

**THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE  
OF THE SACRED**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

## **AUSTRALIANS AND THE FUTURE OF SPIRITUALITY**

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### **PART I: THE SPIRIT IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY AND ART**

Today I would like to consider the topic of Australians and the future of spirituality from a relatively personal point of view. We in academia like to pretend that our views are not 'personal' at all, that we are somehow exempt from the personal equation as we tackle the big issues in our disciplines. But feminism, cultural relativism, and now social constructivism have done much to undermine the idea of a fully objective scholarship, which enables people like myself to address our own 'speaking position' in the conference paper. We can, I hope, learn how to be intelligently personal without indulging our 'personality', and I think the future of scholarship depends on our ability to know the difference between these things.

I am an intellectual who tries to speak from the heart. Is that a contradiction in terms? In some ways it is. My intellect is highly educated, philosophical, with a tendency toward irony and criticism. My heart, insofar as I can 'know' it at all, is the opposite of this: uneducated, primitive, full of inarticulate longing, intensely passionate about things it can feel but cannot even see. About twenty years ago I used to say that I wanted to 'integrate' my head and my heart. Today that seems like youthful idealism. My writing and thought operates at intersections and crossroads where head and heart sometimes meet but also very often collide. With age and insight I have become increasingly aware of how divided I am, and how useless it is to pretend that one is a fully integrated person. I can certainly say with Goethe, that 'Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast, and each one wrestles for the mastery there'.

Like most intellectuals, I have lived life primarily from the intellect, and yet this has meant, I have been forced to see, a systematic denial of the claims of the heart. My intellect does not want belief; in fact it wants to be rid of all belief and to glory in the spaces of its own freedom. This is what I was taught to like and appreciate during my long training in our Western university system. But the heart longs desperately to believe, it lives at a warmer temperature, and finds the coolness of the intellect to be remote and icy. The heart has a different story and a different idea of freedom. For the heart, freedom does not mean getting rid of the objects of belief so as to revel

in its own empty space. Freedom, for the heart, is discovered through committed service and passionate relationship to the sacred. The heart, or at least my heart, is by nature religious, and its motto appears to be 'only connect'.

When the heart's story and the intellect's story collide, this produces disorientation, temporary madness, and the upheavals that have typically come to be called the 'midlife crisis'. For an intellectual, this crisis is particularly burdensome, because all the values and attitudes that have been built up over long years of training have to be suddenly unlearned and transcended, which makes for upheaval at work and at home. However, students are a great consolation, because young and often idealistic students have not yet learned to separate intellect from heart, and often engage in a kind of 'thinking through the heart' which is quite medicinal for their specialist teachers. Where does the heart go to school? Today, alas, it goes to school in psychotherapy, or in the law courts battling over possession, custody, and the other symptoms of the failing bonds of love. Years ago, the heart was schooled in churches and religious orders, and it may well be that the heart will demand that the churches once again fulfill this primordial human task, if the heart can become free enough of the intellect to claim its life of faith, and if the churches can become free enough of their institutional concerns to listen attentively to the naked heart.

I have within me a huge dose of secular materialism, partly derived from my status as an Australian, a country that continually boasts about its secularism and disbelief, and partly derived from long years of indoctrination by Western secular education. In my state-based primary, secondary, and tertiary education, I was indoctrinated into the so-called 'modern condition' of disenchantment, disbelief, and the disappearance of God. During decades of public schooling, the religious worldview, that says that God made man, was reversed and we were led to believe that man had in fact made God. Out went absolute truth, providence, fate, destiny, metaphysics, and in came social constructivism, cultural relativism, attacks on belief and metaphysics, and the debunking of all religious 'myths' as social lies.

On the other hand, I am the product of an incredibly strong and long-standing family religious tradition. In my extended family network, even in these disbelieving and uncertain times, God is very much alive and God definitely 'made' us. I received large doses of religion from both sides of my family, although my paternal and maternal versions of religion were quite different. On my father's side, our Christianity was Methodist, very English,

formal, institutional, austere, with strong elements of puritanism and moral piety: no drinking, no gambling, and restrained living with one's conscience as one's guide. On my mother's side, our Christianity was Irish, Celtic, celebratory, anti-establishment, with distinct leanings toward reflective mystery, wonderment of the natural world, and magic. My early childhood was spent mixing and matching these two versions of religion, wondering why my mother's religion led her to speak with flowers and converse with birds, while my father's religion led him to moralistic ranting and to fury against alcohol. This fury was so hysterical that us kids, aping the so-called 'psychological' climate of the times, began to suspect that he was secretly addicted to the stuff, and that the fury was some kind of compensation.

