



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

16 - The Myth of an Australian Spirituality

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The Myth of an Australian Spirituality

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Is there a unique phenomenon we can describe as 'Australian spirituality'? Is there something so distinctive about Australian culture and the Australian way of life that one of the most profound of all human drives – the drive to make sense of human existence and to place ourselves in some cosmic context – would be differently expressed here from elsewhere, or perhaps even differently *experienced* in the Australian context?

It's a fashionable question to ask because it's part of the fashionable quest for those distinctive Australian values that are supposed to underpin and illuminate a distinctive Australian identity.

I'd better begin by declaring that I'm a sceptic about all this, though I recognise these as serious questions. My scepticism arises from my belief that everything worthwhile about human society, human endeavour and human thought connects us to human nature *in general*, and to the universal experience of what it means to be truly human.

But let's begin our examination of the issue in the time-honoured way, by raising what seems like the opposite question, but one that is inextricably linked to any discussion about values and spirituality. What happens when we ask this question: *Is there a distinctive Australian materialism?*

Superficial expressions of materialism are, of course, tied to particular times and places: fashions wax and wane; self-indulgence takes many forms; prosperity can be defined in many ways. But humans are necessarily rather materialistic creatures, responding to primal drives for shelter, food, warmth and security, so it is at least as reasonable to ask about distinctive Australian expressions of materialism as about a distinctive Australian spirituality.

In some ways, it makes perfect sense to start our discussion in this way, because the European colonisation of Australia was a post-Enlightenment project. Non-indigenous Australia, from the beginning, was a determinedly rationalist and secular society with no official religion and an approach to the construction of a society heavily dependent on hedonism. (Perhaps there was a subtle blend of South Pacific and Europe, from the beginning.)

Today, we are seeing the full flowering of that rationalist and secular approach – coinciding with the full flowering of the capitalist economy – in our contemporary embrace of runaway consumerist materialism. Indeed, when we talk about 'distinctive Australian values' we should probably put materialism at the top of the list. We are a nation obsessed with real estate prices, home renovations, personal possessions, the share market and the movement of



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interest rates. Our record levels of personal and household debt show just how willing we are to yield to the materialist urge.

In political discourse, we have largely conflated 'society' and 'the economy'. We are not citizens so much as consumers. Our much vaunted freedom is most commonly expressed as the freedom to choose between brand X and brand Y in the consumer marketplace, and the freedom to borrow money at the most competitive interest rate to facilitate such purchases. The fact that many of the choices we make as consumers are almost meaningless does not appear to diminish our enthusiasm for making them. Nor are we backward in embracing 'retail therapy' as a potential cure for our anxieties, uncertainties and insecurities. These are the hallmarks of a materialistic society.

But they are hardly distinctive to Australia. Yes, we in Australia enjoy a remarkable choice when it comes to toothbrushes – but so do the Americans from whom we borrow most of the toothbrush brands on offer. We have a remarkable choice when it comes to coffee – short or long black, machiatto, ristretto, cappuccino, flat white, latte, to simply touch on an ever-lengthening list – but the Italians would be amused if we claimed any of this as distinctively ours. Even our hedonistic obsession with backyards, barbecues and beaches doesn't distinguish us from people in many other parts of the world who worship at precisely those same altars.

We've occasionally tried to put an Australian spin on our materialism by declaring that 'Buy Australian' is a virtue, but even that attempt to weave patriotism into our materialism has led us into confusion: what is 'Australian', exactly? Does it refer only to something made here by Australian labour? Does it mean something made by an Australian-owned company? Does it include products made here from imported ingredients? Or products made by Australian workers for foreign-owned companies? No, in our increasingly globalised world, we would have a hard time claiming that a distinctive Australian identity in the commercial marketplace makes much sense.

(In any case, if we were to talk virtue in this context, we would have to introduce another moral dimension: should we perhaps be buying products made in poorer countries than ours?)

Even that quintessential symbol of suburban Australian comfort and prosperity, the detached dwelling with a front garden and a backyard, was the brainchild of an English architect in the middle of the nineteenth century. (Though, speaking of architecture, we do have one distinctively, iconically Australian edifice: the Sydney Opera House, designed, of course, by a Danish architect.)

