in Cave's work, leading him to describe Cave's engagement with the bible and theology as "idiosyncratic".<sup>335</sup>

*I don't believe in an interventionist God  
But I know, darling, that you do  
But if I did I would kneel down and ask Him  
Not to intervene when it came to you  
Not to touch a hair on your head  
To leave you as you are  
And if He felt he had to direct you  
Then direct you into my arms<sup>336</sup>*

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<sup>332</sup> Karen Welberry, "Nick Cave and the Australian language of laughter," in *Cultural Seeds: essays on the work of Nick Cave*, 49.

<sup>333</sup> Kessler, "Faith, doubt and the imagination", 80.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid, 81ff.

<sup>335</sup> Roland Boer, "Under the influence? The bible, culture and Nick Cave", *Journal of religion and popular culture*, Volume 12: Spring 2006: 6, 11. Sourced from <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art12-nickcave-print.html> 5/01/10 2:17pm.

<sup>336</sup> Nick Cave, "Into my arms" in *King Ink II* (Paris: Black Springs Press, 1997), 234.

When taken as a lyrical whole, songs like this can and will demonstrate Cave's determination to situate his own creative work in an uncomfortable place with regards to popular and clichéd understandings of God and the world and hence the description "idiosyncratic" might be at least partially fitting. Kessler's haste in lifting one provocative lyric out of context brings into stark relief for us the dangers of projecting the task of theology onto cultural expression. Whilst some merit can be found in Kessler's theological application of selected lyrics and quotes from Cave, it is her projection of the role of theology onto Cave's work, and indeed the role of theologian onto Cave himself, that we need to reject if we are to attempt to hear the real voice of culture through the work Cave has produced over the span of his creative life so far.

As we shall discover, one of the central characteristics of Cave's creativity is his persistent effort to resist categorization, stylization or labels. These efforts in turn lead to a constant evolution and humorous 'piss-taking' of any style popularly attributed to his work. This characteristic of his work does not relate well to the role of theology that Kessler has attributed to it.

J.R.C Cousland, in another essay from the "Call me the seeker" collection that deals with Cave's work, seems at first to have articulated a perception of the work that provides the opportunity for theology to hear its unique 'voice' as cultural expression. Cousland asserts that an "anti-aesthetic" theme exists throughout much of Cave's work in its aim "to shock or discomfit (his) listeners."<sup>337</sup> At first glance this idea of an "anti-aesthetic" is appealing for the very reason that it can be perceived at every level of Cave's creative life in its lyrical, performance, literary and visual image forms. Cousland gathers examples of the various elements of the work that demonstrate the category of "anti-aesthetic" from Cave's earlier

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<sup>337</sup> J.R.C Cousland, "God, the bad, and the ugly: The vi(t)a negativa of Nick Cave and P.J. Harvey", in *Call me the seeker*, 129-157.

work in “The Birthday Party”, Cave’s second band, and his later work with “The Bad Seeds”.<sup>338</sup> He is aware of the humour that is present in Cave’s incessant pursuit of the dissonant, the dark, the ambiguous and the amoral in their most extreme forms.

Cousland has come much closer to a meaningful theological engagement with Cave’s work that actually allows the work itself to retain its own ‘voice’. Yet at the last Cousland, in my view, falls short of the theological task of conversation by insisting that the anti-aesthetic present in Cave’s work is a purposeful methodology designed to reveal God in the human experience of existence. He describes the idea of an anti-aesthetic as,

...an aesthetic of the grotesque, where the unrighteous and the unlovely are dwelt upon to evoke their alternatives. As in a photographic negative, where the polarities of light and dark are reversed, they “watch the dark” to limn the light.<sup>339</sup>

My argument with Cousland has primarily to do with attributing Cave’s work with the theological intent to achieve the goal of revealing the divine good through an infatuation with the grotesque. There is no doubt, as we shall see, that themes of light and dark, the grotesque, the sorrowful, the violent and the tragic all feature in Cave’s work. To assert that the focus on these elements of human experience and the way they interact with each other reveals a theological intent amounting to a premeditated methodological process is, however, to misread the creative and cultural spirit that reveals itself in Cave’s various creative pursuits. We will discover a real ambiguity in Cave’s work with regard to human experience. Light and dark are less prominent than ambiguous shades of grey, amoral forces and the dangerous interplay of ecstasy and tragedy in the common experience of love. The dark and the grotesque themes of the work are often gratuitous rather than purposeful and suggest a subconscious holding up of a mirror to the roots of Australian colonial culture. Rather than

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid, 131, 132.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid, 129.

the theological purpose of revealing the divine, there appears to be an almost compulsive artistic reaction to the conventional veneers of religious and colonial myth.

It should be clear to us from these two examples how easy it is for the theologian to project the role of theology onto a cultural expression, particularly when that expression interacts with sources held in common with theology such as biblical literature and philosophy. Roland Boer's description of Cave's relationship with the bible as "idiosyncratic", which we can take to mean being 'peculiar to the author', emphasises the way Cave's approach to the bible refuses to fit within the generally accepted (by theologians) and practiced methods of approaching and interpreting biblical literature. Boer's analysis of Cave's work is insightful and pays attention to many facets of Cave's song writing that seem to correlate with Christian theological themes. Boer carefully and honestly demonstrates that the theological themes, in particular the theme of redemption that he is looking for in Cave's work, are in his view elusive, inconsistent, and deeply buried within the layers of Cave's representation of the violent, the grotesque and the ugly.<sup>340</sup> He never actually attributes the role of intentional theologian to Cave, a fact that saves his work from the error of the theologian projecting their own identity onto the conversation partner. Yet Boer is intentionally *looking* for theological themes in Cave's work. The intention of the theologian to seek out or attribute theological themes to a cultural work is acquisitive in approach and the often unintended by product of the acquisitive approach is the appropriation of a cultural voice by theology for theology's own purposes.

Boer openly approaches Cave's work as a theological critic who is looking for signs of redemption from amongst the desperate portrayals of human moral ambivalence. The approach of a theologian who begins with the presupposition that orthodox Christian themes

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<sup>340</sup> Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A study of love, death and apocalypse* (Sheffield, Equinox, 2012), 16-31.

will be found in a work is an acquisitive approach. The logic that suggests that any cultural expression that uses the biblical literature as a source must, even in subtle ways, demonstrate the Christian religious message, is an approach that lacks the requisite humility for an authentic conversation. Lyn McCredden names the issue at stake for our conversation with Cave's work when she writes,

Nick Cave is not a theologian. Nor does he claim to be one... What we find stamped across his songs, over and over, is the dark, lonely figure of a man caught up in the desire for a divine source or balm."<sup>341</sup>

Boer wants to know what this balm is that the dark lonely figure depicted in Cave's artistic representation of himself is desiring. He concludes that the sacred balm is "redemption in all its variety".<sup>342</sup> Boer's impressive and honest exploration of Cave's work thus becomes an intentional search for the Christian theme of redemption. Boer's study is admirable, yet in the end I believe it fails to demonstrate any level of complete redemption in the theological sense in Caves eclectic voice. His claim that Cave's most recent novel "The Death of Bunny Munro" contains the most complete moment of clear redemption is an uncharacteristic misreading of the novel's climax. Bunny Munro has lived a bad life and hurt a lot of people. The final pages of the novel describe what happens in the moments before Bunny dies after being hit by a concrete mixer truck. In the foggy delusions of a dying brain, a demon rapes Bunny as it whispers "Here's something to remember me by, until we meet again".<sup>343</sup> In delusional terror, Bunny fabricates a scenario where he is able to coerce with rhetoric the forgiveness of his victims for his evil deeds against them. His motive is terror of the demon and his redemption is the delusion of a dying mind. Thus the delusional image of redemption is motivated not by the desire to be healed, but by terrified self-interest. Bunny

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<sup>341</sup> Lyn McCredden, "Fleshed Sacred: The Carnal Theologies of Nick Cave", in *Cultural Seeds*, 167.

<sup>342</sup> Boer, *Nick Cave*, introduction page 15.

<sup>343</sup> Nick Cave, *The death of Bunny Munro* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009), 255.

Munro's desperate grasping for salvation is not the healing balm of redemption but a narcissistic terror grounded in the threat of reciprocity in hell for his crimes.

Cave's use of the bible is explosive and anarchic, drawing from it images that challenge established religion and the strictures of systematic and moral theology. Cave's artistic voice, when it is surveyed as a body of work, takes delight in smashing through boundaries, definitions and glib resolutions of what is fundamentally ambiguous. It is not, as the writers I have referred to each suggest in their own way, an overt or covert theological treatise. The cultural voice of Nick Cave is visceral and reactive to experience. It does not seek to shape or grasp experience in the sense that it may find some cohesive purpose or fundamentally common human trait to unveil. We will discover that Cave's art is more akin to an orgasm of artistic reaction to the experience of existence, a reaction that never finds resolution and is destined to repeat itself in exhausting and depleting futility. It is the point in the human erotic impulse that loses control and in mindless ecstatic impulse, ejaculates. The result is an intimate glimpse into the Australian soul and the human condition.

In our analysis of some of Cave's work we will endeavour self-consciously to avoid either attributing the role of theology to it or appropriate its themes as theological themes. Our task is to attempt to hear the idiosyncratic 'voice' of Cave's work in the context of Australian culture so that we might attempt to *converse* with it from the standpoint of contextual theology. We will be attempting a balanced analysis of some of Cave's creative work that represents his artistic career in the second stage of the contrast-in-conversation method, *the will to relate*. We will not be able to provide an exhaustive study of all Cave's works. We will, however, attempt to cover most elements of his creative life including his lyrical, performance and literary elements. It will be a challenging conversation for theology in many regards, in particular in regard to the relentless though mostly unconscious suggestion that the idea of morality is a romantic figment reserved for the wealthy and

‘happy’ and that ambiguity and amorality is the real and common human experience. In short, we will climb out of theology’s backyard and into Nick Cave’s backyard, there to explore and play in the foreign space of our cultural neighbour.

### **Analysis as humility: The will to relate**

*They found Mary Bellows cuffed to the bed  
With a rag in her mouth and a bullet in her head  
O poor Mary Bellows.*<sup>344</sup>

Russell Forster, in an article entitled, “The Bad Seed from the Bad Seed Bed”, published in 1997 yet still seen as one of the most important papers written about Nick Cave’s cultural importance for Australia to this day, addresses these questions directly as questions that give us some insight into the nature of Cave’s cultural voice.<sup>345</sup> Forster writes that it is precisely Cave’s departure from Australia and his struggle to gain an identity as a singer, writer and performer in a global context that reveals to us his importance for Australian culture.<sup>346</sup> From the beginning of his musical career, Cave and his collaborators in “The Boys Next Door” and then in “The Birthday Party” were attempting to break out of the mainstream “banality” of popular Australian music.<sup>347</sup> It was this tortuous and orgasmic reaction against the banality of Australian culture in the music scene that came to define Cave’s importance for that culture.

Clinton Walker, Australian music journalist who was starting his writing career at the same time as “The Boys Next Door” were playing their first gig in the Ashburton Anglican church hall, recalls his firsthand experience of this tortuous process. Walker argued that the

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<sup>344</sup> Nick Cave, “The kindness of strangers” in *Murder Ballads* (Melbourne: Mute Records, 1996), track 7.

<sup>345</sup> Welberry, “Nick Cave and the Australian language of laughter”, 53.

<sup>346</sup> Russell Forster, “The bad seed from the bad seed bed: a cultural perspective on the work of Nick Cave”, *Overland* 149 (1997): 60, 61.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, 60, 61.

post punk revolution in rock and roll during the early 1980s was a primary influence on Cave and his friends in the quest for a musical style that broke all the accepted rules and the music industry expectations.<sup>348</sup> Walker laments the fact that all the “serious discussion that Nick Cave inspires these days” tends to neglect the music itself. He acknowledges the literary strengths in Cave’s work whilst asserting that “... he remains, first and foremost, a musician, a singer and a song writer.”<sup>349</sup>

It was in this post-punk scene that Nick Cave, Mick Harvey and Phil Calvert, all grammar school contemporaries, formed a garage band first called “Concrete Vultures” and later “The Boys Next Door”. Inspired by the punk event of 1977, a short time characterized by explosive music that Walker says, “... became the year’s international moral panic of choice”, “The Boys Next Door” played prolifically around Melbourne.<sup>350</sup> Much of their set was made up of cover versions of songs that inspired the band, songs that had prepared the way for the Punk event and that were now dismantled and recreated with chaotic and energetic synthesis, the trademark of the post-punk period (1978-1984).

The “Boys Next Door”, according to Walker, were far from a polished musical unit, but their “... sheer raw intensity, spontaneity and originality...” made followers of the post-punk scene in Melbourne pay attention.<sup>351</sup> While many contemporaries of the band struggled to find influence outside of the Punk scene that had created the context for their initial existence, “The Boys Next Door” steadily began to dig deeper into their rock and roll roots to find inspiration for new synthesis of rock, blues and literature. It was the time when

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<sup>348</sup> Clinton Walker, “Planting Seeds” in (eds) Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell, *Cultural Seeds: essays on the work of Nick Cave* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 32.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid, 39.

musicians could "... pull apart the most primal Delta Blues and put it back together however you liked, however seemingly dislocated."<sup>352</sup>

This was precisely the way Nick Cave and Roland S. Howard, who joined the band after "The Charlatans" dissolved in 1978, were writing songs. This post-punk freedom, coupled with growing literary inspiration, gave the song writing duo a "taste for surrealism, absurdism."<sup>353</sup> The humour of the absurd would become a major part of Nick Cave's creative drive throughout his career and one that is often missed in the focus of commentators on his melancholy.

"The Boys Next Door", who became, "The Birthday Party" when they moved from Melbourne to London in 1980, were learning that their music and its live performance was about "carving out dynamic space, creating tension."<sup>354</sup> They became masters of this tension. "Birthday Party gigs were genuinely feared for their violence and vitriol. Ian Johnston, author of an early biography of Cave, reports one such gig in Cologne, Germany, where Cave, sick of adoring audiences, wanted to evoke some response, any response other than adoring mediocrity, and so began kicking members of the audience and hitting them with the microphone. Aiming a kick at one person he inadvertently kicked a girl in the face and broke her nose."<sup>355</sup> The growing combination of heroin, alcohol and contempt for mediocrity exploded on stage and the "Birthday Party" became "... one of the most compelling and genuinely dangerous live acts ever to besmirch rock history".<sup>356</sup>

According to Russell Forster the process we have just described was a deeply personal struggle for Cave in particular. He places Cave in what he calls the "cthonian

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>355</sup> Ian Johnston, *Bad Seed: the biography of Nick Cave* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), 112.

<sup>356</sup> Walker, "Planting Seeds", 41.

tradition” with artists like Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed and Neil Young. The term 'chthonian' refers to that which dwells in the earth and comes from ancient understandings of the underworld and the elemental spirits that dwell there. If Cave belongs to a tradition of art that is rooted in the chthonian tradition then he is part of a movement that delves deeply into elemental and formative spiritual forces that lie beneath the surface of human existence. In Forster’s view this delving deeply beneath the surface is, in Cave’s case, primarily to do with identity rooted in the elemental struggles of culture.

What separates and distinguishes artists of this nature is the extent to which they appear to struggle with the idea of self in relation to the culture and its history.<sup>357</sup>

The struggle, Forster asserts, is the struggle for self-discovery through the “chronicling of attendant experience.”<sup>358</sup> Once the self and its experience has begun to be revealed, the process becomes a relentless stripping bare of the psyche. What is revealed in this process in Cave’s case are some home truths about what it means to be an Australian person. The result, as Forster goes on to detail, has been largely unpalatable for mainstream Australia. Too many dark secrets lurk in our past that we would rather lay hidden and Nick Cave relentlessly proceeded to uncover them. Forster has described what we have called the orgasmic nature of Cave’s cultural voice. It is an erotic response to the world of experience.

Forster likens Cave’s “passion for the grotesque” to an aesthetic that can also be discerned in the works of Australians like Albert Tucker and Barry Humphries. The suggestion is that artists of this aesthetic of the grotesque in Australia are subverting a national denial of the true character of our national social, psychological and specifically our religious history, which is profoundly colonial and irrevocably related to colonial power structures and violence. By dwelling on the grotesque, Australian artists are locating what

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<sup>357</sup> Forster, “The bad seed...”, 60.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid, 60.

Forster calls “some latent fury” that is a subconscious response to national denial. Colonial expressions of morality are mocked and subverted in Cave’s participation in this cthonian delving. Morality is aligned with colonial power whilst for those under the colonial rule the reality of existence is more defined by amorality and ambivalence about ‘ethical’ behaviour.

Forster suggests a contrast with Australian reticence to embrace cthonian delving into suppressed violence in mainstream America, which displays a freedom to sing that is based on a national ability to collectively absolve itself of colonial and slave guilt and to give vent to the national pride at having done so in the medium of the song. Forster writes that,

In the US, songs abounded and heroes populated them with purpose and morality... there is no doubt that America took the song and ran with it.<sup>359</sup>

By contrast, Australia has not allowed itself to speak, let alone sing, about its collective consciousness and dark past. Forster reminds us that it was the Irish in the early Australian colonial history who sang traditional songs to lament the desperate circumstances of transportation to Australia. The colonial elite labelled such songs as “subversive” and along with all indigenous forms of song suppressed their development as a risk to the newly forming colonial outpost of British imperialism along with its colonial ideas of morality.

Here we can cite the example of Cave’s much later involvement with the Australian film “The Proposition” as an example of the maturing into consciousness of the cthonian nature of his artistic perspective. Cave wrote the screen play for the film and his sense of the ambiguity of morality, light and darkness is a key theme in the work. Some of the most evocative writing in the script places words of erotic depth, ironically in the mouth of an insanely violent killer.

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid, 60.

“Love! Love is the key, love and family. What are night and day, sun, moon, the stars, without love and those you love around you? What could be more hollow than to die alone, unloved?”<sup>360</sup>

These poetic words are spoken by a learned and reflective philosopher named Arthur Burns while lying on his back next to a fire burning deep in the ancient sculpted rocks of the Queensland outback. The astute viewer of this scene in the film will not miss the strong and tragic irony in these words spilling from the lips of Arthur Burns. Arthur Burns is a notoriously violent killer whose most recent victims were the Hopkins family, a family loved and respected by the local town’s people. There is an inversion of colonial assumptions about the criminally minded that Cave reveals in this part of the script. It is an inversion that challenges all colonial assertions about those who undermine the dominant narratives of social and political life. Arthur Burns, an Irish outlaw and a killer, utters the only words of love in the film.

Arthur Burns and his brothers, Charlie, Samuel and Mike, raped Eliza Hopkins, who was with child, assassinated her husband and children and then Eliza herself before burning their homestead to the ground. We the viewers are not ever offered what the motivation was for this crime. We only perceive the sense of powerless outrage that seeps through every seam of the small frontier community’s life. Such rampant evil must be stopped! Yet when we meet Arthur Burns in his hiding place, we find a man unlike any other so far in the script. Arthur Burns watches the sun setting every evening from his hilltop perch and gives the impression of one who soaks up the meaning of life from the landscape around him. His hidden hole is filled with books and scraps of paper containing the written reflections of his poetic and slightly insane philosophy. He seems a man so deeply connected with himself and his landscape that he is, at first, hard to dislike.

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<sup>360</sup> John Hillcoat and Nick Cave, *The Proposition*.

He is singularly unlike the characters that we meet who form the bulk of the community in the area. They struggle against the land they find themselves in. The vast space, the heat and humidity, the flies, and the indigenous Australians all represent such a rampantly different context than that which they imagined themselves living in that the townsfolk struggle, perched uncomfortably in the desert plains, yearning for England. Maurice Stanley, captain of the local police force, and his wife Martha live in a homestead surrounded by a white picket fence. Within the fence are beds of flowers, ordered garden paths and roses blooming, all of which form only a thin disguise for the desert earth beneath. This house is a little taste of England adapted for the hot Australian environment. Outside the picket fence is a vast flat plain of dry grass, teeming with flies and given to dramatic displays of desert climate.

Very early in the film, Maurice Stanley (played by Ray Winston) stands at the window of a house in which he has trapped two of the Burns brothers and breaths into the heat, "Ah.. Australia! What fresh hell is this?" Jelon Lamb, a bounty hunter waiting in the foothills for Arthur Burns to emerge from his hiding place, proclaims in a drunken rant,

Russia, China, the Congo! Oh I have travelled in unknown places in lands beyond the seas. But nothing! Nothing could have prepared me for this God forsaken hole.

Indeed, for Lamb, the very landscape in which he finds himself represents the antithesis of godliness. He responds to Charlie Burns' question of whether or not he prays:

"Good lord no! I was in days gone by a believer, but alas, I came to this beleaguered land and the God in me just evaporated. So let us change our toast sir. To the God who has forgotten us!"

Together with John Hillcoat (Director), Cave has undermined easy definitions of good and evil. The 'evil', depicted in the character of Arthur Burns, has characteristics that most Australians would like to value; a settled, even familial, relationship with the landscape, a

poetic, reflective though dangerously irrational response to the nature of life and a strong sense of family loyalty. The Burns family are Irish and therefore typecast as subversive and anti-authoritarian, two more characteristics that Australians like to think of in themselves. Arthur Burns is also an extremely impulsive and violent man, whose sentiments of love and life extend only to his own family and who sees in others, outside the familial boundary, only a menace that must be exterminated with malicious and bloodthirsty ferocity.

The 'good', depicted in the characters of Maurice and Martha Stanley and the townsfolk, is not at all clear given that these characters are not likable. They live, as has been said, perched uncomfortably in the landscape. They fight, inwardly and outwardly, against life. Morally outraged at what the Burns brothers have done to the Hopkins family, they show few signs of morality in their own living. They think nothing of brutally massacring the local indigenous people. They are heavy consumers of alcohol and they clearly view the land with a mixture of fear, loathing and misunderstanding. Moreover, they are confused about how to respond to the Burns brothers' violence. They are morally impotent so they themselves resort to violence.

The screen play of this film is true to Nick Cave's career-long themes of the absence of clearly defined categories of good and evil. There is never a time in the film when the viewer is able to rest in the knowledge that one is in the presence of good. There is never a time when one is able as the viewer to comfortably hate the evil. The film insists that morality is a vague and ambiguous concept at best. It is a concept simply not available to the characters in the film. The scene that depicts the flogging of Mike Burns is a clear example of this relentless ambiguity. At first the townsfolk and indeed Martha Stanley support the flogging and turn out to witness it. Mike Burns is, however, merely a young teenager and the flogging is brutal. As the scene unfolds it becomes clear that this form of 'justice' is

sickening, so much so that it no longer has the desired effect of soothing the outrage at the Hopkins murders. The people are now simply sickened by the violence of their own 'justice'.

Whilst Captain Maurice Stanley is depicted as a man wrestling to outwit evil he almost unthinkingly orders his officers to ride out and finish the business of slaughtering the local indigenous people. Elements like these in the film disallow any sense of clear morality. If any moral clarity is allowed at all it is only for the Indigenous victims of colonialism. Silent they lie under the open sky, their lives carelessly thrown away by colonialists who were belligerently ignorant of indigenous law.

Cave is explicitly exploring in the Australian context the violence that underlies colonial cultures. At the same time, however, he is not allowing any clear moral judgements and certainly no theological assertions. Even those committed to the Christian ethic of love would feel uncertainty when faced with the tribal love displayed by Arthur Burns or the love of neighbour that resulted in the flogging of Mike Burns in vengeance for the deaths of the Hopkins family. In the end Maurice Stanley's proposition to Charlie Burns that he kill his brother Arthur in exchange for a pardon is 'successful'. But there is no happy ending in this script. There are no winners, there is no moral victory, and there is no moral right and no moral wrong. All that takes place gives the lie to the colonial myth of order and civilisation.

Cave is evidently writing out of a deep seated and at first largely subconscious reaction to the suppressed violence in the collective memory of the colonial birth of the Australian nation. Part of his creative response is to batter the banal mainstream Australian myths and values with the violent roots of Australian national consciousness. It is precisely this cthonian battering, or delving, that drove Cave early in his career to seek an audience in Europe. The subconscious cthonian delving into his own Australian cultural and religious identity, whilst repulsive to Australian mainstream audiences, found a place in the seedy post

punk melting pots of London and Berlin. Who can say if those audiences ever understood the roots of Cave's prophetic ravings? Did he even understand them himself? It is likely, though, that post-punk expression of Australian cultural violence could only ever have found an audience amongst those whose knowledge of such things was at best theoretical and more likely to be non-existent. Within Australia, Cave had touched too many raw nerves and this situation makes his expatriate status particularly important for contextual theological conversation with his art. Lyrical and performed violence was a key language in Cave's global airing of Australian dirty washing.

Yet Cave also used and uses humour to get underneath banality. Karen Welberry has drawn attention specifically to what she calls the "postcolonial humour" in Cave's song writing and performance style. Humour is a dominant subversive form in the world of postcolonial cultural expression. In her essay, "Nick Cave and the Australian language of laughter", Welberry explores not only the "Australianness" of Cave's humour but also the relentless attack on colonial narratives in that humour.<sup>361</sup> Welberry's asks whether Cave was serious or joking when he had proposed to erect a life size statue of himself on a rearing white horse in the centre of Warracknabeal, the town where he was born in rural Victoria. Cave apparently intended to dump the statue in the desert if refused by the town. Welberry identifies humour in what she says is a parody by Cave of the habit common to Australian rural towns of erecting statues such as the one proposed by Cave in their town squares and parks. The plan to dump the statue in the desert if it were rejected was also a humorous dig at the Australian view of the 'bush' as a place that is only good for dumping unwanted rubbish.

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<sup>361</sup> Karen Welberry, "Nick Cave and the Australian language of laughter" in *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the work of Nick Cave*, in Karen Welberry & Tanya Dalziell (eds) (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009): 47-64.

When asked about the presence of the joke in his work Cave has said that part of being Australian is that “we often don’t know whether we are joking or not.”<sup>362</sup> Following up this ambiguity in the humorous intent, Welberry observes that critics who “interpret Cave very literally, examining his lyrics as unmediated expressions of the artist himself...” fall into the trap of labelling Cave in accordance with the literal value of the lyric.<sup>363</sup> Arguing against such literalism, Welberry asserts that Cave uses words in a kind of “language of laughter”. It is Cave’s appropriation of the “English literary heritage” and the way he “conjures and transforms” that heritage that creates a humorous parody of the Australian attachment to English colonial culture.

Many people, myself included, relish the way Cave injects absurdly discordant erudition, banality, or lyricism into seemingly inappropriate places.<sup>364</sup>

The bloodthirsty account of a mass murderer’s narcissistic and erotic indulgence in the slaughter of his neighbours in Cave’s “O’Malley’s Bar” is a case in point, particularly as an example of what Welberry has called “discordant erudition”.<sup>365</sup> The murderer’s narrative shows an erudition that is never accorded to the criminally minded by the law abiding elements of society and Welberry identifies a wry humour in Cave’s identifying of erotic and narcissistic criminal behaviour with an erudite grasp of the English language.<sup>366</sup>

Situating this use of the English language in the category of postcolonial resistance, Welberry understands Cave’s use of language to be parody and mimicry of colonial social and political ideas and as such it stands within the postcolonial style of many performers throughout the English colonies.

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid, 48. Welberry quotes from Stephen Dalton, ‘The Light in the Cave’, *The Age*, Good Weekend section, 19 September 2004.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>365</sup> Nick Cave, “O’Malley’s Bar” *Murder Ballads* (Virgin: Mute, 1995): Track 9.

<sup>366</sup> Welberry, *Cultural Seeds*, 52.

The linguistic experimentation of many writers and performers of the English diaspora played a crucial role in unsettling both the cultural and political dominance of the former colonial power. 'Mimicry' in particular has been shown to be an extremely effective means of making so called 'superiors' step back and look at themselves.<sup>367</sup>

According to views like Welberry's, the bloody colonial history of Australia that included violence towards indigenous peoples and the largely convict-based society is like a festering and unacknowledged cancer, lying beneath the surface of an identity that is constructed on the premise that this malevolent secret must be suppressed at all costs. Nick Cave is credited with the honesty of a prophet in his ability to burrow beneath the façade and to reveal the cancer by acting out its true nature in the violence of song and literature, a violence that is dripping with wry and sarcastic humour. Welberry attributes the acting out through laughter and mimicry of the true nature of Australian culture with the nature of postcolonial resistance. Forster attributes Cave's focus on naming the dark spirits that are suppressed under Australia's determination to forget the past as cthonian delving and enacting through song of those dark spirits. We must be careful, however, not to suggest that Cave was necessarily intentional in his reaction to colonial culture. It is more likely that cthonian delving and postcolonial mimicry were visceral and erotic reactions to the unnamed and the subconscious and in particular the naming of cthonian delving as *erotic* acknowledges that the cthonian spirit in Cave's work is not primarily an intentional analytical delving. It is, rather, a natural, spontaneous reaction that is outworked in an artistic penetration of popular culture in order to uncover the cthonian spirits of Australian colonial violence.