I was an intensely *dévout*, believing child, and in some ways that childhood self has continued to live beneath the persona of the enlightened academic and the disbelieving intellectual. I was about 14 years of age when I realised with sudden disappointment that my spirituality was old hat and out of step with modern times. I became interested in Christian youth clubs, whose purpose was, apparently, to 'modernise' the church and to make the religious life relevant to the times, but I found little or no leadership in this direction, and the church seemed content to say to its people: remain with me in the comfort and sanctity of belief, or go the way of the world and be damned. I think the thing that I resented most about the church in my late teenage years was its patent refusal to take up critical dialogue with the leading philosophical and social issues of the day. Why wasn't it offering to dialogue, for instance, with social Darwinism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, modernism, relativism, feminism, and all the other 'isms' that interested my precocious adolescent mind? Freud and Nietzsche seemed to me to hold more intellectual appeal than sermons designed merely to protect our faith from the corrosive influences of the modern world. I didn't want an intellectual life that was styled purely as a reactionary resistance to advances in science and philosophy. Had the church failed me, or was I failing the church in my journey into existentialism and doubt?

The churchmen with whom I mixed seemed too exhausted by their parishes and congregations, by the busy-ness of being church, to concentrate on theology or philosophy, much less to provide vigorously critical arguments to keep 'thinking' people like myself within its precincts. At high school, my teachers either dismissed religion as a product of the past, not worthy of serious intelligent inquiry, or else they felt religion was a private

matter, no longer something to be debated in the schoolroom or the university, but something that existed quietly in the precincts of the indwelling soul. This privatisation of religion is one of the great social disasters of our time. If religion retreats into the inner recesses of the soul, and disappears from the public world, then any chance of bringing vigorous critical debate into the public arena is lost, as we lose our nerve and are not willing to risk our reputations to start talking about it again. No science teacher wants to be labeled a Creationist, no literature teacher wants to be dubbed a Born Again believer. Religion acquires a bad name, becomes linked with intellectual weakness, woolly-mindedness, and philosophical embarrassment. But we have to risk embarrassment to bring it into the open again. How else to heal the widening gap between intellect and faith, science and religion, head and heart, if we do not attempt to make public the rifts between these seemingly competing and opposite worlds?

Meanwhile, in my late teens, I found myself immersed in a very different kind of cultural dualism. On the one hand, my teachers at the Alice Springs High School taught me that we inhabited a purely material world, with no hidden presences or determining metaphysical influences. On the other hand, the Aboriginal culture with which I was becoming shyly involved, mainly through the help of the Presbyterian minister Rev. Jim Downing, fervently maintained that the land was full of ancestral creator spirits and invisible powers, and that maintaining a correct and mindful awareness of those powers was central to human well-being. My teachers at school, and especially at university, had all sorts of clever terms to explain away the Aboriginal Dreaming, including anthropomorphism, projection, and even 'pathetic fallacy' - the term used in my art history classes to explain the perceived resonance between human subject and natural background in visual representations. I wasn't so sure who or what to believe, but I think it would be fair to say that in central Australia during the 1960s I effectively split myself into two personalities: one self was completely enthralled by the Aboriginal Dreaming, and still deeply enmeshed in Christian reverie, prayer, and worship; while another self allowed itself to be inducted into modern disenchantment and attempted to assimilate the lessons of school and university.

My parents were strongly opposed to my interest and involvement in Aboriginal spirituality, because they belonged to an era of Christian intolerance, which took the idea of the 'One God' rather literally (i.e. the One God had to be *their* God), and which had no understanding of what the churches now bravely call 'inter-faith dialogue'. They were passionately

intolerant of racial difference, with no apparent awareness of how this attitude contradicted Christian compassion and Christ's moral teaching.

But even more marked than their intolerance of racial difference was their passionate resistance to education, reading, and learning from books. They had been told by their parents, and by devout grandparents, that education was bad because it 'destroys your faith'. Well, in many ways I think they were right. Education does set out to debunk, defraud, demystify, and disenchant. My parents were so opposed to higher education that they sought to prevent me from completing secondary school. Only the intervention of the school principal and one class teacher managed to persuade them to allow me to finish high school. After that, I was up and away, free from parents and family; I moved to another city, attended two universities, and proceeded to indulge and over-educate that split-off self that decided to enter the twentieth century.

