# FROM SOLID GROUND TO SOULFUL LIVING

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*INTRODUCTION*

We burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereupon to build a tower reaching to the infinite. But our groundwork cracks... (Blaise Pascal in 'The Two Infinities')

Religious aspirations while fuelled, ostensibly by the highest aspirations of humanity to know God, the Infinite or ultimate Truth, carry aspirations usually unnamed and recognised, of a baser 'feet of clay' type. As we soar upwards building our towers towards God, we all too often assume that we have begun from a base of secure certain knowledge, rather than from humble human frailty.

History is replete with appropriations of God. Various people across cultures and historical epochs have claimed and still do claim to have exclusive insights about 'a tower reaching the infinite', that is, the means to true communion with (a particular version of) God. Privilege is given to purity of belief or theology and correctness of practice. When peoples beginning with different secure foundations, and building differing towers to the Infinite come together the focus frequently is on differences, where 'the other' is inevitably cast as wrong, or worse as 'evil', rather than on what is shared, honourable aspirations towards a sense of ultimate goodness and to live rightly.

I believe many contexts of our being are implicated in our religious beliefs and practices. It seems to me that there is circularity between the history of our being, both personally and as humanity in total, and expressions of engagement with that which is transcendent. For me, the nature and character of religious beliefs and practices necessarily implicates the nature of our humanness.

This paper begins by elaborating this proposition, through focussing briefly on two sites of clashes commonly found in lived experience. I then posit power and certainty as 'attractors' that run through these (and other) sites of conflict. I wish to show that these clashes can be seen to relate more to the playing out of power relationships and desires, than to religious or spiritual insight. By recognising this, approaches towards ameliorating differences may be made that are not automatically interpreted as counter religious or spiritual sensibility.

## *THE CLASHES THAT ARE FOUND IN LIVED EXPERIENCE*

While differences in conceptions of and beliefs about 'God', together with related ideas about right living practices are generally taken as being purely religious differences, I intend to show here that they are not. The argument I put forward is that it is more useful to see religious beliefs and practices as being circularly implicated in all of human life. That is, people's lived experiences shape religious understanding as much as religious understandings shape possibilities and practices for daily life experience. I demonstrate this claim through exploration of two aspects of lived experience wherein which profound, ubiquitous disagreement is found. The aspects chosen concern culture and ways of knowing. I demonstrate that clashes found in lived experience are not only to be found at one level of human enterprise, but they imbue and implicate us as individuals, as much as small groups, transnational organisations or nation states. In other words, I consider these clashes implicate the nature of our humanness, and hence the nature of our religious or spiritual beliefs.

### *CULTURE*

The evolution of human groups, particularly as these have been shaped by peculiarities of time and space, have resulted in cultural differences that may be observed between individuals, as well as between groups, from local, to transnational.

In Australia we see clashes between Aboriginal culture and the dominant, post colonial culture. By 'culture' I refer to 'the social production of meaning and understanding, whether in the inter-personal and practical organisation of daily routines or in broader institutional and ideological structures.' (Hodge and

Mishra 1990:v). Aboriginal culture historically highly values relationships, both to the people of one's own group and to land. Aboriginal people's daily life traditionally cohered around religious beliefs, to the extent that they dictated (via 'song lines') peoples ongoing movement across the landscape of Australia. For Australian Aboriginal people land rights (access to one own spiritually related land) is a profoundly spiritual or religious concern. For other Australian citizens this has been an alien concept, and many times Aboriginal land rights have been construed as a way for 'lazy' Aboriginal people to acquire the land of hard working Eurocentric people.

