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RELIGION, POLITICS AND PERSONAL INTEGRITY: the evolution of vocation and the reconstruction of faith

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS....traditional owners...CPRT...

In this address I want to elaborate on what I maintain is the credible and necessary core for a contemporary social ethic, (which I name “eco-justice”), in conjunction with what I personally believe must be the essence of a credible belief system (which may be termed “eco-theology”)... but first, with your indulgence, I intend to be reflectively autobiographical – and along the way give some insight into how and why my theology has changed over the years.

The story I draw on tonight is part of a much larger story we all share – in essence it is the story of our common quest to live with integrity in the public arena but also in that tribunal where we are alone before our God. In my case, across a varied career, chiefly in Queensland, I have traversed the boundary between ethics, politics and faith, where love, justice and power intersect. In that context I have engaged again and again not only the oxymoron of political ethics but also the impossible possibilities of social justice – all this set within the ambiguities of the human condition and my own personal frailties.

And, as you know, I have written a book about all this (***Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics, and spirituality, Zeus Publications, 2006***), in part to honour the stories of others “with whom I have traveled in the social and religious reform movements mentioned in its pages”. I trust also this book will provoke in the reader a deeper understanding of their own story.

The final chapter is an essay on what I now believe. It opens with this summary (p 289-90):

Over time, as I have operated on the boundary between church and society I moved way beyond my Methodist origins, through what I call Protestant (as opposed to Roman) Catholicism to eco-spirituality, which is committed to a deep ecumenism willingly joining forces with those who share a common cause, whether they be atheistic Marxists or from non-Christian faiths. As a scholar I also had to come to terms with the clash between the claims of the enlightenment and post-modernism. As a creature of the enlightenment I still want to affirm universal goals and values for the project of humanity on the one hand, while, on the other, I recognize the compelling post-modern account of social reality. Post-modernism emphasizes cultural diversity, though not necessarily ethical relativism, and describes a world coming to terms with its dark side and limitations. Similarly, I have been caught up in the boundary shift from an old Left view to the new Left in then culture at large. So, the democratic socialism of my youthful politics has become a more complex ideology enriched especially by ecological insights. Altogether I have a sense of a movement toward becoming more fully human in a world of fewer boundaries.

POLITICS AND FAITH

Several decades ago I chose to ignore the popular view that religion and politics don't mix, for I have made a vocation out of the engagement of faith and politics. The biblical prophets speaking truth to power left their mark on me in my youth. I have long understood Jesus of Nazareth to be in this prophetic tradition and, moreover, that the culmination of his ministry in the crucifixion was an event of political as much as salvific significance.

But the ground for my interest in linking politics and faith had been laid even before that. Perhaps politics was in my genes, for my maternal grandfather had been Mayor of Townsville and a Member of the Queensland Parliament. However, in my case the genetic influence mutated somewhat, for Grandad Green was one of the founders of the Country party in Queensland.

Then there was the influence of Methodism whose 18th century founder John Wesley adopted the slogan "The World is my Parish", and established a movement which had social, political and economic ramifications. Methodism was mediated to me chiefly through my father. My father, himself a minister, as you will read in the book, modeled this ministry-to-the-world idea through many community services including what has become Australia's largest domiciliary and community nursing service, Bluecare, and other initiatives like conducting church in a picture theatre under the slogan "Plain Talks for the People". Arthur Preston was never comfortable in being confined to the security provided by the church. The message I received as a boy was clear: Christianity required a life committed to making a difference in the world – and that I concluded meant political engagement, inspired by an ethical vision.

The wider stage of human events also played its part. While an undergraduate in the sixties I felt the existential impact of the Vietnam War and Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* as religious and political foundations began to shake. The study of political science, and rehearsals for activism in student anti-war marches during the sixties were a prelude to doctoral studies in Christian Social Ethics in the USA. I began to see that it is not just a matter of mixing faith and politics – how they were to mix was critical.

My role models and mentors were Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr.