I didn't so much 'reject' as I buried, shelved, or repressed the spiritual experience I had gained 'from both Western Christian and Australian Aboriginal traditions. At university, I declared myself, fashionably, to be an atheist, and my major sources of intellectual reference were Freud, Nietzsche, Hardy, existentialism, and modernism. I discovered Jung after these intellectual sources had made their impact on me, and, through Jung, I was gradually able to work my way back to the religious point of view. But the mainstream discourses of Western intellectualism are clever, erudite, critical, illuminating, and anti-religious. These modern traditions have little to say to our deeper emotional needs and spiritual desires. They are very much a product of Western patriarchal excess: they are supremacist and arrogant, gleefully debunking spiritual realities, and riding roughshod over the thought of the heart and the wisdom of the soul. Needless to say, largely as a result of a midlife crisis and the return of my repressed childhood self, I have disidentified from the Western intellectual tradition, and am no longer a supporter of the kind of hollow discourse that rings loudly and noisily throughout the halls of academia.

It could be that we in Australia are predisposed by history, geography, and divine grace, to experience a reawakening of the sacred realities. As I have tried to show from my personal example, we in Australia have a double dose of religious heritage to contend with. We have our Jewish-Christian tradition which has been brought in from Europe and elsewhere, and which has survived here for a not insignificant two hundred years. And we have the awesome might of the Aboriginal Dreamings, an ancient and rich spiritual culture that is possibly the longest continuous spiritual

tradition on earth. These traditions together represent a formidable combined force against intellectual rationalism and modern arrogance. I know in my own life this combined force has won through, and I now work within the university system in direct opposition to the prevailing mainstream forces of secularism, demystification, and disenchantment.

The Aboriginal sacred experience becomes, whether we like it or not, our own cultural heritage as soon as we send cultural tap-roots down into Aboriginal soil. This is a dangerous and controversial thing to say, and it must be immediately qualified. I don't mean to say that we European Australians must possess or acquire the Aboriginal Dreaming like a material appendage or consumer item. If we grasp greedily for the Dreaming, then we may rightly be accused of performing the last, most fatal act of imperial appropriation in our tragic history of dispossession and colonialism. A conscious or deliberate hunger for the Dreaming is politically suspect, socially irresponsible, and a product of New Age spiritual materialism. It is not that we, in our desperation and emptiness, reach out for the Dreaming, but rather that the Dreaming, and the wisdom of the ages, comes gradually and subtly toward us. This is what we find in Australian literature and art, and what I attempted to explore in my book *Edge of the Sacred*.<sup>1</sup> If we are attentive to the land, and receptive to our own souls in this land and drawing from this land, then we may find that we are, as it were, Aboriginalised in our spiritual endeavours here.

As the poet Les Murray has said: 'In Australian civilisation, I would contend, convergence between white and black is a fact, a subtle process, hard to discern often, and hard to produce evidence for. Just now, too, it lacks the force of fashion to drive it; the fashion is all for divisiveness now.'<sup>2</sup> This is almost the understatement of the century: the fashion is certainly for divisiveness, away from confluence and convergence. Most intellectual progressives and left-wing thinkers adopt a 'hands off' approach when it comes to the sacred heritage of Aboriginal cultures. It is unfashionable to talk about this topic, lest one be accused of cultural insensitivity, imperial exploitation, or New Age consumerism. But, as Murray has said, such spiritual convergence is a fact, and is a great human and religious mystery. If we live authentically within Australia, and cast off the prejudices and shackles of colonialism, we find that we have been given an enormous gift, so enormous that our best artists grapple to express the outlines and structure of this gift in work after work. And it is lucky for us that the artists are not hamstrung by 'political correctness' and other moral rigidities and taboos, because they are compelled first and foremost to attend to their

creative impulses, which are in turn being fed and nourished by the spirituality of the land. Artists cannot afford to live shallowly at the surface of life; they must put down solid roots in the soil, and as soon as they do this they hit pay-dirt, their work flourishes, their creativity takes on new life and colour, and they celebrate the deep links that connect us to this place, to the indigenous inhabitants, and to the spirituality of the earth itself.

