Towards a Contemporary Australian Retrieval of Sacral Imagination and Sacramentality

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Abstract: A theologian of Ghana argues that the West is declining in adherence to Christian Faith because its cultural meanings which are constitutive of the human and the cosmos tend to suppress human sacral imagination and the sacramentality of the cosmos. This author wagers that the Ghanaian's position is correct and goes on to explore how this suppression of sacral imagination has taken place through the cultural changes in the West from pre-modernity to modernity and up to the present. Against the argument behind these cultural changes the author seeks to establish the validity of sacral imagination and sacramentality through a critical appropriation of the human subject as incarnate spirit and symbolic animal. A contemporary Australian spirituality might thus retrieve a capacity for sacral imagination adequate to the mystery carried in this land and to the redemptive hope needed in Australian society.

A GHANAIAN THEOLOGIAN, KWAME BEDIAKO, contrasts the marked decline of Christian faith in countries of modern European culture with its growth in "the South", particularly in Africa. Bediako ascribes the difference to the aliveness of a primal and sacral imagination in African culture compared with its repression in modern European culture.[1] J. H. Newman, in *The Grammar of Assent,* lends support for this view, insisting that imagination is a necessary dimension of faith. The reason: faith must be a matter of heart, and only imagination touches the heart.[2]

For Bediako, the African world view may be summed up under five headings: a human kinship or communion within nature; a sense of creaturehood before the Sacred; a conviction of a transcendent spiritual world "behind" the everyday world; belief that one can enter into a relationship with the beings of the spiritual world; and belief that there is a communion of affection between the living and their ancestors, now in the after-life. Together, the points of this worldview, says Bediako, sustain a sense that the cosmos is sacramental and that there is no

1. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: the Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (New York: Orbis, 1995) viii-xiii, 96 and 104.
2. J. H. Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 86-92.

separation between the material and the spiritual.[3] Such a centrality of the sacramental, he says, has been necessary for Christian faith down the centuries.[4] If Bediako's judgement is correct, a revitalisation of spirituality within Western countries will require recovery of sacral imagination and sacramentality.

Australia, too, is experiencing the marked decline in Christian adherence among the mainstream Euro-Australian population. Australians are regularly confronted by the cultural contrast between the modern secular mainstream and the people of the Dreaming who cling to what remains of their primal and sacral culture. Indeed in studies of traditional aboriginal peoples, the Australians are regarded as having been notable for devotion to their ceremonies.[5] These ceremonies are unsurpassed in expressing the *mimesis* at the core of sacramentality. *Mimesis* means more than imitation or representation: it means the elaboration of a dramatic ceremony, with dance, song, ritual and story, so that the people can participate vitally in the mysteries celebrated. Yet it is *mimesis*, story-acting, that is most opaque to the Western mindset.

In spite of this opaqueness, however, we do perceive that the *mimesis* of sacramentality played a role in the Hebrews' dramatic re-presentation of their people's redemptive story: the passover meal, for example. Indeed, as Robert Murray has shown, there are powerful expressions of primal and sacral imagination remaining in the Hebrew scriptures.[6]

Nevertheless, there is a difference between traditional Aboriginal sacramentality and that of the Hebrews, a difference which will be significant throughout this paper. Where Aboriginal symbolisms are primal, rooted in the land as sacramental of the sacred order, the Hebrew stories were at another level of religious intuition. The Hebrew stories arose from the intimation that, in a world dominated by powers which use violence, treachery, indeed any form of evil to attain their ends, there is no other salvation from evil than that which originates from the divine. The stories dramatically portray both this intimation and the hope for rescue through the divine redeeming action. Theirs is a God who saves. Whilst the primal and the redemptive are distinct, in the case of the Hebrews the redemptive kept roots in the primal. As Walter Brueggeman has expressed it: the redeeming story was always in and of a place.[7]

Christian symbolisms emerged in the redemptive and apocalyptic line of the Hebrews, with a similar dependence on the cosmological. As St Leo the Great expressed it, "The visible life of Christ has passed over

3. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 93-96.
4. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 105.
5. Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993) 7-15.
6. Robert Murray, *Cosmic Covenant* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992).
7. Walter Brueggeman, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) xvi-xvii, 1-8.

into sacraments".[8] Bediako writes of the translatability of these Christian symbolisms: they are to find their expression in all places and cultures.[9] They have taken root in the cultures which retain sacral imagination. But in the West the spark is weak.