Reinhold Niebuhr – American Christian social ethicist figure dominant from the 1930s to the 1960s. His method which hinged around the dialectical interaction between agape love, justice and power informed me but so also his example of engagement in political affairs which took seriously not just the possibilities but also the limitations of political practice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – who engaged the political forces of darkness in Nazi Germany in a way that cost him his life. Bonhoeffer prophetically spoke of “religionless Christianity”.

Martin Luther King Jr. – who was a graduate of the same School of Theology at Boston University where I pursued my doctoral studies in social ethics and whose dream of social justice led the civil rights movement until his assassination in 1968.

I returned to Australia from Boston University just before Gough Whitlam was elected in 1972 and I took up an appointment in a city pulpit in Brisbane in Joh Bjelke Petersen's Queensland. So began the roller coaster of social justice advocacy. It was a somewhat poisoned chalice in those times to be mandated as a spokesperson and advocate on questions of social justice or, as we Methodists quaintly called them at the time, Christian Citizenship matters. There was no shortage of issues to address in the years that followed: racism, the erosion of civil liberties and democracy, peace and nuclear disarmament, corruption in government and so on.

In Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland the mixture of religion and politics was particularly potent. Fundamentalist religion and conservative politics went hand in hand, while bodies

like the National Civic Council and the League of Rights were very visible. From my standpoint the invocation of religion simply to bless government, or the conjunction of moralism with authoritarian government which eschewed concerns about social reform was repugnant. I saw vividly in Joh Bjelke-Petersen what I was to see later in individual politicians like Fred Nile or most recently perhaps in George Bush that the conjunction of self-righteousness, self-delusional innocence and political power is a most dangerous mix.

The 1970s was an era in which people power struggles for social justice across the world spawned a new theological emphasis in which Christian faith and socialist analytic tools joined forces. Liberation theology, as it was termed, flourished in Latin America and the Phillipines and we saw parallels in our situation in Queensland.

As Christians committed to social justice in Queensland we were faced with the challenge that the Bjelke Petersen government paraded itself as the bastion of morality and the defenders of Christian society against the atheistic socialist marauders from Canberra. In the book I describe how we responded as part of the Action for World Development ecumenical initiative and through the activist group we formed called Concerned Christians.

Let me now read how I have explained the motivation behind our political activism.

(p.100) At the end of the day the issue for me was one of evangelization and apologetics. that is, the 'concern' of 'Concerned Christians' was to provide an alternative and more authentic witness to Christ in the world, to that espoused by the zealous religious allies of the Bjelke-Petersen government's policies..

I observe that in 2007 there are similar dynamics operating in Australian political life – perhaps not as crudely as the liaison between the Bjelke-Petersen government and Queensland's rustic fundamentalism seemed - but arguably more concerning and far-reaching. The convergence of interests between some political conservative forces and the religious right is a current reality I find concerning. Once again, as we faced in the 1970s in Queensland, there is an issue of credibility for those who would witness to a prophetic faith committed to social justice. I have passingly referred to this contemporary phenomenon in *Beyond the Boundary*:

(p.231) Just as the connection between one version of Christian morality and conservative politics in Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland caused some of us to declare an explicit, alternative religious and political witness, it is time for such a movement across Australia to challenge the cynical or simplistic marriage of the religious and political right.

The autobiographical account has further twists and turns as through the 1980s I made a career adjustment from being a clergyman to becoming an academic – a context which freed me to a point to develop my own beliefs and world view without ecclesiastic expectations or demands (though I retained my status as an ordained Minister of the Word).

The focus of my teaching and research was Applied and Professional Ethics. The Fitzgerald Inquiry into corruption in public life in Queensland provided a platform for ongoing publication and advocacy aimed at public sector ethics and the goal of accountability in government.

In this context I had the opportunity to advise on the development of integrity mechanisms including codes of conduct for public officials and parliamentarians. The underlying challenge has always been to link ethics in the processes of government with ethical public policy, after all “clean” government is not necessarily “good” government.

In some quarters we have made ground in public sector ethics but there are still lessons to be learnt and vigilance will always be required. Here in Canberra the erosion of accountability in government is obvious – nowhere more so than in the AWB affair especially when that is linked to the spurious justification for our warring intervention in Iraq.