It's hard to escape the conclusion that in our materialism, we are just like everyone else in comparably developed societies. Our cars, our plasma TV screens, our computers, our cameras, our soft drinks, our fashions ... these are mostly the products of world brands and our consumer markets are mostly indistinguishable from other markets around the world. We eat, we wear, we drive, we watch, we listen to the same products – in everything from pop music to processed food and fashion labels – as almost all Westerners.

Our materialism casts dark shadows across our society, but they are no different from the shadows cast by materialism across other societies: the reinforcement of greed; the encouragement of a competitiveness that enshrines the concept of winners and losers; the quest for a larger slice of the economic pie (which leaves smaller slices for others); the assumption that our worth can be defined by our wealth. Rampant materialism breeds rampant individualism which diminishes our sense of being part of a communal whole. And, of course, materialism casts its



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deepest shadow in the inevitable disappointment inherent in any quest for gratification through material possessions.

What, then, of our non-material values?

Three of our favourite so-called 'national values' sound suspiciously as if they were borrowed from the French Republic's *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, though they are generally presented in the reverse order as Australia's very own: mateship, egalitarianism and the 'fair go'.

So how do they stack up? Though it may be an unpopular view to take, I suspect this particular trinity offers more comfort than illumination. Myths are fine when they inspire, but what if they actually weaken us by blinding us to the truth about ourselves?

Take **mateship** – a perennial favourite among back-slapping blokes, though not so immediately appealing to women. Derived largely from the legends of survival in the harsh outback, the solidarity of trade unionists, and the bonding rituals of sport, mateship is actually a rather clubby, tribal concept. Our version seems less inclusive than the French: rather than implying that we are one 'brotherhood', it suggests we look after our mates; we care for our own. Well, who doesn't? Throwing a sympathetic arm around a friend in trouble is natural, but hardly noble – and hardly unique to Australia. When two miners were trapped underground for a week in Tasmania's Beaconsfield gold mine, politicians and the media praised the rescue efforts – which were indeed heroic – as a tangible expression of classic Aussie mateship. But wouldn't Russian, German or South African miners have tried just as hard to rescue their colleagues?

What about **egalitarianism**? Given our increasingly stark socio-economic stratification, it's even doubtful whether this is still our dream, and the more we recite it like a mantra, the less clearly we'll perceive the contradictory reality of unequal access to education, health-care, housing and information. Were we ever a truly egalitarian society, compared with, say, Denmark or Italy, both of which have far flatter distribution of wealth than we do? The dream thrived in the 1950s when it looked as if the suburban middle class would become our paradigm, but the gap between wealth and poverty now seems unlikely to narrow. Today, the wealthiest 20 percent of Australian households have an average annual household income of \$225,000, while the poorest 20 percent have an average annual household income of \$22,000. There are many reasons for that gap, but poverty is an intransigent fact of contemporary Australia, in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom and previously unimagined levels of wealth at the top of the heap.

Egalitarianism is about equality of opportunity, not equality of outcomes, but if history is any guide, the present gap between rich and poor households has implications for future opportunities as well: the institutionalisation of socio-economic strata seems a real possibility, if it hasn't already happened.

Of course, we've always had our own jumped-up version of an aristocracy, mainly based on money and as deluded as any other, and we weren't even egalitarian in our attitudes to women until the last 25 years or so. There's still a common view that immigrants should first 'learn their place' before they can expect to be accepted as equals here. And while we claim to abhor elitism, we're highly elitist in our treatment of sports stars and celebrities.



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The *'fair go'*? That certainly sounds like us. Dinky-di. Unless you're an asylum-seeker, of course, or the kind of refugee we don't want, an Aborigine, poor, homeless, or have a mental illness or some other disability. (Come to think of it, we're quite adept at marginalising people.) We're not even particularly good at ensuring a fair go for those in rural and regional Australia who watch the prosperity gap between them and the city widen: the income of non-metropolitan Australians is, on average, 16 percent lower than for metros. Many rural and regional Australians are being disadvantaged by the steady withdrawal of commercial, health, education and other services.