Aboriginal spiritual beliefs were taken as being non existent, on a par with the beliefs of children, or else 'evil' and directly against 'true Christian' understanding. Even until the 1950's 'Christian' Australians were engaged in the practice of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal families, in order to provide these children with a 'good Christian 'education and opportunity for a 'better' life. Even when children were not removed from family, the culture of Aboriginal society, traditional social processes of production of meaning and understanding were severely impacted. As a Warlpiri friend reflects, 'The Europeans used to run the town like superintendents' (Andrew Japaljari Spencer 1990:83). For him, the 'Christian' interventions are the direct cause of family breakdown today in the Aboriginal community:

*We used to grow up in a family but now people go their separate ways, that's what our family breakdown is about. Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, grandfathers. They all go their different ways and the kids get into trouble, worse and worse trouble, then they go to jail or pass away. How do we get the family back? We've got surnames from Europeans, but in our culture we have skin names, we have ceremonies, we have our Dreaming and we follow our families. So if my son has some problems there's a family I can send him to - not only his mother. (Andrew Japaljari Spencer1990:85)*

Cultural clashes also occur where there is greater homogeneity of cultural history. Take for example clashes between various Christian groups in Australia. There is ongoing vilification between 'Bible believing fundamentalist Baptists' and those 'good works' oriented 'wishy washy' Uniting Church people, as well as between Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelical Christians. From between groups, to between individuals there are clashes. Drawing on my own experience, I note that style of music has been a prime site of clashes in cultural and religious beliefs and practices. In a church I once belonged to one of the expressions of such difference was around not only the kind of music considered properly worshipful (classical or rock and roll), but also as to when it was appropriate to use the piano as opposed to the organ (which was thought to be

far more reverent than the piano). One of my Christian protestant friends belonged to a Church where all instrumental playing was deemed unacceptable, with the only right spiritual music being that sung by the human voice. And so it goes on, from micro to macro, from hurt feelings regarding different views about forms of music to killing people for their different beliefs.

If vignettes such as I have described here are considered outside of a longer historical purview, then the ways that cultural evolution is bound up with religious and spiritual awareness and beliefs is not so readily apparent. Formal historical exegesis of doctrine and religious practice does reveal something of this ongoing interplay. Of course such historical exegesis is often itself a site of disputation. So to end this section I will again turn to reflect upon some of my experiences.

In the early 1970's along with other young people from my church, I would visit the local beaches of a Sunday afternoon to 'witness' about God. Of course we went in our Sunday best clothes, even though the weather was hot, and everyone else was in swimming attire. At that time people in our church believed that the Bible told us not to engage in frivolous, worldly activities on a Sunday, such as visiting the beach to relax and swim, but to engage in God focussed, worshipful activities, such as attending Bible class, church services or being formally engaged in 'witnessing'. Today, young and older people at that same church do use Sunday to visit the beach and to relax. These activities are now thought God honouring.

I also witnessed in the 1980's widespread reconsideration of 'biblical insight' concerning the relationship between God, humanity, and all creation. Christian writers at that time began to attest to recognising that since the Reformation the Protestant church in the western world had 'been preoccupied with the questions of God's relationship to humanity' (Granberg-Michaelson 1987:3). Gradually creation became a fundamental theme in protestant Christian writing (such as Wilkinson, 1980, Moltmann, 1985 and Granberg-Michaelson, 1987).

Interestingly, in the 1970's and 1980's I spent time with Aboriginal people in Yuendumu, in Central Australia. At this time, most of the Warlpiri counted themselves as Christian. What I found really intriguing was the way that the people brought together their Warlpiri traditions with their Christianity. For example, while I was visiting on one occasion I was shown how the elders had over eighteen months developed a traditional ceremony interpretation of the biblical story of the 'Easter story'. The process of developing this involved the elders discussing with other elders when they had dreamed a section of what this ceremony would look like. Through dreaming and considered discussion the

ceremony was gradually evolved. Something had clearly changed and what once constituted a clash of cultures and spirituality, was at least for some people, no more.

*WAYS OF KNOWING*

In February 1616 the Congregation of the Index of Holy Roman Church decided that the following two propositions were false and that they contradicted the doctrine of the Holy Scripture:

*The sun is the centre of the world and hence immovable in location.*

*The earth is not the centre of the world, nor immovable, but moves according to the whole of itself, also with a diurnal motion.*

The Congregation decreed that Nicolaus Copernicus's work on *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* would be suspended until it was corrected (de Santillana 1955).