FAITH AND PERSONAL INTEGRITY

That – in a rambling, but truncated way - is the story, or at least the public and political part of it. There is another layer to the narrative. I refer to the private quest for integrity, the inner struggle, the sacred story – and in *Beyond the Boundary* I have tried to be as honest about that as I can. So in the Preface I wrote:

(Pxiii) I am acutely aware that someone whose public profile is associated with declarations and commentary about the ethical nature of others' behaviour cannot expect to escape accountability for personal conduct. that said, full and detailed disclosure of one's personal life is not always possible, appropriate or necessary in a work such as this. Nonetheless my intention has been to open the windows into my personal and inner journey sufficiently to explore authentically my struggle to live with integrity. Readers should not be surprised that even those who build their vocation around ethics are not saints but flawed individuals.

Perhaps the search for integrity is more accurately expressed as a journey to authenticity and credibility . That quest is very demanding as we know and requires a willingness to admit our wrongs, be open to change and to know, ultimately, that we cannot control life's destiny, even in our own personal world.

Along the way I have encountered several conversion points, milestones on the journey. I open the chapter entitled "Boundaries of the Inner Life" with these words:

*(p.251) In my youth a joyous, energizing conversion experience propelled me into ministry. Life's later 'conversions' were tinged with pain, depression, loss and grief – most specially a broken marriage and the recurring shadow of cancer. these dark and difficult times were also times of dangerous yet liberating clarity, occasions of ecstasy – literally 'standing outside oneself'(as the original Greek *ekstasis* suggests) – periods of doubt and despair, interspersed with rich seasons of personal growth, and spaces for empowerment and the renewal of energy and vision.*

The most critical lessons I have learnt, and therefore the most important reflections I can offer come out of the crucible of suffering, human frailty, experiences of loss and letting go. Authenticity and credibility come at a price. In the early years of social activism these were lessons I barely took time to learn, but eventually, life's experiences and indeed one's body, insist that sustainable activism must be built on contemplation and the nurturance of compassion in all relationships. Several encounters with cancer including major surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy and the ongoing shadow of prostate cancer have prompted a profound inner journey of spiritual discovery.

Through all this the challenge became acute:how to integrate better one's vision of social ethics and spirituality in a credible 21st century way.

In the remainder of this address I want to outline the key theological and ethical insights this challenge has unearthed.

At the same time that I was teaching applied ethics and encouraging politicians to develop codes of ethics there was a deepening of my awareness that the vital ethical question of our time is a question of environmental ethics: *how ought we live together with the Earth?* I quote again.

(p.238-9) My sensitivity to this question has been strengthened as I have aged. Conversations with my wife Coralie, whose interest in astronomy and bird-watching along with a deep commitment to eco-feminism, have enriched my understanding. Times of serious illness have generated the potent insight that my individual and embodied self is but part of a greater whole. Life is bigger than any particular expression of life. Healing times in rainforests, at the beach or with the humpback whales, together with reading an emerging body of literature around environmental ethics, and eco-spirituality, have expanded my worldview and theology. I now see that 'social analysis' and 'bio analysis' (the analysis of life systems) must be linked – an argument advanced by the feminist Indian ecologists, Vandana Shiva and Arundati Roy. Another influential author is Thomas Berry, a priest who calls himself an 'ecologist' rather than a 'theologian', and who is described by Theodore Roszak as "the bard of the new cosmology". Berry makes a claim about the human spirit which emphasizes the fundamental place of bio analysis:

"We have no inner spiritual life if we don't have the outer experience of a beautiful world." Complementing this observation is that of another leading thinker, Franciscan theologian, Leonardo Boff. He invites us to link social analysis with bio analysis.

"The most threatened of nature's creatures are the poor..."

Taken together these insights suggest a need to extend our understanding of social justice to what is better termed 'eco-justice'. Eco-justice signifies that poverty in human societies is an ecological problem, just as violations of nature's biodiversity and the biosphere have exacerbated the extent of global poverty. Therefore to achieve eco-justice we must not only address environmental degradation but also challenge the exploitation of the poor.