In his early work with "The Birthday Party" this violent, erotic and sometimes anarchic spirit was clearly evident in his song writing and in his live performance. Footage from as early as 1979 and into the early 1980s shows Cave's ever-evolving capacity to blend

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid, 49.

literature with gothic punk performance. The Birthday Party's performance of "Hamlet (Pow,pow,pow)" is a good example of the chaotic and sometimes violent nature of Birthday Party performances.<sup>368</sup>

At the time the music press were obsessed with Cave's addiction to heroin and attributed his dramatic performance style and his penchant for violence to the ravages of a drug habit out of control. Cave's drug habit might be seen as a personal outcome of his erotic delving into the Australian subconscious suppression of violence alongside his deeply creative and cathartic performance style and synthetic blend of literature and gothic punk culture. Cave's life and work were closely blended at this stage of his career. He was acting out the post-punk spirit in his art and drug use. Later, when Cave faced the legal necessity of ending his illicit drug use, he would be deeply concerned about the potential impact of ending his heroin use on his creative life.<sup>369</sup>

Much of Cave's early song writing in the "Birthday Party" began to formulate into an idea for a book that delved deeply into the themes of the suppression of the imagination that Cave increasingly understood to be at the root of violence. Cave started writing his first novel, *And the ass saw the angel*, while he was still in the fog of drug addiction. The novel was completed and published in 1989 after his detoxification in a drug clinic.<sup>370</sup> In this dark and compelling piece of literature Cave explores what he calls the divine origins of madness and erotic violence. Written from the perspective of a mad mutant boy, Euchrid Eucrow, and set in the context of a cane sugar town in a secluded valley in the deep south of America, the story unfolds of the religious bigotry of the town's founders, the Ukulites, and their tendency towards violent catharsis in the face of perceived sin. In an attempt to expunge the town of

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<sup>368</sup> The Birthday Party, "Hamlet (Pow, Pow, Pow!)", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGU4wxN12uQ> viewed at 2.20pm 02/07/2014.

<sup>369</sup> Ian Johnston, *Bad Seed*, 239.

<sup>370</sup> Nick Cave, *And the ass saw the angel* (London: Black Springs Press, 1989).

guilt, and remove the curse of incessant rain that has blighted the town for three years, the religious sect attack and badly beat a local harlot. Euchrid, driven by the divine voice within his silent world that clamours with mad imaginings, explodes in violent, bloodthirsty and insane counteraction against the whole township and particularly against the supposedly righteous sect that he instinctively understands is his own antithesis.

The harlot, removed from her home and disgraced in the town, gives birth to a baby girl and leaves her secretly at the feet of the town's memorial to its prophet. The people who find the girl take her as a sign from God that their sins have been forgiven and the rain stops falling on the very night of her discovery. The foundling is raised by the Ukulites and is venerated as one predestined to be an instrument of God. What the Ukulites fail to see is that Euchrid, the mad mute boy, is in fact the divine instrument in their valley. Responding to the voice of the divine in him, Euchrid has sex with the now teenage girl, shattering the Ukulite's expectations that God's moral purity would be incarnate in her. Later, again in response to the voice of God, Euchrid attempts to kill the foundling, but she survives. His cathartic violence sated, Euchrid retreats to the swamp and sinks willingly into the murky quick-mud at its heart denying the Ukulites their 'divine' vengeance.

For Cave, the mute, mad boy, Euchrid, is "Jesus struck dumb, he is the blocked artist, he is internalised imagination become madness".<sup>371</sup> In Cave's thought, Jesus and Euchrid are both highly attuned to their own imagination and creative power. In Jesus, the imagination finds voice in the drama of love and freedom verses the dead letter of the law. In Euchrid, the imagination, blocked by his inability to speak, eats its way into his sanity and eventually explodes into violence and madness directed, as love and freedom was in Jesus, at the religious custodians of law and dogma. Cave identifies both Jesus and Euchrid with the

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<sup>371</sup> Nick Cave, *The flesh made word* (London: King Mob, 1999). Audio lecture, originally recorded for radio broadcast by BBC radio 3 Religious Services, London 1996.

divine. For Cave, divine presence must hold the potential for both life giving and ecstatic spirit and violent ecstatic despair. To separate these two forces is to deny divinity altogether and to kill the wild, erratic, erotic and creative potential of the human imagination—God.

To this end Cave resists in his work and thought any suggestion that God can be a moral being asserting divine morality onto humanity. Rather, ‘God’ is the creative imagination and humanity is the conduit, the pipe through which it flows. If blocked, ‘God’ will explode in violent outrage at the blockage. One is left with the impression that for Cave, the greatest blockages occur when the imagination is caged within carefully framed myths of morality, whether they be social, political, personal, national, historical, theological or artistic. Frameworks that suppress the explosive imagination will unleash the very amorality and violence they seek to suppress.

The Punk movement had been the perfect foundation from which Cave was able to launch what was clearly his innate, even sub-conscious, urge to set his imagination free from convention, morality, mainstream culture and, increasingly, modernity. It was an urge that would perhaps first emerge in his rejection of contemporary art forms in favour of pre modern religious art while at art school in the late seventies.<sup>372</sup> By the end of 1983 "The Birthday Party" were finished and disbanded. Nick Cave, however, was determined to continue writing songs. The rest of the 1980s would see the rise of Cave’s new band called “The Bad Seeds”. It would also see the beginning of a steady and deliberate separation of his personal life from his creative work. Cave has said that this, in his mind, was a transition from ‘Old Testament thinking’ to ‘New Testament thinking’. By this he meant that the God of the ‘Old Testament’ often expressed himself through vindictive hatred and violence, a

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<sup>372</sup> Nick Cave, *The secret life of the love song* (London, King Mob, 1998). Originally presented at the Vienna poetry festival in 1998.

nature that inspired much of Cave's early performance style.<sup>373</sup> The 'New Testament' God expressed himself through the language of love. Cave's song writing increasingly explored the dynamics of love as an irrational response to the banality of existence. This irrationality of love in Cave's work gives it an erotic character in the broad sense of that word. Erotic, in the sense we will use it, is defined as the force of human nature that irresistibly and irrationally seeks to penetrate the surface of human experience and culture.

More recently Cave has been quoted as having worked on the freeing of his imagination by a personal embrace of the ordinary.

I guess what I've been trying to do over the last decade is to remove my 'persona' from the picture... to lead a life that is of no particular interest to anyone, a kind of non-life, a life of ritual and routine, so that my perceived persona does not interfere as much in the work itself. I find that the more incident-free my personal life is, the more volatile, violent and explosive my imaginative life is.<sup>374</sup>

The passage from a life profoundly connected with his art to a life intentionally remote from it took place throughout the 1990s. Cave's creative focus shifted from the expression of the chaotic and the angry to the expression of the ambiguity and irrationality of love. Yet the chaotic aspect has remained in Cave's work without dominating it. Hatred, which Cave has said was inspired by the Old Testament God, has less prevalence in his work. Cave's own life does not demonstrate the complexity of ideas and images that are present in his work, yet the same cthonian and erotic energy is present in his development of the love song.

Violence, bitterness, sadness and loss are used by Cave to save the love song from sentimentality and conversely sentimentality is used to mock romanticism. The concurrence of the irrational themes of love with Cave's continued cthonian energy constitutes Cave's

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Nick Cave, quoted in "Sowing new seeds" *The Age Good Weekend* (August 1, 2009), 13.

movement into 'New Testament' thinking. The phenomenon of the love song became, for Cave, the primary language of the human imagination and therefore of the 'divine' element in life. The analysis of Cave's love songs takes us irresistibly closer to his lyrical content and his literary reflective essays. Yet his *performance* of love songs remains important as the primary medium of sadness and cthonian eroticism.

The final song on the album "No more shall we part" takes the listener on an aching, and sometimes apocalyptic, walk that is said to be the "final walk". "Darker with the day", performed on the piano at a slow and sorrowful tempo that concurs with the lyrical journey undertaken in the song, correlates a sense of the end of things, the inexplicable futility of human existence and the impotence of religion, with an unutterably sad heart ache for the lover who has gone away. The listener is left wondering if the bereft lover sees the world as an apocalyptic mess through eyes tinted by love lost, or whether existence really is as futile as this and the only possible consolation for humanity is in the pursuit of erotic love. Either way, or both together, Cave has written a song that evokes a yearning that is palpable in its painful cry of the bereft. From the first line, the language in the lyric is about endings. This walk is the final walk. There is a desire for endings, closure. The desire for closure leads the journey into the cloistered darkness of a church pursued relentlessly by love like a dog panting at one's feet. The desire for closure attempts to materialize into some semblance of the divine but the symbolic presence of God in a church can find no finger-hold in the nameless dog of love and it slips redundant in the wake of the heart cry, "Babe, it seems so long since you've been gone away. And I, just got to say, that it grows darker with the day."<sup>375</sup> The song is a love song and holds in it a sorrow that seems to be at the heart of Cave's artistic endeavour.

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<sup>375</sup> Nick Cave, "Darker with the day" in *No more shall we part* (London: Mute Records, 2001).

In a lecture entitled, “The secret life of the love song,” Nick Cave purports to reveal his own understanding of what is occurring in the phenomenon of the love song. For Cave, writing love songs evolved as his attempt to fill what he calls “a great gaping hole left in my life by the death of my father”. Cave, who was nineteen years old at the time of his father’s death, says the creative act of writing love songs was aimed directly at that hole. What is profound for our conversation with Cave is that for him, the act of writing songs brings ‘god’ into existence. In fact this incarnating of the ‘divine’ as imagination in the love song is at the core of his creative spirit.

The actualizing of God through the medium of the love song remains my prime motivation as an artist... language became a salve to longing.<sup>376</sup>

Cave reflects on this creative response to tragedy with the words of twentieth century poet W.H. Auden whom he quotes saying,

“The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting. Had it not occurred, it would have found another, in order that its life become a serious matter.”<sup>377</sup>

Cave reads this seriousness based in tragedy as the basis of his creative life. For him, the creative elements of the human person actually cause tragedy, which is, for him, the incubator for longing and desire. It is again an idea that relates to the dynamics of eros as that in the human person that seeks to penetrate and give expression to the experience of existence. Cave uses a Portuguese word, *saudade*, to capture the essence of this longing that is born in tragedy. He translates the meaning of *saudade* as “an inexplicable longing, an

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<sup>376</sup> Nick Cave, *The secret life of the love song* (London: King Mob, 1998). Originally presented at the Vienna poetry festival in 1998.

<sup>377</sup> W.H. Auden, quoted by Nick Cave in *The secret life of the love song*. The quotation is from a book review Auden published in 1941 and cited in many places, including Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins, (ed.), *In Solitude, for Company: W. H. Auden after 1940*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 155.

unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul.” This longing is the birthplace of the love song and “the love song is the light of God, deep down, blasting up through our wounds.”<sup>378</sup>

For Cave, the feeling of *saudade* serves to bring into focus the sense of distance between mundane reality and imagination. Imagination holds the promise of flight from the mundane world. Cave equates God with imagination and thus the love song becomes an instinctive language “to fill... the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.” It is imperative for sorrow to be present in the love song, however, for the absence of sorrow means the absence of longing, of *saudade*. The sense of the divine in Cave’s characterisation of the love song is in fact still the sense of the free human imagination. There is nothing in this description of the divine that correlates with religious understandings of the divine. It is a god born in the throes of human erotic desire to penetrate the meaning of existence with the free imagination.

The presence of sorrow in Cave’s love songs by no means relies upon the tragic element in the lyric. Cave’s music alternates between raw, angry, almost anarchic sounds and the sublime ambiguity of sorrowful ballad. There is always a sense of brooding sorrow in the music, whether angry or reflective, and Cave attempts to name this sense of sorrow with a word used by Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936). “Whatever has black sounds has *duende*.”<sup>379</sup> *Duende*, in the thought of Lorca, is a quality or feeling present in some music, poetry and philosophy characterised by a sense of struggle. *Duende* may not be constructed in art or philosophy; it is present or not, and it seems usually to be accompanied by the willing embrace of death and the flare of artistic imagination that produces something

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Federico Garcia Lorca, *The duende: theory and divertissement* (<http://www.musicpsyche.org/Lorca-Duende.htm> viewed at 3:03pm, 28/09/09) Originally presented by Lorca in Havana and Buenos Aires in 1934. Quoted by Nick Cave in *The secret life of the love song*.

completely original and new. Lorca claims that *duende* is common in Spanish cultures precisely as a result of the Spanish cultural celebration of death.

To *saudade* and *duende* Cave adds a third ingredient that, for him, must be present if a song is to be truly a love song. Born and nurtured in tragedy, longing and sorrow, the love song must be an expression of the human capacity for irrationality.

The love song must be born into the realm of the irrational, the absurd, the distracted, the melancholic, the obsessive and the insane, for the love song is the noise of love itself and love is, of course, a form of madness. Whether it be the love of God, or romantic, erotic love – these are manifestations of our need to be torn away from the rational, to take leave of our senses, so to speak. Love songs come in many forms and are written for a host of reasons, as declarations of love or revenge, to praise or to wound or to flatter – I have written songs for all of these reasons – but ultimately the love song exists to fill, with language, the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.<sup>380</sup>

The “realm of the irrational” is, for Cave, the realm of the imagination. In an earlier lecture entitled, “The flesh made word,” Cave asserted in more detail the nature of the human imagination and its role in incarnating the divine. Using the saying of Jesus from Matthew 18:20, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”, Cave argues that the language of human interaction is imagination and it is in the imaginative interaction of people that God *becomes*. “God is a product of the creative imagination, and God is that imagination taken flight.”<sup>381</sup> In his childhood, Cave believed he was to suppress his imagination. His early experience as choir boy in his local parish gave him the experience of contrast between the “remote... and uncertain” God preached in the pulpit and the “dark mutterings” of his imagination, and the leaking of “rogue thoughts” that he now argues were the voice of God in him. As a teenager, he witnessed his father’s love of literature and the way he would lose himself in his own creative energy while reading out loud. Cave became

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<sup>380</sup> Nick Cave, *The secret life of the love song*.

<sup>381</sup> Nick Cave, *The flesh made word*.

aware of the power that art, as an expression of the imagination, has to lift a person above the mundane reality of the world. It was this growing awareness that first motivated Cave to write, first poetry and then songs.

As a young art student, Cave became interested in religious art and began reading the Bible, which was the source of much of the religious art he surrounded himself with. It was in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, that he discovered *duende* and *saudade* in forms never encountered in other literature. Using Psalm 137 as an example Cave was captivated by the way both longing and violence, the demand for justice and blood lust could all be held within the one song, and that song a prayer to God.

Verses of longing, rapture and love can hold within them apparently opposite sentiments. Hate, revenge, bloody mindedness etc... they were not mutually exclusive.<sup>382</sup>

The composite of creative and destructive emotion that Cave discovered in the Bible became the foundational characteristic of Cave's song writing and his writing in general.

Analysis of Cave's work has revealed an amoral commitment through performance, song and literature to the voicing of an erotic determination to break through the banality of human existence into something beyond. It should not be assumed, however, that Cave understands that what is beyond surface banality and colonial suppression is divine in the sense that theology has spoken of the divine.

A common theme in all of Cave's work from the chaotic, violent and humorous undermining of banality in his early work, to the sadness violence and humour of the love song with its desire to fill the tragic hole in human existence, is the theme of rejecting the 'given' state of things in a desperate bid for transcendence of the banal and the ordinary. This

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

insatiable desire in the human spirit is tragic, revolutionary and insistent. Cave has said that the primary function of the imagination is the erotic drive to transcendence and thus the imagination is the 'divine' voice in human experience.

The 'divine' element in Cave's work, despite his claims that it resembles the New Testament God, has a great deal in common with early Greek understandings of the divine Eros. The terror and tragedy of eros are palpably present in Cave's work. Cave's art is its own idiosyncratic genre of *cthonian eroticism*. Cthonian eroticism is a term that calls our attention to the ejaculatory delving in post-punk cultural truth telling and in the irrationality of the love song, in order to shatter the banal myths of nationhood and sentimentality and name the depths of human existence through the explosive power of the irrational imagination.

Having outlined something of the character and themes in Cave's artistic work, in the next step of the contrast-in-conversation method we will explore the contrasts between that work and Christian theology.

### **Identifying Points of Contrast as Humility**

There are three elements that have been identified in our analysis of Cave's art that may be in contrast to orthodox Christian theology. We must remember that orthodox theology is itself a vast and diverse body of thought with many streams and traditions and that in part the perceived contrast is based upon Nick Cave's perception of the nature of theology.

The first point of contrast we can identify is between theology's carefully reasoned God as a transcendent being, or the ontological depth of being, and Cave's understanding of

God as the irrational imagination of the human person in relation to the experience of existence. The second point of contrast is between the idea in theology that the human desire for the divine is a drive towards the good, expressed in and through agape, and Cave's determination that the divine as irrational imagination is an interweaving of good and evil, love and violence, an interweaving that is eternally ambiguous. The third point of contrast we can identify is between the idea in theology that the divine-human relationship is working towards the eternal healing, or salvation, of the human predicament in existence and the idea in Cave's art that the explosive freedom of the human imagination is as close as human beings will ever get to any form of salvation. For Cave, the artistic imagination does not redeem us. It gives us permission to be free!

Cave's songs and writing are an expression of the divine life as irrational imagination free of the shackles of religion. Though it purports to reach towards something beyond human experience, in fact it does not. It expresses for us the actual experience of human existence in the context of Australian cultural life. Its expression embraces the 'always' nature of ambiguity in that experience, an ambiguity that includes hatred, love, violence, sexuality that is both violent and tender, and gentleness. None of this is controllable in Cave's artistic world. To control it in order to make it safe is to bring out its violence and its hatred at the risk of being destroyed by it.

Cave's work then is an erotic voice in the Australian cultural context. It is a voice that embraces the erotic impulses of human nature to access spheres of meaning that transcend the banal and the ordinary. Each of these contrasts, that of irrational imagination, the ambiguity of human desire for the divine and the absence of salvation apart from the freedom of the imagination can be situated in the idea of the erotic element in human existence. The erotic is always connected to the physical reality of human existence and it gives human beings a

powerful sense of themselves as a force of nature that drives into the depth and meaning of human nature.

The concept of divine Eros is rooted in the Greek view of nature as wild, potent, uncontrollable, amoral and indiscriminate in its propensity for destruction and interference with the ordered nature of reason and human society. Bruce Thornton argues that in the highly controlled environment of the Western urban setting, the Greek fear of nature has lost its meaning. In the time of ancient Greek mythology and philosophy, ninety percent of people lived in a constant struggle with nature just to provide the basic needs for their families. For them, nature was indiscriminate in its ability to provide or withhold the means for survival. Nature displayed no feeling for the value of human life. Nature's power was absolute over humanity and its terrors were many.<sup>383</sup> Eros, according to Thornton, first appears in Greek mythology in the writing of Hesiod and emerges with chaos, earth and Tartarus (the lower regions). Thus Eros, the son of Aphrodite, is depicted as a force of nature with all of the terror and amorality that such a concept held for the ancient Greeks.<sup>384</sup>

Greek Eros... is something that actively conquers, that tames and breaks and subdues... Eros doesn't just "conquer" the heart, it attacks the mind, breaks the will like a horse tamer breaking a horse, lays low the soul like death.<sup>385</sup>

Using the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece by Apollonius as an example, Thornton suggests that the mischief of Eros has far more sinister implications for the ancient Greeks than it does in the post Enlightenment, post Romanticism world of today. When the witch Medea is struck by Eros' arrow the description of her experience is full of imagery that

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<sup>383</sup> Bruce Thornton, *Eros, the myth of ancient Greek sexuality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 1-14.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

reveals the depth of her terror, a terror that would have been well understood in ancient Greece.

Meantime Eros passed unseen through the grey mist, causing confusion... Gliding close by Aeson's son (Jason) he laid the arrow notch on the cord in the centre, and drawing wide apart with both hands he shot at Medea; and speechless amazement seized her soul... And the bolt burnt deep down in the maiden's heart, like a flame... within her breast her heart panted fast through anguish, and her soul melted with the sweet pain... So, coiling around her heart, burnt secretly Love the destroyer, and the hue of her soft cheeks went and came; now pale, now red, in her soul's distraction.<sup>386</sup>

In Thornton's view, the imagery of the arrow conjures up the sense of being wounded unto death. An arrow wound was greatly feared in ancient Greece as one of the least likely wounds to recover from. It carried with it fear of disease and utter destruction. The image of "speechless amazement" conjures up the ancient Greek fear of insanity or madness, the complete loss of the capacity for reason. The image of flame conjures the fear of wild fire, fire that escapes its domestic boundaries and becomes a destructive force like no other. The Australian fear of bush fire would be akin to the experience of the deeply burning flame in Medea's breast. The image of the snake conjures the fear of nature. All these images that may be used in the modern age with more or less benign connotations were, to the ancient Greeks, sources of deep elemental fear and even despair.

Thornton's understanding of Greek Eros can be correlated with Cave's understanding of what is required in a love song. A true love song must hold within it all the potential, if not the actuality, for amoral, ambiguous, chaotic, ecstatic eros that can lead the human person into darkness and light conjunctively. In the same way, what we have identified as Cave's cthonian delving into the suppressed violence of Australian colonial culture can, in the light

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<sup>386</sup> Apollonius, *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, translated by R.C. Seaton (London: W. Heinemann, 1930). Quoted by Bruce Thornton in *Eros*, 15.

of Thornton's description of Greek Eros, be understood as an unleashing of elemental 'spirits' like Eros as a force of nature, that confound us.

Cave's voice in the script of the film "The Proposition" expresses all of the elements of experience that I have suggested relate to 'divine' Eros as a force of nature present in the human response to existence. The characters in the film are brutally confronted with the futility of their own violence. Rationality is thwarted by irrationality, love is expressed through madness and violence, truth and justice are undermined by certainty and dogma, and the desire to see the human story resolved in some form of justice is lost in the realisation that all human actions have uncertain moral outcomes.

All of these elements in Cave's script writing express Cave's unleashing of the arrow of Eros into the heart of his own culture. Madness, fear, violence and death are all expressed as languages of love. When we say love we mean *erotic* love, the love that is a force of nature rising up within the human life and driving in it an irrational desire to penetrate and be penetrated by the meaning of existence. It is no accident that the most potent human experience of erotic love is sex. For sex is always uncertain in its outcomes.

The sexual force of eros features a great deal in Christian theology, though more often than not in the field of ethics, morality and justice. Rarely is Eros, as the force of nature, dealt with positively in the sense in which it might actually have something to say about the divine life present in human experience. Eros viewed through the lenses of the Enlightenment and Romanticism may have a place in current theology, but how does the amoral force of nature encountered in the Greek myths have any place in a theological context that is wedded to a particular form of morality and highly reasoned ethics?

Eros is, of course, present in the biblical literature. We must now briefly look at its place in Christian theology and ask whether its presence in Cave's work is indeed in contrast to its presence in theology.

David Carr argues that despite the presence of eros in the bible, particularly in the Hebrew Bible, Christianity has insisted on separating eros from spirituality.<sup>387</sup> He suggests that eros needs to be redefined from the perspective of Christian spirituality.<sup>388</sup> In his view the task of redefining eros for theology is currently being undertaken predominantly by women and gay and lesbian theologians and it is supposed that this is the case as a result of the marginalisation of such people by the traditional patriarchal attitudes to sexuality in the church.

Initially Carr's redefining of eros is based on the assertion that eros is too narrowly defined in theology as sexual. Carr argues that any definition of eros that will be correlated with spirituality must encompass all elements of life that are known and experienced with "intense passion", including "intellectual, artistic and spiritual yearnings". It is this "intense passion" that Carr suggests is actively present in the biblical texts of both the Hebrew bible and the New Testament that can be said to have an erotic nature, and these texts hold a key for Christians today to understand and embrace the erotic energy that is the basis for all their passions. This key, in Carr's view, is found in the imagery of the biblical gardens, which uncover the importance of human longing and its necessity as an expression of our spirituality.

Carr is at his most pertinent for our purposes here when he outlines the biblical theology that seeks to suppress the human element of passionate desire. We can read the

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<sup>387</sup> David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: sexuality, spirituality and the bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid*, 9-11.

presence of this pervasive suppression in seemingly liberating theologies of grace such as those based on the Pauline idea “by grace alone” (Eph. 2.8), which is so often quoted without its companion text “through faith”, and can render the *human quest for God* irrelevant, even heretical, by suggesting that there is no place for human desire in the divine/human relationship, only divine sanction. In many theologies the human being is, and must remain, passive in relationship to the divine. God saves the passive human by grace. Even faith is characterised as the inner readiness of the human to accept God’s grace. Faith becomes a tool of passive receptivity.

In such theologies, as Carr outlines them, there is no room for eros. For eros, if it is anything, is a powerful force of nature in the human person that drives towards at-one-ment with God and the most powerful erotic symbol of this is the sexual act. Eros, both male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, is never a passive/receptive energy. It is the outward drive that brooks no delay and waits for no moral stricture.

Carr uses three biblical texts to outline a biblical interpretation of eros. All are garden texts that, for Carr, contain the imagery of lovers and sustained sexual nurture. The first garden setting is Eden, the Genesis story of creation where human beings, male and female, are created as the “image of God.” Carr suggests that if God were to have an image it would be that of the human body. In fact, humanity looks like God. Contrary to the view that only the body passes away and the spirit connects us to God, this view suggests that our bodies connect us to God. This view is supported by theologians such as Sallie McFague, who claims that science has left us no other way to view the body. McFague, writing her ecological theology, comments that science has shown that all elements of human existence are bodily realities. “We do not have bodies, we are bodies.”<sup>389</sup> Such a view of the body

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<sup>389</sup> Sallie McFague, *The body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

includes the raw force of nature that manifests itself as bodily erotic passion. Eros is part of the divine bodily image.

Reading the Genesis Chapter 2 creation account, Carr emphasises the earthiness, or ‘naturalness’ (in the ancient Greek sense of the word, i.e. “force of nature”) of the first human. Carr states that the Hebrew name given to the first human, “*haadam*” is the word that simply means “human being,” and is used in word play with “*adamah*” (fertile ground) to suggest that the first human is very much a part of the fertile earth out of which he was created. Equally, Eve (*havah*) means “life”, which brings with it all the imagery of power, creativity and energy. Thus, Carr asserts that from the beginning human beings were a force of nature and creative life was the product of their eros. Carr addresses the question of what has become known as “the fall” in a way that finds agreement from Mark Brett.<sup>390</sup> Carr suggests that the very nature of Eros itself made the disconnection with God inevitable. The wisdom (knowledge of good and evil) that humans gained through impassioned disobedience actually increases their likeness to God. Indeed, as Brett explains, the wisdom gained here is the same as the desirable wisdom of Proverbs 8 and indeed the wisdom attributed to the kings of Israel that made them like God.<sup>391</sup> Such wisdom is painted as wrongful in Genesis 2 and, according to Brett, reveals the anti-monarchical feeling on the part of the editors. It also reveals an insatiable power at work in human eros. Eros drives the human towards God and God backs away seeking to place limits on the maturing of human desire.

By contrast, the Genesis story reveals the tendency for human eros to drive towards existential individualism – the full freedom of the human from its creative ground. Such

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<sup>390</sup> See Mark Brett, *Genesis: procreation and the politics of identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 24-35.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid*, 32-35.

wisdom, and the desire for existence, comes with much labour and the pain of existential anxiety.<sup>392</sup>

Carr argues that rather than read this drive towards full existence as a “fall” it should be read as symbolising a process of enlightenment (the eyes being opened) that can be viewed as desirable though accompanied by the existential and actual uncertainties of mature humanity.<sup>393</sup> In the language of Paul Tillich, such a movement is symbolised by the language of essential being and existential being. The Genesis 3 story can be read as the myth of human becoming in the movement from essential oneness with being itself to individual existence. Thus, the story of the snake and the fruit may be re-titled “the becoming of humanity” rather than the “fall” of humanity.

Offering a survey of Hebrew laws that regulate sex and the sexuality, particularly of women, Carr argues that such laws were a reflection of the dangers of mature human existence. Laws were designed to protect the fragility of female fertility and the family group. Fathers owned their wives' and daughters' bodies and their sexuality and had exclusive right to decide how it was used to protect the fragile family group.<sup>394</sup> In the modern West, child birth and sex are no longer so closely linked. Many of the dangers of sex have been overcome and as such the way we think about sex has broadened considerably. The human reality ‘post garden of Eden’ is ambiguity. Certainty and blind obedience to divine law no longer exist. Decisions about sexuality now lie in the hands of each human person and depend on what is right and true for today.<sup>395</sup>

Carr has described the Genesis garden story as symbolising humanity’s emergence from divine law and life into independence and ambiguity and thus attempted to give us a

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<sup>392</sup> Carr, *The Erotic Word*, 45, 46.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid, 49-54.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, 55, 56.

sense of the risks that eros presents to humanity. Does such an argument enable theology to consider that the dark and ambiguous outcomes of eros might be taken as part of humanity's desire for the divine? Can morally ambiguous sex, violence and the irresistibly powerful bodily desires that lead to uncertain outcomes be understood as a human 'groan' of erotic movement towards the divine as Cave's work seems to suggest?

Here our three points of contrast converge in one primary observation that is central to each of them. For theology, the overcoming of ambiguity in favour of the certain outcomes of salvation is a foundational concern. Any positive representation of eros in theology must describe it as the desire for union with the divine, which is always communion with the ultimate good. Cave's work is more empirical in the sense that it accepts the tragedy and ambiguity of the human situation as the unchangeable nature of things that in itself expresses the erotic drive into the life of the imagination which is for him the divine life. There is no salvation, no redemption, beyond the freedom of the human imagination.

Can theology dwell in a consensus space with the cultural voice of Nick Cave? In the next step of the contrast-in-conversation method we will examine some of the ways in which theology and the voice of Nick Cave may reach consensus.

### **Humility as consensus gathering**

Can theology risk being in consensus with the cthonian erotics of Nick Cave that asserts that the tragic nature of existence and the human response to it in the freedom of the artistic imagination is the birth of divine transcendence?