So that 'holy trinity' of Aussie values, however appealing, doesn't quite capture the real us. I've already suggested that if you were to be brutally honest about the values that drive us at present, materialism would have to top the list, perhaps followed by pragmatism. But these hardly sound noble enough to be enshrined as the values that define us (though pragmatism has been an important factor in generating the levels of tolerance and inclusiveness necessary to create our famously diverse and increasingly cosmopolitan culture).

If we were to abandon the clichés and focus on what is really distinctive about this vibrant, exciting, infuriating place we call Australia, we'd have to acknowledge that we're world champions at creating a harmonious society from a blend of people who, over the years, have come here from about 180 different birthplaces around the world. Diversity is our cultural distinctive; tolerance is therefore one of our cardinal virtues. Whether we're talking about our cultural identity or our spiritual life and religious practice, it's therefore inevitable that we should be, for the time being, an amalgam of all those cultures from which we've sprung. Yes, some – like British and Irish – are more dominant than others, but it is the very diversity of our heritage that makes us unique.

Nevertheless, many Australians still cling to the idea that there must be some distinctive values that spring from an inherently Australian ethos and help to define the kind of people we are, or aspire to be.

Yet most of the values we claim as cornerstones of our way of life are simply the touchstones of any modern liberal democracy: respect for persons as individuals, regardless of age or sex; respect for democracy and its institutions, including the rule of law and the principle of parliamentary representation; the right to freedom of speech, belief and assembly. We discourage the exploitation of the weak by the strong; we abhor prejudice that judges people by the category they represent – ethnic, religious, or otherwise. We condemn the oppression and abuse of minorities.

It goes without saying that we don't all live by all those values all the time, but we could scarcely claim them as uniquely ours, without offending every other liberal democracy on the planet.

So our materialism isn't unique, our noblest and most enriching values aren't unique, and it follows from what I've been saying that I don't think we can make much sense of the idea of a unique Australian spirituality, either.

There have been many heroic attempts to find something distinctively Australian in our spiritual and religious life, and to discern some distinctive *spiritual essence* of Australianness in our art, music or literature. While some people have been tempted to look to indigenous art, culture or spirituality as a source of distinctive Australianness – perhaps hoping for a unique fusion of Indigenous and Western or other traditions – Professor Gary Bouma reminds us in *Australian Soul* (2006) that there has been a sharp decline in the number of people identifying with traditional Aboriginal religions. Although indigenous Australians have been expressing their spirituality through various forms of religious practice for over 40,000 years, this has been a highly diverse heritage, reflecting the many indigenous



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'nations' that lived here before European settlement. In any case, as Bouma points out, most contemporary Australians who identify themselves as Aboriginal also indicate that they are Christians. Quoting 2001 census figures, Bouma notes that only 1.2 percent of Aboriginal people said they held to their traditional religions, whereas 69 percent identified with a Christian denomination in proportions that roughly follow those of the Australian population as a whole.

In any case, the attempt to fuse religion and nationalism has a discouraging history. Clifford Geertz reminds us in his 1973 classic *The Interpretation of Cultures* that '(sometimes in combination) religious bigotry and nationalist hatred have probably brought more havoc upon humanity than any two forces in history', while conceding that, like religion, nationalism 'has been a driving force in some of the most creative changes in history'. Religion is not the same thing as religious bigotry, of course; nationalism is not the same thing as nationalist hatred. But the attempt to recruit religion into the nationalist project – or to recruit nationalism into the service of religion – is fraught with peculiar hazard, doubling the risk of passionate, prejudiced self-righteousness.

In our religious faith and practice, as in our broader cultural life, we are highly diverse and we share that diversity with – and indeed derive much of it from – many different cultures from around the world, both past and present. The Australian physical and cultural context naturally exerts its influence on our creative artists, yet there is no reason to suppose that the most profound and universal human impulses and yearnings should find unique expression in Australia, disconnected from the flow of creative evolution around the world – whether in religion, art, music, literature, values, or any other aspect of our culture.