Along with this shift from social justice to eco-justice I tuned into the expanding conversation about global ethics being generated in the World Parliament of Religions meetings convened by Hans Kung and others. In the late nineties I particularly became aware of the Earth Charter Initiative which after more than a decade of widespread consultations has resulted in a comprehensive declaration of principles which are both universal and yet respecting of cultural diversity to underpin a global community of peace, justice and sustainability, in other words a manifesto of eco-justice. In its preamble the Earth charter declares: *As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognise that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one earth community with a common destiny.*

That challenge clearly suggests that the context and goal of all theology and politics must now be to support and develop global community, understood to include both non-human

and human species, and the story which should inspire and shape our theology and our politics is fundamentally the universe story, the story of life. As for politics and the quest for global justice I conclude the chapter where I explore these matters as follows:

(p.243-4) There is no other way. a new politics is necessary if the vision of the Earth Charter is to be realized. It is too glib to say that this new politics requires a change of heart in most of us. In contemporary Australian politics only the Greens articulate that vision consistently, though I have no doubt that there are elements and key persons in the major parties who are amenable to its message...the transformation of politics...requires political practice that is itself transformative, responding to the nobility of human beings, a nobility derived not from domination over life on Earth but from humanity's capacity for stewardship on behalf of life on Earth, mandated as it is through our species' place of responsible dependence within the biosphere.

I know there is much more to be said to fill in the detail of this big picture, but my point is that we must first clarify the vision.

Along with this realisation we have to come to terms with the reality that the explanation of faith that we received in our youth lacks credibility in certain respects in light of contemporary cosmology and what we have learnt about the nature of the profound interconnectedness of life.

I guess I have always been something of a liberal theologically. In my oral examination for ordination I disturbed some of the church fathers with my readiness to dismiss the historicity of Gospel accounts of miracles and a bodily resurrection. But now I maintain that we must go even further in reconstructing faith – credibility, authenticity and the reality of life's interconnectedness demand it.

Let me share how I express this as an account of an eco-theology which supports an eco-spirituality.

(p. 287)I summarise eco-spirituality as "centred on compassion which is all inclusive and empowering, drawing on well-springs that are both contemplative and prophetic; it is a spirituality which challenges the illusions which easily capture us – that consumerism makes us happy or even that there is a god out there who will save us; it is also a spirituality which supports a focus on outcomes that are realistic and practical, even if they are sometimes less than ideal. In the quest for a balance that is in harmony with the Earth, this spirituality calls us to act justly, love all beings tenderly and walk humbly with the Spirit of Life (Micah 6v.8), sure in the faith that it is the meek who inherit the earth (Matt 5v.5).

(p.295-6)... the approach I have stumbled to explain here certainly leads to some emphases of belief which are a modification of traditional and orthodox Christianity...characterized by being:

1. ecocentric and not anthropocentric, that is it rejects human-centred theology, which subtly endorses our species' destructive dominance of nature through human technology, in favour of a view which takes seriously the intrinsic value of all life;
2. inclusive not exclusive, not just in a gender, race or species sense, but also, in rejecting a fundamentalist mindset, it recognizes 'the truth to live by' may be revealed in varying and multiple ways;
3. mystical rather than literalist, that is it centres on an experience of transcendence in the midst of life's uncertainties triggered more by cosmic connectedness with other creatures than by codified religious forms;
4. shaped by an over-riding sense of the goodness of life rather than by its undeniable tragedy, which suggests that life's purpose is more about celebrating original goodness rather than seeking salvation from original sin.

As I see it, the faith perspective I outline here is not at variance with what we know of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth (and we know very little in a strictly historical sense), a man like ourselves limited by the cultural context in which his consciousness developed, and a man who, I am sure, turns in his grave at the practices of 'Jesusolatry' which humans have constructed in the past two millennia.

The key question begged in all this is of course 'the god question'. We must address it.

This is my brief explanation in *Beyond the Boundary*.