If there are grounds for consensus in conversation with the cthonian eroticism expressed in and through the work of Nick Cave they will appear in the area of progressive

theological exploration of the potential for situating human sex, violence and ambiguity in the realm of the divine.

Unlike Plato (in *Symposium*), who argues for a fine distinction between the two, Cave seeks to superimpose physical eros and spiritual eros, relating the bodily urges of sex and violence to the human drive to transcend. Whereas Socrates, in *Symposium*, using the voice of Diotima, speaks of a ladder from the lower bodily loves to the higher spiritual love, Nick Cave writes and sings of bodily sex, violent sex and other forms of violence as explosions of the human imagination. They are a madness of human existence driving towards transcendence thus replacing the ladder by completing the quest for the spiritual love *in* the ‘madness’ of bodily sexual love and violence. The only distinction between sex and violence is that violence occurs when the imagination and the erotic drive are suppressed by law, or perhaps even by the captivation of the mind by philosophy as an art that despises the erotic urges of the body and the imagination.

An example of Cave’s superimposition of bodily eros with spiritual eros emerged in the exhibition of his creative works in Melbourne at the Arts Centre Gallery (November 2007 – April 2008). Cave had collected together in a photo album some old pornographic drawings and pictures from a children’s book of Saints. He had nailed a brass crucifix onto the cover. Cave reflects that “I found that an extremely pleasing relationship existed between these two things...”<sup>396</sup> The “pleasing relationship” between the sacred and the sexually erotic reveals itself frequently in Cave’s song lyrics and screenplays. Perhaps the most delightful and deeply erotic example of his interweaving of physical and spiritual eros comes in a lyric from the “Brompton Oratory” that holds together the philosophical eros for beauty, the

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<sup>396</sup> Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Stories* (Melbourne: Victorian Arts Centre Trust 2007), 34.

spiritual/religious eros for transcendence and the unendurable eros of bodily sex in one experience of the local church service.

*And I wish that I was made of stone  
So that I would not have to see  
A beauty impossible to define  
A beauty impossible to believe  
A beauty impossible to endure  
The blood imparted in little sips  
The smell of you still on my hands  
As I bring the cup up to my lips...*<sup>397</sup>

The platonic opposition of ‘base’ (sexual) eros and the eros of philosophy is rejected in a binary correlation, an irreducible weaving together between the ‘base’ and ‘spiritual’ in Cave’s imagination. The most physical act of sexual gratification takes on the highest philosophical significance. The coming together of bodily sexual fluids and the most sacred of religious symbols (the cup) represents for Cave the irresistible relationship that the story of Christ has to the unendurable pain of the sexual drive for transcendence. The beautifully made film clip to one of Cave’s most recent songs “Jubilee Street”, another collaboration between Cave, John Hillcoat and Ray Winston, again highlights the power of the sexually erotic to drive the human imagination into transcendence. The song very simply portrays the desperate addiction of a very ordinary man to a prostitute on Jubilee Street. Overlaid together in the song, and portrayed by a transcending light in the film clip, is the seemingly irreconcilable murkiness of sexual gratification with spiritual transcendence.<sup>398</sup>

Religious symbols are common in erotic art, though they usually serve as symbols of moral opposition to the erotic urge that delights in the demonic element of eros. Belgian painter and print maker Felician Rops (1833-1898) depicts this displacement of the sacred by the demonic eros in his “La tentacion de San Antonio”, a painting that shows the interruption

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<sup>397</sup> Lyrics sourced from Nick Cave, “Brompton Oratory” in *King Ink 2* (Paris: Black Spring Press, 1998), 242.

<sup>398</sup> Viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCxHvNI9MmQ&feature=kp>, 12.34pm, 08-07-14

by eros of St Antony's contemplation of the cross. In the painting, a demon grasps the figure of Christ, unceremoniously removing him from the cross and replacing him with the voluptuous and naked figure of the female temptress. The inscription above the new figure reads "Eros" and St Antony's dismay is palpable.<sup>399</sup> The painting is a wonderful presentation of the religious suppression of eros and the resultant emergence of eros as a demonic force rather than a sacred drive.

Though the early mystic ascetic tendencies in Christianity do not dominate theologies of Christian living today, Christology itself remains deeply imbedded within the platonic binary opposition between the erotics of the body and the erotics of the spirit. The understanding of Christ's resurrection has, in many theological perspectives, robbed God of the incarnation, although it could be argued that in the gospels his incarnation was only ever a partial incarnation that voided the bodily Jesus of sexuality, even in his conception. We hear little or nothing of Jesus' bodily maleness, nor of his erotic presence as a male amongst the many women and men who followed him. Jesus hung naked on the cross, yet his nakedness is usually hidden in the popular traditions of Christian symbolism and art.<sup>400</sup> The gospel traditions say nothing of Jesus' sexual relationships as an adolescent or adult male and a great deal of theology seeks even to identify the resurrected Jesus with pure essences, divine disembodied truth or at best embodied ethics.

Bodily erotics has been characterized, in much of Christian orthodoxy, as the demonic element of the flesh. Cave challenges the idea in theology that the erotic is demonic. The point of contrast between Cave and theology is his assertion that erotic love is a form of the irrational imagination and therefore the essence of divine life. Indeed, for Cave, all forms of

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<sup>399</sup> Viewed at [www.all-art.org/symbolism/rops.html](http://www.all-art.org/symbolism/rops.html) , 5.50am, 24-11-10.

<sup>400</sup> Similarly, the Virgin Mother is very rarely depicted with breasts bared for her child. She too is largely de-sexed in Christian art.

love, including the tragic and the passionate forms of violence, are an embrace of the irrational, a desperate desertion of rationality in the quest for the divine.

A notable exception to this broad characterisation of theology is the erotically charged ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila, who describes her vision of the penetration of her entrails with a fiery arrow that elicits groans of desire for God that include both spiritual and “a considerable share” of physically ecstatic, painful pleasure that she “cannot possibly wish... to cease”.<sup>401</sup> Do we interpret this vision as an allegory or might we consider that St Teresa actually experienced a transcendent and ecstatic vision of spiritual desire whilst pleasuring herself sexually? Once again the artist Felicien Rops challenges Christian sensibilities towards any interweaving of God and the erotic with his explicitly erotic depiction of St Teresa’s experience of her vision in the pen and ink drawing simply titled “Saint Teresa”.<sup>402</sup>

The dual usage of a Bible and dildo in Rops’ depiction of Teresa’s devotions is a determined interpretation of the divine in the erotic that many would find to be a demonic misrepresentation of Teresa’s vision. Yet it is precisely this interpretation of Teresa’s vision that Nick Cave would consider a true depiction of what is at the centre of his art.

Cave’s contribution to Australian culture has insistently embodied a sense of the cthonian erotic in song, performance, literature, lyric and film script. The embodied cthonian erotic stands in contrast to the predominance in theology of the association of embodied eros with the demonic. That Cave so often finds creative delight in weaving together what is traditionally sacred (and therefore inherently repressive with regards to the embodiment of the erotic) with eros in its sexual embodiment, speaks clearly of his perception that the two traditions are in contrast and creative tension with each other.

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<sup>401</sup> St Teresa of Avila, ‘The book of her life’ in (ed) Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila volume one* (Washington: ICS publications, 1976), 252.

<sup>402</sup> Viewed at <http://www.wikiart.org/en/felicien-rops/st-therese>, 1.40pm, 08-07-14.

Does theology have anything to say about this contrast between Cave's embodiment of cthonian eros and its own tradition of repressed eros? Theology does have a significant amount to say about its own history of the repression of embodied eros and also about its own efforts to recognise and embrace the positive affirmation of embodied eros in its own traditions. The presence of the element of demonic eros in Christianity can be traced back to the roots of the Christian philosophy of love in Plato. The Platonic emphasis on eros as that which ultimately drives towards the good and the beautiful in its essence, as opposed to its base bodily expression, was adopted by Christianity and has informed its emphasis on eros as the drive towards the essence of the good, namely God's self without reference to the carnality of bodily life and sexuality. Augustine, though by no means alone in his depiction of embodied eros as sinful sexual desire, is usually held up as one of Christian theology's fathers of the dichotomy between base sexual desire and rightly ordered sexual activity that glorifies God because it is under the discipline of the will, which is itself oriented towards the moral good, God's self in essence as the origin and telos of all rightly willed moral action.<sup>403</sup>

There can be no room, in this Platonic form of Christian theology, for the suggestion that sexual desire and fulfilment for its own erotic sake could in fact embody and express the essence of divine life. And if this is the case for sexuality then it is also the case for all embodiment of eros in finite and concrete forms such as the written word, the song, the performance or the work of art. Such concrete embodiments of eros are 'base' and fall short of the 'pure' eros for the essences. In spite of his desire to transcend the banality of life in his art, Cave's work has consistently confronted a carnal truth, which is that there is no eros for the essences, only carnal eros that contains and expresses everything it is possible for a human to express about the divine.

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<sup>403</sup> Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's writing on women* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), 161.

The ordering of erotic love in such a way that distinguishes the base from the good can be found in Plato's "Symposium" as the valuing of dialogue over rhetoric.

Plato, using the voice of Socrates, sets up a binary opposition between rhetoric and dialogue. Rhetoric, the art of speech making, is depicted as an element or development of base eros that is the forte of the general politic and includes the love of and desire for beautiful bodies, beautiful speechmaking and engagement in the politics of democracy. It is caricatured as "base" for its desire of the form as opposed to the dialogical desire for truth. Socrates demonstrates the desire for truth with a devastating dialectical demolition of the rhetorical flattery of eros that has preceded his turn at the Symposium.<sup>404</sup>

Yet Socrates also used the presence of 'base' sexually erotic urges to demonstrate that the love of wisdom was in fact the highest form of eros and above the 'base' eros of the body. The accepted erotic etiquette of the polis was seen to be that of the old and wise chasing the bodily beauty of the young, the strong and the beautiful. Socrates shows himself to be flirtatious with an ironic motive. His philosophical wisdom is the passionate desire of the young and beautiful for the old and the wise. Far from placing himself above the physical aspect of the lust in young men for the wisdom of the old man, Socrates', by making himself the object of the lust of the young and thus inverting the accepted erotics of the city, enslaves the young with lust for truth. Jordan argues that the speech of Alcibiades reveals this dynamic in Socrates.<sup>405</sup>

Alcibiades pursues Socrates hoping to turn him into his own suitor. When Socrates is unresponsive (deliberately and not without his own lust), Alcibiades openly becomes the suitor of Socrates and the normal practice of the city is inverted. It is now the young and the

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<sup>404</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "What do we talk about when we talk about Platonic love?" in (ed) Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, *Toward a theology of Eros: Transfiguring passion at the limits of discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006): 3-22.

<sup>405</sup> Mark D. Jordan, "Flesh in confession: Alcibiades beside Augustine" in *Toward a theology of Eros*, 23-37.

beautiful that pursues the old and the wise (who are the pursuers of truth). Yet when Alcibiades eventually persuades Socrates to spend the night with him, “nothing happens”. According to Alcibiades it is like he lay down with a brother or father. Plato has suggested in the erotic dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades the elevation of the ‘pure’ erotic desire for the essence of truth above the ‘base’ erotics of the flesh.

How was this platonic ordering of ‘pure’ eros above ‘base’ eros was absorbed into Christianity. Mark Jordan places Alcibiades next to Augustine and compares the lust of Alcibiades for Socrates to the lust of Augustine for God, though without the flesh of the very male body of Jesus. For Augustine, eros was acceptable when under the discipline of the will, which was directed towards the essence of God, thus subordinating unfettered erotic desire for the body to the disciplined erotic desire for God.

In response to this Platonic elevation of eros for the essence of being, Christian theology can rightly point to its own tradition of embodiment in the Christological story of the incarnation, in the sacramental embodiment of the sacred in the Eucharist and other sacraments and in the embodiment of the resurrection spirit of Christ in the church as the body of Christ. It is questionable, however, whether these traditions of embodiment have achieved much at all in the face of the strong Platonic emphasis on the essences in Christianity. It can and has been argued that in fact, the resurrection narrative has allowed theology to both spiritualize and politicize the symbols of embodiment in the life of the church. By placing the resurrected Christ at the head of the body, the New Testament has allowed for traditional patriarchal models of power to be applied to the church. The spiritual power of Christ is situated in the power of the rational male to unify all diversity under his own authority, thus devaluing the carnal sensuality of femaleness and the diversity of others

who do not fit the superior male category.<sup>406</sup> Furthermore, Christ, the resurrected, male, unifying and rational head of the body has re-joined the realm of pure essences in spite of the theological claims that he is present in the church.

Women and people of various gender types and sexual orientation have traditionally been devalued, controlled and or excluded by this dual spiritualization and politicization of the resurrected Christ. New readings of the texts that seek to embody the spirit of the resurrection in the church are attempting to rescue those texts from the ever present temptation of read them through the lens of Plato and first century political and social world-views.

Diana M. Swancutt applies a fresh hermeneutic to the Pauline theology of the body of Christ to reinterpret the meaning of Christian sex.<sup>407</sup> She argues convincingly that modern understandings of gender, and therefore sexuality, as two sexed, are deeply embedded in modern cultural norms and cannot be based on biblical understandings of sex and gender. Equally, Swancutt shows how the Pauline understanding of sex and gender was imbedded in the Greek/Roman cultural views of his day. Paul's theology of the body of Christ, though steeped in the misogynistic understanding of gender and the body, provides a new hermeneutical paradigm through which sex in relation to the divine may be understood. The result is a reading of Paul that may well open the way towards consensus with the sacred cthonian erotics of Nick Cave.

Swancutt begins her hermeneutical approach by questioning the culturally grounded assumptions of a two-sex human sexuality held by both conservatives and 'progressives' in

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<sup>406</sup> Sallie McFague, *The body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 36-37.

<sup>407</sup> Diana M. Swancutt, "Sexing the Pauline Body of Christ: Scriptural sex in the context of the American Christian culture war" in *Toward a theology of Eros*, 67-98.

the Christian church.<sup>408</sup> What is most important for Swancutt, and what places her work in the category of a hermeneutic of suspicion, is her claim that conservative *and* ‘progressive’ theologians project the assumption of a two-sex human sexuality onto scripture. She argues that the two-sex assumption is a cultural, not biblical, understanding of the human body and sexuality and that it is being used by conservative Christian groups as the “last bastion” of Christian morality holding back a flood of immoral human behaviour and the loss of Christian control of Western society.<sup>409</sup>

The basis of the two-sex view of the human body and sexuality is modern medical science, which Swancutt argues has categorized as ‘normal’ the male and female sex types.<sup>410</sup> This is a “cultural construction” that deems variations of the scientific norm to be “unnatural”.<sup>411</sup> What is key here is that the cultural norms based on modern science not only define sex types with regards to body type (male and female) but also ‘normal’ sexual behaviour as heterosexual intercourse. The error in modern Christian sexual ethics is said to be the projection of this cultural normalizing of the heterosexual two-sex human onto the New Testament, which had no such view as its basis for understanding the human body or sexual activity.

The dilemma of the modern cultural construct for natural sexuality leads Swancutt to declare, “Heterosexuality is an ideological artefact of the hegemonic bi-gender body.”<sup>412</sup> In light of this statement she determines to show how the Pauline construction of a somatic Christology aligns the body of Christ with queer and ‘unnatural’ body types in a postmodern subversive act of asserting the power of the *body* of Christ.

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid, 65-98.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid, 75.

Paul's writing on godly sex was based on a "pre modern, one-sex model of human nature".<sup>413</sup> Paul understood the human body to be, in its highest form, basically male. The Hellenistic view was that the perfect body is strong, reasoning, dominating and penetrating, in other words male. Women and 'soft men' were not seen as separate sexes, rather as lesser, even degraded expressions of the single sex human body. The perfect body was marked by the desired characteristics while women were understood to be lesser in status (though without dishonour) due to their propensity for passion and due to the fact that they were sexually penetrated.<sup>414</sup> Paul's statement about unnatural sex in Romans 1:26,27 is about the loss of masculine status in the body as retribution for degrading God's masculinity by virtue of the practice of idolatry (Rom 1:23).<sup>415</sup> Swancutt asserts that Paul was not talking about same sex relationships but about "gender transgression that led to somatic change".<sup>416</sup> The argument from Paul is that those who degraded God's masculinity by exchanging true worship for idolatry would be punished by having their own masculinity degraded and being somatically transformed from penetrators to the penetrated, remembering that Paul understood all this to be on the basis of a single sex body that was manifest on a spectrum of masculinity.

What is significantly interesting about Paul's use of the sexuality of the body is the way he not only uses it to warn against idolatry but also to construct his own somatic Christology which aligns itself with the androgynous human rather than the alpha masculine. The masculinity of God that was so dishonoured in Romans one is now exchanged for a powerful, androgynous, all-inclusive human in which differences in sexuality are ended. Swancutt argues that Paul used his view of the body to,

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid, 76, 77.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid, 76.

...identify Christ as the created original androgyne, into whose body believers were materially knit in baptism with a power so transforming that it rendered them beyond male and female (Gal 3:28) and with an intimacy so complete that it surpassed the intercourse of male and female (1 Cor 6:16-19).<sup>417</sup>

This interpretation of Paul relies on the assertion there is irony in Paul's use of the Greco-Roman idea of the body and sexuality to "censure" the androgynous elements in Gentile culture on the one hand and then to use the same ideas to interpret and subvert Roman domination through the application of it to his Christology. This idea leads to a radical sexual subversion of Roman power.

In an act of resistance to imperial self-definition and emasculation of the messianic movement, Paul transformed several Greco-Roman discourses of masculinity, through the effemination of the cross, to name the crucified Christ as the androgynous last Adam, the new creation into whose body believers were materially knit and within whose body they were being materially transformed.<sup>418</sup>

Swancutt tracks the erotic element in Paul's Christology from its basis in the colonized effemination of Jesus and his disciples. Rome classified the ideal human as the powerful, masculine, dominating Roman citizen; the colonizer. Men who belonged to colonized cultures were viewed as "half-men", dominated and penetrated by the Roman Empire. Jesus was thoroughly effeminised by his crucifixion. A man, particularly one who challenged the dominance of Rome, who was humiliated and executed, was deemed to be emasculated, de-sexed, along with those associated with him.

It is out of this androgynising context that a subversive anti-colonial somatic Christology emerged in Paul's teaching.<sup>419</sup> The early Christians took the title "Son of God" for the resurrected Jesus as a means of subverting the dominance of the Emperor and re-establishing the manhood of Christ through post-colonial mimicry of title and sexual identity.

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid, 75, 76.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid, 85.

Usurping the ancient Greek myth of the original androgynous human body, Paul, calling Christ the “last Adam”, argues that Christ is the new androgynous human who has the power to establish the human identity of all who become part of the body of Christ. In this way the domination of Rome is subverted by the sexual union of believers with the body of Christ. Those who are sexually united with Christ become one with the androgynous body of Christ and achieve a state of potent human sexual identity that is beyond male and female but is a full expression of humanity (Eph 4:12-24 is an expression of this idea by an early Pauline interpreter). Therefore, the resurrected Jesus becomes the symbol of sexual identity for all who are emasculated by the Roman colonial power and indeed for the colonizers themselves as Paul’s mission to the Gentiles shows.

It is on the basis of this understanding of human sexual identity in the Pauline corpus that Swancutt develops her erotic reading of Paul’s Christology and her interpretation of the meaning and power of sex within the context of the body of Christ. She suggests that Paul’s writings on sexual union are primarily to do with establishing the body in order that it might bear the image of the last Adam, the resurrected Jesus. Thus, the believer in Christ is said to gain somatic sexual identity by having sex with Christ and with each other. Sex for the believer is a powerful “ménage a trois” that builds up the body of Christ (1 Cor 6:15-18). Here we may pause and wonder at the correlation of this idea with St Teresa’s vision. St Teresa’s vision is a compelling picture of Swancutt’s claim that,

...Christian lovers are purified by their location in Christ’s body. The argument of 1Cor 7 assumes that sex is sanctifying not *because* it is created or heterosexual or complementary or “natural” but *when* it brings people into and unites them with the body.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid 95.

Swancutt argues that a rethinking of Christian sexual ethics on the basis of the Pauline understanding would significantly subvert the modern fixation with sex within the heterosexual marriage and would situate the act of sex between Christians as a powerfully subversive act that undermines the power structures of culture and empire by establishing human identity in the new androgynous body of Christ.

Anatomical sex is ritualized as a baptismal gift of new creation, human nature redefined sacramentally beyond dualism as a uniquely Christian, one-body, multi-gender practice of becoming. Christian sex is thereby transfigured into a transfiguring enactment of God. This would mean, as Paul claims, that sexual ethics in the body must revolve around communal re-creativity rather than individual pro-creativity. If we took it seriously, neither “male and female” nor “male” and “female”, nor heterosexuality, nor either kind of marriage would be a Christian good – only the sexual and sexed/gendered performances that unnaturally unite divided peoples, in the body of Christ, for lives of Christian service.<sup>421</sup>

Swancutt has attempted to extricate sex from the grasp of the narrow moral strictures of the two-sex family unit model whilst showing a way for it to remain within the bounds of ethical and religious significance. Such a shift in hermeneutical perspective may enable theology to engage eros more completely without reducing it to the ‘higher’ desire for the perfect good, which is characterised as being above the base and unreasoning passion of the body. Sex, including the bodily passion that is beyond rationality, which is embraced as a means of contributing to the new humanity by uniting formerly disunited elements within human society may be less constrained by the “letter that killeth” enabling a theology that could converse with Cave’s inclusion of erotic sexual love in the divine element of the human imagination.

Swancutt’s view attempts to embrace the diversity of human embodiment and does so in such a way that situates the new humanity, the body of Christ, in concrete political and social opposition to current norms. Her analysis of sex and eros, however, is not able to

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid, 97.

take into its interpretation of the erotic the tragic element that is so central to Nick Cave's understanding of the power of love and imagination and that characterises eros in his work.

It is this point that offers fruitful grounds for ongoing consensus with the work of Nick Cave. Cave's work is explosive and irrational and Cave, as we have seen, describes love as a form of madness, a compulsive rejection of the rational. For Cave, love is not a philosophical reality, nor is it a theological reflection, nor is it a transformative programme of social and political resistance, all of which situate eros in the rational mind. Cave challenges the rational basis of theology and philosophy by suggesting that eros is inherently irrational and carnal.

Swancutt's reinterpretation of Paul's body of Christ retains the central theme of the Christian religion, which is reconciliation with God through the body of Christ. The closest that Cave comes to this kind of idea is his use of the symbol of Jesus as the unblocked imagination and therefore a primary example of a human being through whom the divine flows into the world. Contrast between the art of Nick Cave and theology remains firmly present. Yet grounds for consensus are also present. Theology is challenged by Nick Cave to continue considering how the divine might be present in the irrational and the violent; the explosive and ecstatically uncontrollable erotic urges of the human life. Theology is also challenged by Cave's determined understanding of the rogue imagination as the only way to think or speak about the 'divine'. And finally, the dynamics of cthonian delving into, and enacting of, deeply buried cultural wounds as an erotic response to cultural experience challenges theology to consider that stories that do not fit within the orthodox narratives of salvation may indeed be representations of the imagination as divine life. Cave's work reveals a cultural feeling that the essences of things are an illusion. The only way to encounter what has been named as essence is by a cthonian delving into the carnal reality of the concrete. Tragedy is encountered when cthonian delving reveals only the limited carnality

of the concrete and delivers only a yearning to go deeper, to identify more fully with carnal reality, that can never be sated.

In this chapter, theology has climbed over its own 'back fence' and played in the cultural 'backyard' of Nick Cave. There it has been profoundly challenged by the contrasts between its own understandings of God and the world and those that have leaked with orgasmic potency into the world, and in particular into the cultural consciousness of Australians, through the art of Nick Cave.

## Chapter Six

### *Humanist Theology Theology in conversation with Raimond Gaita*

#### **Acknowledgement and Disclosure as Humility**

We now turn to the philosophical work of German born, Romanian Australian, Raimond Gaita. Raimond Gaita is most commonly known in Australia in relation to the film based on the book he wrote about the life of his father called *Romulus, My Father*.<sup>422</sup> There are a number of characteristics to note about the particular contribution that Gaita brings to the Australian cultural context. Firstly, he is an immigrant from Europe and his life and philosophical work bear all the marks of the immigrant stories that are part of the Australian cultural identity. The story of his father's life in *Romulus My Father* contains many remembered experiences of immigrant life in rural Victoria that have shaped his philosophical work and grounded it in a common Australian experience that facilitates its ability to make deliberate and effectual comment on the contemporary political and social consciousness of Australia.

Secondly, until recently he has shared his academic life between King's College, University of London as Professor of Moral Philosophy and the Australian Catholic University as post graduate supervisor and researcher. He has now left the Australian Catholic University and is a Professorial Fellow of the Melbourne Law School. As Gaita recently demonstrated at a public lecture given at the Melbourne Law School entitled "Power and Consent", in which he contrasted the British people's lack of confidence in their own ability to judge politicians who were addicted to spin with the relative confidence of

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<sup>422</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 1998).

Australians in their own judgement of politicians who were telling outright lies (an observation made earlier in his essay *Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics*), spending six months of the year in London has given him the ability to comment with significant insight on the Australian political consciousness in contrast with that in Great Britain.<sup>423</sup> Once again, the ex-patriot perspective is seen to be of significance in cultural analysis and contribution.

Thirdly, Gaita has demonstrated through the publication of his major philosophical work *Good and Evil: an absolute conception*, his more recent work *A Common Humanity: thinking about love and truth and justice*, through his numerous contributions to public journals and through his long term commitment to addressing the thinking public through a series of public lectures called “The Wednesday Lectures”, that he is committed to addressing the Australian public with thoughtful analysis of its political, social, ethical and cultural life on the basis of his philosophical thought.

These three characteristics alone make Raimond Gaita an outstanding candidate for conversation in this essay. His public philosophy is relevant to the contemporary cultural context in Australia and addresses serious moral and ethical concerns in the national life. One recent example was his short but pertinent article in *The Age* newspaper that addressed the mendacious nature of political spin. Gaita skilfully draws on the Socratic understanding of conversation verses oratory in Plato’s *Gorgias* to warn Australians against the potential for politicians to stoop to a new level of mendacity through “counterfeits of conversational intimacy”.<sup>424</sup> What is important in this article for Australian culture is the lucid analysis of

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<sup>423</sup> Raimond Gaita, “Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics” in *Quarterly Essay* no.16 (2004).

<sup>424</sup> Raimond Gaita, “Even Socrates drew the line at spin,” *The Age*, August 21, 2010, Comments section.

the political situation and the ease with which Gaita translates a complex philosophical observation into public discourse.

Having acknowledged Gaita's suitability as a conversation partner in this essay we must now acknowledge with humility the theological perspective being brought to the conversation. I have not been trained in the academy of philosophy. Gaita's ideas are rooted in complex and well established schools of philosophical thought and his writing, particularly in *Good and Evil*, assumes a kind of logical philosophical thought and reasoning that is not always clear to the mind trained to think primarily theologically. Yet, as we said in Chapter Two, Paul Tillich has warned the theologian against the error of believing that theology is a completely distinct form of thinking from philosophy. Philosophy, according to Tillich, has formed most of the categories within which theologians think and indeed both theology and philosophy are respectively the personal and impersonal pursuits of an answer to the same question. In theological terms it is the question of God. In philosophical terms it is the question of being. Tillich argues that there is a direct correlation between God and being and that theology is deeply indebted to philosophy for the categories used to ask what he calls the "ontological question."<sup>425</sup> I am not convinced that Raimond Gaita shares this view as he frequently articulates his view that theology is unashamedly personal and that that is its great value. He also argues, however, that it does not follow from experiences of revelation that theology is right to make the personal assertion that God exists.<sup>426</sup>

Whilst we approach this conversation operating from the position asserted by Paul Tillich it is crucial that we understand Gaita's firm commitment to a secular understanding of philosophy. Indeed, Gaita's firm secularity will contribute a great deal to the point of contrast

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<sup>425</sup> Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5-10.

<sup>426</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), 20, 21.

between theology and his particular cultural contribution. I labour this point particularly for the reason that Gaita does not speak of theology or religion with any animosity. On the contrary, one sometimes feels that he envies theology for its religious language and epistemology that seems to him to have greater ease of access to that which evokes a sense of mystery in philosophy. Yet it is part of Gaita's greatness that he steadfastly refuses to use such language himself. Great love only reveals the mystery of great love according to Gaita whereas great love, according to Tillich, reveals love itself, the ground of love or God.

It is integral to the contrast-in-conversation method that the analysis undertaken should be done so with the stance of humility. Humility demands that the theologian acknowledge that though secular philosophy deals with the question of God it fundamentally rejects the idea of a God as correlative with any philosophically absolute conceptions of reality. Thus, the following analysis will diligently draw attention to the determination in Gaita's philosophy to use language that reflects his secular stance. One of the primary questions for theology in conversation with Gaita's secular moral philosophy will be how to respond to Gaita's determination to identify religious language as unashamedly and *necessarily* anthropomorphic. Can theology adopt the God of philosophy that so often depersonalises language about God in favour of ontological language, or is it trapped in its anthropomorphic language? If theology wants to talk of God in terms of being, being itself and ground of being does it lose its distinctive meaning? The value of Gaita's philosophy for theology is its rigorous demand for language that illuminates what is morally real without recourse to religious terms. How does theology respond?