The Australian abstract landscape painter Ross Lawrie, for example, sees his highly distinctive work as being set squarely in a tradition that runs from Rembrandt and Tintoretto via Willem De Kooning to Lawrie's studio on a sheep farm in Walcha. Similarly, there's no reason to suppose that cultural expressions of deep human impulses from other parts of the world should seem alien or unacceptable to us.

While there has indeed been a recent surge of interest in the subject of values, it has little to do with *national* values. When politicians try to hijack the values debate, they miss the point: our keenest interest in values is almost entirely confined to the private realm: 'How should we live? How can we manage our lives better than we're doing at present? How can we restore balance to our lives? How can we bring out the best in ourselves and each other?'

In *Where to Now?: Australia's Identity in the Nineties* (1993), the Hungarian-born writer and literary critic, Andrew Riemer, wrote that 'in the case of national identities and national prototypes, perhaps even national fictions, there are profound myths, legends and beliefs that become part and parcel of the cultural fabric of a society. It is those things we ought to try to explore.'

In Australia, there are plenty of myths, legends and beliefs that sustain our sense of ourselves: the Anzac tradition, Eureka Stockade, Burke and Wills – though those are all tales of heroic failure. More broadly, we respect our military history and revere the exploits of explorers and the privations of pioneers who opened up *the outback* (itself a sustaining myth that has sold an awful lot of four-wheel-drive vehicles, elastic-sided boots and 'country' furniture to city slickers). Our painters, poets, writers and composers have framed a national story for us and inspired us with a deep sense of Australianness that sometimes springs from our distinctive environment – the land, the sea, the sky –



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and sometimes from the very tensions inherent in the process of creating a cultural amalgam out of a highly eclectic collection of immigrants.

But it's early days. We've only been a federated nation for a little over 100 years. Think of Greece and Italy. Think of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Think of France, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Cambodia. Think of Egypt, Iraq, Iran. Think of India, China and Japan. Think of Hungary, Poland, Austria and Germany. We need another century or two, at least. The process of identity-formation has scarcely begun.

In any case, the more closely we approach an understanding of spirituality, the more we must acknowledge that local, culture-specific expressions of it only resonate with us because they point to universal truths and common human experiences that connect us to deeper questions about the meaning of life itself ... and not just *our* lives.

When, as theologians, musicians, painters, poets or writers, we strive to be 'relevant' in a transient, trendy way, that's when we are least likely to be tapping into those noble impulses that transcend the vagaries of fashion and of populism. That's when we're least likely to be responding to the universal.

The creation of spiritually evocative music, art or literature in one context does not limit its evocative power to that context. JS Bach had plenty to say to his listeners, and he has plenty to say to us. Ditto for Palestrina, Byrd, Taverner and Tavener, Wesley (*S and C*), Philip Glass and Peter Sculthorpe. Ditto for Shakespeare, Proust, Joyce; for Vikram Seth, David Malouf, Richard Ford, Tim Winton and Salman Rushdie. Creative people never appeal to everyone in their own culture, and sometimes attract unbridled hostility and ridicule, but what they evoke from those who do respond is a sense of the universality of truth or beauty – a sense of engagement with the great themes of human existence. Many creative artists whose work is denigrated in their lifetime nevertheless connect with people in other times and places who respond to some truth – some authenticity – in what they see or hear, often in ways that eluded the artists' own contemporaries.

It goes without saying that fashions influence artistic expression. How could it be otherwise? Similarly, spirituality is *expressed* in different ways that are sometimes specific to time, place and culture, and sometimes not. But those expressions that endure, crossing the boundaries of space and time, are always about the same things:

the possibility of finding goodness – truth, beauty, integrity – in human experience;

the possibility of redemption, regardless of our frailty;

the possibility of forgiveness, regardless of our offence;

the transforming idea that we are all connected – that we are all part of a larger whole;

the idea that meaning can be given to our lives through contemplation of the sacred and the infinite and that such meaning will be expressed most vividly through our relationships with each other and our willingness to accept responsibility for each other's wellbeing.