This reference to a weak spark corresponds to the desires for an emerging spirituality in this country, an Australian spirituality. It takes inspiration, in part at least, from the sacramentality of Aboriginal spirituality and it longs for the spark of sacral imagination so that its contemplation might find symbolic roots for the sacred in this land and recover in the story of this people the inner feeling of Christian redemptive and apocalyptic sacramentality.

There are obvious pitfalls and objections regarding this Australian spirituality. Do not we moderns feel the danger of imagination in religion? As moderns, can we play at being pre-modern in a contemporary world? We have to consider these objections. We have to do what Bediako and traditional Aborigines have not done: we have to propose a critical grounding for what they could accept with "a first naivety".

My suggestion is that a key to this project is at hand in an understanding of what Bernard Lonergan calls constitutive meaning: the meaning that constitutes the mean-er in his/her search for direction in the flux of life. A case in point would be one's religious experience: this has an impact on one's life choices. However, since one's religious experience is interior and personal, it is not outwardly verifiable for others. Consequently it would not be recognised directly by others in a statement of how things are. But it is nonetheless real for one's self. It is from religious experience, usually non-objectified, that faith is born—an interior trusting, hoping, loving, imaging, knowing: the sacral constitutive meaning whereby people are empowered with the courage to find direction amid life.

Constitutive meaning, however, may not be sacral. Nor is it confined to the personal; it may also belong to a community or to a whole culture. Then it is what constitutes a people's sense of their own meaning. Such is usually found in the key stories of a community and the kind of symbols carried in the stories.

From historical accounts it can surely be said that the constitutive meaning of the pre-modern West, as shown in its stories and symbols, was sacral, nurtured by a sacral imagination. On the other hand, modernity over the centuries has become increasingly suspicious of imagination and particularly of sacral imagination. Our first task will be

8. St Leo the Great, "Sermon 2 on the Ascension, 1-4" in *The Divine Office according to the Roman Rite* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1974), Vol 2, 642.
9. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa,* Chapter 7.

to identify how modernity involved a breakdown in sacral constitutive meaning.

THE PASSAGE FROM PRE-MODERNITY TO MODERNITY

Louis Dupre in *The Passage to Modernity* insists that this breakdown began in the late medieval era with the nominalist theologians' teaching that, to safeguard divine transcendence, the supernatural order had to be understood as not intrinsically connected to the natural order of creation. God is creator but remains outside of nature and outside the human spirit. When this nominalist theology of separation combined with the humanist movement there followed the cultural explosion which shattered the medieval spiritual synthesis of cosmos, human society, divine mystery and the human spirit.[10] To nominalism and humanism I would add the scientific and technological revolution. These have decisively coloured the constitutive meaning of modernity. Dupre's treatment highlights the role of Descartes, the philosopher of emerging modernity, and of modernity's three critics: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Marx denounced modernity's alienation of humans from nature, Nietzsche its false rationalism and Freud its cultural repression.[11]

With the breakdown in the sense of being rooted within the cosmos and within sacred mystery, the human lost its belonging in an order beyond itself. Descartes initiated the modern turn to the autonomous self whereby human consciousness became the new foundation. As the modern period wore on, the autonomous self tended more and more to be identified with the ego, leading to an ego transcendence that sought to use the world for its own purposes. As Fred Lawrence has pointed out, by the time Nietzsche articulated the will to power, European philosophy had come to recognise no structures or norms within human consciousness. This left no possibility for grounding the human spirit beyond itself.[12]

Nihilism became a significant stream in Western culture, reinforcing a passive egoism among individuals in society. C. G. Jung wrote of the "mass man", whose mind was largely taken over by the attitudes and opinions prevalent within society and who assumed little responsibility for its social and political evils.[13] The "collective innocence" of the "mass man" was reinforced by a further attitude. Jung spoke of it as

10. L. Dupre, *The Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 3.
11. Dupre, *The Passage to Modernity*, 4-6.
12. Fred Lawrence, "The Horizon of Political Theology" in T. A. Dunne and J. M. Laporte (eds.), *Trinification of the World: A Festschrift in Honor of F. E. Crowe* (Toronto: Regis College Press, 1978) 46-70, see p. 53.
13. C. G. Jung, "On the Nature of the Psyche" (*Collected Works 8*) quoted in R. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: Regis College Press, 1990) 332-33.