Our creative artists, visual, musical, architectural, and literary, are mapping for us the outlines of our national spiritual renaissance, but our critics, reviewers, and intellectuals are still at a loss to figure out how to read this development. Our greatest artists, such as Patrick White, Les Murray, Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, Rodney Hall, Tim Winton, Michael Leunig, are providing a wealth of material to nourish our souls and to give structure to our spiritual life, but our 'official' consciousness is as yet unable to receive this wealth or assimilate these signs. Our artistic traditions here have hugely contributed to a new sense of the sacred, and yet academic specialists of Australian culture still subscribe to the peculiar fiction that our national culture is secular, ironical, and debunking. It is little wonder, in view of this, that our artists and writers are deeply suspicious of academics to the point of resentment and bitterness.

Witness Patrick White's view of academics, for instance, or Les Murray's, or Judith Wright's. Our artists have long been involved in an epic *resacralisation* of the world, and yet this basic project is rejected, ignored, or denied, by a literary intelligentsia whose tastes and values have been founded upon an earlier 'skeptical' bush tradition, derived principally from Joseph Furphy and Henry Lawson. Even in nineteenth-century Australia, however, we had a vigorous tradition of sacred literature, especially in the poetry of Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall, but the secular critics canned this as colonial, derivative, and not 'Australian' enough, where 'Australian' is defined as disbelieving and debunking. The hermeneutics of suspicion could only applaud secular texts like *Such is Life* and *While the Billy Boils*, and it frankly did not know what to do with our sacred literature, so it just attacked it, or ignored it, as in the case of the Sydney poet Christopher Brennan. This cultural problem came to a great climax in the career of Patrick White. Here was possibly our greatest writer, whose works were so deeply mystical that even schoolchildren could see he did not fit the official Aussie mold. But we had Leonie Kramer arguing that *Riders in the Chariot* was an ironic essay on religious life, and other critics declaring that White's novels were not 'Australian' enough to fit with the national literary canon. The intellectual hermeneutics of suspicion had no way of adequately



handling the religious hermeneutics of affirmation, and that is basically why Australian literary criticism is so inadequate, and why there is such hatred and loathing between our visionary artists and our critical intellectuals.

What I experience within myself as a kind of localised internal strife, namely the collision between the disbelieving intellect and the passionately religious heart, I find outside, in the culture, in this ongoing strife between artists and intellectuals. The artists are, of course, like artists everywhere, ahead of their times, but Australian artists are also *beneath* their times, in the sense of exploring areas of the national psyche that are hidden from view and beneath the surface of our persona-life. This means that their religious vision is unique and far from conventional, and it may be just as difficult, in fact, for 'religious' criticism to access their subterranean life, as it is for secular mainstream criticism to make cultural sense of their vision. Because any new spiritual vision emerges first of all in the arts, the intellectual frameworks employed by critics from a diverse range of positions and perspectives may prove to be hermeneutically inadequate. But because intellectual discourse - of either the conventional religious or the anti-religious kind - is habitually hubristic, it often doesn't notice how inappropriate its own discourse is. Instead of interpreting its artists for the sake of the people, these discourses proffer interpretations for their own sake, thus contributing to the familiar protest that the academic-hermeneutic industry is elitist, exclusive, self-serving, and even irrelevant to the national interest.

Upon returning to Australia from Oxford, and after viewing an exhibition of Australian art called 'Spirit and Place' at the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art, academic and writer Peter Conrad said: 'The whole curse of the modern world just doesn't seem to have imposed itself here [in Australia]. When the sky-god expired, the earth gods were reanimated.'<sup>3</sup> This is certainly true in the Australian arts, and it goes a long way to explain the relative optimism and earth-romanticism of Australian poetry and painting, for instance, just at the time when modernist artists overseas were all grumbling mournfully about the death of God and the loss of religious meaning. Although the Jewish-Christian sky god may have died or disappeared in European modernism, in Australia we were at this time just discovering what it means to be living upon sacred Aboriginal soil.

The Aboriginal Dreaming is, above all else, a cosmology of earth-gods, and Aboriginal spirituality is deeply grounded in the earth and is a celebration of the numinosity of the land. Given what Les Murray has said

about the secret, almost unconscious, confluence between white and black in Australia, it would seem logical, if not entirely rational, that the 'curse of modernism', with its precious angst, its existential despair, and its sense of life's ultimate futility, never really established itself in Australian art. Even Kenneth Slessor, our nearest approximation to modernism in poetry, stopped short of complete futility, and wrote about landscape, myth, and the natural world in such a way that modulated the modernist tone. But most notably of all, we had prolific and important poets like John Shaw Neilson, Judith Wright, and the Jindyworobaks, who were all writing lyrics in poetic and even mystic celebration of the land, at the same time as English and European poets were composing their self-conscious odes to futility and existential despair. With the singular poetic contribution of Les Murray himself, the Aboriginal project of the Jindyworobaks has been developed to new heights, and we find in Murray, Wright and Shaw Neilson an impressive tradition of earth-romanticism of considerable national and even international importance. The earth gods have indeed been reanimated here, and this observation enables us to understand what is actually beneath the contemporary renaissance of powerful white and black Australian art.