Here we see a contradiction in ways of knowing – scientific and spiritual. Christian Holy Scriptures were taken as authoritative across all domains, even scientific investigation. Although sites of disagreement have changed through the years, conflicts between spiritual and scientific matters continue. I have been in churches where the theory of evolution was thought to be foolish, being based on tricks of the devil designed to give humans a false view of the age of the earth. Similarly I have experienced sincere Christians who hold to Theistic Evolution. I have been amongst some who view this world as ephemeral and not to be focussed upon, and amongst others who view it as 'creation in action', such as those who argue that:

> *To be alive means existing in relationship with other people and things. Life is communication in communion.* (Moltman1985:3)

There are of course, infinite 'ways of knowing', beyond descriptions such as 'scientific' or 'spiritual'. Another site of clashes in lived experience relates to the certainty with which views or knowledge is held. Where views are thought to be indisputable, and ways of understanding taken as certain, we see in action a foundational style of knowing. Foundationalism presupposes the possibility of finding or creating a firm foundation of certitude. Blaise Pascal's observation that we 'burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation' has application beyond spiritual domains. Foundationalism has been claimed as constituting the 'classic theory of theorising in the Western world' (Wolterstorff 1976:28), and hence is seen to underpin 'genuine science'. From theology to cosmology, foundationalism flourishes. However, a foundationalist attitude

fosters clashes, for when one set of ideas (relating to any topic) are taken as having certainty, they are not open to question, to reformulation or revision. Different ideas can only be held as incorrect or misinformed. There is consequently no space for alterity. No room for negotiation.

Some people construe particular others as holders and conveyers of true knowledge, which must then be 'received'. Often grouped together with such special people, are texts, which are assumed to be interpreted correctly only by a select group. This kind of perspective sees it as dangerous that people learn to think critically for themselves. I have witnessed great concern amongst many devout people that going to university meant a person would lose their faith. This judgement was made too, about attendance at particular Bible colleges, where emphasis was not on teaching received wisdom but inviting original engagement with one's faith perspective. These concerns indicate clashes relating to personal knowledge and to ideas about 'who knows' and freedom to learn.

For a time I belonged to an association of Christian Scholars. This association served as a forum where Christians who were also scholars in a range of fields could examine and develop their thinking about the implications of their membership in two communities; secular and spiritual. My experience was that there was a sense of 'gate keeping' and of hierarchy were specific scholars were held up as authoritative. Not all directions of inquiry were welcomed. The group seemed to me to favour belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes as these relate to the spiritual domain, emphasising a distinctive take on the 'Christian' in 'Christian scholarship'. If I asked a question such as 'If we understand all human knowledge as quintessentially humanly socially constructed, how do we differentiate the certainty of our ideas about God, from the certainty of ideas about other things, such as a particular model of ecology?', I was given to understand that such a distinction could be made. I was told not to go too far with 'constructivist' thinking. Belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes regarding constructivist epistemology were not favoured.

### *CERTAINTY AND POWER*

As indicated above, although disagreements may manifest as purely spiritual or religious, differences in culture and ways of knowing are implicit, may be even central. Providing impetus, in my analysis, is human attraction to power and certainty.

Complexity science suggests that many elements are held in specific relationship through what are termed 'attractors'. We could say the sun functions

as an attractor for the movement of the earth for example. Similarly I believe desire for power, both for oneself and over others is a compelling attractor in clashes regarding culture, ways of knowing and manifestations of belief and practices regarding our sense of God or the Infinite.

Perhaps it may be argued that holding power over others lessens a person's own sense of fragility, of existing within ultimate mystery. Holding beliefs with certainty serves this same purpose. Power and certainty on this analysis provide a means of forestalling existential angst.