"the person without a shadow" who "imagines he actually is only what he cares to know about himself".[14]

These are apparent opposites: the ego transcendence that seeks by its own will and technology to overcome nature and the ego passivity that gives up its personal responsibility to society. To understand these apparent opposites we must return to the issue of constitutive meaning, the meaning that empowers the human to find direction within the flux of life. For Lonergan the modern technological form of constitutive meaning has constituted a culture in decline. He believes it must be reconstituted by the appropriation of the authentic functioning of the human subject. He appropriates the human organism as an interplay between spirit and matter; or, more at length, as an interplay between the human spirit's intention toward transcendence and the sensitive flow of the imagination, images, symbols, memories and bodily sensations. This flow of imagination and sensation is felt within the psyche. Over against transcendence, Lonergan designates the sensitive flow as limitation; it represents our earthiness.

Lonergan goes on to affirm that, for the human to proceed genuinely in finding its direction within life, there must be a balance between its transcendence and its limitation or earthiness. If there is imbalance towards either transcendence or limitation, then the constitutive meaning is either culturally or personally inauthentic. On this basis, the technological constitution of modernity, in seeking to impose its will over nature, is unbalanced in the direction of transcendence. By the same token, the personal irresponsibility of the modern is an imbalance away from the spirit toward limitation.[15]

THE WORLD OF SACRAL IMAGINATION

The world of symbolic imagination was also much affected by the conjunction of science, nominalism and humanism. This was manifest in art by the disappearance of the spirit figures of the pre-modern era and by the turn to naturalism. The human form was celebrated with nature as its background – a shift away from the pre-modern consciousness of human participation within nature. These shifts would not have occurred without struggle. From modernity's viewpoint we have inherited a story that runs as follows: those who followed the modern thrust of human rationality and empirical investigation experienced those stuck in the old mentality of participation in nature and mystery as full of superstition, imprisoned in a world of fears and ghosts, spells and magic. Imagination, it seemed, worked on the side of irrationality and one could be overwhelmed by it.

14. Jung, "On the Nature of the Psyche", 332-33.
15. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, 46-9, 82-4.

So nature and imagination were affected at three levels: the human felt apart from nature; nature lost the immanent sense of spiritual presence expressed in symbolic non-naturalistic images; and such images were derided as merely superstitious.

The early break away from nature, mystery and sacral imagination in the passage to modernity grew over the modern period. In the century just past the anti-superstition factor combined with nihilism to culminate in those European existentialists for whom the universe was meaningless and human consciousness a cosmic accident.[16] Mark C. Taylor, in *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture and Religion,* states that in the contemporary West the mystery within the cosmos, in so far as it can be reached at all, is often felt as a void, a darkness and an inner absence.[17] The symbols of void and darkness may suggest positively that some artists are reaching past any facile objectification of the sacral mystery: they are letting themselves experience the "no-thingness" of the apophatic. Negatively, however, the absence may suggest the depth of alienation in some artists regarding sacral imagination. In that case these symbols reveal the depth of alienation many moderns feel interiorly about who they are and what meaning they have within the cosmos.

A CRITICAL GROUNDING OF SACRAL IMAGINATION WITHIN INTERIORITY

To resume: the problem regarding the sacral imagination from the viewpoint of modernity is that it is wayward, drawn to superstition and as such in need of being heavily controlled by rationality – rationality being the mark of the human spirit. Confronting this problem is not a matter of regressing to being pre-modern. My contention is that the experience of sacral imagination and sacramentality can be recovered by critical grounding in interiority – a grounding involving two preliminary steps.