## **Analysis as Humility: the will to relate**

Raimond Gaita's first philosophical work, *Good and Evil an absolute conception*, establishes the framework for much of his later and more public philosophy. By 'public philosophy' I mean Gaita's determination to write philosophically for an audience beyond the academy and the philosophical schools. This determination is evident even in *Good and Evil*, where his struggle for philosophical language that is founded on more than the merely academic descriptions of moral philosophy is a central motivation in his embrace of human experience as his primary source.<sup>427</sup>

The title of his first work is of vital importance if we are to achieve a good grasp of Gaita's philosophical voice, a voice that moves and shapes his ongoing contribution to the public discussion of political morality in Australia. His work in *Good and Evil* is a discussion of the nature of moral value as *absolute* value.<sup>428</sup> Rejecting the way of thinking about moral value that begins with a moral code or set of moral norms, Gaita embraces a theory of absolute moral value that is based on particular experiences that reveal something absolute about morality. Part of his exploration of this philosophy includes an attempt to clarify some terms that have been misused by certain philosophical schools. Gaita explores the term *sui generis* (of its own kind) as a way of speaking about the absolute nature of morality in order to distinguish this view of morality from a reductionist view that attempts to restrict it to teleological value.<sup>429</sup>

Using the analogy of the contrast between a *trade* and a *craft* to distinguish the merely functional from the intricate combination of functionality, aesthetics and identity that he

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<sup>427</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil an Absolute Conception* (London: Routledge, 2004), 22. The first edition of this work was published by Routledge in London in 1991.

<sup>428</sup> The absolute nature of moral value is set in contrast to the relative elements of moral value. For example, relativity in moral value may apply when different cultures live with different sets of moral values. Is there any such thing as absolute moral value that is applicable in all contexts and not subject to cultural relativity?

<sup>429</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 90.

correlates with nobility, Gaita reclaims the *sui generis* nature of morality from the reductionists. He does not want to give morality *sui generis* a religious or organisational hegemony; rather, he wants simply to state that morality is not reducible to its teleological functionality.<sup>430</sup>

Yet in common with most philosophical expressions Gaita finds the idea of *sui generis* a troublesome one in that it is a limited way of speaking about something that experience reveals to be essentially a mystery. It is not a mystery in the sense of being unknowable, rather a mystery in the sense that what becomes known is irreducible. Here we are talking about the term *Absolute* in Gaita's book title. In philosophy the term *Absolute* carries a specific meaning in the field of ethics. Ethical Absolutism asserts that there is such a thing as moral value that applies to all people, all cultures and all times. It is an assertion that stands in sharp contrast to ethical relativism, which asserts that there are different moral values that apply in different cultural situations and that none of these ever apply universally to the whole of humanity.<sup>431</sup> The heart of what Gaita is asserting is absolute moral value and its presence in common human life as revealed through the common experience of good and evil, and indeed through the way good and evil are correlated in their ability to reveal the absolute moral nature of humanity. An absolute conception, in Gaita's writing, is the possibility of a universally shared experience of good and evil that reveals something universal about the nature of our humanity as moral. In other words it is universally conceivable that certain experiences that we call good and evil reveal something common about all human beings.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid, 84-90.

<sup>431</sup> Chris Horner and Emrys Westacott, *Thinking Through Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126-130

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 70-73.

Before we go any further we need to be clear about the way Gaita uses the words *good* and *evil* together. I have just said that in Gaita's thought good and evil are correlated. By this I mean that Gaita does not understand good and evil as two separate categories engaged in a dualistic struggle for influence in human experience. Such a view is a religious construct that does not fit within Gaita's secular understanding of philosophy. What Gaita says about good and evil is that they both reveal the same thing in human experience and that is, that human beings are moral beings. What happens when good and evil occur is a revelation of what it means for human beings to be moral beings. For Gaita there is an irreducible mystery in this process but in his view it is an absolute process, one that does not rely upon the relative differences of culture and situation.

Gaita's attempt has brought him into conflict with other common and often prevailing moral philosophies such as consequentialism and moral scepticism. It is due to this conflict that much of *Good and Evil* is a complex unravelling of language in order to clarify precisely how Gaita uses his terms and precisely in which philosophical traditions he does *not* stand. This includes a clear differentiation between his own position and that of both religion, and specifically the Christian religion, and indeed the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whom he greatly admires. This analysis of Gaita's work does not have the breadth to comment in detail about all of his philosophical differentiations, however we will attempt to get to the heart of the language Gaita uses to state his own position and how he has subsequently applied that to Australian political culture.

Gaita's basic philosophical method always works on the basis of a story, either historical or hypothetical though usually the former, from which he draws out a dialectical approach to the question of absolute value and morality. This method is most apparent in *Good and Evil* and is there developed to its most academic philosophical potential. For our purposes however it is more likely that the examples used in *A Common Humanity* will yield

up Gaita's most conscious contribution to Australian culture. *A Common Humanity* has had a far broader readership amongst the Australian population due to Gaita's determination in it to state his profound philosophy in language that can be accessed by those untrained in the schools of philosophy. We must therefore make the assumption that *A Common Humanity*, with the possible exception of *Romulus My Father*, has been the greatest contribution to Australian culture of all of Gaita's philosophical reflections. We will therefore concentrate on the examples Gaita uses in *A Common Humanity* though with significant reference to *Good and Evil* and references to *Romulus My Father* for our analysis.

*A Common Humanity* begins with the telling of an experience that Gaita had when he was seventeen years old. It was an experience that formed the basis for much of his later philosophical reflection. Working as a ward-assistant at a psychiatric hospital, Gaita was able to observe the patients, some of whom were long-term patients, their somewhat derelict environment and the diverse relationships formed with them by nurses, psychiatrists and other carers.<sup>433</sup> Gaita is careful to point out that the patients "were judged to be incurable and they appeared to have irretrievably lost everything which gives meaning to our lives."<sup>434</sup> Most of the nurses and psychiatrists treated the patients "brutishly" with the exception of a small number who worked hard to improve the patients' conditions and who professed to believe in the patients' "inalienable dignity" despite the apparent absence of everything that we would normally associate with dignity. Gaita admired these psychiatrists until an event unfolded that led him more deeply into a consideration of the nature of goodness.

Gaita recalls the event as having a profound impact on him as a person and as a philosopher. He begins to tell of the event in words almost suitable for a children's book, though entirely lacking in sentimentality. He writes, "One day a nun came to the ward" and

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<sup>433</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 17.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

begins to tell of the power in her behaviour towards the patients. Here I must quote extensively to capture the depth of the nun's behaviour in Gaita's memory.

...everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this...

I admired the psychiatrists for their many virtues – for their wisdom, their compassion, their courage, their capacity for self-sacrificing hard work and sometimes for more besides. In the nun's case, her behaviour was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behaviour.<sup>435</sup>

Gaita chooses very carefully the words he uses to categorize his response to the way the nun treated the patients. The primary word he chooses is wonder. He wondered at her and at the “reality which it (her behaviour) revealed.”<sup>436</sup> The word “wonder” becomes very significant as Gaita attempts to extract his response from the claims of religion and certain schools of philosophy. We must note firstly that Gaita wonders not at virtue but at revelation. The nun's behaviour reveals the full humanity of people who have lost all the usual appearance of meaningful humanity. Gaita is quick to answer the obvious observation from the religious mind that the nun's behaviour was due to her religious faith and her belief that all human beings are God's children and therefore equal. He concedes that she would most likely have believed such a thing but he does not concede that her behaviour proves any theological or metaphysically speculative assertion.<sup>437</sup>

Gaita states unequivocally that the only thing the nun's behaviour revealed was the quality of her love. The quality of the nun's love was revelatory of something that was

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 19, 20.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid, 21.

previously hidden, the full and equal humanity of people who displayed none of the outward criteria by which we normally judge meaningful human life. So Gaita is led to say, “For me, the purity of the love proved the reality of what it revealed.”<sup>438</sup> Having rejected the theological assertion that the nun’s behaviour revealed the existence of a God that loves all human persons with an unconditional parental love, Gaita asserts that he must reject any religious language that is attached to such beliefs. Thus he is robbed of words that are often used to explain such behaviours and what they reveal. Gaita examines the word *sacred* as one that would normally give insight into the nun’s behaviour. He acknowledges that this word informs a great many people about the nature of a human being as a limit to our will and thus reveals something real in the nun’s behaviour. But again, and with great integrity and consistency, Gaita rejects the word as one that only religious people can use seriously. Those who are not religious are left to look for other words that are invariably less powerful in their ability to access the mystery of the nun’s behaviour. In one sense Gaita is lamenting the loss of the religious language that he claims gains its power from the “unashamedly anthropomorphic character of the claim that we are sacred because God loves us, his children.”<sup>439</sup> Yet, according to Gaita, if the non-religious want to be consistent they must choose other language that may prove to be less powerful than religious language, though still access for them a sense of the meaning of what the goodness of the nun’s behaviour revealed about human beings. The word chosen by Gaita is “wondrous.”<sup>440</sup>

The wondrous nature of the nun’s behaviour to her patients is in what it revealed her patients to be. Her patients were revealed to be full human beings and equal with her in every way despite their disabilities. Gaita argues strongly that this wondrous behaviour is prior to both religious belief and the philosophy of technical reason. As we have seen, Gaita argues

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid, 19.

that the nun's behaviour proved nothing other than the nature of her love and what it revealed. Yet Gaita goes a step further in his argument against the religious perspective on this. In a statement of strikingly simple logic Gaita declares that anthropomorphic theology is not possible without the presence of an absolute moral understanding of humanity. He states it in the following sentence.

‘Don’t you see this person is sacred, the child of God,’ cannot function as an exhortation intended to trump, ‘Don’t you see, this is a fellow human being.’ Only if we are moved by the latter could we understand the former.<sup>441</sup>

According to this logic religious world-views are reliant on the prior understanding of absolute moral value revealed to us through the unconditional love of one human being to another thus revealing the full humanity of the one who is loved. The secular humanist may on this basis lay claim to such logic with integrity and thus fulfil Jesus’ commandment to love without ever knowing herself to be claimed by a religious understanding of it.

The word wondrous, and indeed the love that inspires the experience of wonder, also offends the logic of much western philosophy. Using Kant as an example, Gaita asserts that love and the wonder it inspires are not reasonable in the way that philosophy has demanded. Philosophy seeks to move away from the language of subjective experiences and towards the language of objective reason. This movement in philosophy is demonstrated by Gaita in his critique of the kind of language we use when confronted with what unconditional love reveals.

Because of the place the impartial love of saints has occupied in our culture, there has developed a language of love whose grammar has transformed our understanding of what it is for a human being to be a unique kind of limit to our will. We express our sense of that limit when we say that human beings are owed unconditional respect, or that they have inalienable rights, and similar things. These ways of speaking express a disposition to find a basis for what love has revealed which is more steadfast than love

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid, 46.

itself is believed to be and which will make the fruits of love's work more secure to reason.<sup>442</sup>

Gaita cites Kant as the pre-eminent example of a philosophy that places the value of the individual person at the centre of moral obligation. Kant, says Gaita, uses the idea that the individual should always be treated as an end rather than a means to describe what love reveals in a way that is more secure to reason. He aligns this with Kant's famous interpretation of Jesus' commandment to love as a rhetorical tool to express human duty. Thus the moral duty is to treat the individual as an end rather than a means.<sup>443</sup>

For Gaita, however, moral duty or obligation is limited in that it is invariably tied to Aristotle's understanding of the virtues that give value to the individual. We cannot even begin to feel obligated or duty bound to a person who seems to us to be without the virtues and attributes that can evoke in us the love that establishes their humanity. It is only when we see them *revealed in the light of another's love* for them that we know them to be the intelligible objects of human love; our equals. Gaita calls this love saintly love, for it goes beyond even parental love, which is based upon familial relationship. He uses the example of a method used in some prisons of not allowing the guards to see the prisoners while they have visits from those who love them. If they were to see them as people loved by another, they would begin to view them as equals.<sup>444</sup>

People, says Gaita, "affect one another in ways beyond reason and beyond merit" and this has "offended rationalists and moralists since the dawn of thought."<sup>445</sup> The human ability to affect each other in ways beyond reason and merit is a significant point in Gaita's philosophy of absolute value. It is precisely this kind of attachment to one another that

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid, 24, 25.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 25. Gaita's reading of Kant comes from Kant's *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid, 27.

reveals what is absolute about human moral value, and that is that each individual, regardless of merit or virtue is “unique and irreplaceable... Such attachments, and the joy and the grief which they may cause, conditions our sense of the preciousness of human beings. Love is the most important of them.”<sup>446</sup> Gaita refers to this experience as that which leads us into a sense of the mystery of human beings. Preciousness and mystery are held closely together in the revealing of absolute value through the love of one person for another. Mystery, as was mentioned above, does not mean that which is essentially hidden; rather, for Gaita, it means something that is irreducible to teleological function, virtue or moral duty.<sup>447</sup>

Gaita has gone against the philosophers that stand in the tradition of Kant and moral duty.<sup>448</sup> He has made an assertion about the absolute value of human life on the basis of the experience of love that reveals the nature of the human individual as unique, precious and irreplaceable. In this assertion is the implicit argument that goodness is an absolute conception. Goodness reveals something that is not dependant on virtue, is not reducible to consequences or teleological ends, nor motivated by duty; rather, it reveals something that is common to every human individual regardless of race, culture, ability, education, gender, sexuality, language or any of the many distinctions we make between ourselves.

Gaita has made his argument in clear distinction from the ways that both religion and philosophy have attempted to do so in the past. He has given the morally serious secularist a philosophical basis on which to understand their experience of the good as revelatory of nothing more nor less than the mysterious preciousness of human beings.

We must now turn to Gaita’s exploration of the experience of evil and how it, in relation to good, reveals something absolute about the human person. We must remember at

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>447</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 9.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, 24-42. For Gaita’s more complete and complex argument see *Good and Evil* chapter three, entitled “Mortal men and rational beings.”

this point that for Gaita evil is not a separate concept to good. The two are linked as an absolute conception. This should alert us, at the beginning of our careful listening for Gaita's cultural voice, that evil will reveal the same as what good has been said to reveal.

At the heart of Gaita's discussion on the relation of good and evil to the moral nature of humanity is a claim made by Plato's Socrates in the dialogue *Gorgias*. The claim in Socrates' dialogue with Polus is that it is better to suffer evil than to do it.<sup>449</sup> Gaita claims that when reading this dialogue as a student of philosophy he recognised the meaning of the assertion not from prior reading but from what his father's behaviour had revealed for him about what it meant to be human.<sup>450</sup> To be good was to honour our humanity and Gaita learnt this from his father's own behaviour, specifically his father's behaviour when others wronged him, a fact which Gaita recounts with tragic power in his memoirs of his father. Gaita's mother, Christina, suffered from severe mental illness, had numerous affairs, which were one of the symptoms of her illness, and eventually left Romulus (Gaita's father) for his good friend Mitru.<sup>451</sup> Despite the wrong done to him, Romulus treated Christina as his wife and even paid the rent for her and Mitru when they were struggling. His behaviour was seen to be almost irrational by many who knew him, but Raimond Gaita, his son, now recognises the implicit and foundational moral nature of his father's actions. They were the embodiment of the Socratic assertion that it is better to suffer evil than to do it.<sup>452</sup> The human experience that most clearly demonstrates the power of the Socratic assertion that it is better to suffer evil than to do it is said by Gaita to be the experience of *sober remorse*.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> eBooks@Adelaide, "Gorgias, by Plato", <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plato/p71g/gorgias.html>, viewed on 19-11-2011.

<sup>450</sup> Raimond Gaita, *After Romulus* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2011) 84, 85.

<sup>451</sup> Gaita, *Romulus my Father*, 29-34.

<sup>452</sup> Gaita, *After Romulus*, 70, 71.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid*, 84, 85.

The language of wonder, mystery and the preciousness of human beings arose, for Gaita, out of experience. The language of remorse, self-knowledge, mystery and preciousness arises from his assertion that there is a level of experience that is common to all human beings. In *A Common Humanity*, Gaita states his question clearly in two ways. “Does the concept of evil mark out a distinctive moral reality? Or does it merely record an inclination to demonise severe moral transgression?”<sup>454</sup> Distinguishing what we might call natural evil such as disease and death from what we might call moral evil such as murder or torture, Gaita focuses on the latter and refines his question. “Does evil mark out a distinctive and irreducible kind of moral terribleness?”<sup>455</sup> For Gaita this is a question surrounded by the controversial influence of religious connotations and judgemental moralism, which can arise as easily from religious codes as it can from secular philosophy. Moralism, the judgemental attitudes based on rigid moral ‘oughts’, is a corruption of morality in Gaita’s view. Morality is able to recognize and acknowledge evil, without rejecting the evil doer, in an act of acceptance of the tragic element of being human, the element of human proneness to tragedy, failure and dis-ease.<sup>456</sup> As with his analysis of goodness Gaita offers an experiential example as a tool to aid us in answering his question of whether evil marks out a distinctive and irreducible kind of moral terribleness without resort to religion or duty bound moral imperatives. In this case he offers a hypothetical scenario that is designed to focus our attention on the experience of the evildoer.

Imagine someone – call him N – whose route home from work takes him past destitute homeless people sleeping in the doorways of shops. They are not young homeless, but old, ruined by drink, unable ever to get a job, without family and friends. If any one of them were to die, no one would care. If N were to hear that one to whom he occasionally gave money had died that evening, he might think on it for a few minutes and then his mind would pass to other, perhaps trivial, things. No one would do more. Now imagine that one of the homeless people asks N for money, abuses him when he refuses to give it, and stands aggressively in his path. In a fit of

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<sup>454</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 29.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>456</sup> Gaita, *After Romulus*, 85-89.

temper N pushes him aside, off the kerb and, unintentionally, into the path of an oncoming car. The beggar is killed.<sup>457</sup>

Gaita uses this hypothetical scenario to explore what he thinks is the most likely experiential response of N, that being remorse. He defines remorse as “the pained realisation of the meaning of what he had done.”<sup>458</sup> The word 'meaning' in this definition is of central importance to Gaita’s argument. He hopes to draw our attention not only to the meaning of what has happened to the homeless man but also to the meaning of what has happened to the unintentional killer. The experience of the killer in the midst of remorse is described by Gaita as “pained bewilderment” expressed in the potential verbal outburst of the killer, “What have I done? How could I have done it?”<sup>459</sup>

Remorse is so painful, and indeed unlike any other pain, primarily because it is a pained realisation of what I have become in the act that led to remorse. Gaita distinguishes guilt from shame in relation to remorse. Remorse is closest to guilt for guilt relates to something one has done. Yet shame is not entirely unrelated for it relates to the sense of what one has been *revealed to be* through one’s own actions or the actions of those around us. For this reason Gaita states, “Just as the contact with the goodness of the kind showed by the nun inspires the wonder that there could be such a thing in the world, so remorse makes us painfully aware of the reality of evil”.<sup>460</sup>

Gaita distinguishes remorse from guilt, shame and ignorance due to insanity by focussing on the element in remorse that relentlessly reminds the killer of the precious individuality of his victim and what that means for the victim and indeed for the killer. What has N become? What does this experience mean for him? He has become a killer, and

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<sup>457</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 30.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

perhaps in his own mind, a murderer. His focus on what he has become cannot be divorced from his focus on the individuality of his victim for, as Gaita carefully points out, that would be a corruption of remorse. Gaita says, “His response...is saturated by the realisation of the unconditional preciousness of his victim.”<sup>461</sup>

The understanding of morality that is described in the language of duty to moral obligations that has arisen as part of the modern western philosophical tradition cannot, in Gaita’s view, give voice to the depth of the experience of remorse. We are reminded again of our earlier observation from the pages of *Good and Evil* that Gaita distinguishes mortal men from rational beings in an attempt to show that rational philosophy becomes nothing more than a parody of real remorse if its conclusions are inserted into the mouths of the remorseful person.

My God, what have I done? I have been a traitor to reason! I have violated rational nature in another... I have violated my freely chosen and universally prescribed principle that one shouldn’t kill people under circumstances such as these!<sup>462</sup>

By highlighting the insufficiency of such objective language Gaita runs the risk of giving the impression that experiences such as remorse offer an objective proof for absolute value. He is careful not to say this, however, and this point is one of the carefully nuanced elements of his argument. Real remorse, or as Gaita calls it, “sober remorse,” is not said to “underwrite” a conception of absolute value. Gaita instead emphasises that sober remorse is an “expression” of absolute value. Such expressions are no replacement for the supposedly more real and objective language of moral philosophy. Rather, sober remorse expresses the mystery of discovering one’s own humanity and indeed another’s humanity to be irreducible.

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>462</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 33, 34.

The humanity one discovers when one is in deep and sober remorse is a humanity that is not reducible to moral function, virtue or consequential value. It is a humanity wrapped in a mystery that is only apparent and expressed through experiences like wonder and sober remorse. Gaita refers to this mystery in terms of the preciousness of the individual and the unconditional respect owed to each individual on the basis of that preciousness.<sup>463</sup>

In order to understand fully what Gaita is drawing from the experience of remorse we need to carefully assess what he says remorse is. He differentiates sober remorse from guilt and shame, giving it a specific character as an expression of absolute value.

Sober remorse is a sense of self-judgement on the basis of one's own actions according to Gaita. It does not necessarily imply guilt in a legal sense but always reveals the seriousness of an action in the level of self-judgement that occurs.<sup>464</sup> The wider society of human beings recognises sober remorse and what it reveals in the wrongdoer by holding that person responsible for what they have done. By "holding responsible" Gaita means that the significance of what the person has done is not evaded by them or their fellow human beings.<sup>465</sup> The qualifying adjective, "sober", is carefully placed to make us aware that there are corruptions of remorse that are not "authoritative" when it comes to recognising the seriousness of wrongdoing. Gaita identifies remorse that is "...sentimental or morbid or self dramatising..." as corrupt forms of remorse that can teach us nothing apart from illuminating the narcissistic nature of the response to a wrong. Sober remorse reveals the moral significance of a wrong precisely by the nature of its seriousness.

Gaita's idea that sober remorse can reveal absolute moral value relies on his understanding of how one person's remorse can reveal a moral absolute to the one who

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid, 8, 9.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid, 44.

observes that remorse. He argues that witnessing sober remorse moves us to confront the reality of moral evil. In doing so he finds himself arguing with those who refused to admit such experiences as “being moved” into the realm of reason.

When Kant said that even in the presence of Jesus he would need to step back and turn inwards to listen to the deliverance of Reason, he was partly right and partly wrong. He was right insofar as he wished to stress that the acknowledgement of Jesus could not be a blind response, but he was wrong to think that insofar as we responded because we were moved, then to that extent we responded blindly. He was right insofar as he thought that lucidity required one to be obedient to the critical grammar of thought (Reason), but he was wrong to believe that that critical grammar is conditioned by an a priori conception of what it is to think well and what it is to think badly which necessarily excluded feeling as something extraneous to it.<sup>466</sup>

Remorse has the power to move us because it reveals what a person becomes when they have done evil and it reveals the preciousness of every human person by the seriousness of having done evil to another. This revelation occurs to the wrongdoer and to those who witness her remorse. It is powerfully moving precisely because there can be no consolation. Remorse cannot be relieved by pointing out the relatively worse wrong done by others, for sober remorse is a serious self-judgement on the basis of what one perceives oneself to have become on the basis of the wrong done to another.<sup>467</sup> To entertain such 'relative' considerations would be a denial of the genuineness or 'soberness' of the remorse. The perception of oneself as a wrongdoer can, in Gaita's view, only rest upon the realisation of the absolute preciousness of the one that has been wronged.

Remorse, in Gaita's view, knows no fellowship. Unlike guilt, which can be known collectively, remorse singles out the one who experiences it. There is no consolation for remorse in the fellowship of the guilty. Gaita argues that this singular experience changes the

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid, 47.

wrongdoer's relationship with the world by denying the fellowship of unselfconscious participation with others.

Those who, in remorse, suffer in guilty recognition of what they have become are radically singular, and for that reason remorse is a kind of dying to the world.<sup>468</sup>

Ironically, though it is an isolating experience sober remorse is not self-absorption. Rather, Gaita argues that sober remorse is “a form of the recognition of the reality of others – those we have wronged.”<sup>469</sup> Though remorse is a form of dying to the world it is a dying not of utter withdrawal but of a profound and lonely “recognition of reality”.<sup>470</sup>

For Gaita, remorse directly expresses the reality of moral evil. It does not and cannot prove or underwrite any sense of evil as an absolute conception but it is an expression of its presence and is often the prompt for some to describe the ethical as *sui generis* and irreducible.<sup>471</sup> The mystery (irreducible nature) of emotions like the love of the nun that was totally lacking in condescension and the wonder it evoked, and the sober remorse of the one who has wronged another, awaken us to an understanding of reality, an understanding in which every human person is indelibly precious. The mystery lies in the fact that human preciousness is irreducible to moral “oughts” or consequential outcomes. Human beings are indelibly precious regardless of whether they bear any of the usual marks of what we associate with a meaningful life.

Gaita does not claim that the presence of remorse is what reveals whether something is evil or not. Rather he argues that anything that is the “intelligible object of remorse” can be identified as morally wrong or evil.<sup>472</sup> He is also careful not to fall into the trap of basing

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid, 48, 49.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, 60.

moral value on mere feelings, which is why wonder and remorse in these examples are described as “serious” and “sober”. Remorse, in Gaita’s view, for something that is not an intelligible object of remorse is the experience of insanity. Sober remorse is “a disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what we did.”<sup>473</sup>

Gaita’s account of good and evil as an absolute conception has been retrospectively asserted as having its basis in his experience of the tragic goodness of his father and his father’s response to great wrong done to him. Gaita argues that his father could only have responded to those who wronged him with such goodness if he had implicitly acknowledged the terrible implications of remorse and what it reveals about the wrongdoer and the wronged.<sup>474</sup>

Gaita’s philosophy has a profound voice when it is spoken into the political and social arena. His philosophy is often impacting the Australian political consciousness and as such is a formative influence on Australian culture. He makes no secret of the fact that his moral philosophy is an attack on consequentialism, which is so predominant in modern moral philosophy and which is so often employed in public and political policy making. A form of reductionism, consequentialism argues that a moral good or evil is determined by its consequences for the greatest number.

Gaita has singled out Peter Singer as a philosophical contemporary who is a proponent of direct consequentialism, which argues that each moral act is judged to be right or wrong on the basis of how many people on balance are happier, or have greater well-being, as a consequence of the act.<sup>475</sup> Singer argues for what he calls “preference consequentialism” on the basis that it allows for an objective element of reason to universalise morality. He is

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>474</sup> Gaita, *After Romulus*, 75, 76.

<sup>475</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 57.

most definitely not a relativist and Gaita's argument with him is not about absolutes versus relativisms.<sup>476</sup>

All forms of utilitarianism, of which direct consequentialism is one, seek to describe morality in terms of an objective and universal principle that can be applied without allowing for bias or 'agent-relative' consequences. It is argued that only by removing the realm of the ethical from the messiness of 'agent-relativity' can the moral philosopher or indeed any moral agent do justice to reason.<sup>477</sup> Singer situates himself firmly in the camp of direct consequentialism, arguing that it is the least complicated means to a universal moral theory based on reason.<sup>478</sup> Gaita's argument with Singer, and all consequentialism, is that the removal of moral theory from the realm of the personal into the realm of 'reason' can, and often does, divorce individuals from any serious or even sane connection between their individual acts and the consequences of those acts. Using Singer's argument that going over to India and killing a bunch of peasants is morally the same as forgetting to make your monthly payment to Oxfam to highlight the insanity of such a position, Gaita reemphasises the centrality of the individual in what defines human beings as moral beings.<sup>479</sup> Gaita argues that if Singer was found to have hung himself for forgetting to renew his subscription to Oxfam we would be right in judging his suicide as an act of insanity. On the other hand, if he had done the same as an act of sober remorse for having deliberately shot a group of peasants in India we could at least understand the remorseful basis of his decision to take his own life.

The point is that for an act to be judged as morally wrong it must be the intelligible object of sober remorse, which is a personal and individual self-judgement. Thus, Gaita

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<sup>476</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5. Originally published in 1980 and as a second edition in 1993.

<sup>477</sup> Michael Slote, "Utilitarianism," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy: New Edition*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford University Press, 2005), 936-9.

<sup>478</sup> Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 8-15.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid*, 194-199. See this reference for the argument Gaita attacks.

suggests, absolute moral value cannot ever be divorced from agent-relativity, nor should it be. Intrinsic to his argument is that agent-relativity does not necessarily mean egocentric and self-oriented moral bias. The presence of sober remorse saves the agent and those around her from egocentric distortions of moral value.<sup>480</sup>

The implications of Gaita's ethical philosophy for public life are profound. To begin with, his emphasis on human beings as moral beings who are revealed to be moral and human through their capacity to be moved by their fellow beings challenges common philosophical assumptions about the nature of reason and indeed the objectivity of moral acts and decisions. It is conceivable for example that governments acting on the basis of a consequentialist morality could abuse the minority groups within their sphere of care for the perceived good or well-being of the majority. Gaita's understanding allows for no such situation, for the abuse of a fellow human being or group of human beings is a reasonable object of intelligible sober remorse and the abuser is revealed to be an evildoer. The preciousness of human beings is found to be paramount in Gaita's understanding of morality. What is of absolute value is our shared humanity. We are revealed to be moral by our love for each other and the wonder it inspires and our wronging of each other and the remorse that it inspires.