Foucault (1980) argues that knowledge can be seen as a prerequisite for power in advanced industrial societies. When beliefs are held with strong certainty, they too serve as a prerequisite to, and fostering of the exercise of power.

However, both certainty and power over others run counter to the central intuitions of most of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions.

When God or the Infinite is understood as being beyond human knowing, then *ipso facto* we understand God as not being fully knowable. Holding our views with some measure of humility and uncertainty is appropriate. Recognising one's own uncertainty can be expected to lessen one's sense of rightfulness to have power over another. The 'one' I refer to here may be an individual, a group, a nation or a religious institution.

Most of the great religious traditions subscribe to a view of humans that asks people to consider others as themselves. For example, we see this variously expressed as:

> *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. (Judaism)*
>
> *As you would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. (Christianity)*
>
> *What you do not want done to yourself, do not so unto others. (Confucianism)*
>
> *Let no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself. (Hinduism)*
>
> *Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Buddhism)*

The sentiment expressed repeatedly in these various religious traditions challenges our propensity for blaming and reproaching others for their belief, disbelief, or non-belief. Seriously considering others as oneself surely suggests we be rather more circumspect regarding attempts to express power over others through seeking to circumscribe their thinking and believing.

The move from assuming great certainty and power in religious and spiritual practices requires a more cautious approach to 'religious laws' and those whom guard and promote these, along with greater emphasis on human freedom of engagement.

*TOWARDS A SOUFUL WAY OF BEING*

In recognising the world and human knowing as ensconced within complexity and mystery, I suggest as virtues, humility, circumspection and uncertainty. While I do not wish to insist on the practice of these virtues with the voice of 'one who truly knows', I do suggest that attention to them may soften some of the clashes found in daily living.

Humility stresses awareness of the place of humanity within a larger, mysterious infinity. Circumspection asks that we be mindful of other times, places and ways of knowing and being. Uncertainty reminds us of the limitedness of perspectives.

It is all very well to come up with pious recommendations, however the difficult question remains. How might these virtues be fostered?

This question may not be easily answered, for it requires plurality of response. As a beginning suggestion, my response is that these virtues may be encouraged through people having benign experiences of alterity. For example this may be through education and involvement in multi-faith and multi-cultural activities and events. These may be at micro through to macro scales.

I am currently researching a community development program called 'The Enablers Project', that I believe demonstrates how these virtues may be encouraged. In this project, a group of local community members meet together weekly over approximately twenty weeks with the aim being to develop community leaders through self-enrichment. The project is being undertaken in a local government area of New South Wales that has the largest population of Indigenous Aboriginal persons, with more than two thirds (69.6%) of the population being Aboriginal and one third non-Aboriginal (37.3%). Within the non-Aboriginal population are significant numbers of refugees, including Sudanese, Somali, Iraqi and Afgani, as well as a significant Filipino and Pacific Islander communities.

As explained by the facilitators, 'in an atmosphere of deep respect, participants are encouraged to examine their own person anew, from the perspectives of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual development'. The basic assumption guiding the approach is that it is believed

that 'having been more strongly affirmed in their own person, participants would feel more strength to enable the other, who ever the other might be'. Enablers' participants come from many of the diverse peoples residing in the area. Respecting and not judging the values of others means being humble, circumspect about one's own views, values and beliefs, as well as being uncertain about the innate superiority of one's own worldview. It does not mean however, not engaging with the other, not continuing processes of reviewing and deepening self understanding, negotiating how to build shared community with 'the other'.

*BACK TO THE ROUGH GROUND*

Having begun this paper with Pascal's metaphor of the desire for solid ground to describe the human desire for certainty in relation to engaging with Infinity, I now close with another perspective about 'ground':

> *We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need* friction. *Back to the rough ground! (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations)*

Wittgenstein's reminder is salient. To walk we do need friction. Perhaps to build towers to the Infinite friction is necessary too. Perhaps we ought not to aim to remove the clashes of lived experience, but merely find ways to better negotiate rough ground.

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