These are some of my thoughts about Australian culture, religious experience, and my own speaking position. Now I would like to turn to the idea of the rebirth of the sacred in Western society, only my focus here will not be on 'evidence' of this rebirth in high culture, as upon the psychology of human character that makes this rebirth possible, and preoccupations in mass or popular culture that point to spiritual concerns.

## PART II: RECOVERING THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE

Spirituality has been eroded and attacked by numerous cultural forces since at least the time of the Intellectual Enlightenment. The combined forces of humanism, scientific rationalism, academic free-thinking, and materialism have all conspired to weaken and undermine spirituality and religion. And yet, for all this, spirituality has survived and is even coming back again. Culturally, it appears that we are at the beginning of a new wave of international interest in things spiritual. The opponents of spirituality claim this is a regression to outmoded thinking. They say people are losing their nerve, unable to go forward with scientific progress, and so are turning back to the past. Naturally enough, the return to spirituality is read negatively by

those who are ideologically opposed to it, and especially by those whose secular authority is challenged by the return of the sacred.

However, a more positive reading is to assert that humanity is *homo religiosus*, naturally religious, and we are simply recovering this original and basic sense of ourselves. According to this reading, religion was never destroyed, and God never died, but people lost touch with these primal realities due to the arrogance of human reason. Now that we are beginning to see that science, rationality and secularism are not the wonderful panaceas we once thought they were, we are losing faith in the false religion of secular progress. Now that we are seeing that the freedom promised by the secular dream is never going to be realised, we are sensing that we have short-changed ourselves and have missed out on a large dimension of reality. We are starting to see through our own idols and self-idolisation, and we are reaching out to something greater. The secular project has not delivered its promised boons, and we are now in a new, postmodern stage of exploration, but our exploration is driven by necessity and tinged with a sense of crisis and urgency. While skeptics might dismiss this new spiritual search as weakness or regression, it seems to me that it is a sign of genuine strength and wisdom.

In psychological terms, we are talking about an epic battle between the ego and the soul. The ego likes to imagine that it is in control of the personality and in charge of the world. The ego establishes itself as the sole psychological authority, and attacks other authorities that challenge the illusion of its omnipotence. After killing off the Gods and destroying the sacred, which, as Mircea Eliade has said, 'is the prime obstacle to [secular man's] freedom',<sup>4</sup> the ego crows loudly upon its dung-heap, boasting about its new-found freedom and power. But, at the very height of its success, something new happens. The ego suddenly feels alone and depressed, mournful and nostalgic. It is indeed 'free', but free to do what? and free to be what? There is an inner emptiness, and a deep-seated loneliness. In killing off the sacred, the ego is not made free, but merely alienated. The ego cannot live without its partner, the soul. The soul gives life value, meaning, and direction. The sacred is not an obstacle to the soul's freedom, but the primary means through which its freedom is established. This is a spiritual paradox that the ego does not understand: in devotion, the soul finds freedom; in service, it finds joy.

Even in high secularism and rationality, the claims of the soul are not entirely extinguished. The soul continues to long for a larger life, it yearns for relationship with something more. But because secularism does not

recognise the reality of soul, nor give it its own realm of symbolic experience, the longings of the soul become interpreted as ego-desires, thus compounding the situation and making it worse. So when the soul cries out for more, the ego says, 'I'll give you more', and it presents us with more events, more activities, more consumer goods, more sex, more entertainment, more sports. The ego takes the soul's legitimate longing for more and distorts it into something literal, material, and horrible. It serves up more at faster and faster speed, so that as time passes, we end up choked with countless, undigested, and unintegrated events. We have lots of events, but no experiences, because only that intangible reality of soul can deepen our events, give them resonance, and turn them into experiences. If soul was more present in our lives, we would demand fewer events and enjoy more experiences. This is what a great many people are beginning to realise throughout the world today: the ego's dream of progress and constant stimulation is in fact a nightmare, and people are retreating from this nightmare in search of more sustaining visions and values. Televisions are being turned off, and crass entertainment refused, as people attempt to listen to the still small voice of their own souls.