Gaita argues that much of the moral malaise in public life in Australia is due to the consequentialism at the heart of a great deal of its policy making. The utilitarian basis for public policy creates a platform for governments to remove themselves from taking responsibility for their actions on the grounds that they were undertaken for the greater good of the majority and on the basis of supposedly impartial reasoning to that effect. Removing the individual and collective involvement from "practical ethics", to use Peter Singer's phrase, is to fail to recognise the intrinsic and equal value of all human persons and as such is

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<sup>480</sup> Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 55-60.

to fail as moral beings. Morality, for Gaita, is less about doing good or doing evil as it is about being good and being evil. Good and evil as an absolute conception leads us away from moral codes and objective universalism into an understanding of human *being* as intrinsically and absolutely valuable.

Gaita applies this philosophical perspective to general questions of morality such as the question of what it means to be racist. It is also applied to more specific examples of evil such as the question of what it means to be the perpetrators of genocide. These examples and others are discussed in *A Common Humanity* but a more recent example of Gaita's application of his philosophy to the public life of Australians is found in his influential Quarterly Essay, *Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics*, published in 2004. In this essay Gaita makes penetrating comment on the impact of governmental mendacity under the John Howard led coalition government (1996-2007), particularly in the context of the invasion of Iraq on the basis of the purported presence of weapons of mass destruction inside the Iraqi nation. The essay uses all of the elements of Gaita's philosophy described above to make a statement about Australian political culture in language that is accessible to an audience not trained in philosophy.

This essay was written after the 2004 re-election of George Bush in the United States of America and John Howard in Australia. The 'war on terror' was well under way and the publics of both Australia and America were being asked to trust John Howard and George Bush in spite of their apparent pervasive mendacity over the reason why both nations went to war with Iraq.<sup>481</sup> Gaita recalls the shock felt by many of the liberal left throughout the USA when George Bush was re-elected. How was it possible "that a president that was incapable of presenting a coherent account of the reasons why he invaded Iraq and how this was linked

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<sup>481</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Publishing, 2004), 1, 2.

to the war on terror could be re-elected?”<sup>482</sup> Gaita records that he observed a real division between the liberal middle class left and the majority of other Americans at that time.

Fundamental to the question was the underlying question of what now constituted a sense of morality in politics. People who were outraged about abortion were apparently quite prepared to go to war on the basis of a lie.<sup>483</sup>

The same was true in Australia, though not so much as in America, and to an even greater degree in Great Britain where, according to Gaita, the public seemed no longer to have any reference point on which to judge their government. The government’s level of mendacity had utterly disoriented the British electorate. Australians, on the other hand, understood the level of mendacity present in the Coalition government, were cynical about politics generally and felt that as long as the economy was going along nicely they could tolerate such mendacity—it was in accordance with what a cynical view of politics would expect.<sup>484</sup>

Gaita applies his philosophy to the question of what this cynical measure of politics shows about morality and politics in the Australian context. He effectively demonstrates how the Coalition government deliberately “muddied the waters” about what was properly controversial at the time. Using the issue of mandatory detention of asylum seekers as an example, Gaita argues that the Coalition were able to make it a controversial question as to whether or not it is “evil to incarcerate children behind razor wire as part of a strategy to deter asylum seekers from landing on our shores.”<sup>485</sup> He suggests that such a question ought not to be controversial and that when most Australian people are invited into a serious consideration of the moral implications of such a policy they can see clearly that the issue is not

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, 6.

controversial and easily answered in the positive, that is, that yes it *is* evil to incarcerate children for such a purpose.

To clarify how this question is directly linked to Gaita's philosophy we might say that incarcerating children under such circumstances is an action that most people would readily understand to be the right object of sober remorse, thus revealing for the observer that the action is evil and the perpetrators of the action have failed morally. In Gaita's view the real controversy around this issue at the time was the broader question of "what our immigration policy should be" and based on his own discussions with people who live in and around his home in central Victoria he concludes that many Australians, when brought into a sober contemplation of what is really morally controversial and what is not, are able to make the distinction with ease.<sup>486</sup> Gaita is arguing that the Coalition government under John Howard were masters at creating controversy by making questionable moral understandings that are common amongst the Australian people, in particular, questions around the moral value of human beings.

As with all of his philosophy Gaita traces its roots to his own father Romulus, his father's friend and second father to Gaita, Pantalemon Hora, and in this essay in particular more broadly to the general world-view of those living in central Victoria throughout his lifetime. The suggestion is that there were elements of what might be called moral value, as distinct from morals, in the Australian rural communities Gaita grew up in, that undergird our common humanity in such a way that demonstrates the implicit evil of Coalition mendacity during the Howard government. Gaita draws our attention to what I have called moral value with a wonderful story that he recounts in a number of places.

A number of German Jews who fled to England in World War II were arrested by the British as enemy aliens and sent to Australia on a ship called the *Dunera*. They became

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 6.

known as “the Dunera boys”. As they were being marched to an internment camp on the fringes of the desert, a soldier guarding the stragglers handed one of them his rifle and said: “Here mate, hold this while I go and have a piss.” Telling the story later, the Dunera boy said he knew then that he was in heaven.<sup>487</sup>

The point of telling the story in the context of the discussion on government mendacity was to highlight the great gulf that existed in 2004, and many would argue remains today, between that soldier’s “beautifully simple acknowledgement of a common humanity with his prisoner” and the political culture and values of today. Gaita remembers that people valued hard work and honesty, not so much as virtues but as marks of personhood. Such values were rooted in deeper soil than instrumentality. Honesty and hard work were not valued only for what they achieved, but rather for the value they instilled in the person and in life itself. Honesty, for those people, was a keen awareness of the nuances of mendacity and the right and wrong uses of power.<sup>488</sup>

One of Gaita’s most compelling metaphors demonstrating his preference for understanding value as greater than instrumentality, particularly in relation to the virtues, is the metaphor of the craft. Gaita describes the idea of a *craft*, over and against a *trade*, as being the holding together of instrumentality and value. Gaita’s father Romulus was a blacksmith who valued his trade as a craft; it was an expression of himself as a person and what he valued. The craftsperson produces their craft in such a way as perfectly combines both the function of the product and the revelation, through the way the product is made, of the value of the craftsperson. In a way that is so rare today, the craftsperson ‘stands within’ the product of their craft. It is the loss of this sense of a person’s identity being present in what they do, whether it is blacksmithing, teaching or politics, that has led to moral value being reduced to the functionalism that justifies a means by its instrumentalist ends.

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid, 14, 15.

This loss is described by Gaita as a form of estrangement from the deepest values that have formed Australian culture and society. When moral value is determined only by what the consequences of actions are and never by what the actions themselves reveal the agent to be, Gaita argues that such morality has lost its ability to shape identity.<sup>489</sup> This is Gaita's diagnosis of Australian political culture in his Quarterly Essay. Australian politics has fallen into what Gaita has said is consequentialism. Government actions, including numerous subtle kinds of manipulation of the electorate and including brazen and manipulative rhetoric, are justified on the basis that they will ultimately see the incumbent government re-elected regardless of what those actions reveal the government to be in terms of its identity established in its moral value.<sup>490</sup>

The story of the soldier and the "Dunera boy" serves as a stark reminder of what such behaviour can reveal one to be. The soldier is revealed to be a person who acknowledges his common humanity with his prisoner. Such moral value with its revelatory power is deeply rooted in Socrates' statement that "it is better to suffer evil than to do it." Consequentialism does not recognise the value of common humanity despite its sometimes high claims that the greatest good for the greatest number as a moral consequence has the love of humanity at its centre. Gaita's essay laments the loss of revelatory goodness in politics.

Raimond Gaita applies his philosophy to a significant number of important issues in the public and political culture of Australia. The issues of national identity in the light of the treatment of indigenous Australians, the basis for going to war in Iraq, the treatment of asylum seekers and the use of rhetoric to manipulate the electorate are all examples of the application of his statement of moral value through a sense of common humanity. His appeal to the secular moral value of a common humanity is inclusive of both religious and secular

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid, 20.

standpoints; but he claims that the secular position of common humanity as the expression of absolute moral value is logically prior to the religious claim that we are all equal because we are all God's children. On the basis of his philosophy the secular person may have a profound and mysterious basis for a morality that seriously challenges the power of religious ethics.

### **Identifying Points of Contrast as Humility**

Though we have not been able to give a more comprehensive account of the application of Gaita's philosophy to the political and moral culture of Australian life we have at least been able to identify the core elements of his philosophy and demonstrate with a number of examples how he has attempted to do so. Having done that we now turn to the task of clearly identifying the elements of his philosophy that are in contrast to theology as such and to acknowledging these contrasts with the humility of the dialogue. When we face the prospect of a dialogue between philosophy and theology we are potentially open to an irresolvable situation unless we set very carefully the parameters of the conversation. The parameters that we must set to contain this dialogue are parameters that are dictated to us by the assertions made by Gaita with regards to the nature of theology and of moral theology in particular.

The primary assertion made by Gaita about moral theology, or "Christian Ethics" as it is usually called in some theological circles, is that its force or power comes from its anthropomorphic language. The capacity of theological language to enable us to see human beings in the light of familial love regardless of their actual familial circumstances is what Gaita values in theological and religious language and indeed what he laments in the limits of secular philosophy. In his view religious language is able to say that every human being is absolutely precious because God, the *Father God*, loves each person equally and without

reference to their qualities other than the fact that they are human. I emphasise the paternal language in order to capture the familial power of the religious language that Gaita says characterizes the religious moral understanding.<sup>491</sup>

Given the vast amount of theological discourse on ‘Christian Ethics’ in general we will limit our inquiry to whether or not Gaita’s assertion is representative of Ethics from the Christian theological point of view. One thing is clear, our brief examination of the question must not distract us from a clear identification of the most profound determination in Gaita’s work to distance himself and his work from any suggestion that what he calls “mystery” in the revelatory elements of *good and evil* implies a divine personal agency. It is in that distance between Gaita’s definition of mystery as “irreducible” and the Christian ethical stance that suggests that human ethics has a divine ground that we find the most important contrast between Gaita and theology and it is one that we must honour and take seriously. Prior to this contrasting point we will find a number of other points of significant contrast. For example, Gaita’s philosophical assertion that *good and evil* are correlated in their ability to reveal the absolute ethical nature of humanity can be shown to contrast with the significant themes of atonement in theology that have teleological understanding of the end of evil in the triumph of the good.

It is clear that Gaita’s philosophy is situated entirely in the realm of human existence and does not extend to any contemplation of a divine element. I contend that Gaita presents a moral philosophy that rivals religious ethics in its power to shape our culture’s understanding of moral value. His understanding of human beings as beings who are revealed to be indelibly precious by the *good and evil* that permeates their lives is rich with potential correlations with the Christian story. Gaita has, however, argued that what is in his view a Christian ethical

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<sup>491</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 22, 23.

understanding cannot come about without first acknowledging common humanity, which any suggestion of a divine element logically relies upon. This logic renders the religious recourse to a divine element entirely unnecessary in his view. Can theology reach a consensus with such a view? Is there not a fundamental philosophical breach between a humanist ethic like Gaita's and a religious ethic? The remainder of this section will engage a selection of theological voices as examples of Christian ethics that grapple with the relationship of theology, the ethical person and the secular world view.

One of the most controversial ethical questions in theological discourse has been whether or not Christian ethics is based on what is called natural law. The theory of natural law is based on creation theology and suggests that God created the world (cosmos) as an ordered and reasonable world and that morality is therefore part of that reasonable structure to which all created things should naturally conform.<sup>492</sup> Natural law once dominated Christian ethical thinking based on the thought of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, but has more recently been heavily criticised. Criticisms of natural law include reservations about its static nature, which renders it impossible for natural law to concede that the human situation might alter what is deemed to be naturally good for human life. The static element of natural law has the potential to allow interpretations of natural law to become irrelevant to real concrete human beings in the current situation. The universally static approach of natural law is one of its greatest hindrances.<sup>493</sup>

Natural law identifies nature with reason to the extent that nature is seen as that which governs all natural creatures in an "orderly plan".<sup>494</sup> Whilst it is easy to assert that there is a

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<sup>492</sup> John Finnis, "Natural Law" in (ed) Ted Honderich *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 642.

<sup>493</sup> Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Novalis: Eerdmans, 1999), 32, 33.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

natural law on the basis of reason, and some hegemonic authority exists, as soon as that hegemony is challenged—as that of the church has been so comprehensively by the sciences—the certainty of what is ‘natural’ can no longer be held with such authority by the hegemony. Any theory of human morality that involves a form of hegemonic authority sits in contrast to Raimond Gaita’s philosophy that emphasises what we might call *empirical revelation* as it is seen in the observation of what wondrous love and remorse reveal human beings to be. We might be able to say that ‘natural’ element in the theory of natural law is found in Gaita’s philosophy in that he situates the moral nature of human beings firmly in his empirical observation of *human beings* and the situations they live in. For Gaita it is the ‘law’ element that fails to adequately reflect what he has observed.

It is the ‘law’ element in natural law theory that draws in both the divine element and the rigid moralistic or virtue-based ideas of human morality. These stand in contrast to Gaita’s firm and clear articulation of the mystery at the heart of being human. That mystery is the irreducible nature of the way human beings reveal one another to be indelibly precious by their wondrous love and by their sober remorse. We have called this ‘empirical revelation’ as opposed to ‘natural law’. One of the key strengths of Gaita’s philosophy is its foundation on the dynamic and evolving reality of human life in interaction with its environment. His emphasis on the way human beings are “moved” by one another in the context of good and evil frees morality from moralism, heteronomy and divine law whilst dealing seriously with the reality of the human experience of good and evil. Is it possible for the Christian understanding of natural law to be freed from its rigidity?

John Macquarrie is one theologian among others who has sought to rejuvenate natural law from its limitations in the eyes of its critics. In Macquarrie’s theological approach to Christian ethics we find a growing preparedness to understand the dynamic, chaotic and changing nature of the human situation and therefore the difficulty for an ethics based on a

static interpretation of divine law in keeping pace with the complexity of the scientific and technological age.<sup>495</sup>

Macquarrie approaches the question of Christian ethics by asking three questions that he argues must be addressed if Christians are to join the ethical conversation in modern times. The first question is whether or not ‘Christian morals’ are related to ‘non-Christian morals’ in any way. In other words, is there some continuity between the ethics of different faith traditions and indeed between the ethics of faith and the various secular traditions, such as that of Gaita? Or is there a fundamental disconnection between Christian morals and these other traditions, each of which carry their own commitment to ethical conversation? For our thesis the main element of this question is the continuity or otherwise between religious ethics and secular ethics.<sup>496</sup>

The second question he asks is reliant on the answer to the first. “What is the shape of the theological ethic appropriate to our time?”<sup>497</sup> If theological ethics *is* continuous with non-theological ethics then the answer will differ from a view reached on the assumption that theological ethics is *not* continuous with non-theological ethics. Macquarrie argues that the starting point for these first two questions is the consideration of the meaning of humanity as such, without reference to creed. Here he is touching very closely upon the question at the heart of Gaita’s philosophy.

Macquarrie argues against the assertion that theological concepts come before theological ethics.<sup>498</sup> One of his main reasons for doing so is to avoid the trap of what he calls the impertinent idea that somehow those who do not belong to the Christian creed but who nevertheless live with an ethical stance that looks the same as the Christian stance are

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<sup>495</sup> John Macquarrie, *Three Issues in Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 11.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid*, 13-18.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

somehow “hidden Christians” or, “anonymous Christians” as Karl Rahner has called them. Macquarrie rejects this idea as one of the worst ideas to come out of theological ethics, in particular as they were manifest in the “new morality” movements that were prevalent in his time.<sup>499</sup> In order to steer the debate away from such ideas Macquarrie is prepared to engage in a revival and reinterpretation of the traditional Catholic idea of natural law. If such an idea is to be revived, however, in his view it must be transformed from a static natural law into a dynamic natural law that incorporates all of the change that is reflected in the evolutionary basis for modern scientific understandings about the meaning and nature of life.<sup>500</sup>

Macquarrie’s third question arises from the other two. If it were argued that there *is* continuity between non-religious ethics and religious ethics, what place do religious ethics even have in the broader ethical conversation?<sup>501</sup> These questions and the answers to them are crucial for the formation of a consensus between Raimond Gaita and Christian theology.

Macquarrie comments that new renewal movements in Christian morality are often couched in terms of the embrace of ‘situationist’ ethics as a reaction against hegemonic religious moral law.<sup>502</sup> “Persons before principles” was a common catch phrase of the new morality movement. But Macquarrie asserts that even law based ethical systems in the church have had situational considerations built into them. Law is general and will always allow flexibility on the basis of the concrete situation.<sup>503</sup>

Macquarrie accepts that humanity is a dynamic and evolving reality rather than a static animal bound by a static nature.<sup>504</sup> The phrase “(Human) being-on-the-way” denotes

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid, 19-20. Macquarrie is referring to Rahner’s argument for the possibility that a person outside of the Christian faith may be “secretly moved by the Holy Spirit of grace” and “unwittingly feel(s) itself to be such a child of God”. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Vol IV* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 187.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid, 21-24.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid, 45-53.

this sense that human beings do not stay the same but change and develop as they react to one another, their context and their physical situation. Human beings transcend themselves whenever a new image of themselves is envisioned.<sup>505</sup> Could Gaita's "wonder" and "sober remorse" be visions of humanity that are frontiers of transformation in human evolution (becoming)?

Macquarrie is adamant that human beings are creatures of the world in which they live. Human being has no meaning outside of "Human being in the world".<sup>506</sup> This understanding of the human being is based on the Christian doctrine of the creation of humanity as part of the overall creation. In spite of the "otherworldly" emphasis in much of Christian doctrine, this "being in the world" is a basic Christian understanding of what it means to be human.<sup>507</sup> Macquarrie draws out the significance of this understanding of human being. He says,

This does mean some rethinking of the Christian ethic, a rethinking that is likely to lead it closer to some of the non-Christian ethics of our time. If we take seriously that man is a being-in-the-world, then the Christian ethic, as we conceive it today and as we are likely to conceive it in the foreseeable future, will be less ascetic than it has often been in the past.<sup>508</sup>

In Macquarrie's argument we can hear that he is attempting to hold together both the material reality of humanity and what he argues is the implicit human nature of self-transcendence. This holding together of the elements of material need and self-transcendence saves the Christian ethic from a materialistic view of humanity as if the highest good were to fulfil human material needs or desires.<sup>509</sup> It is by no means clear that this argument answers Gaita's determined renouncing of the virtues and the physical and mental attributes that

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid, 59.

would normally be present in order for us to say that a person is in possession of full human dignity. In other words, how does the Christian ethic address the question of the full humanity of those who are not in possession of the physical attributes or virtues that we normally associate with self-transcendence?

Macquarrie also speaks of the social element of being human. This social element of Christian ethics is very close to Gaita's philosophy of the power of human beings to move one another to a sense of their common humanity.<sup>510</sup> He begins his discussion of Humanity as agent (doer) by calling into question Descartes' idea that "I think therefore I am". Macquarrie equates agency with freedom and argues that the Christian ethic must promote freedom in the sense that human beings have the opportunity to be the agents of their own becoming.<sup>511</sup>

Finally Macquarrie speaks of humanity as 'coming of age', that is, assuming responsibility for self and world. Macquarrie believes this is another specific area of continuity with secular ethics. Though secularists tend to believe that with the coming of age of humanity religion is no longer necessary, Macquarrie points out that the "New Man (Being)" is central to the Pauline theology of Christ overcoming the law with spirit.<sup>512</sup>

I believe that Christians and humanists (including some Marxists) may well come closer together as they understand their own humanity better. The Christian on his side is abandoning some of the more naïve and mythological ways in which he has thought of God; the humanist on his side is acknowledging a transcendence and a mystery in man that were denied by old fashioned naturalism. The meeting ground between the two lines of thought could be an expanded and deepened notion of responsibility.<sup>513</sup>

Macquarrie's emphasis on the worldliness and naturalness of the human being certainly provides a way through to secular thinking and indeed has the potential to show

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid, 72-81.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid, 77-78.

how secularism and Christian ethics may remain in dialogue. Macquarrie's route towards understanding between secularism and theology seems to rely on a positive view of human freedom and evolution. Macquarrie has placed himself more in line with instrumentalist understandings of value.<sup>514</sup> By doing so he runs the risk of basing his view of human moral value on the presence of the virtue of teleological usefulness that drives towards material self-transcendence.

In contrast to the instrumentalist perspective, Gaita's philosophy is rooted in his observation of his father's response to the *tragic* nature of life as much as to the positive nature of life. His view is that failure and tragedy are inevitable in life and what is important is not how we avoid such things but how we behave to one another *when* tragedy strikes. This was demonstrated clearly in Romulus' behaviour towards his wife who was the central element in the tragic element in Romulus' life. All of Gaita's examples of human experience that form the basis of his philosophical observations include human response to suffering and situations that would normally cause questions to be asked about the value of human life in such circumstances. Gaita never associates the value of being human with the capacity for freedom, purpose, usefulness or self-transcendence (evolution). The issue here is that many see this self-transcendence as implying some ultimate or perfect state, as if there is a set of qualities achieved, or a final stage of growth: whereas conceivably it is a state of being, which is consistent with many different characteristics. A dynamic interpretation of self-transcendence could provide a possible point of resonance, without being instrumentalist, between Macquarrie and Gaita.

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<sup>514</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and education* (London: Collier MacMillan, 1938), 61. The instrumentalist perspective is apparent in this brief statement of the true nature of freedom. "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgement exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile."

Macquarrie is seeking a way for theology beyond a static view of both the divine and the natural, both of which are correlated with each other in the natural law that emerges from the theological view that God created a reasonable cosmos. He has sought to do this by embracing modern understandings of nature as dynamic and self-transcending. In doing so he offers a different theological path to that of the neo orthodox theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who seeks to liberate the human person from individual ethical concern.

Bonhoeffer's view is that there is no implicit 'code' which is 'given' to the 'moral' person according to which they must decide what is right and what is wrong.

... man is a living and mortal creature in a finite and destructible world and ... he is not essentially or exclusively a student of ethics. It is one of the great naivetés, or, more exactly, one of the great follies, of the moralists that they deliberately overlook this fact and start out from the fiction that at every moment of his life man has to make a final and infinite choice, the fiction that every moment of life involves a conscious decision between good and evil.<sup>515</sup>

Bonhoeffer's position here implicitly denies the presence of a natural law that is the subject of human reason and rational judgement. Bonhoeffer shares Gaita's contempt of the moralist. He declares that their obsession with adherence to the given code unforgivably neglects the multi-faceted nature of human existence and turns the moralist into a tyrant.<sup>516</sup>

In Bonhoeffer's thought preoccupation with the ethical in the daily human life must be avoided when seeking to determine the higher principles of morality and indeed the absolute conceptions of morality. For the imposition of these absolutes and higher principles will render the human life unliveable. Thus, Bonhoeffer very carefully defines and limits the discussion of ethics to specific situations in which the determination of good from evil is warranted. "Big guns are not the right weapons for shooting sparrows".<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>515</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed) Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1949), 232.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid, 232, 233.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid, 233.

The ethical as a higher “theme” does not intrude into the everyday life of the human person when the social, political and personal limitations naturally and easily apply to living. It is when these limiting elements in the human life begin to disintegrate that the higher ethical questions become a theme for human discourse and decision-making. These occasions purify the human community but must remain exceptions to the general life of the community.<sup>518</sup> Bonhoeffer depicts ethics and the ethicist as that which shows how life is bounded and prevented from disintegration by the ‘shall’ and the ‘should’ that speak into human life from the periphery and only when necessary.<sup>519</sup>

Bonhoeffer shows himself to be something of a relativist. His relativism is not an attempt to escape the importance of the ethical for all of humanity but an insistence that ethical principles that are divorced from the concrete context, the *sitz em leben* or situation within which they are to speak, lose their meaning for us. Thus, if we are to speak of absolutes at all it is only as absolutes that may have relevance universally in the human concrete situation, which is eternally variant.<sup>520</sup> Bonhoeffer argues that ethical discourse cannot be taken upon oneself but is conferred first upon the superior authority in the community whether it be due to age, wisdom, position etc., and only on the individual when the structures of authority break down. In this he sets up an ethical discourse that is reliant on authority and subordination so long as the social, religious and political structures remain healthy and intact.<sup>521</sup> He is careful, however, to show that such concrete social manifestations of the ethical are not to sanction privilege of class or rank in society. The concreteness of ethics in the chain of command and subordination is present precisely to ensure that all human beings are *equally* bound by the limits of the ‘shall’ and the ‘should’. Therefore, “the

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid, 234, 235.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid, 239.

ethical is not essentially a formal rational principle but a concrete relation between the giver and the receiver of commands.”<sup>522</sup>

All of this view fulfils only part of the much broader, indeed the eternal, vision of ethics as it comes to us in what he calls “the commandment of God.”

The commandment of God is something different from what we have so far referred to as the ethical. It embraces the whole of life. It is not only unconditional; it is also total. It does not only forbid and command; it also permits. It does not only bind; it also sets free; and it does this by binding. Yet the ‘ethical’, in a sense which still has to be explained, is part of it. God’s commandment is the only warrant for ethical discourse.<sup>523</sup>

God’s commandment is not open to interpretation by human beings. Nor is God’s commandment merely a universal ethical principle as opposed to a concrete moral situation. God’s commandment is absolute and all defining according to Bonhoeffer.<sup>524</sup> God’s commandment, which is God’s ‘voice’ to human beings, is discovered by us in the historically concrete forms of Jesus as the Christ, the Church, the family, through labour and the government. It is worth noting that with the exception of Jesus as the Christ, these are all socially constructed elements of authority and subordination in human community and that the potential limits of Bonhoeffer’s conception of the commandment of God for Australian culture are very much on display here.

If God’s commandment is not clear, definite and concrete to the last detail, then it is not God’s commandment.<sup>525</sup>

Jesus as the Christ is the historically concrete command of God. From him the command comes to all people through the authority of social, religious and political structures. The task of the human person is to subordinate herself to the command of God

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid, 245.

first through the appropriate social structures in order to free herself to live and second, and only when the former fail, through her subordination to Jesus Christ in her own personal centre, thereby winning freedom and peace.

If we subject this view to the scathing and cynical critique of religion that Friedrich Nietzsche gave in *Beyond Good and Evil*, we can I think forgive the Australian secularist her mistrust of Bonhoeffer's 'command to freedom' that comes from God through the authority structures of religion and human society. Nietzsche has sown the seed that sets the neo orthodox view aside as irrelevant for the modern secularist and it is not sufficient for theology to rest in the comfort of its own earnest propositions. The strength of Nietzsche's vision of religion is revealed in the way he undermines the freedom of the "ordinary man".

For the strong and independent prepared and predestined to command, in whom the art and reason of a ruling race is incarnated, religion is one more means of overcoming resistance so as to be able to rule: as a bond that unites together ruler and ruled and betrays and hands over to the former the consciences of the latter, all that is hidden and most intimate in them which would like to exclude itself from obedience... To the ordinary men, finally, the great majority, who exist for service and general utility and who may exist only for that purpose, religion gives an invaluable contentment with their nature and station, manifold peace of heart, an ennobling of obedience, one piece of joy and sorrow more to share with their fellows, and some transfiguration of the whole everydayness, the whole lowliness, the whole half-bestial poverty of their souls.<sup>526</sup>

Bonhoeffer argues that the command of God *liberates* the human to be fully human without fear of ethical stricture. He speaks of it as "permission" and it is a permission that "commands freedom". His ethics suffers in the minds of most secular Australians under the misfortune of distrust at the hands of Nietzsche's critique. It reads like a spiritual centredness in the historical event of Jesus as the Christ that pervades and orients the human life through the authority of structures that relieve the individual moral conscience of the everyday burden

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<sup>526</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 2003), 86, 87. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Originally published in August 1886.

of moral decision. Yet in a culture that equates religious and political authority with corruption Nietzsche's voice will sow the seeds of unshakeable doubt.<sup>527</sup>

Bonhoeffer's language of obedience and authority and his structural view of ethics does not adapt easily to the Australian cultural backlash against authority on the basis of its rootedness in colonialism. It is hard to imagine the average Australian person embracing such an authoritarian model however much that authority is said to set free and establish and transform humanity, unless somehow that authority is correlated more clearly with individual freedom and less overtly with social and political structures. The voice of Nietzsche is so strong in the mind of the determined secularist that it will continue to undermine views that situate the centre of human freedom in an external authority. On this point, and perhaps only on this point, we can hear the voice of Nietzsche coming through Gaita's work in its refusal to admit that religion and the concept of God can be the basis for human moral freedom.

The critical voice of Gaita also reserves the right for the secular Australian person to lay claim to love as the ethical absolute without conceding that the authority of a command of God, even in the form of a concrete personal life, is necessary. It is enough in his view that we are moved by all of our fellow human beings and that such movements direct our moral responses to one another. The language of love, however, provides theology with perhaps its best opportunity yet to reach a consensus with the secular moral theology of Raimond Gaita. Theology can and does argue that the revelation of Christ is the revelation of love, which is eternal. Only in this sense can what is revealed be said to be divine. Thus, we could argue in an attempt at consensus that love is that to which we are connected 'naturally' and from which we are estranged 'naturally'. But through love, our connection to it *and* our

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<sup>527</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 248.

estrangement from it human beings are revealed to be indelibly precious and are endowed with irreducible value.

A hint of such a consensus can be found in the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg. In his commentary on the moral theology of Wilhelm Herrmann, Pannenberg identifies the inward authority of the moral command of God in Herrmann's thesis. He quotes Herrmann from his later work "Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott".