The first step is an appropriation of the human spirit. Let me begin with a concrete instance of this appropriation. Commonly, conscience is thought of as a ready-made moral calculator inside the human person. To become a person of authentic conscience one has to grow constitutively as a person. The process requires developing a freedom from ego narcissism so as to be able to love and consider others. It also requires a freedom from self-disesteem and from passivity within cultural forces so as to make personally committed value judgements and morally responsible decisions. Such development involves a progressive transformation of one's self. It requires personal effort, but there is also a sense of being drawn interiorly as by an undertow. Thus

16. L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (New York: Bobbs Merril, 1969) 362 and 411.

17. Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) viii and Chapter 8 ("Desertion").

in becoming a conscientious person one is drawn by an intention of self-transcendence toward seeking the true and the good. This inner intentionality, then, functions within the normative structure of human consciousness. Indeed, relating to this intentionality means relating to one's human spirit.[18]

Relating to this structured intentionality of spirit might be regarded as separate from divine mystery. On the contrary, the intentionality of the spirit is, above all, towards mystery. The intelligence seeks what is true, the moral responsibility seeks what is good, the affectivity seeks what is its destiny to love. These desires operate within the world proportionate to the human. But beyond and within all things the spirit seeks mystery, seeks the ultimate truth and goodness, the ultimate Beloved. So the drive to self-transcendence brings one to the moment where intentionality is transformed beyond itself.[19] Transcendence, as it were, "dies". This is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's inward journey, where one comes finally to discover one's self as grounded in a mystery of awe and love that posits one's existence: the human spirit finds itself grounded in an experience of transcendent mystery which is at the same time immanent to its deepest interiority. At the same time religious experience is also felt within one's human subjectivity *as a being within nature and the human world.*

This experience, says Lonergan, is the only foundation for the word "God". He quotes Karl Rahner: religious experience is a "consolation with a content but without an object".[20] God does not stand as an object of our consciousness. Rather, the mystery is felt in an experience wherein the world and the self touch a point of ultimacy. In religious experience the human spirit and the cosmos are together constituted in sacral meaning.

This first step – the appropriation of the spirit's seeking of the mystery in all things – flows into the second. The human seeks direction and momentum within the flux of life. That is to say, the human spirit works intelligently, morally, affectively to find a direction for life. But the flux of life is felt within a psyche attuned to human bodiliness. This means that the flux of life is carried in the flow of sensitive imagination. And as the spirit longs ultimately for the mystery within all beings and situations, this too is reflected in the imagination, for the psyche participates in the interplay between spirit and matter. The psyche's participation in this interrelationship is such that it acts as a *sensorium*: it magnifies the spirit's search within its imaginal reflection of life's movement. Thus it magnifies the touches of religious experience which are often subliminal.

18. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History,* 212.
19. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 106 and 240.
20. Lonergan, *Method in Theology,* 106 n. 4.

The sacral experience is dramatically felt because its impressions are caught up by the imagination; the imagination stirs the heart, leading the person to experience the momentum which will carry the search for direction in life. But what, we may ask, of sacral symbols that are inherited or proclaimed in a manner that is outside personal or cultural experience? As outside this experience they may fail to evoke imagination. Imagination is to such symbols as the wind is to the sails that move the ship.

Since the power of symbols that are open to our imagination is better shown than explained, let us consider a sacral symbolic story. *A goat approaches a dark wall; it butts its horns repeatedly against the wall till its head aches and it gives up. A tiger approaches and leaps up against the wall, repeatedly falling back in rage, until it too gives up. A seed falls into the earth near the wall; as a tree, it grows up tall beside the wall till its boughs reach over.*[21]

The goat and the tiger symbolise the experience of egoist transcendence; they treat the wall as an obstacle, they have only an "I-it" relationship toward it. The seed, on the other hand, symbolises spirit that senses a reverent "I-thou" relationship to the wall. To attack the wall is futile. The seed recognises its earthiness and so relates to mystery (the wall) with humility.

This relationship to mystery is hardly articulated but it is definitely felt: those who hear the story are exposed to the mimetic power of a symbolic story. The imagination leads listeners inside the story, evoking the possibility that they too might be truly rooted in the earth and, like the tree, grow up patiently and reach an arm into mystery. We humans are symbolic animals: involvement in symbolic imagination is something we enjoy.