Perhaps some of us are growing up, and as we grow up we are seeing through the pretensions and delusions of the ego. Our ego is a lot like the fallen angel, Lucifer. When it serves a higher reality, when it devotes itself in service and love to greater ideals and a greater spirit, ego is a very noble figure, and something to admire. But when, like Lucifer, it imagines it can do without the higher reality, that it can kill off God, suddenly it loses its former dignity and becomes darkly demonic. The inferior voice within the ego tells it that continued service to the divine is a drag and a burden, something it can readily shrug off. This inferior voice is what Scripture mythologises as Satan and personifies as the Devil, namely, that element of egoic vitality that works away from divine service, that seeks to replace the authority of the divine with the authority of the ego. It is interesting that what secular society portrays as 'freedom' - the ego 'free' to pursue its own desires - is what traditional religions and myths portray as inhuman subservience and enslavement. To indulge the power of the ego is a bogus or fake liberation, since the very things that give life meaning and joy are alienated in the very process of elevating the ego.

The Western world is experiencing a kind of midlife crisis, or a moment of deep transition, and our turn to the spiritual is in many cases forced upon us by necessity. We are not heading toward spirituality because we are the willing inheritors of a religious culture, we are being hounded

toward the spiritual as an urgent response to the mess we have got ourselves into. Or, to change the metaphor, we are not becoming spiritual because we have seen the light, but because we have grown weary of the dark - a darkness and heaviness of soul that, ironically, is a direct result of what we choose to call our 'Enlightenment'. Those who resist this development are merely frustrating the evolution of consciousness, or are preventing us from growing into our cultural maturity. In *The Sibling Society*, the poet Robert Bly laments that modern society is not allowing itself to grow up, because age brings wisdom beyond the rational ego, and such wisdom is not wanted by secular society.<sup>5</sup> Jung argued that as we mature we grow beyond the confines of the limited self, and sometimes the ego must break, collapse, or painfully fracture before we can accept our own spiritual growth. Life shatters the cocoon-like encasement of the ego, and this can be a terrifying and anguished experience.

The more tightly sealed the envelope of the self, the more violent and upsetting will be the involuntary experience that seeks to jolt us out of our condition. This leads to another paradox: the more often we can have an ecstatic experience of the Wholly Other the less likely we are to be plagued by shocking events and disturbing revelations that try to turn our heads to the larger life. Here we can understand scripture in the light of this psychological truth: 'He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it' (Matthew 10:39). When the ego clings onto everything, it will lose everything, but if it sacrifices to a larger life, it will be allowed to live, and to live abundantly. Nature, fate, destiny, or God - however we like to conceptualise the Wholly Other - will simply cut off the supply of vitality and life to the inflated creature who does not consciously live the sacramental and devotional life. Western consciousness must now sacrifice something of its ego-security for the sake of greater growth. To the extent that it resists this process, it is contributing to what Jung calls the 'frustration of archetypal intent' and delaying the necessary transformation of our society.

The person who spiritually matures is the person who grows into a sense of the Other, an awareness of the importance of other people, of social needs beyond my needs, of the centrality of nature and the environment, and of the divine imprint in all things. An egocentric culture makes us oblivious to the life of nature and the delicate ecological balances in the environment, it makes us ignorant of our social responsibility, and disrespectful of age and aging. We have not learned the lesson which is basic to all ancient and tribal cultures: that the personal self is a working fiction,

and deep down we are coterminous with the social collective, the ancestors, and even the cosmos itself. In tribal cultures, initiations took place not only to mark the beginning of puberty and adolescence, but also to begin the transition whereby human identity shifts from the personal ego to the collective or transpersonal soul. This process of spiritual transformation needs rituals and cultural support to further it along, and in this regard so-called 'primitive' societies are in advance of our own so-called 'sophisticated' one. In initiations, the neophyte is urged to identify with a totemic symbol, with the life of the whole tribe and the strivings of the ancestors, and in this way the personality is weaned away from the ego and directed toward the life of the soul. Ancient initiations enabled us to pass from narcissism to wisdom, from ego-centredness to eco-centredness and community-mindedness.