...the only God who could reveal himself to us is one who in our moral battles shows himself as the power to whom we are truly subject inwardly. This is imparted to us by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>528</sup>

The interface of theology with secularism has often led to a fear in theology of the privatisation of faith. Bonhoeffer's idea that the authority of Christ speaks through the church and the state first and only in the individual human spirit in the face of the failure of those authorities is an idea that I argue would be received with suspicion in the Australian cultural mind. Herrmann's language that describes the authority of Christ as necessarily an inward authority may hold greater possibility for consensus with Gaita's humanist moral theology. There are philosophical problems with this view of inward authority however.

Pannenberg shows how Herrmann's moral theology is really based on Kant, for it determines that the basis for theology is in the inward moral imperative even though he calls it the moral power of Jesus in us.<sup>529</sup> This can create problems and remains in contrast to Gaita's philosophy. The inward moral force for Gaita must be essentially a movement of the inward self of the human person that originated from interaction with fellow human beings rather than some form of universal moral imperative that motivates us. Unless remorse is

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<sup>528</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 59. Originally published in the German in 1928.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

firmly rooted in the radical self-revelation that emerges from the evil deed then it cannot reveal fully the preciousness of the person who has been wronged to the evildoer.

Pannenberg discusses the crisis in ethics that Nietzsche foresaw and therefore criticises those who see any moral authority, inward or outward, as defining for theology in the public sphere. He also critiques the view that the concrete situation creates moral demands or realities. He does so on the basis of his view of love as creative imagination.

Christian ethics is completely the opposite of such situation ethics, because its starting point is not the situation but the creative imagination of love.<sup>530</sup>

The creative imagination of love in Pannenberg's view of ethics is the creative agency of the moral decision maker who enacts moral decisions in the situation thus transforming the situation into a moral one.

Even to discover the plight of those I encounter on my way through life requires an act of creative imagination ... situations outside 'the conventions of society cannot directly be interpreted as a demand upon us' ... a situation is never of itself clearly ethical. It is only so when confronted by a person who makes ethical decisions.<sup>531</sup>

Gaita, by comparison, suggests that the situation acts upon us to reveal the absolute moral value of human beings. The human agent in the situation does not 'enact' moral value via decision as an agent of moral love but as a person who is themselves moved by the absolute moral value of others through the mystery of wondrous love and sober remorse. Thus, while both Pannenberg and Gaita place high value on the dynamics of love in the revealing of moral value, significant contrast remains between them. Pannenberg's acceptance of the idea that situations outside of our particular social conventions do not have any moral demand on us demonstrates that he does not accept that absolute moral value is intrinsic to the nature of human beings. Gaita, as we have already discussed, disagrees. The

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid, 65.

mystery of the absolute and intrinsic preciousness of every human being is conveyed through their ability to move one another and that must be true wherever human beings are, within our outside 'social conventions'. This disagreement is grounded in Gaita's holding together of *good and evil* as a conception of moral value. Not wondrous love alone but sober remorse also reveals the irreducible moral value of the human person. What is lacking in the theology so far is the recognition of the revelatory character of the tragic element in human experience, namely evil.

Pannenberg's approach to ethics does not only situate moral agency in the decision maker per se. "The Christian ethical conscience presupposes the truth of the Christian message."<sup>532</sup> Here Pannenberg demands that if there is to be such a thing as a Christian ethical conscience then the truth about God must first be firmly established as its basis. For orthodox Protestant theology the proof of God's relational love for humanity may only be found in the concrete historical event of Jesus as the Christ. In its necessary grounding in this Christological assertion theology confirms Gaita's observation that the distinctive religious moral attitude to the equality of all human beings is reliant on its language of familial love. Gaita values this language in theology, despite his inability to accept it if it is used as a suggestion of divine agency, and it remains a key point of contrast between him and theology.

Pannenberg uses the Johannine text, *we love because he first loved us* (1 John 4:19) as the textual support for this assertion that the truth about God must first be established in the Christological story as the basis for a Christian ethic. It is this point in particular that sets Gaita apart from theology. He asserts that the goodness of saintly love proves only that some people are capable of saintly love and nothing more. That humans can love in such ways proves only that humans have the capacity for such love. Gaita's insistence that *good and evil*

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid, 67.

is an absolute conception that reveals moral value beyond relativity discovers a potential flaw in the Christian ethics of Pannenberg. If morality is dependent on the human decision to transform the situation with the creative imagination of love and that love in turn is dependent on divine love as its basis, then two possibilities that limit the scope of Christian morality emerge. First, that which inspires the creative imagination of love is extraneous to our humanity and therefore limited to the Christian religion. Second, love that is extraneous to our fundamental humanity is subject to the risk that it is conditional upon external source. In other words, Christians may be justified in acting morally only towards those who meet the conditions of the extraneous source of morality. For example, love might be extended only towards those who accept redemption through the Christian story. We do not suggest that this is actually the case in every example of Christian love and ethical behaviour. Yet it is a potential and logical limitation in Christian ethics that Gaita's philosophy highlights in the application of contrast-in-conversation.

In another perspective that rejects 'natural law' and emphasises human relationship Stanley Hauerwas argues that the "presence of the other" draws us out of self-absorption and into freedom. In this there is a hint of Gaita's argument that people are moved by one another in ways that reveal the indelible preciousness of all human life.<sup>533</sup> Hauerwas' view that it is interaction with the 'other' that establishes human moral character undermines the premise of natural law as created reasonable order. Hauerwas describes Catholic "natural law" as a practice in how to avoid evil by adhering to certain disciplines. The law was natural because, "God is the creator of a rational universe and moral law can be thus known without the aid of

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<sup>533</sup> Stanley Hauerwas *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Indiana, SCM Press, 1983), 44. Emphasis added.

revelation”.<sup>534</sup> Hauerwas shifts the basis of human moral sensibility away from rationality and firmly situates it in human community. He says,

‘natural law’ really names those moral convictions that have been tested by the experiences of the Christian community and have been judged essential for sustaining its common life.<sup>535</sup>

In this view there is no reasonable structure apart from what emerges out of human interaction. Hauerwas draws very close to Gaita’s determined idea that fellow humanity precedes the idea of God. In the quotation below we find Hauerwas declaring almost the same thing:

God’s story is not simply told; it must be lived. We do not respond to the story simply in itself, rather the story grasps our attention through the form of another person. The “freedom” provided by that narrative thus comes only in the form of someone external to me; it must come in the presence of another. I am an agent just to the extent I have the capacity to be called from myself by another.”<sup>536</sup>

The story of God has no meaning unless it is realized in the way human beings move one another to recognize its intrinsic presence in the moral value of human beings. Hauerwas bases Christian ethics then on the tradition of human community that has been moved by the historical story of Jesus, the human being, as the Christ. He says that “The Christian tradition holds us accountable, not to an abstract story, but to a *body of people* who have been formed by the life of Jesus.”<sup>537</sup>

Hauerwas adds nuance to the conversation with Gaita on the assertion that for the religious person, love of neighbour is determined by the familial relationship between humanity and God, the Father God. This argument in Christian theology is that this familial relatedness that drives human freedom is found not in God, the Father God, per se, but

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<sup>534</sup>Ibid, 51.

<sup>535</sup>Ibid, 120.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid, 44, 45.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid, 46. Emphasis added.

specifically in a historical human life and the community that has been moved by his life since that time.

Theology interprets this historical life as an incarnation of divine life and asserts that it is the Christian community, created by the event of Jesus the human person, who is then interpreted by that community as the Christ that forms the collective relationship within which Christian moral consciousness is formed. A key question that arises out of the concentration on the historical event of Jesus as the Christ as the basis for Christian moral consciousness is whether or not that historical event must always be interpreted theologically in conversations between theology and culture. Is there a basis for theology allowing a secular humanist interpretation of the historical event of Jesus? In other words, can theology allow for the veracity of a secular humanist perspective that would accept the power of Jesus' historical human life to move human beings to a sense of the absolute moral preciousness of all human life without recourse to the divine?

The task of this section of the chapter has been to identify whether or not there are any real contrasts between Gaita's moral philosophy and what is called theological ethics. One basic contrast is between the secular humanist insistence that there cannot be a theological or metaphysical interpretation of absolute conceptions like that of *good and evil* and the theological insistence that morality originates in God and is either delivered naturally as part of the reasonable structure of creation ('natural law'), via the authority of revelation or via the human community moved by the life of the historical Jesus interpreted to be the story of the Christ.

Neither natural law nor revelation in the theological sense is of any interest to Raimond Gaita. Given that his question revolves entirely around how human beings 'move' one another in any given situation, it is possible that ethics based in the assertion that human

community has been 'moved' by the human life of Jesus has significant potential for ongoing consensus. Gaita's is an entirely humanist perspective. Consensus in discussion of the humanity of Jesus may bear a great deal of fruit in the pursuit of a view of ethics informed by contrast-in-conversation in the Australian context.

### **Humility as consensus gathering: grounds for continued conversation**

We have identified three primary points of contrast between theology and the philosophy of Raimond Gaita. Each of these is related in some way to the contrast between the secular humanist understanding of ethics and the religious understanding of ethics. The first contrast is between the familial language of religious ethics and the more empirical language of secular humanist philosophy. The second contrast is related to the first but with the emphasis on the dynamics of love rather than the familial language. The religious perspective that divine love is the basis for human love is in contrast to Gaita's perspective that human love is just that, human love. The third contrast is between the religious view that the decision for love as the morally good reveals the moral value of human beings and Gaita's view that good and evil is an absolute conception that reveals human beings to be of moral value.

We have suggested that there is potential for consensus (ongoing conversation) if we concentrate on the possibility of a humanist interpretation of the life of Jesus. We have also suggested that the dynamics of love may provide ample grounds for consensus.

If a consensus is to be reached that allows both the secular philosophy of Raimond Gaita and theology to continue the conversation in mutual recognition, theology must answer the question of whether or not it is able to willingly render up the story of Jesus as the Christ

to a humanist interpretation with the goal of holding theology and secular humanism together in ongoing conversation.

The first question for theology is whether or not there is biblical support for honouring the quest for revelation in the non-religious humanist sphere. Can revelation be non-supernatural, or empirical as Gaita has asserted? A short analysis of the second chapter of Romans suggests that there is indeed biblical reference to just this sort of possibility. The apostle Paul creates space for us to contemplate that the language of God is utterly meaningless unless it is grounded in what we experience in our relationships with other human beings. Paul seems to suggest that religion and religious identification has very little meaning when it is divorced from righteousness. In the second chapter of Romans Paul suggests that in this regard both Gentiles and Jews are on an equal footing: those who possess the law are no different to those who do not possess the law for all have sinned and come under God's judgement (Rom 2:12). Paul writes that what is important to God is what a person *does* rather than what a person believes. God does not see the human person as differentiated by religion or perhaps philosophy or atheism. God sees the human person as differentiated by their behaviour, *For God shows no partiality* (2:11). Paul undermines his own religion in order to highlight the equal standing of the Gentile and the Jew in the eyes of God.<sup>538</sup> Having undermined religion, or non-religion as the case may be, Paul argues that real human value is found not in beliefs or belief systems but in an instinctive human response in any given situation.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (2:13-16 NRSV).

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<sup>538</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 115.

Paul is using rhetoric to build an argument that all human beings will only be judged as righteous according to the gift of grace through Jesus as the Christ.<sup>539</sup> But for the time being his argument is that righteousness resides not in a person's religious beliefs or ethnic status but in the state of a person's inner life and the way that is exercised outwardly in relation to others. There is a strong argument to be made that this principle stands alone without necessary relationship to Paul's broader argument.<sup>540</sup> It could be argued that to give Paul's rhetoric meaning in isolation from his broader argument would be to misinterpret it on the basis of isolating the argument from its context. Brendan Byrne, however, writes that Paul allows his argument of chapter two to stand alone without immediate reference to the gift of righteousness through Christ and as such the interpreter should take seriously Paul's intent to highlight the presence of what Byrne calls the "inner moral core" of the human person.<sup>541</sup>

Paul develops his idea in the context of the question of circumcision, one of the great questions of the early church. The law is only valid if it is kept and circumcision is only meaningful if it is accompanied by perfect obedience to the law (vs 17-25). Paul is not suggesting that obedience to the law is impossible, though he seems to suggest that it is not certain on the basis of membership of his own religion; Judaism. What he is suggesting is that manifestation of the law of God in the human life is not dependent on religious law. In fact, if we follow James Dunn's reading of this passage we would cautiously interpret Paul to be suggesting that religion is the greatest potential *threat* to the irrepressible human instinct to "...invest ultimate significance in God's creative power..."<sup>542</sup> The law of God may be manifest in any human life on the basis of an instinctive inner orientation towards the law of

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<sup>539</sup> Brendan Byrne SJ, *Romans* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 90. See Romans 5.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>542</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 114.

God, which Dunn argues Paul saw as basically irrepressible. Paul calls this the “circumcision of the heart” (vs 26-29).

Karl Barth in his commentary on Romans wrote that this argument of Paul’s was “a disturbing and surprising piece of information from the other side.”<sup>543</sup> Barth interprets Paul’s argument as the rendering of all humankind as equally bereft of righteousness. “Human righteousness is...in itself, an illusion” he argues. Apart from the gracious work of God in Christ bringing about the “new man” there can be no righteousness. Righteousness is rendered to humankind by the act of God’s grace in Jesus as the Christ. Barth also critiques the importance of religion but from a different perspective than James Dunn. For Barth religion is the symbol of the human as bereft of the righteousness that has left its imprint on creation.<sup>544</sup> Brendan Byrne accepts this argument but takes it further than Barth, arguing that Paul’s idea not only describes the human condition prior to God’s gracious gift in Christ but also suggests that the gift of Christ as the New Human to us is one that is not necessarily limited to those who profess Christian faith.

The sense of God’s judgement in Christ reaching beyond externals to grasp the moral capacity hidden in the depths of human beings promotes a view of divine grace as something ranging well beyond the bounds of explicit Christian faith. However distant Paul’s argument may seem from contemporary concerns, it at least gives a hint that God’s work in Christ, as well as initiating a process and a movement of explicit belief, also offers a paradigm of salvation for those who do not explicitly believe.<sup>545</sup>

Byrne’s argument shifts the emphasis away from basic human instinct, which might look a bit like natural law as it appears to do in the reading of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan where they refer to “a common divine law for all humanity”, and places it

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<sup>543</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans: sixth edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 70.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid*, 75, 76.

<sup>545</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, 90.

firmly in the realm of Christology.<sup>546</sup> What has happened in Jesus as the Christ transcends religious response and identifies the human instinct to live in the way of God for what it is, regardless of the presence or absence of religion. This human instinct for God's way is not a natural divine law, nor an ethical law, nor a religious law but an eros of human nature, which is rooted in what it means to exist as a human being and ultimately demonstrated in the life of Jesus.

All this discussion demonstrates is that there are biblical clues that allow theologians to consider the presence of a true ethic based on a secular humanist perspective. It does not change the fact that even these clues rely on the religious assumption that all life is God's. Nevertheless, if theologians can contemplate the possibility of a true ethic outside of their own religious narrative we may have grounds for consensus.

How can this actually be in the modern world? I would suggest that it could be manifest in the possibility of a humanist interpretation of the story of Jesus in conversation with a religious interpretation and a mutual acknowledgement of the meaning of his life as a concrete symbol of true humanity. Both the confirmed secular humanist and the devout Christian may be able to encounter each other in the story of Jesus and affirm one another's expression of what it means to be human on the basis of that encounter.

Theological engagement with a humanist interpretation of the gospel story must allow for an interpretation without reference to the supernatural elements of the story as verifiable elements of real human experience. Some proponents of this possibility within theology have asserted that this means a reduction of the meaning of the gospel to its ethical values. Lloyd Geering has argued just this, saying that God has retreated into the realm of the private life

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<sup>546</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The first Paul: reclaiming the radical visionary behind the Church's conservative icon* (London: SPCK, 2009), 162.

leaving the public secular space only with values that are desirable from the history of the Christian religion.<sup>547</sup>

Geering's assertions belong to a resurgence of what became known as 'death of God theology' in the nineteen sixties, in the form of what is being called "progressive" Christianity. The term "death of God" was in fact merely sensationalist and did not adequately convey what its theological proponents sought to convey, that is, the argument that the rise of secularism, or this worldliness, meant that the modern human mind had no place for supernaturalism. John A. T. Robinson published his famous book on this question, *Honest to God*, in 1963 and argued, largely on the basis of the theological work done by Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that theology had degenerated into a series of assertions about a supernatural being and that theology as such was entirely inadequate for the modern secular mind.<sup>548</sup> Responding to Robinson's argument Rowan Williams points out that a significant element of theology throughout history refused to confine God to any category at all and that therefore Robinson's argument was with a corruption of theology and his apparent atheism misguided.<sup>549</sup>

Robinson bases his argument that theology must consider rejecting theism on a somewhat inadequate reading of Paul Tillich's critique of supernaturalism and the symbolic language of God. He embraces the Neo Platonic ontological language preferred by Tillich that describes the divine as *esse ipsum*, being itself, and describes Tillich's understanding of faith, ultimate concern, as "that which concerns us ultimately", a direct quote from Tillich.<sup>550</sup> His representation of Tillich is manifestly inadequate, however, and fails to recognise the full

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<sup>547</sup> Lloyd Geering, *Christianity without God* (Santa Rosa: Pleridge Press, 2002).

<sup>548</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 16-18. *Honest to God* was republished in 2002 by Westminster John Knox Press with essays by Douglas John Hall and Rowan Williams. We are referring to this recent edition.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

implications of Tillich's understanding of faith. Faith, for Tillich, is not only that which concerns us ultimately but our ultimate concern for that which is ultimate. That which is ultimate in Tillich's theology is that which is eternally beyond existence but in which existence has its eternal ground and being. If Robinson wanted Tillich to provide the basis for a new Christian atheism a more careful reading of Tillich would have led him to be disappointed. While Tillich himself without doubt sought to give credence to the critical protest of atheism against supernaturalism, his own ontology did not allow for a complete embrace of secular humanist atheism.

Paul Van Buren, who was characterised as a "Death of God" proponent, recognised that the philosophy of ontology, as a way of speaking about God that avoided the error of supernaturalism, may well suit the liberal Christian but it does not convince the secular humanist who demands empirical evidence for all logical assertions. Van Buren goes so far as to say that the modern mind "cannot even understand the Nietzschean cry 'God is dead!' for if it were so, how could we know?"<sup>551</sup> Both the language of theism and indeed the language of ontology, if it is applied to some kind of unverifiable deeper reality, creates an unverifiable conundrum that confuses the modern mind and has no meaning for it. Van Buren's rejection of the language of theism and the language of ontology meant that he perhaps earned the title of 'Death of God theologian' more completely than Robinson did and yet in fact what we see in his work is merely a determined shift away from supernaturalism towards a secular understanding of Christology.

Van Buren wanted to ground the meaning of the gospel story in the world today without reference to another unverifiable world.

If we want to say that, although we are not sure what we mean when we speak of God, our concern is with Jesus of Nazareth and with our life in the world today, this

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<sup>551</sup> Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 103.

concern could certainly be expressed in more than one way. The road ahead is not predestined, nor is it dull and flat.<sup>552</sup>

There is a distinct biblical tradition that lends support to the ‘this worldly’ element in what could be called the gospel of (?) divine-human correlation. The synoptic gospels refer to this tradition in the sayings related to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The discourse that leads to Jesus’ telling of the story suggests the correlation between love of God and love of neighbour. One could conceivably read that Jesus was daring to suggest that to love one's neighbour was in fact to love God. This is surely the point of the contrast between the Samaritan and those who abandoned the man in need, a priest and a Levite. The secular humanist mind can conceivably, in the view of the theologian, fulfil all of the law and the prophets with reference only to her neighbour in love and need not have any recourse to belief in the supernatural. The Johannine tradition also refers to this ‘divine-human correlation’ by suggesting that it is impossible to say one loves God if one does not love one's brother or sister (1 John 4:20). It is conceivable in any correlation that one element may remain implied and not explicitly addressed. Thus, the religious mind may acknowledge the divine element of the correlation and the secular mind may not and yet grounds for conversation and mutual respect remain valid. Robinson, Van Buren and Geering all argue that the divine element in this correlation is unnecessary for the meaning of the gospel to be fulfilled in modern human experience.

The great problem for the “Death of God” theologians was, and is, that their vision of secular Christianity was always in danger of being reduced to a particular moral sense that was invariably grounded in an optimistic view of human existence and an evolutionary belief in the capacity of human beings to transcend themselves morally. We saw this element emerging in Macquarrie’s argument above. What is missing in this view is that element of the

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid, 103,104.

gospel that embraces an act of self-emptying and orientation towards the radically other (John 12:44; Phil 2:5-11). This is in turn based in a full and frank admission of the tragic element in existence and the human need for redemption and salvation, even if those two concepts are taken in their 'this-worldly' sense. When I say "radically other", I am referring to that element of theology that asks the question about the divine as that which is irreducible to human or 'natural existence'. By this I mean that which is implied in human existence as a question but which is beyond the grasp of human existence whilst at the same time being present and active.<sup>553</sup>

One could argue that it is precisely this ungraspable element that forms the centre of the Christological ethic at the heart of secular Christianity and, using the distinctions of Martin Buber, Van Buren argues precisely this. Buber's distinction between the 'I' and the 'Thou' becomes central to the Christian idea of radical self-emptying for the sake of that which is 'other' for Van Buren.<sup>554</sup> Even with Buber's deeply applicable distinctions, however, the gospel story without God, or what I have above called 'that which is radically other', is in great peril of becoming a new moralism rather than a secular Christology that retains the power of redemption and salvation in a 'this-worldly' sense.

As we have already observed, these theological attempts to interpret the story of Jesus for the modern secular mind are important mainly for their suggestion to us that creative consensus conversations are viable between Raimond Gaita's secular moral philosophy and Christian ethics. Gaita's philosophy will still firmly deny any explicit or implicit moral code, divine or otherwise, in favour of the ability of the irreducible human person to move us to sensibility of the moral value of all human beings.

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<sup>553</sup> Paul Tillich, "What is wrong with the "Dialectic" theology?" *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April, 1935): 137.

<sup>554</sup> Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, 195.

Raimond Gaita has argued for an element in human being that is essentially mysterious. As we discovered in our analysis of his philosophy, he defines mystery to mean that something is irreducible. The meaning of a human life, revealed in the light of the wondrous love and remorse of his fellow human beings, cannot be reduced to what is morally perfect, functional, virtuous or consequential. It is mysteriously beyond all of these categories, which only means that it may not be reduced to any of them. The meaning of a human life is revealed to be mysterious in this way only in the light of the wondrous love and sober remorse of its fellow human beings. Human beings are moved by one another.

Gaita's philosophy is not reliant on a positivistic view of human existence. It takes full account of the reality of *good and evil* and it observes the way human beings are revealed to be inalienably precious in the midst of that reality. Furthermore, his observations inform moral debate without framing a moral imperative. Rather, he describes an empirically observable yet mysterious reality.

Gaita's observations may give a secular Christology the depth it needs to avoid the reductionism of a purely morals- or values-based philosophy of life, however. If we apply Gaita's idea to the gospel story we may sensibly assert that it was the wondrous and self-offering love of one man for many that revealed them to be inalienably precious in our eyes and created a hope that even in the midst of their limited existence the meaning of a human life has ultimate significance. A respectful conversation between Gaita's idea of mystery as that which is irreducible and the theological demand that human beings devote themselves to that which is radically and wholly other (God) is implied here. Gaita's reference to the mystery of the human person as being her irreducible nature stands over and against any attempt to divorce existence from its spiritual depth, that which is in quest of the ultimate.

If this is true the secular humanist may conceivably substitute devotion to a theistic God with wondrous devotion to the mystery of human preciousness and retain the full meaning and impact of the Christian gospel. Thus, the rejection of theistic supernaturalism does not exclude the presence of what Gaita calls mystery as that which is irreducible, or what Paul Tillich has called the ultimate question.

It is precisely this point that I would argue enables a consensus to emerge between Australian theology and the philosophy of Raimond Gaita. The consensus may emerge in two forms and achieve much in both. Firstly, for those theologians and other Christians who feel able to embrace a fully secular Christology, that is, the gospel story without any form of supernaturalism, Gaita's philosophy allows them to do so and retain the crucial element of the 'radical other', thus avoiding the reductionism of a moral code. Secondly, for those who are unable to embrace a fully secular Christology, Gaita's philosophy applied to the gospel story allows for a meaningful conversation in the field of Christology without the need to settle the question of the existence of a God. The Christology of the theists and the Christology of the atheists should be able to offer the meaning of the gospel story to religious atheists and theists and to secular atheists.

The consensus in this case can, I would argue, be seen to be particularly fruitful for the Australian context. Australian culture is self-consciously secular in cultural identity and as such stands to benefit from a theology that is fully equipped for conversation with secular humanism. Theology has again climbed over the back fence and played in the neighbour's 'backyard'. By listening for the voice of the neighbour and opening ourselves as theologians to a conversation with it we have created opportunity for ongoing consensus for the benefit of Australian contextual theology. The application of these grounds for consensus will be explored further in chapter seven.

## Chapter Seven

### *Elements of the Australian Religious Spirit in Consensus with Theology*

The three preceding chapters have each engaged an expression of Australian culture in conversation using the contrast-in-conversation method. The application of the method has sought to identify within each expression its own cultural ‘voice’ and bring it into conversation with Christian theology. By doing so we have attempted to hear what we had earlier called the *religious spirit*—a continuous development of traditional theological themes and ideas outside of the religious institution and embedded in the forms of culture. This is not to suggest that we have merely been listening for developments of Christian theology in culture. Rather, we have been listening for cultural voices that deliberately speak back to the Christian elements of culture and re-form and re-shape spirituality for a post-religious cultural context.

Based on our conversation with each cultural expression we are able to bring three distinct, though not unrelated, cultural ‘voices’ to the consensus space. Each of these ‘voices’, it could be argued, may reveal the culturally embedded *religious spirit* in Australian culture. Elements of the Australian cultural religious spirit may be described in our conversations with these cultural expressions as the spirit of Bower Bird identity reconstruction, the spirit of cthonian eros and the spirit of mystery in humanism. Theology in the consensus space is confronted with a religious spirit that challenges it to think and act differently in the Australian cultural context. In this chapter we will explore further the cultural religious spirit revealed in each conversation and the potential theological directions that openness to the cultural religious spirit may suggest for Australian contextual theology.

## **Bower Bird – Post colonial identity gathering and carnal reality**

The cultural ‘voice’ of Lin Onus has seriously challenged Christian theology to consider that there exists a basic human right to construct or reconstruct one’s own cultural and spiritual identity, particularly in the wake of colonialism. It is not unreasonable to perceive in his painting, *And on the eighth day...*, the fundamental resistance of colonized peoples to the spirit that invades from outside. Onus’ spontaneous artistic post colonialism was a direct study of resistance to the insertion of identity and culture into the existing situation from an external influence and a direct comment on the complexity of the task of building a new identity for those who inherit the history of the colonial invasion of indigenous cultures.

The question of the Christian God as invading colonizer is raised by Onus in this painting. The Christian God is unavoidably linked by Onus to colonial invasion. The land, vibrant with spirit, seems to be saying, “all that needs to be said and known about God is already here, implicit in the land and its people”. Hence the question is: Why must divinity be inserted into the situation when it is clearly already here? The idea that somehow God needed to be incarnated in the 'new' land by the presence of a foreign religious tradition is resisted. At the heart of Onus’ resistance to this invasive God/culture is the question of how to claim identity without succumbing to the dominating forces of colonial control over identity. In our analysis of Onus’ life and work we discovered that his own answer to this question is the “Bower Bird” approach to the construction of spirituality and identity. The task of the self, both individually and in relation to others, as identity constructor lies at the heart of the religious spirit implicit in Onus’ work. The construction of a postcolonial spiritual, cultural and social identity is undertaken on the presumption that all that is spiritually real is freely available within the current situation for humanity to ‘pick up’, to use the imagery of the Bower Bird.

This perspective, brought to the conversation by artists like Lin Onus, challenges Australian theology to think of spirit and spirituality in terms of their implicit presence in the *carnal reality* of the world.<sup>555</sup> In other words, in the same way that pre-colonial Australia already contained spirit and never required colonial powers to inject spirit into it, spirit does not need to be injected into the corporeal in order for that reality to gain some spiritual meaning. This idea by extension challenges Australian theology to shift its emphasis away from the idea of *incarnation* (an idea that has the potential to suggest that spirit must be injected from an external source) and towards the idea of *spirit as implicitly carnal*, and therefore towards the idea that the field of enquiry for theology in Australia is not transcendence of the human situation, by means of the added ingredient of divine spirit, but openness to what can be known in the depth of the human situation. In this understanding all real things, in their depth, are part of the whole complex and spiritual reality of existence.

The implications for this proposed shift in emphasis in the Australian context are significant in that they assert that what we can know of God in the Australian context is knowable in the corporeal reality of the Australian context when it is understood as the ecological interweaving of all forms of life and reality in this situation. To be clear, we do not mean to suggest that the spirit of the Bower Bird in any way asserts that ‘God’ is the sum of mere matter, if there is such a thing as God in this view. We do mean to assert that in as much as we wish to speak of spirit, and God as spirit, we may only do so in the sense that spirit is the integration of corporeal life as a whole and is understood by immersion in what is knowable in our present reality.