In its symbolism this story is clearly constitutive. It is not real in the outward world but it arouses in the imagination an interior interplay of spirit and earth. Further, the wall and the tree suggest the human's instinctive relationship towards the mystery. Yet as moderns living within the technological form of constitutive meaning, we feel personally powerless within an impersonal cosmos: we experience imbalance in the direction of limitation. To restore the balance we need a boldness of spirit that is willing to embrace the earth. From that willingness we may receive the constitutive image we need. We have an example in Thérèse of Lisieux. She wrote of herself as suffering a severe unbalance towards limitation: her frailty and ultra-sensitivity. But the symbol of child provided a boldness of spirit and a child-like intimacy with the mystery.

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21. A story told me in May 1998 by Jungian analyst Terrence McBride; the story is itself based upon one used by C. G. Jung.

Thérèse, of course, provides an example of an individual whose life was largely lived within a sacral culture. Even then she needed her personal sacral symbols – such as that of the child. But there are whole communities and cultures under the sway of the modern technological form of constitutive meaning which need to be aware that there is a symbolic base to their society. African theologians are promoting small Christian communities where people would seek, first of all, to reclaim their basic sacral symbols broken by colonialism,[22] and then, secondly, to connect with the redemptive and apocalyptic symbols of Christian faith. If Africans are similar to Australian Aborigines they may readily stir the sacral imagination within themselves because these are deep in the spiritual "bones". But there is a distinct difference, as we noted above, between the primal and the redemptive symbols. The primal symbols are protological, founded in the beginning time; the redemptive symbols look also to the *eschaton,* the end time. This involves a distinctly different turn in the sacral imagination.[23]

Compared with Africans, mainstream Australians are thoroughly under the thrall of the technological constitutive meaning of modernity. For this reason, as a number of writers, poets and painters have portrayed, many Australians suffer from an affliction of soul, a withholding of genuine passion.[24] They are alienated about who they are and what meaning they have in the cosmos. Sebastian Moore believes this is *the* religious question for the West today.[25] For an Australian this alienation arises from dim perception of an unease about the symbolic base of society in this land. It shows itself in a hunger for a contemporary constitutive meaning that will nourish both the imagination and the spirit.

How to find such nourishment? Unlike Aborigines and Africans, mainstream Australians may not find that the wind of imagination so readily fills the sails of primal symbols. The long break with nature and with mystery has to heal.

For the redemptive symbols, too, the sacral imagination of mainstream Australians is constrained. Restoring a sense of the redemptive must begin by reclaiming the intentionality of the spirit and its undertow towards mystery. Then the task will be to examine the social dynamics: where is the power and corruption that subordinates and deforms the spirit? where is the suffering that results and how is it symbolised? Perhaps most important, where are the biases and resentments within society that have skewed its imagination?

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22. J. M. Ela, *My Faith as an African* (New York: Orbis, 1990) ix, xiii.
23. Ela, *My Faith as an African* , chapters 4 and 6.
24. See Frank Fletcher, "Finding the Framework to Prepare for Dialogue with the Aborigines", *Pacifica* 10 (1997) 25-38, esp. 26-8.
25. Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980) 13.

An issue that arises most notably in connection with this skewering of symbolic imagination concerns the scapegoating of the Aborigines. As I have argued elsewhere,[26] they are resented because their sacral imagination inter-relates them with the land, imparting a sacral nourishing from which the technological westerner feels constitutively severed. Here, at least in part, is the source of the hollowness Australian poets, such as A. D. Hope and Judith Wright, have portrayed.[27]

So we return to facing the symbolic basis of the post-colonial modern society on this continent. The institutions of this society have functioned on the principles of utilitarianism: all is to be subordinated to the advantage and the will of the majority. The prevailing symbols have been bland. There has been a sluggishness to admit the evil and shadows of past and present policies toward minority and disadvantaged groups. Likewise, society has been slow to celebrate the thoroughgoing thrust of the human spirit toward the just, the true, the good and the mystery.

Yet if one reclaims the spirit and negotiates the skewered imagination, a modern Australian can seek authentically to renew the symbolic base of this society as rooted in a sacramental experience of the Antipodean land. But the retrieval of sacramentality will require a willingness to let ego transcendence die, to fall as a seed in the land, to surrender to the numinous presence and to trust in the redeeming care of the *Mysterium Tremendum.*

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26. Fletcher, "Finding the Framework", 35-8.
27. Fletcher, "Finding the Framework", 33.