It is the role of religion to provide a liturgical and a communal framework for such contemplation and to provide – through words, music and ritual – the stimulation and the inspiration for the development of our spirituality.



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Our religious practice, like all other aspects of our lives, is a blend of imports and local variations. Even where particular churches have tried to tie themselves to a national identity – Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Scots Presbyterian, Greek Orthodox – that particularity has been mainly administrative and historical. Such churches only succeed in stimulating and nurturing our spirituality (and only survive their transplantation to other places) to the extent they are willing to focus more on the universality of spiritual experience and less on the particularities of dogma and structure.

The more we try to tie religion to specific dogma and even to particular articles of faith, the less it will contribute to our spiritual development since that development is all about enlargement, liberation and inclusion – widening the focus of our thinking, not narrowing it.

Still, we can't deny that narrowness has its appeal at certain times in our social evolution; the present is such a time. In contemporary Australia, we have witnessed the rise of fundamentalism in religion (but also in economics, feminism, environmentalism, medicine and elsewhere) in direct response to widespread feelings of insecurity and uncertainty and a corresponding yearning for simplicity, security and certainty. Our present insecurities and uncertainties – and our lowered tolerance of ambiguity – are the result of living through a sustained period of social and cultural instability caused by four simultaneous revolutions:

- the gender revolution, redefining the role and status of women and transforming inter-gender relations and attitudes;

- the economic revolution, transforming the workplace, teaching us to live with 'job insecurity' and widening the gap between rich and poor in our society;

- the information technology revolution, changing the way we live and work and even redefining our understanding of words like 'communication' and 'connectedness';

- the revolution in our sense of national identity, partly driven by the rise of multiculturalism, and raising deep questions about our place in the region and the world.

The cumulative effect of these revolutions can be found in widespread feelings of anxiety, distress and fatigue which have contributed to our epidemic of depression. We have been called upon to rethink many aspects of the Australian way of life that we once thought were inherent and immutable – to acknowledge that many things we thought were cornerstones of a society have either crumbled or shifted.

In this context, it is hardly surprising to find people seeking relief in magic simplicities and simple, black-and-white certainties. While many of us recognise the need to live with a sense of ambiguity, complexity and even a kind of cosmic doubt, others find such prospects daunting and seek instead the reassurance of material comforts or spiritual over-simplification. For those of us who regard doubt as the very engine of faith, the appeal of fundamentalism seems odd. But its appeal continues to grow as more people embrace the idea that faith should feel like certainty.

The greater the level of social anxiety and insecurity, the greater the appeal of the simple answer. Yet, paradoxically, the fundamentalist approach can actually distract us from engagement with the mysteries that lie at the heart of our spirituality. The pounding beat and numbing repetition of rock music, for example, can narrow our focus and reduce



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us to primitive responses in the religious context as effectively as in any other context. Similarly, dogmatic reliance on the literal truth of scripture can narrow the focus of a religious pilgrim. Even, bizarrely, the blending of materialism and religion into a so-called 'prosperity theology' can narrow our focus by confusing material comfort with the soul's ease.

My personal view is that fundamentalism in religion has little to do with spirituality, though its rise may be a symptom of an unfulfilled spiritual need – an increasing willingness to examine what religion has to offer or, more broadly, to re-engage with the mysterious and the numinous.

The goal of all religious endeavour, no doubt, is to achieve a greater sense of wholeness [holiness] and because of our wide range of individual differences, we will inevitably test many possible pathways towards that goal. Diversity, as ever, is the Australian way. But most of those pathways are themselves imports, so we come back to the beginning: there is nothing especially original or unique about Australian spirituality, in any of its expressions – from the cathedral to the gospel hall; from plainsong to rock 'n' roll. If there were something unique about Australian expressions of spirituality – or, indeed, about the nature of the Australian spiritual quest – I'd be deeply concerned. If we, as Australians, were not sharing in the broad human experience of spiritual engagement, around the world and down the ages, what misguided souls we would be!

After all, whether we're talking about the values of a civil society or the trajectory of a spiritual journey, isn't being human more important, more significant, and more inspiring, than being Australian?





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