Here Friedrich Schleiermacher may be quoted as an important theologian for those who would understand spirit in this way. In his first speech to the cultured despisers of

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<sup>555</sup> Here we use the word carnal to express the corporeal nature of reality in the sense that reality is material substance that is implicitly spiritual. As we have already suggested, corporeal reality cannot be divorced from spiritual reality in the cultural voices we have engaged.

religion he hints at what will become his thesis. Piety, that is, God consciousness, is awoken not by speculation about the supernatural but by a certain attitude to what is real and knowable about the universe. Schleiermacher writes that, "...you must understand the production of light and heat in a soul surrendered to the Universe."<sup>556</sup> Schleiermacher was compelled on the basis of this statement to defend himself against the charge of pantheism, a charge not unsurprisingly levelled against Tillich as well. Schleiermacher's defence was to argue that far from suggesting that the universe is God, he is suggesting that the human spirit is ignited with piety (God consciousness) only by its full and determined participation in the natural world. Thus, for Schleiermacher, science and piety are indelibly linked.<sup>557</sup>

The broader significance for theology is of course that our knowledge of God emerges not from outside our experience but from deep within it where, Schleiermacher argues, our piety will be awoken by our apprehension of the unity and dependence of all created things. The gospel tradition of the correlation between love of God and love of neighbour (Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:27, Matthew 22:36-40) informs the idea that if one can speak at all of a reality that transcends the situation one may only access that idea through experience of knowable physical reality, in this case love of neighbour.

What then are the specific images that emerge from our conversation with Lin Onus that give Australian theologians a knowable sense of spirit, at the very least in the existing physical reality of the Australian situation? The two primary images we have drawn out of that conversation are the postcolonial images of bower bird identity reconstruction that includes the dynamic of breaking through cultural and spiritual barriers, and secondly, the traditional Christological idea of kenosis. These two images both help to form an idea of what might be called a *carnal theology* and indeed rely upon such an idea for their power in the

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<sup>556</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On religion; speeches to its cultured despisers* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1893), 18.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid*, 24. Note 4.

Australian context. In the formation of an Australian theology on the basis of the conversation with Lin Onus the idea of kenosis informs and forms the idea of Bower Bird hybridity that emerges from the postcolonial freedom to overcome traditional barriers to cultural and religious synthesis.

As we discovered in the chapter on Onus, Mark Brett dealt with both the idea of kenosis and that of cultural hybridity as key elements of the development of postcolonial theology in the Australian context. For Brett, kenosis is the self-limiting element of the life of God that creates space for multiple expressions of human life (gender, ethnicity, culture, religion etc.) and gives rise to a community in which kenotic hospitality is the foundation of hybridity as a central characteristic.<sup>558</sup> Brett points firmly to Jürgen Moltmann's idea that creation itself is a form of kenosis in God.<sup>559</sup> The differentiation of God's self from the created world suggests a creating of space, an allowing of the other to have being.

It is a vital implication of these ideas that to discover the unity of all things we should not focus our attention on transcendent unity, but on the concrete differentiation of all things in existence, affirming their particularity and relatedness. As Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Tillich and others have put it, the concern for the differentiated in existence precedes the concern for the unity of all things.<sup>560</sup> Essential unity is at the root of corporeal existence rather than being its teleological aim. For Tillich, to say that differentiation seeks its essential unity is simply to say that the driving force in life is love.<sup>561</sup> In stating this we claim that what Tillich calls ultimate concern is concern for the ultimate as ground not merely telos. Thus, kenosis must be understood as the ground of essential unity issuing forth with life, which is differentiation.

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<sup>558</sup> Mark Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 182.

<sup>559</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 86-87.

<sup>560</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the idols* in *The portable Nietzsche* (ed, trans) Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1954), 554.

<sup>561</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, power and justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 25.

Kenosis, taken in this sense must be seen outside of its traditional Christological sense as the Word taking on flesh (John 1) and be seen as part of the nature of being itself that affirms life. Life relies upon diversity. The dominance of homogeneity causes death. Understood thus, kenosis may be one of the roots of carnal life. Being itself affirms existence through the spirit of kenosis. Existence is affirmed through the acceptance of hybrid communities and the proliferation of cohesive diversity. If indeed kenosis is creative in the way that Moltmann has suggested, then it is evolutionary in the sense that the capacity to adapt, in order to create space for diverse forms of life promotes life. This notion of a Bower Bird like hybridity, the gathering of diverse elements of identity, resists ideas of teleological evolution towards a single, uniform and inevitable form of life. It also contrasts with the idea in some modern theology that interprets the evolutionary process individualistically in a movement of transcendence in which humanity evolves into an ever more perfect species and that Jesus is the 'new Adam', the pinnacle of the newly evolving type of human being. Such a view has more in common with the colonial use of evolution and potentially stands in opposition to kenosis.<sup>562</sup>

If indeed we are to think in terms of kenosis as a spiritual movement in being itself that undermines or is in opposition to the colonial movement of domination and transcendence experienced in the largely evolutionary anthropology underlying the Australian colonial situation, we must transform our understanding of kenosis. We must move from a narrow Christological form of incarnational thinking into the broader sense of incarnation, or carnality, that knows God in all created things, in short, panentheism.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 385. Here, and as noted in Chapter Five (A Humanist Theology), Macquarrie articulates a Christological view of Jesus as the pinnacle of human evolution.

<sup>563</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 297. Pannenberg's comment is that we cannot begin at the point of speaking about incarnation in Christology. The idea of incarnation emerges from our experience of the humanity of Jesus. I would agree with him and I am suggesting that Jesus' humanity reveals divinity as the ground of existence and thus the idea of incarnation may only be used in the sense that it understands revelation to be necessarily carnal.

Kenosis, for us, becomes the opposite of the kind of transcending Christology presented by Macquarrie. The pinnacle of being human is participation in kenotic diversity and reflects a spiritual movement seen in the life of Jesus, in the full embrace of the carnal reality of humanity. This implies an acknowledgement that the human person is at heart carnality and finitude and in this is related to being itself. The human person does not reach God through self-transcendence but through self-acceptance, an evolutionary kenotic acceptance of the self as part of a whole that promotes life. Diversity and hybridity are at the heart of what it means to be human and therefore at the heart of the ground of our humanity, the divine life.

If then we are to speak of God in the Australian context we would assert that God is kenotic in essence and hybrid in existence and can only be known through our experience of the carnal reality of evolutionary diversity. If we are to speak about God in this way we must acknowledge that this language derives from the desire for an organising idea to make some sense of what is experienced as chaotic and diverse reality. God, here, is not the dominant unifying power transcending all particular beings but rather is known through the realities of human particularity. Such a God unsettles homogeneous power structures in the social and political situation, religious situation, ethnic and cultural situations. In short, when human beings assert dominance over other species and each other they cut ties with nature and with God.

The embrace of cultural and religious hybridity returns us to the idea of the Bower Bird found in the work of Lin Onus. Bower Bird theology would not merely be an indiscriminate melding of cultures and traditions because they happen to be there. Rather, it is a discerning adaptation that affirms life and identity. Thus, Bower Bird theology affirms that which promotes the life of the unified whole through its embrace of diversity and adaptability.

## **Eros – Divine life and carnal reality**

The expression of, or desire for, erotic ecstasy that is attained through *enstatic* cultural delving emerged from our analysis of the cultural contribution of Nick Cave as another cultural *religious spirit* that theology must engage with in the consensus space. Much of Cave's work from the early eighties through to the end of last century is characterised by the uniting of the idea of the divine with the carnal erotic passion of human existence in a poetic collage of sex and ecstasy. Cave describes the divine as irrational imagination and the erotic as both the divine driver of love and the human quest for ecstasy. His demand that the true love song contains the elements of sorrow, sadness and death, plus his concentration on the violent in human experience, has drawn the observation that his understanding of erotic ecstasy is cthonian in nature rather than transcendent. There is a tension in Cave's work created by the irony that ecstasy, which is normally a drive to *transcend* or stand outside of the subject-object structure of relationality, is here derived from the determination to face and *penetrate* the ambiguity of the subject-object structure of relational existence.

Cave's poetic situation of the divine *in* the erotic is a cthonian movement to wrench the divine away from the transcendent and into the underworld of human identity. This cthonian element in Cave's work raises the question of whether the ecstatic element in his work, that element that seeks to transcend the mundane in imagination, is in fact best understood through the language of ecstasy. Cave's imagination drives him relentlessly into the roots of suffering human love, a movement that he claims transcends the mundane and the ordinary. The only term in theology that comes close to describing this state is ecstasy. Yet the meaning of ecstasy, as Tillich outlines it, is to "stand outside oneself". The value of the language of ecstasy is limited in the Australian context as it either evokes a sense of transcendence not generally articulated in Australian culture, or it has the potential to validate the jingoism of popular cultural efforts to divorce Australian colonial culture from its dark

and violent roots. It is possible that the language of *enstasy* best captures the erotic desire to break through the subject-object structure, particularly if that erotic desire is characterised by a cthonian delving, a ‘standing within’ which is relentless in its pursuit of the subconscious truth about our origins.

The word *enstasy* has been attributed various meanings in its historical use. Aristotle is amongst the earliest to use the term *enstasy* in his *Analytics* and *Rhetoric*. In that context the word *enstasis* is used to describe a form of objection to an enthymeme (an incomplete syllogism, incomplete because it is missing one premise). The meaning of the word as it is used by Aristotle evokes the image of the rhetorical opponent standing in opposition to a rhetorical argument by refuting the premise of the argument with a contrary premise.<sup>564</sup> J. Glen Friesen argues that the use of *enstasis* in the rhetorical sense has no relevance for its use in theology where it is primarily contrasted with ecstasy.<sup>565</sup> Yet the image of the rhetorician blocking the way of the opponent by objecting to the opponent’s premise retains the sense of ‘standing within oneself’ that is central to the meaning of the word. It is important to be aware of Aristotle’s use of the word in this context because the way in which he uses *enstasy* gives it the meaning of finding within one’s own reason the objection to error. Reason, in this case, has not reached its limit but is dependent on the courage of the one who stands in objection. In other words the *enstatic* objector stands or falls on her own reason. Whilst this is not a complete meaning for the word *enstasy* it provides an element of contrast with ecstasy as Paul Tillich defines it.

More recent uses of the word *enstasy* situate it firmly in the religious realm of yogic contemplation. Friesen acknowledges Mircea Eliade’s use of the term in the contemplative sense as that reflective state in which, without the support of the senses, the self becomes

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<sup>564</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* at (<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8rh/complete.html> viewed on 25/8/2011), Book II, 25, page 91.

<sup>565</sup> J. Glenn Friesen, “Enstasy, ecstasy and religious self-reflection: a history of Dooyeweerd’s ideas of pre-theoretical experience,” at (<http://www.members.shaw.ca/aevum/Enstasy.html>) viewed on 25/8/2011, 5.

aware only of pure being.<sup>566</sup> Friesen's paper is more concerned, however, with Herman Dooyeweerd's (1894-1977) use of *enstasy*. Dooyeweerd's use of *enstasy*, according to Friesen, has little relation to Eliade's contemplative use. For Dooyeweerd, *enstasy* is the naive awareness of the self as part of temporal reality and an entering into, or embrace of, the self as part of temporal reality. Dooyeweerd, according to Friesen, believes that for this naive embrace of the self as temporal there must also be a sense in which the self is supra-temporal.<sup>567</sup> Leaving aside Dooyeweerd's assertions about the supra-temporal element of human existence, the idea of *enstasy* as the self being naively aware of itself as belonging to temporal reality illuminates the meaning of the word as we are using it. This sense of the word adds meaning to Nick Cave's artistic embrace of ecstasy through the determined and cthonian embrace of temporal reality, that is, *enstasy*.

In this way of presenting the erotic aim of human life Cave depicts the divine as being encountered in an *enstatic* interaction between people and between people and their own story, as opposed to the idea that the divine breaks into the subject-object structure and lifts the individual out of that structure in a momentary transcendence of it. We discovered that Cave includes this longing of the human spirit for transcendence of the banality of the ordinary in his philosophy of the love song. Yet in actual fact the love song loses its power if it attempts to transcend the tragic elements of love in the real subject-object encounter.

Paul Tillich's analysis of ecstasy almost succeeds in meeting Cave's creative intuition of this question in his art forms in a conversational consensus. A brief analysis of Tillich's understanding of ecstasy will not only help us to articulate an *enstatic* theology in conversation with Cave, but will also illuminate the context within which we will attempt an answer to issues raised in conversation with Gaita's moral philosophy. For Tillich, the use of

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid, 4.  
<sup>567</sup> Ibid, 46.

the word ecstasy, or ecstatic, though deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition, is at great risk in theology today. The word, in his view, needs to be rescued from the distorted meanings that have rendered it almost unusable in theology.<sup>568</sup> There is some question about whether Tillich has succeeded in his quest to rescue the language of ecstasy for the Australian cultural context. In fact, it could be argued that what he actually describes is indeed *enstasy* rather than ecstasy, a situation that would suit the Australian context seen through the lens of Nick Cave's cthonian love songs.

Ecstasy, in Tillich's restoration of the meaning of the word, means that the human mind is grasped by an experience in which it "transcends its ordinary situation."<sup>569</sup> By its ordinary situation Tillich means the subject-object structure of the mind in its relation to the world. The key to understanding ecstasy, as opposed to demonic possession, is that ecstasy does not destroy or negate reason. Here, in order to convey the meaning of how one can experience this transcendence without negating reason Tillich uses an ontological metaphor. Without accepting anything irrational, reason goes beyond itself by its encounter with its own depth.

Ecstasy is the form in which that which concerns us unconditionally manifests itself within the whole of our psychological conditions. It appears through them but cannot be derived from them.<sup>570</sup>

The manifestation of that which concerns us unconditionally is described by Tillich as "the ontological shock". It is under the influence of this shock that reason is "thrown back upon itself" when the abysmal threat of non-being is grasped by the mind.<sup>571</sup> Importantly, ecstasy is only genuine ecstasy when it occurs within the dimensions of human reason. It requires the centred activity of all the dimensions of human reason in order to create the

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<sup>568</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol I, 124.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid, 125, 6.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid, 126.

conditions under which an ecstatic experience of reason reaching its limit and going out of itself may occur. As we have seen, however, Tillich is careful to observe that reason cannot derive the ecstatic from itself but is “grasped” by ecstasy when it reaches its own limit and encounters its abysmal depth. Reason encounters its depth and glimpses the unconditional, its ultimate concern. That is what Tillich meant by 'ecstatic reason'.

Restating the meaning of ecstasy in religious terms Tillich calls this glimpse of the unconditional the “Spiritual Presence”, which is manifest in the human spirit. Here he refers to the divine manifest under the conditions of existence. The “Spiritual Presence” is received as a “meaning bearing power that grasps the human spirit in an ecstatic experience.”<sup>572</sup>

Tillich distinguishes this ecstatic experience from “intoxication”, which is often confused with ecstasy and has led to the corruption of its meaning for theology. Intoxication, in Tillich’s thought, is an attempt to escape from the spiritual dimension of our own lives, that dimension that Tillich says holds our “...personal centredness and responsibility and cultural rationality.”<sup>573</sup> By contrast, genuine ecstasy engages the reality of our lives in its depth.

It is feasible to think that when Nick Cave expressed the human desire to escape from the mundane reality of existence he was describing the desire for intoxication, a state that Tillich describes as less than ecstatic. But Cave’s actual work does not achieve this state of intoxication. Cave’s drive for transcendence is most profoundly manifest in his cthonian embrace of the human story, an embrace that drives the human spirit towards itself and its own responsibility.

From the preceding discussion, it is arguable that in the Australian cultural context ecstasy, the human spirit grasped by the meaning giving awareness of its own abyss and ground, is best understood through the language or concept of enstasy. Tillich's

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<sup>572</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 3, 122.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid, 126.

understanding of ecstasy actually supports this line of thinking. He insists that ecstasy takes place within the intactness of the human spirit, when it is centred enough to be grasped by its own finitude, its own depth. This is essentially a description of *enstasy*, in a way that actually captures more adequately the cthonian standing within oneself that is so compelling in the work of Nick Cave. The dynamics of being grasped by the divine Spiritual Presence cannot be divorced then from the real encounters of the human spirit as the “multi-dimensional unity of life”. It may be possible to understand this grasping experience entirely in the language of *enstasy* and avoid altogether the confusion of ecstasy with an escape from reality or a form of intoxication.

By way of example we can refer to Tillich’s discussion about the phenomenon of the universalising religious movement towards transcendence of the particularity of the Christian tradition, which is essentially an example of movement towards ecstatic transcendence. He argues that one does not transcend particularity in religion by creating universal abstractions that are divorced from the religion in order to be universally applicable. On the contrary, one approaches the universal depth of religion only if one penetrates the depth of their *particular* religious tradition through devotion to its *particularity*. Through this devout entering into the depth of religion one is grasped by the ground of all religion.<sup>574</sup> Thus, using that example Tillich demonstrates for us that enstatic penetration is at least a prior requirement if not the more adequate replacement of the idea of ecstatic transcendence.

What then can we say has been brought into the consensus space between the cultural expression of Nick Cave and theology? How does the conversation create a shared consensus between the religious spirit evident in Cave’s cultural voice and the religious spirit of Christian theology? The consensus space is occupied by theology’s recognition that there is in Australian culture a post-colonial resistance to the supernaturalism that is inherent in the

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<sup>574</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the encounter of world religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963), 61, 62.

colonial dominance of modern Australian culture. Theology is invited by this religious spirit of resistance to external impositions into a conversation with culture that situates meaning in the spiritual dynamics of plumbing the ethnonian depths of Australian cultural and social life. Theology is challenged to discover spiritual meaning in Australian culture by *standing within* its carnal reality rather than by seeking its salvation through transcendent redemption. We shall return to this possibility later in the chapter.

### **Humanist – The transcendent in common humanity**

Raimond Gaita's idea of mystery as "that which is irreducible" is a crucial element of his philosophy that reveals for us something of the Australian cultural *religious spirit* and invites theology into the consensus space. So far conversations with Lin Onus and Nick Cave have suggested a religious spirit in Australian culture that is firmly committed to finding meaning in carnal human reality. Raimond Gaita's philosophy also situates meaning in the actual observable reality of how human beings impact one another in real, concrete, relational situations. This approach again raises the question of whether the situation of spiritual meaning in carnal reality is an element of the Australian cultural religious spirit that theology must engage with if it is to be contextual.

There can be no doubt that there would be objections to a 'carnal theology' on varied grounds including the criticism that it would reduce theology to science, anthropology, metaphysics, ethics or psychology. If there is no transcendence of the human situation, no breaking in of a saving God from an outside place how can we face the questions of sin and suffering with any hope? How could we lay claim to the salvation of a God who is found within our corporeal interactions in the world? The problem of sin and moral corruptibility prevents many Christians from entertaining the ideas at the heart of a carnal theology.

It is necessary here to recollect the primary points of contrast between Raimond Gaita's philosophy of good and evil and the theological voices we brought into conversation with that philosophy in Chapter Five. The consensus space between theology and Gaita must pay due attention to the idea that *good and evil* as an absolute conception is the basis on which the revelation that human beings are an irreducible mystery is formed. The importance of this idea lies in its capacity to reveal something of the cultural religious spirit in Australian moral philosophy.

Gaita's philosophy contrasts with the Christian idea that revelation is always correlated with the final and complete victory of good over evil. Gaita insists that human beings are revealed as their truest, irreducible selves in the midst of the tragic aspects of existence. Idealism, utopianism, transcendent symbols of salvation and even ontology are critiqued by Gaita's position on this. Such transcendent ideas are rejected in favour of a mysterious revelation of what it means to be a human being in the midst of tragedy and limitedness. Humans are indelibly precious and irreducible and revealed to be so by the love and remorse of other human beings in relation to them.

The understanding of mystery as that which is irreducible emerges from our analysis of Gaita's philosophical contributions to Australian culture as another representation of the cultural religious spirit for theology to address in the consensus space. I contend that this idea of mystery, applied to the idea of a carnal theology, offers such a theology a means of avoiding reductionism. For if theology is to reject supernaturalism it must do so without emptying itself of the religious spirit, otherwise it cannot be distinguished from science, anthropology, metaphysics, ethics or psychology without reducing as reductions of the religious spirit to the carnal and the finite.

How can theology approach the idea of mystery as that which is irreducible when it is revealed in the way human beings move one another with love and remorse? When we are

moved with a sense of wonder, to use Gaita's chosen language, the sense that human beings are mysterious, irreducible, is revealed to us. This means that when we see the other in light of someone's love or remorse we discover for ourselves that they cannot be wholly defined by whatever category we may be tempted reduce them to. The human person is not able to be reduced a set of values based on teleological aims or ideals. The human person is not able to be reduced to a cause or an effect. The human person is not able to be viewed as valuable or meaningful on the basis of her physical functionality, usefulness, possession of the virtues, possession of the faculties of reason technical or otherwise, possession of ideals or her capacity to contribute to society or the greater good. The human person is revealed to be indelibly precious and irreplaceable because someone loves her or is moved to sober remorse on the basis of wrong done to her. What is revealed here is the mystery of life and in this case the mystery of human life. For that which is reducible is dead. Life, then, is indelibly precious and good and evil reveal the dynamic nature of life.

Is the mystery of irreducibility sufficient language to define, in the consensus space, what theologians mean when they use the symbolic language of the divine? Clearly the consensus must not be uncritical. It is the task of the conversation to discern the elements of the cultural expression that can be said to ground theology more adequately in its context and historical situation. Theology is not going to give up the symbolism of God to accommodate Gaita's secular philosophy. It may, however, accept the critique inherent in Gaita's philosophy, adjust its self-understanding and develop those elements of itself that contain the most potential for an ongoing consensus with Gaita's philosophy.

Can we conclude that mystery as irreducibility adequately replaces the supernaturalism of traditional Christian theology whilst avoiding the trap of reducing faith to a moral imperative? If theology takes Paul Tillich's understanding of faith as 'ultimate concern', which is a compelling development of Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute

dependence', and rereads it in light of Gaita's 'mystery as irreducibility' it may arrive at a consensus that is a further development of the theological quest for reunification that was stated by Schleiermacher and restated by Tillich. The 'ultimate' of Tillich's ultimate concern is the eternal, being itself. It is both related to existence and divorced from existence. The eternal is perceived in the temporal but never reducible to the temporal. The eternal is perceived in existence but is not reducible to any part of existence. It is its irreducibility that classifies the eternal as eternal, the absolute as absolute. Tillich's concept of faith as *concern* develops Schleiermacher's concept of *feeling* and rescues it from the reduction of faith to the personal and private sphere of human consciousness. Gaita's language of irreducibility and his equating of irreducibility with mystery, coupled with his determined denial that mystery could be equated with an objective reality that is somehow prior to, or given to, the natural world, encapsulates Schleiermacher's assertion that nothing given as an object against which the human self-consciousness of freedom would necessarily be exercised could be absolute or, to use Tillich's language, ultimate.<sup>575</sup>

Thus, it could be said that Gaita's philosophy is a potential route for the development of Tillich's theology of faith as ultimate concern. What Gaita calls mystery Tillich calls the eternal and both words are symbols of what we perceive as irreducible to anything in particular in existence. In this we encounter the eternal or mystery as something from which we are disconnected or divorced. We are moved by something in each other that is essentially beyond our grasp. Yet we *are* moved by it and this confronts us with the reality of our relationship, our connectedness to the eternal, the irreducible.

What is it about each other that moves us to a sense of the mystery of our irreducibility? It is not merely a feeling induced by the unknowable or the unattainable. It is

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<sup>575</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2011 edition), 12-18. Originally published in 1821.

the experience of being grasped by the way love and remorse reveal the irreducible preciousness of human being even in the most challenging circumstances where many of the characteristics of meaning and value seem to be absent. It is the determined movement of carnal life towards integration and away from disintegration that awakens the wonder in us when we encounter this movement in one another. Is there a basis of consensus between this view of human being and the theological analysis of the depth of human experience in theology? To explore this question further we will consider in more detail the ideas of Schleiermacher and Tillich.

Schleiermacher's description of piety as the "feeling of absolute dependence" left him open to the criticism that he had made piety, or faith, into a purely psychological phenomenon.<sup>576</sup> Schleiermacher distinguished between two elements of self-consciousness that coexist in the self-conscious self. The one is the "self-caused" element that expresses "the existence of the subject for itself", and the other is the "non-self-caused" element that expresses the "co-existence" of the subject with "an Other". The primary element of these two is the non-self-caused for there is, according to Schleiermacher, no part of the human life that is not dependent on something external to the self for its presence.<sup>577</sup> The non-self-caused consciousness is the consciousness of receptivity or dependence, as opposed to the self-caused consciousness of activity or freedom. In Schleiermacher's thought there can be no such thing as the feeling of absolute freedom, for any self-caused activity must at least have an object that is non-self-caused and thus an object of the consciousness of receptivity. The same is not said for the possibility of a feeling of absolute dependence. Such a feeling is entirely possible though always in relation with a relative feeling of freedom. For out of our activity arises the understanding that our entire self, including our feeling of freedom is

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<sup>576</sup> Tillich, *A history of Christian thought*, 392.

<sup>577</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 13.

dependent on that which is given to us, outside of us and that state of self-consciousness is described by Schleiermacher as the feeling of absolute dependence.<sup>578</sup>

Schleiermacher equates the feeling of absolute dependence with the state of piety, which he says is God consciousness. God consciousness is the question at the heart of dependence. It is the question of whence came that which is given to us. It is not a question to be answered scientifically, it is a question that forms our sense of being related to the whole and to the *whence* of the whole.<sup>579</sup>

Tillich, whilst critical of Schleiermacher's terminology, argues that Schleiermacher remains of central importance for theology if it is ever going to reconcile the modern mind with faith. For Tillich, the key element in Schleiermacher that his critics undervalued but which is very helpful for our present conversation, was the element of the absolute. It is true, Tillich argues, that the language of feeling leaves Schleiermacher open to the critique of those neo-orthodox theologians who saw the danger of the reduction of faith to psychology. It is also true, however, that Schleiermacher's critics have failed to take account of the key element of the absolute that determines the nature of Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence as irreducible to psychology. The feeling of absolute dependence is the impact of the universe on the self-consciousness of the human person. This impact transcends the subject-object relationship and grasps the person in the depths of her being with a question, *whence?*<sup>580</sup>

Determined to rescue Schleiermacher from his critics Tillich reforms his theology with language more suited to the demand that faith transcend the subjective self-conscious. Tillich develops his language of faith as ultimate concern and the impact of the universe on the individual becomes undeniably the question that transcends subject and object and grasps

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid, 16, 17.

<sup>580</sup> Tillich, *A history of Christian thought*, 392.

the whole being of the person with a concern that defines and shapes every aspect of their existence.

My contention is that Raimond Gaita's philosophy creates a way for a carnal and non-supernatural theology to adopt Schleiermacher and Tillich's view of faith and piety, whilst offering an even more concrete piety outside of mere feeling as psychology and more corporeally concrete than even Tillich's grounding of ultimate concern in the analysis of depth in existence. Gaita situates mystery, the impact of the irreducible, in the capacity for human beings to move one another. Thus, we are grasped by mystery when we are moved by one another. The *ultimate*, or the *irreducible*, becomes specifically dependent on these *relational* experiences, in Gaita's thought.

The holding together of Schleiermacher, Tillich and Gaita in the consensus space makes possible a synthesis that transforms Schleiermacher's idea of feeling by giving it the specific content of Gaita's idea that we are moved by one another as human beings. Here a carnal theology parts company with the evolutionary Christology that emerges out of the modern understanding of Jesus as the 'second Adam' or God's prototype of perfect humanity towards which the evolution of the human being is directed.

A carnal theology, using Gaita's understanding of the power of humans to move one another in the midst of the reality of good and evil, would situate 'true humanity' not in an evolutionary ideal but in a courageous embrace of the present human situation. By describing the human situation as communal, in that humanity is discovered in the way human beings move one another and reveal in one another the irreducibility of mystery, consensus with Gaita would allow a carnal theology to attempt the task of reunification of theology with post enlightenment culture whilst avoiding both the traps of subjective individualism and the teleological values of modernist evolutionary theology.

In attempting to ground the piety of Schleiermacher and the ultimate concern of Tillich in the relational humanism of Gaita a carnal theology would draw close to the spirit of St Irenaeus' declaration about the correlation of God and human life. Irenaeus wrote that, *the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.*<sup>581</sup> Irenaeus understands this to be apparent both in the existence of life, in other words through creation, and through the demonstration of human life in the final revelation of Jesus as the Christ. What is crucial for Irenaeus is that there is no discontinuity between God evident in creation (or the feeling of absolute dependence to use Schleiermacher's term) and God evident in the human life of Jesus. Jesus is the ongoing fulfilment of creation that was begun in the first Adam. It is crucial for us to emphasise that there is no discontinuity in this creative process. The first Adam's creation was limited by the reality of sin but the creative process continued to unfold in the advent of the Word, in Jesus as the Christ. The creation process continues in us as we participate in the humanity of the Christ. Thus our carnal humanity may be precisely that which reveals the living God as irreducible mystery. Tillich calls this transcendent humanism.<sup>582</sup>

How is this different from the evolutionary teleology we have criticised before? It is precisely that Jesus' humanity is not a superior model to all humanity but that Jesus' humanity proved to be the final revelation of what our humanity already essentially is that marks this as a compelling theology for a culture (Australia) seeking meaning in its own carnal reality. By "final" we don't mean 'last' but 'complete'. We discover in Christ not what we could be, according to evolutionary teleology, but what we already essentially are as revealed by Jesus' love for those around him. Human beings are revealed to be indelibly and

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<sup>581</sup> St Irenaeus, *Irenaeus against heresies*, 4.20.7 <http://carm.org/irenaeus-heresies4-1-20> Accessed on 15-01-13.