Our culture, patently fails to teach us how to pass from the condition of ego to the condition of soul. The culture is Luciferian in its insistence that we stick to the ego and continue to deny the great world of the sacred. Instead of encouraging age and wisdom, our culture encourages continued youth and endless selfishness. Because wisdom cannot be conceptualised, age is viewed merely as the absence of youth, the loss of the ability to live recklessly and passionately from the personal ego. Today, age simply means that we are forced to slow down, to enjoy fewer diversions offered by our culture; therefore, it has been decided, old age is a bore. But age should mean that we are more able to enter the larger life beyond the ego, and to shed many of the personal ties, affectations, and idiosyncrasies that prevent us from participating in the universal life of the creator.

We cling to youth because we don't want to let go of the envelope of the self and our identification with it. We are grubs, and live grubby lives, in that well-spun cocoon, and we can't bear to become the butterfly who evolves naturally from the cocoon. But the person or culture who is caught inside this egoic structure often longs for a kind of negative or symptomatic transcendence. We find that, despite our commitment to maintaining the rationality of the ego, we are unconsciously addicted to this or that activity, to this or that substance, that holds out the possibility of release from the ego. The illusions offered by drugs, alcohol, consumerism, and other forms of indulgence become irresistible to an ego that cannot or does not want to discover the natural path of self-transcendence.

It is tragically ironic that a culture that refuses the open and available path of natural transcendence ends up destroying itself in pursuit of a negative or artificial transcendence. Human life has been ordained by nature

to transcend the ego, and if it lacks the guts to negotiate this transformation spiritually, it will become the victim of transformation gone wrong. If we won't turn into a butterfly, the grub inside the cocoon will hemorrhage and rupture, experiencing an 'explosion' of ego boundaries that brings death, addiction, or slow suicide. The problem of our increasing violence in the streets and at home, and our addiction to violence on screen and television, can be understood in precisely this light. We do not know how to transcend our limits through prayer or meditation, through wonderment or reverie, or through the enjoyment of great art, and so we take the tragically literal short-cut: 'exploding' our boundaries through violent attacks on the body, the mind, property, buildings, and all human or man-made containers. Everything is fair game, everything that can be blown apart will be blown apart. We must have transcendence of some sort, and in this way the postmodern world becomes addicted to violations of all boundaries in the vain hope of finding release.

The increasingly popular interest in UFOs, life on Mars, extraterrestrial life-forms, alien abductions, and whatever else, can also be seen through for its symbolic possibilities. On our screens and televisions, the UFO cult almost rivals the cult of violence and disaster in its intensity and repetitiveness. From the isolation and loneliness of the ego, people are gazing into the heavens with wonderment and hope, eager to find some sign of intelligent life in the wider universe. This is the primordial longing of the ego for a greatness outside and beyond itself, and concomitant with this longing is the suspicion that there has been some official cover-up, that the US government, or any government, is not allowing us to know what it already knows about this cosmic intelligent life. In this psychodrama, the US government plays the role of the conservative and repressive superego, the rigid and unbending consciousness that will not admit to the wider public that there is in fact a greater life, that there is something More than what the secular ego knows. This drama, which seems so new and marvelous with its high-tech imagery and interstellar distances, is simply the old and ancient drama of the soul, projected above us upon the skies, which have always been the eternal dwelling-place of the Western Gods.

But so long as this collective fantasy is taken literally and concretely we won't get anywhere; there will be a stalemate, a blockage of creative life, with many staring up in hope while the cynics look on with laughter and scorn. There is indeed a greater reality, an intelligent cosmic life, but the only thing blocking this transformative recognition is the alienated ego itself, which won't transcend its alienation long enough to admit to the

reality of spirit. Many people today are stuck in this double-bind, denying the world of spirit with the ego, and yet caught symptomatically in a literalised search for a greater life 'out there', anxious to prove in literal space what they continue to deny in symbolic and spiritual space. Because it is the scientific attitude that has chased the Gods away, it is 'science' itself that becomes burdened with repressed contents; our scientific awareness is disturbed by 'fictions' and 'fantasies' that attest to the continued reality of the soul. So long as this drama remains unconscious, it remains trapped in these external projections, and locked up in a 'techno' language that can never be decoded while we continue to be dominated by an ego that will not read its own experience symbolically or spiritually.