(p.291-2) *The perspective I bring to a credible credo for the twenty-first century is predicated on a way of thinking known as "process philosophy" which is linked to the work of some theologians and scientists like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, John Cobb and Charles Birch who take seriously the evolutionary and interconnected processes creating life in the universe. The story of the Universe is therefore the primary context for "theologizing". Other worldview narratives – including the Judaeo- Christian account in which is embedded the Jesus story – must be reframed accordingly. In a process worldview premised on the Universe story, the "god out there" of traditional theism, the "elsewhere" God, is replaced by the "everywhere" God. Pan-en-theism (everywhere) replaces mono-theism (elsewhere). In shorthand, this is akin to "the higher power" referred to by Alcoholics Anonymous for instance. This sense of God is experienced relationally, indeed personally, and in the processes which give life. In human consciousness it may be known as an inner awareness, a mystical knowledge beyond what some would regard as rational.*

One day as I wrestled with these theological conundrums I saw a roadside church notice board, obviously preparing for Christmas, which carried a question to attract the attention of those passing by: What if God were one of us? I realized again the simple, though not necessarily unique, claim of the Christian gospel, that Jesus of Nazareth is a human being who shows us god-like characteristics pointing to new and better possibilities. Expressed colloquially, Jesus is as much of God as can be fitted into a human being. But, while Jesus defines God for some of us, God is not confined to this definition.

And I thought about it further (in pan-en-theistic terms). In life's story we are all members one of another. However, humans have a special character in evolution on Earth as "the cosmos come to consciousness" i.e. of being self consciously aware and knowledgeable about the story of life and the possibility of shaping its meanings. Moreover, just as all other beings of life's evolution are in a sense "one of us", so divine being is caught up in the process of life which includes all beings and contributes to the life changing process just as we all do. In this understanding, Jesus and those like him (and that potentially means all of us) may represent a breakthrough in the evolution of consciousness which is

a sign of a new being, a new being that is closer, as it were, to the loving nature we may call divine. What I am trying to say is that rather than simply being beings for whom the survival of the fittest is the ultimate law, we are part of the evolutionary possibility of fashioning a community of love which expresses the life of God – and Jesus is a key, historical indicator of this.

A pan-en-theistic view also opens a credible and constructive way to examine issues of natural injustice like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, because pan-en-theism takes seriously the idea that even the divine presence is subject to the evolutionary processes of life. The New Testament core statement that “God is Love” fits with pan-en-theism. Love is that energy, that quality in the process, which shapes life’s relationships in ways that are more harmonious, empowering, joyous and just, reflecting, if you like, “the divine” or “the ground of our being”.

IN SUMMARY

I look forward to the conversation we will now have but first let me sum up. I have traced a personal journey - which I know is not unique - from liberation theology to eco theology...from democratic socialism to green politics...from social justice to ecojustice. Altogether I have sense that we are called to be more fully human in a world of fewer boundaries.

I have spoken of ‘spirituality’ quite deliberately, for that term embraces more accurately where my interests lie, beyond religion, beyond institutional Christianity and beyond theism, while remaining essentially Christ-centred.

All that said, in the end surely it is a matter not so much of being “right” but of being “true to oneself”, that state which is the precursor to the wisdom which ultimately eludes us. We continue to play out life’s charade as we must, but the hope that sustains us rests on act of faith which relies on that impossible possibility: life’s greatest gift, love in its many dimensions.

That said I have chosen to end the book not so much on the theme of love but on a note of hope, though despair sits in the wings.

(p.304) ...the inescapable reality being realised more and more is that the human spirit (the bearer of hope and despair) is a creation of the cosmos and that, therefore, our will to survive must be subject to a life force which transcends ourselves. Whether our starting point is economics or bioscience or speculative spirituality or even crass technology, we are faced as never before with the possibility and necessity of global citizenship, of being one world and of interconnectedness between human beings and all beings throughout the whole universe. Hope derives from this possibility and necessity.

We each have a choice: to act on this reality with hope for a better world or to be passive as we despair that things can ever improve. Ultimately the choice to hope requires faith and is an expression of love. Even when we feel that we are hoping against hope, the choice remains, for the game is not up until the final cards are played. If we look at the big picture of history there is much evidence of remarkable and hopeful transformation. The future is an infinite succession of present moments, and to live in hope today, in defiance of evil around us, is itself a marvellous victory for hope.