<sup>582</sup> Tillich, *A History of Christian thought*, 45.

mysteriously precious by the love of the human Jesus for all humanity in the midst of good and evil.

The cultural religious spirit revealed in the conversation with Gaita's philosophy is a religious spirit with no place for the supernatural. It is also a religious spirit that can clearly see the irreducibility of human life characterized by good and evil. As such it is a religious spirit that challenges religion itself to consider that, in Australia at least, spiritual meaning is found in the carnal reality of living. We now turn to evaluate the theological possibilities of these findings.

### **Theology in the consensus space**

When theology is brought to the consensus space in conversation with these voices of the Australian cultural religious spirit it is confronted with a choice of responses. Firstly, theology may choose to refuse or negate the cultural religious spirit. Refusal or negation is a common Christian response that places Christ against culture. It is a position that speaks back to the culture with an emphatic response: "In this case, we know about God and you don't!" Placing Christ against culture in this way may be required under certain historical circumstances such as the extreme situation of the church in Nazi Germany. Even in those circumstances, however, it became clear that the church and its understanding of Christ was not entirely independent of the culture. The task of conversation with culture therefore cannot proceed on the basis of Christ in absolute opposition to all cultural voices. In reality theology is enmeshed in culture and ought to acknowledge when Christ appears in the broader culture.

A second response of theology to the cultural religious spirit in the consensus space could be that of outright concession. This response would effectively require theology to say to culture, "In this case you know about God and we don't!" Whilst it is hard to imagine a

theological stance that would allow a concession as complete as this, there is the potential for a considerable attitude of concession, particularly in theologies that explore the potential for inter-faith dialogue to lead beyond the particularity of a given religion to a universal religious concept in a kind of universalising self-negation. Paul Tillich asserted that religions will only be lasting if and when they have the capacity for self-negation. It is through the Protestant capacity for self-negation that a religion will “break through its own particularity”.<sup>583</sup> In Tillich’s view, however, the self-negation of religion is never achieved by abandoning the particularity of a given religion but by “penetrating into the depth of one’s own religion, in devotion, thought and action”.<sup>584</sup> This argument suggests that in the depth of every religion there is the point at which its particularity is no longer relevant as it breaks through into “spiritual freedom”. Here it can perceive humanity’s ultimate meaning in expressions of life through other religions and in non-religious elements of humanity’s existence. Concessionary responses to the religious spirit in culture by Christian theology are therefore never complete in their concession if theology seeks to retain the particularity of its own religious tradition.

Neither negation nor concession are adequate responses to culture in and of themselves. If neither can be constructively brought to the consensus space how should theology proceed? A number of possibilities present themselves. Firstly, theology might proceed on the basis of an ethical discussion. The question of how the religious spirit in culture might help to shape Australia’s cultural and theological approach to ethics in the current global situation would be a significant field of conversational engagement between theology and culture. It is a question that arises from this thesis and yet reaches beyond the scope of this thesis. Important research into the ethical implications of conversation between theology and culture will be an important next step to the work undertaken in this thesis.

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<sup>583</sup> Tillich, *Christianity and the encounter of world religions*, 61.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

Secondly, the question of how the cultural religious spirit might contribute to an Australian sense of spirituality could be an important basis for consensus in the conversation. In Chapter One we briefly referred to the assertion made by Rachael Kohn that developments of the religious spirit outside the traditional religions in elements of culture represent the considerable development of Australian spirituality. The experiences of Australians in their cultural context could be recognised by theology as positive reformations of the Western Christian tradition. The question of the spirituality of experience is another question that reaches beyond the scope of this thesis. It is, however, a question that is posed by this thesis and further research into the question should be undertaken on the basis of this thesis.

Thirdly, the question of whether theology can be formed in the consensus space with culture, without recourse to either absolute negation of the religious spirit in culture or absolute concession to the religious spirit in culture, is the question of whether theology can learn to shape its speech about God *with* culture. This question is the key focus of this thesis. By taking the evidence of the religious spirit in culture that exists apart from and beyond the reach of established religions as valid and authoritative source material for the formation of contextual theology, theology may well develop ways of speaking about God that truly reflect the Australian cultural context. In the final section of this chapter we will outline what this final option for the consensus space may look like in conversation with the three cultural expressions at the heart of this thesis.

### **Australian Theology as Carnal Theology: From Incarnation to Carnality**

The common theme running throughout the analysis of the three cultural sources examined in this essay it is that the spiritual element in human experience can only be encountered through bodily participation in the reality of life here and now. While each

cultural expression is profoundly aware of the spiritual, the supernatural awareness that is common to theology is challenged by a unanimous affirmation of the carnal. In this particular set of conversations, therefore, there is a determined and consistent message from Australian culture that any conversation about God will be approached from the cultural perspective of non-supernaturalism. This poses a crucial question for theology as it seeks consensus with the cultural voices.

The central theological question that arises out of the synthesis of cultural voices addressed in this essay is the question of how Christian theology engages the possibility of the divine revealed to human beings as non-supernatural carnality. Is orthodox theology, and particularly Christology, adequate for the reaching of a consensus with Australian culture or will a fresh approach, perhaps from the perspective of Creation theology, need to play a lead role in order for Christian thinking about God to contemplate the profound cultural shift away from supernaturalism? The answer to this question depends largely on how the idea of *incarnation* as it is applied to Christ in orthodox Christian theology is interpreted.

The religious idea of incarnation, which is most certainly not unique to Christianity, has, according to Maurice Wiles, been broadly interpreted in two ways by Christian theologians. One approach relates incarnational thinking to Creation theology by defining incarnational faith as faith that approaches God, and receives God's approach (revelation) through the physical rather than the transcendence of the physical.<sup>585</sup> This interpretation has significant importance for our attempt to reach a consensus with Australian cultural voices. The second interpretation, and the one that is most prevalent in the Christian Churches, is narrower in focus and outlines "a faith whose central tenet affirms the incarnation of God in the particular individual Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>586</sup> This second and dominant understanding of

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<sup>585</sup> Maurice Wiles, "Christianity without incarnation?" in (ed) John Hick, *The myth of God incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 1.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

incarnation relies on a transcendent and supernatural understanding of the divine. The Christian doctrine of incarnation so understood teaches that God, whilst remaining God, has been revealed to human beings by *becoming* a human being.<sup>587</sup> The key word here is *becoming*, which implies that the divine is of a fundamentally different nature to human reality into which it becomes incarnate. In Christian theology these dual natures are described as spirit and flesh (*pneuma* and *sarx*) that are frequently seen as being opposed to each other particularly in the Pauline letters where Paul aligns physical religious signs of human self-confidence in keeping religious law, such as circumcision, with flesh and aligns the freedom of grace and faith with spirit.<sup>588</sup> In the same way Paul's use of body (*soma*) implies that the physical body is the mediator between the human person and their environment.<sup>589</sup> Implied in this understanding of the body is the idea of an interactive relationship between a number of elements of a human person (body, mind, soul, spirit). Nevertheless, it is clearly apparent in the Pauline texts that the idea of flesh verses spirit, though it has been understood as such, need not be taken as a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, but rather as the conflict between two kinds of 'law' that have influence in the human life, the one being the law of ethnic and religious identity and the other being the law of grace, faith and freedom. The idea that the Christian possesses a body that must be subject to spirit, including the will, remains prevalent in the New Testament however (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

The idea that the human self, understood as spirit, 'has' a body through which it mediates its experience of its environment, a mechanistic idea that is unavoidable in Pauline theology but not necessarily in the broader biblical world-view, has been refuted by feminist and environmental theology. That aspect of human self-understanding that is called spirit or

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<sup>587</sup> Brian Hebblethwaite, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed) Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), 289-291.

<sup>588</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1998), 69. Dunn provides a full discussion that highlights the ambiguity of Paul's use of *sarx*. Dunn concludes that for Paul *sarx* was primarily to do with his own people's over-reliance on their ethnic identity.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

soul is now acknowledged to be inseparable from organic and physical body rather than distinct from it. Inherent in this is the refutation of the idea of the immortality of the soul.<sup>590</sup> We can no longer say with any credibility that we *have* bodies. On the basis of our scientific self-knowledge we must now say that we *are* bodies.<sup>591</sup>

This acknowledgement on the basis of the Christian understanding of creation ex nihilo (the idea that there was nothing before the physical world) and modern science leads us to the question of the relationship of the divine to the physical world. This is of course not a new question. The early church wrestled with precisely this question and its consensus is found in the great statement of Chalcedon, which refers to the nature of Christ as, “truly God and truly man, of a reasonable rational soul and body; consubstantial (coessential) with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood”. The difficulty the modern mind has with Chalcedon is that it is based largely on a world view shaped by metaphysical categories that no longer have any meaning in the modern understandings of nature and spirit. As Frances Young has stated in relation to this situation, “When the science becomes out dated, the myth (that has based itself on the science) is endangered.”<sup>592</sup> The loss of the meaning of some central Patristic sources for the Christology of Chalcedon leads to the current question that we have discerned in Australian cultural expressions. If spirit is body how can we say that the Spirit of God, logos, *becomes* flesh? Can the Word be the Word without physical body? Can we differentiate between the divine and the body, the spiritual and the carnal?

Frances Young writes that the early Christians faced two primary questions in the development of their Christology. Firstly, how is Jesus related to the one and only God?

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<sup>590</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 209. Tillich consistently argues against the immortality of the soul on the basis of creation ex nihilo.

<sup>591</sup> Sally McFague, *The Body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 13-22.

<sup>592</sup> Frances Young, “A Cloud of Witnesses: the development of Patristic Christology” in (ed) John Hick, *The myth of God incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 36.

Secondly, how is God related to the world?<sup>593</sup> The answers to these two questions were based largely on three sources: the Jewish answer to the second question, in which monotheism related God to the world through the symbol of wisdom; the New Testament witness to logos made flesh; and, underlying both of the above, a platonic understanding of the nature of God as beyond existence and indivisible. At the heart of Patristic Christology then was the philosophical problem of relating the Platonic idea of God to the real physical world. What appeared in Chalcedon was a paradoxical conundrum of truly courageous proportions.<sup>594</sup> It is clear that modern science and philosophy have made Chalcedon even less available to the grasp of human reason and indeed faith. Our conversation with Australian cultural expressions has made it clear that Australian culture no longer understands, nor is it particularly interested in, the Patristic solution in Chalcedon. The question of a God that is completely separate from existence has become anachronistic and has been replaced with the question of the spiritual dimension of the physically existing world. Therefore, the Christological question may need to give precedence to the question of creation theology; it is reformed into a question of how Jesus reveals God as ground of being fundamentally related to the carnal world. What must remain in an attempt to move from incarnational theology to carnal theology is the understanding of the divine logos, being itself, revealed through the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth. The move from incarnational language to carnal language is only necessary when incarnation is taken in the narrow sense that Jesus is the incarnation of a divine disembodied logos.

From the current Australian cultural perspective, without body there is no spirit; thus, without the physical world there is no divine, no being itself. For theology to speak about God with meaning in the Australian context, therefore, it must re-evaluate how it interprets its

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

key incarnational texts. When theology reads and speaks about the traditional incarnational texts in conversation with Australian cultural expressions, it will be challenged to think about incarnation in terms of the implicit communicable presence of divine life in carnal reality, as opposed to the arrival of an external divine life that enters into carnal reality from the outside.

For example, when we speak, with the gospel of John, of Jesus as the *logos* made flesh it would be more helpful to speak not of a supernatural disembodied spirit that has become embodied, but rather of an historical carnal body in whom the eternal victory of being over non-being is revealed. In this concrete life all other carnal bodies may recognise and be grasped by the eternal affirmation of corporeal in all its diversity and possibilities. In other words, the eternal relevance of Jesus' life and his death is his carnal humanity and what it reveals rather than the unintelligible and culturally irrelevant idea that Jesus is somehow 'fully' human whilst 'fully' embodying an external divine reality.

This understanding of Jesus as the carnal revelation of the eternal victory of being over non-being must be seen as a natural event with eternal revelatory significance. To understand Christology in this way removes the colonising element from incarnational theology. In the Australian cultural context the language of the corporeal will convey the shift in emphasis away from colonial images of the Christ who is inserted into the world from a foreign place. It is precisely this understanding of God inserted into human experience through Christ that is resisted in Australian culture. An Australian theology will emphasise revelation as that which emerges from the dynamics of a corporeal spirituality within carnal human reality rather than revelation as a supernatural event breaking into human carnality from the outside.

If this shift in incarnational thinking is possible we will stand in the tradition of unification that was most markedly attempted for theology by Friedrich Schleiermacher and

has been re-attempted most notably by Paul Tillich.<sup>595</sup> The unification tradition is the attempt, in reaction against the Enlightenment, to articulate an understanding of the infinite as a naturally occurring aim or concern of the finite. Tillich is careful to point out in his analysis of the tradition within which he himself stands that this great attempt may not be reduced to pantheism, which understands God as the sum of all finite things, but must be seen as the mutual indwelling of the finite and the infinite. "[I]t means that the power of the divine is present in everything, that he is the ground and unity of everything."<sup>596</sup> The same idea is found in the creation theology of Jurgen Moltmann who, in agreement with Tillich, understands the idea of unification as a fundamentally Trinitarian perichoresis that includes creation (Jn 10:30 "I and the Father are one").<sup>597</sup>

Both Tillich and Moltmann are often described as holding the view of panentheism, the idea that God dwells in all created things. It has been suggested by Chris Carroll Smith that the panentheism of Tillich is significantly different to that of Moltmann. Smith describes Tillich's panentheism as relying on the concept of God as ground of being, a concept that makes the divine entirely transcendent in his view. Smith argues that because Tillich differentiates so completely between divine essence and temporal existence, and therefore cannot describe the divine as a personal being, his panentheism is reliant on the transcendence of the divine as the ground of all being. On the other hand, Smith suggests that Moltmann's panentheism is based on the idea of perichoresis and is closer to an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. In Moltmann's panentheism, according to Smith, a personal God has created space for existence whilst remaining in relationship with it.<sup>598</sup> Smith distinguishes between Moltmann and Tillich, however, in a way that fails to take account of

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<sup>595</sup> Paul Tillich, *A history of Christian thought*, 386-410.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid*, 391.

<sup>597</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *God in creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 16, 17.

<sup>598</sup> Chris Carroll Smith, *The two (very different) pantheisms of Tillich and Moltmann*, (<http://chriscarrollsmith.blogspot.com.au/2008/01/>). Accessed on 29/11/2012.

Tillich's method of correlation that relies not only on the existential separation of existence from its ground but on the essential unity of existence with its ground. Thus, whilst Tillich does not speak of the divine as *a being* or in terms of being *a person*, he does speak of the essential unity of personhood in existence with the divine ground of personhood. In other words, God is not *a person*, God is personhood. For Tillich therefore, panentheism is rooted in the essential unity of existence with its ground. Thus, in the method of correlation Christian Trinitarian symbolism plays as much a part as it does in Moltmann's creation theology. Moltmann describes perichoresis using personal Trinitarian symbolism and Tillich describes perichoresis using the language of depth and correlation. For this reason we can see in Tillich's method the Trinitarian structure of existence. The question of being is correlated with the theology of God, the question of existence is correlated with the Christ and the question of life is correlated with Spirit.<sup>599</sup> Whilst Tillich and Moltmann use different symbolic language to describe the presence of the eternal within existence, both affirm the essential unity and the existential separation from the eternal dimension that defines panentheism.

In seeking to emphasise carnality over *incarnation*, we are hoping to state clearly that for Australian theology perichoresis is not merely inclusive of carnality but is the creative ground of corporeal life and the ultimate question and aim of corporeal life. When we speak of God we mean, with Tillich, being itself, affirmed and evident in individual, collective, human, animal and ecological body as both existentially separate from but essentially united with the carnal world. All references to the divine and the eternal in contrast to the finite and the temporal are to be taken as symbols of what is made known to us through our interaction in and with the natural world. This stands in stark contrast to the idea of embodied immortal spirit.

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<sup>599</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1, 69.

The preceding argument leads us to affirm that we must think symbolically of God as *carnal perichoresis*; that is, that the eternal ground of all being only discernible as body. Therefore, any language that differentiates between the natural world and that which it reveals is symbolic. For symbols to be alive they must symbolize the real concerns of the context in which they exist. An Australian theology that is responsive to the conversation with its own cultural context will therefore need to emphasise the symbols of roots rather than horizons, spirit as integration rather than spirit calling forth transcendence. This emphasis is about the nature of being rather than the transcendence of the nature of being. The concept of ecstasy that emerged from the analysis of Nick Cave's creative work must be replaced with the concept of enstacy, as opposed to the ecstatic image of "standing outside oneself". Tillich's idea that transcendence can only be achieved by immersing oneself in the situation comes close to articulating these ideas.<sup>600</sup>

Theology that emphasises digging deeper into what it means to be bodily human as opposed to ascertaining what it means to transcend our humanity may be called cthonian theology. A cthonian theology will share in the demand of the elements of Australian culture that delve deeply into the roots of the current cultural situation, which will mean confronting the demons of its own colonial violence and learning how to transform a history of violence, through acknowledgement, into a future story of creative force for life. The quest for revelation, in the Australian context, will be a cthonian delving into and underneath our cultural life, the body of which incorporates religious concern, collective and individual psyche, participation in the Australian ecological context and ownership of the historical situation. This delving will seek to discover the root of human desire for undifferentiated 'peace' and to transform that desire in order to affirm the eternal diversity, chaos and creative potential of life.

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<sup>600</sup> Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the encounter of world religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963), 61, 62.

All through the preceding argument we have been aware of the possible objection that the kind of theology here proposed would be nothing more than a restatement of Carl Jung's thought in situating the soul in psychology.<sup>601</sup> The idea of a theology like a cthonian theology, however, whilst embracing the contributions of psychology, cannot stop at psychology and claim to be a theology. In this case, the Australian collective cultural expression points to a mystery unexplained by psychology. Theology, in order to be theology and hold on to its commitment to carnal reality, may draw on Raimond Gaita's understanding of mystery as that which is irreducible. Carnal realities, human beings, can reveal that which is inherently irreducible and precious through their interactions with one another and their natural environment. This revelation is far more than psychology. It is the infinitely diverse reality of the living religious spirit embodied within (Australian) culture and life.

Our conversation with Australian cultural elements has expressed the idea of unification for our particular time and historical and cultural context. The preceding analysis of three distinctly Australian cultural expressions leads us to the conclusion that Australian theology can stand in the tradition of unification if it is correlated with the cultural voices that resist colonialism, recognise the spiritual dynamic of carnality, and situate revelation in the encounter of a common human and with the physical world. While the key element of this possibility of reunification idea comes from Raimond Gaita's understanding of mystery as "that which is irreducible", the elements of postcolonial identity construction found in the work of Lin Onus and the elements of cthonian consciousness and erotic ecstasy found in the work of Nick Cave are further essential contributions to the shaping of a carnal theology emerging out of the consensus, reached through theology's conversation with culture.

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<sup>601</sup> Rachael Kohn, *The new believers: re-imagining God* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003), 122-126. Kohn offers a brief summary of Jung's claim for the soul in psychology.

The contention of this chapter, then, is that any theology arising from the consensus space created in the conversation between theology and the three cultural expressions in this essay will emphasise carnality as the basis for a more appropriate and non-supernaturalistic understanding of incarnational theology. The understanding of life-giving diversity expressed through the Bower Bird embrace of hybridity and kenotic humility that emerged from our conversation with Lin Onus articulated the cultural demand that evolution, as it is applied to culture and theology, be understood as adaptability reliant on diversification rather than a teleological goal. This perspective was our first hint that the Australian culture is resisting idealism.

The erotically charged drive to transcend the mundane that emerged in the consensus space created in the conversation with Nick Cave delivered us with the delicious irony that transcendence is actually the symbolic language for a deep enstatic self-discovery of our humanity rooted in the subject-object relationship. This perspective suggested the cultural demand for symbols of teleological or transcendent aims must be qualified by the reality of cthonian delving into the human situation. The Australian cultural perspective in this case is cthonian, ensuring that any theology emerging from this consensus making conversation will need to pay attention to the element of inward delving and ‘standing within oneself’ in the erotic drive for transcendence. The humanist embrace of the mystery of relational interaction through good and evil in the philosophy of Raimond Gaita articulated a cultural demand that the ultimate mystery be firmly situated in the carnal reality of human life and relationship.

These cultural voices provide Australian theology with an opportunity to reshape its language in a way that gives credibility to a culture that has taken the religious spirit beyond the boundaries of traditional religion and theology. When theology climbed over the back fence in conversation with its cultural neighbours it discovered cultural voices there that

challenge it to reach deeply into its own tradition in order to find within itself the elements that may have something to say to the corporeal religious spirit of Australian culture. The Australian cultural religious spirit, in its postcolonial context, is non-supernatural and corporeal. Australian theology is challenged by it to speak about God as the implicit spiritual ground of carnal reality. The spirit of Australians is rooted deeply in its own soil, its own history and desire for transcendence and its own capacity to be moved by relationships within the human situation. An Australian theology that is formed in conversation with the Australian cultural religious spirit will develop language and symbols that point to the presence of God in corporeal reality. It will be a carnal theology.

## Conclusion

In this thesis we have set out to identify and apply an effective methodology that will enable Australian contextual theologians to listen authentically to expressions of culture as bearers of the religious spirit and as such as crucial conversation partners in the process of learning to speak about God in the Australian context. The importance of the thesis is situated in its determination to articulate for theologians a workable method for conversational theology that takes the 'otherness' of cultural voices seriously and therefore allows them an authentic 'voice' in the conversation, whilst avoiding the error of appropriating cultural voices for predetermined theological purposes.

We began working towards the formation of a method for conversational theology by situating this new venture within the historical context of Australian theologies. Chapter one provided a survey of theology with a self-consciously Australian perspective. Using the metaphor of the Australian backyard, we explored the difference between theology that stays within the safe confines of the backyard fence and theology that climbs over the back fence to play with the neighbours. This metaphor helped us to distinguish between theologies that essentially seek to protect themselves from their context by either ignoring it, criticising it or appropriating it for their own theological ends and theologies that are prepared, at least in theory, to leave the confines of their own discipline in order to interact with those of a significantly different world view. Examples of theological perspectives that were seeking ways to climb over the back fence and engage with our cultural neighbours were found in the theology of Frank Rees and the postcolonial perspective of biblical scholar Mark Brett. On the basis of Rees' call to engage culture with a conversational theology the question of how theology would allow culture to speak with its own voice was asked. No clear method for contextual theologians in the Australian context to attempt to hear the voices of culture

clearly and allow those voices to speak with authority in a conversation had been articulated. Thus, it was determined that this thesis would seek to articulate such a method and apply it as a hypothesis to a number of Australian cultural voices in order to hear what we called the Australian religious spirit in culture.

The first task in determining how we might articulate a method to enable theology to listen for and hear the otherness of the voices of culture was to determine the theological basis for what is called conversational theology. Chapter Two focussed on this question by outlining the cultural theology of Paul Tillich, which formed the basis for Rees' suggestions of methodology for Australian theology. The reason we focused on Paul Tillich was that his method of correlation comes closest to the idea that culture and theology may have a question and answer relationship that sounds conversational. Yet correlation in Tillich's method implies that culture and theology are bound in a relationship where culture asks the questions and theology provides the answers. The very nature of correlative relationships suggests that those in relation are fixed in relation to each other. Any predetermined relationship between culture and theology was never going to be sufficient to describe a true conversation. This limit in Tillich's method was found to be the catalyst for a new development in contextual theology.

Frank Rees' critique of Tillich suggested that a true conversation would allow both conversation partners to be free to ask and answer the questions at hand. This suggestion provided the way forward in Chapter Three. If culture was going to be free to both ask questions and provide answers, however, how would theology apply itself to the task of hearing and taking seriously the questions and answers of cultural expressions in the Australian context? Rees' key suggestion was that theology must apply an attitude of humility to its part in the conversation and be prepared to take the culture seriously. The question of how to apply humility in a theological method in order to allow culture to speak

and shape the way Australians speak about faith and spirituality became the concluding focus of Chapter Three. Contrast-in-conversation, a method of cultural analysis that determines points of contrast between expressions of culture and received theology, was outlined as a hypothesis for the application of conversational theology to Australian cultural expressions that could conceivably open new ways for Australian contextual theology to speak about God.

The works of urban Aboriginal artist Lin Onus, post punk musician and author Nick Cave and immigrant moral philosopher Raimond Gaita were chosen as expressions of Australian culture that could provide substantially contrasting perspectives to those most common to theology. Chapters Four, Five and Six applied the contrast-in-conversation method to each of these cultural expressions respectively. Contrasts in perspective between the cultural voice and theology formed the basis of a conversation working towards consensus. Consensus in this case was defined as the agreement between culture and theology to continue in conversation together in the pursuit of further learning.

Reconstructing identity using a form of syncretising cultural hybridity was discovered to be the key cultural voice inherent in Onus' art. This cultural perspective was shown to be in contrast to the predominantly homogenising dominance of colonial Christianity. Consensus with Onus' artistic voice in Australian theology would lead to theological efforts to situate the eternal, or the divine, in the concreteness of place and in the courageous acceptance of the dynamics of hybridity in the divine.

Reaching beyond the mundane and the superficial with cthonian erotic delving into the real and the concrete was shown to be the key cultural voice inherent in Nick Cave's work. Using his song writing, performance style and literary writing Cave relentlessly drives below the superficial surface of things. He claims to be reaching for transcendence of the mundane, but in fact demonstrates that reaching beyond the mundane and superficial is

achieved by stripping cultural myths bare in pursuit of the ugly and violent truth. The pursuit of what is true about ourselves is the irrational and erotic drive of the human imagination set free. In this and only in this is any sense of divine power and spiritual meaning made apparent in the work of Nick Cave. This cultural perspective was shown to be in contrast with the long standing tradition in Christian theology of reaching beyond the ordinary and mundane reality by means of transcendence and rationality. Rather than a spiritual retreat from the earthy realities of sex, violence and unfettered and irrational imagination, Cave's work proposes that these realities of human existence constitute the spiritual reality about humanity and the means to breaking through mundane superficiality towards life. Consensus with Cave's cultural voice would lead theology to attempt to find ways to situate the divine in the irrational, the erotic and the enstatic, cthonian delving into the murky liminal realities of human life.

The reality of good and evil and the understanding of it as an absolute conception formed the central cultural idea that theology encountered in conversation with Raimond Gaita. Good and evil in their various forms were shown to reveal human beings to be of intrinsic moral value. When human beings interact with wondrous love or sober remorse they reveal one another to be irreducible. This human irreducibility is the meaning of the mystery at the heart of our common humanity. We discovered that, for Gaita, this irreducible mystery of our common humanity precedes any deductions about the basis of human value in relationship to a God. He effectively showed how Australian people could rationally conclude that before one can say that we are all equally precious human beings because God loves us it is necessary to have deduced that we are all equally precious because we are all human beings. Thus, the necessity for God was shown to be preceded, and therefore set aside, by the rational knowledge of common humanity. Human beings are found to be irreducible to any element of being or moral value and are therefore a mystery. Gaita's cultural voice was

shown to be in contrast to the received theological view that moral value is revealed in the human decision for love on the basis of God's love for the world. We concluded that consensus might be reached between theology and Gaita's philosophy if theology has the courage to seek the divine mystery in the irreducibility of Jesus' absolute humanity as opposed to seeking divinity in Jesus via the language of a dual divine-human nature.

These three voices that contrast with theology—syncretising hybridity, cthonian erotics and good and evil as an absolute moral conception—individually and together invite theology to consider that in the Australian context God, or the reality of irreducible mystery, must be spoken of in terms of being intrinsic to the nature of being, and that as such the divine is syncretic, liminal, irrational and thoroughly human.

In pursuit of an Australian theology that has the courage to speak about God in these terms the concluding chapter of the thesis revived the great task of reunification set for theology in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Schleiermacher. It did so by arguing for a rethinking of incarnational theology that places the emphasis on God as intrinsic to and inherent in the physical reality of the world. A view of God incarnate in a particular person betrays the belief that God is essentially a foreign insert into physical reality. Such an idea of incarnation in the Australian cultural context does not readily take into account the Australian commitment to bodily reality. In order to highlight the difference between incarnational theology and Australian cultural commitment to bodily reality we focused on a progression from incarnational theology to a broader focus on the mystery of carnal reality as the revelation of the divine. This was done as a means of acknowledging that in the Australian context God is found in the intrinsic nature of reality rather than in that which transcends reality.

The voices of these cultural expressions could just as easily have been brought into conversation with other theological traditions in order to reach a consensus space. The

potential field of conversation between culture and theology is not restricted to certain forms of culture or theology, but is open and dynamic.

The application of the contrast-in-conversation method has shown that when theology determines to pay sufficient attention to cultural voices that are in contrast to its own, it faces some very specific challenges but may also benefit greatly. The challenge for theology to speak into its context in language and symbols that actually address the issues and expressions of the culture itself has become apparent. Contrast-in-conversation methodology cannot represent the voices of culture with absolute accuracy. Its representation of cultural voices will always necessarily be precisely that, an interpretative representation. Nevertheless, when theology welcomes the voice of the contrasting other rather than merely seeking to appropriate elements of culture to illuminate its own traditional voice, it draws much nearer to a real conversation and valuable insights may be the outcome.

This thesis concludes that contrast-in-conversation method is an effective intentional step in the ongoing attempt to listen for and hear the real voices of the culture within which theology is situated. The potential for encounters between theology and culture on the basis of contrasting voices is seemingly boundless. Various theologies may come into contrasting conversations with various cultures and the conversations that may result will be rich with meaning for Australian cultural life.

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