As the unchurched majority rediscover the sacred, we also have to contend with this thing called the New Age. The New Age phenomenon is frequently put down by church, media, and university alike, and we have been taught to dismiss this movement as aberrant and vulgar. But what is the New Age? It is, quite simply, the old religious impulse back again. The New Age is the return of the repressed: the sons and daughters of enlightened, university-educated parents, the offspring of intellectuals, Marxists, Freudians and other materialists, who are desperately searching for spiritual meaning, in the hope of recovering a lost or broken religious bond with the universe. This religious impulse is 'infantile' in both positive and negative senses. It is pregnant with the future, and will give rise to something dramatically new and decidedly post-rational, but we also notice how crude and silly much of the New Age is. Like an infant, the New Age consumes everything: all world religions and ancient spiritualities go into its mouth, are sucked for a while, and are often spat out undigested. Like an infant, the New Age imagines that God exists as a source of its own pleasure, as a consumer item, as something to grasp, manipulate, and acquire. The New Age is the same old consumeristic capitalism at work in the spiritual sphere, and of course it can rarely satisfy its own hunger because its attitude is false and misguided from the outset. Like UFOism, the drug culture, or the cult of violence, the New Age can merely gyrate around itself, bringing symptomatic release but not true release from the tyranny of the ego that binds us.

In addition to all these popular substitutes for religion, we have also the not-quite-so popular alternative of returning to the churches from which many of us, or at least our parents and grandparents, started. This raises a different set of spiritual and emotional problems. The return to our natal faiths can also be a 'religious substitute' if we do not negotiate this



genuine calling in the right way. For instance, it is my belief that the reawakening of the Spirit in our time is urging us on to new understandings of the sacred, and that the Church itself is being asked to change and adapt to new social circumstances and to new awarenesses of the body, of sexuality, of passion, of our relationship to nature and the natural world, of the immanent God working with us and within creation itself. It seems to me that the old-world transcendentalism of patriarchal Christianity will have to be superseded by a new religious revelation which is more affirmative and more closely related to the sacredness of the body, the feminine mysteries, and the everyday.

In other words, the West's 'loss of religion' may have been especially meaningful, not merely a mistake or some hiccup in our cultural development. We may have lost religion in order to find a new kind of religious awareness, and perhaps God himself was tired of our former religion, having no room within it to develop his complexity or his plurality of manifestation. If God is alive, then His - or Her - church must also change with the changing conditions in which the Spirit manifests its life to humanity. Those churchmen who always believe that we must go back to the distant past in order to recover 'true' Christianity inhabit a world in which God could be said to be dead, in the sense that the God of this backward-looking revelation is not alive today, and not beckoning us forward to new manifestations and new understandings of ourselves and our world.

From the point of view of the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, it may be counted as a regression for the West to go through all these colossal upheavals, the Reformation, the Intellectual Enlightenment, the erosion of conventional faith through the rise of science and humanism, only to find that when the sacred calls us again we respond to that calling by returning to a medieval conception of the divine. Rather than search for postmodern meanings of the sacred, some of us opt for premodern categories, which correctly inspire the criticism from others that we have become reactionary. I did notice in my own spiritual journey that when Christian spirituality became a new imperative for me, I was at first attracted to the oldest and most conservative forms of Christian practice. This shows a certain lack of nerve and courage, and also a desire for something rock-solid and unchanging. But when we are called to the sacred this is not to be seen as a call to attend to our own comfort and to infantile longings for absolute security. The call to the sacred is a risk, an adventure, and we have to respond appropriately.

The vital element here is to redefine the sacred and to bring it into our modern understandings, so that our religion does not contradict science, or humanism, or social justice, but acts as a complement to the world that we have already helped to put into place. This work of religious reconstruction is crucially important, because unless we perform this task now a future return to religion at the mass or collective level is bound to prove synonymous with a lurch to extremist right-wing politics and to rigid fundamentalism. That infantile longing for complete spiritual security that I first experienced during my own metanoia, is the same psychological ground from which all future religious fanaticisms will arise. We have to recognise that although religion enshrines what is eternal and universal, religion must not be led to believe that it is itself eternal or unchangeable. All enlightened minds within the existing churches realise this essential paradox, which has been nicely summed up by Jung, when he wrote: 'The eternal truths must be constantly reshaped and rediscovered, for only that which changes remains true.'<sup>6</sup> Ordinary people need help to negotiate this paradox, and that, I believe, is the social function of prophecy, great art, and visionary literature. Artists and prophets realise that eternity and time are crucially interdependent, and that the empty repetition of past expressions of the sacred kills the creative process and inhibits the Holy Spirit as it is working within us today.

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#### REFERENCES

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