

# Of Tall Poppies, Mateship and Pragmatism: Spirituality in the Australasian Context

By Dr Brian Harris

## 1) By way of an introduction

In some ways it feels strange for me to writing on Spirituality in the Australasian context. My accent readily betrays me as being somewhat less than a 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> generation resident of this part of the globe. Indeed, New Zealand was my home for an all too brief 9 years, and after 2½ years, Australia now claims a special part of my heart. So when I speak of Australasian spirituality, I speak as someone whose spirituality was originally shaped in the African context... as someone who was initially perplexed and at times dismayed to discover that faith in God can express itself in ways that at times are boldly and blatantly different, while at other times, so subtly different that it confuses. It's having a congregation roar with laughter at something you say while preaching, and wondering why they found it amusing, and then cracking a witticism at which you're barely able to conceal your own delight, and being met by stony silence.

In Africa I had learnt that people matter more than programmes (we are people only with other people), that when it comes to time, *kairos* is so much more important than *chronos* (we start when we start, and end when we end, and the hands of the clock are impotent when they try to intrude and shape those decisions), and that simply "being there" is as important an achievement as setting the pace. David Crutchley is right when he comments on the holism and harmony of African spirituality that, "The 'other' is connected to the umbilical cord of my humanity and there is no dichotomization of the material and the spiritual domains" (75).<sup>i</sup>

What then have I learnt of the spirituality of my adopted countries of New Zealand and Australia? Perhaps I need to talk more of the spiritualities of Australasia. After all, which spirituality should I talk of? Is it of Aboriginal Australia,<sup>ii</sup> or multicultural Australia, or those many Australians who have solid Anglo-Saxon or Celtic roots, and who sometimes (though far less so than in the past) still think of England or Ireland as "home". The same questions could be asked of New Zealand (and to confuse New Zealand with Australia is as offensive as suggesting that a Canadian is from the USA or that someone from Ireland is English). Is it the spirituality of Maori or Pakeha New Zealand that should be our focus? And what of the contribution of New Zealand's South Pacific neighbours, who contribute so fully to her success on the rugby field, and who have impacted New Zealand life and culture so deeply?

Of necessity, choices must be made. So be it! My choice is to focus not on indigenous spirituality – the spirituality of the first occupants of the land – but on spirituality as experienced by the majority who now call Australasia home. I will later argue that one of the hallmarks of Australasian spirituality is that it is pragmatic. Clearly then, this is my home, for the pragmatic argument that I should explore the spirituality of the majority has won the day. Not that it can really be compartmentalized so easily. While a walk through New Zealand's Christchurch might leaving you wondering which town in England you were strolling through, a comparable walk through New Zealand's South Auckland would leave you in no doubt that you were in the South Pacific. In an era captive to chronological snobbery, it is sobering to remember that as far back as 1624, John Dunne perceptively wrote, "No man is an island entire of itself."<sup>iii</sup> It is equally true that no culture is an island. The meeting of cultures, while sometimes painful – even blood-filled - invariably births something new.

This creative new synthesis has theological implications. The late, and I think it fair to add "great", Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz has argued that theology is sourced from three conversation partners, scripture, tradition and culture.<sup>iv</sup> Whilst evangelicals have sometimes deluded themselves into thinking that their theology is shaped by scripture alone,<sup>v</sup> a more sober analysis usually reveals the rich tapestry woven by these three players. To some extent, therefore, it is impossible to talk of Australasian spirituality without being influenced by both Aboriginal and Maori perspectives.

Let me begin by giving a quick feel for the breadth of the topic, before opting for depth, and focusing on three images that I will argue capture something of the essence of Australasian spirituality, namely, tall poppies, mateship and pragmatism.

## 2) The broad range of options

It is sometimes noted that whilst North America was settled by people seeking freedom *for* religion, New Zealand and Australia were settled by people seeking freedom *from* religion!<sup>vi</sup> Though a gross overgeneralization, the embedded kernel of truth should not be ignored. In another paper I have noted:

*The longer trajectory of both New Zealand and Australian church history has been one of a polite but unenthusiastic embrace of the Christian faith of their British colonizers. The nominal form of Christianity adopted tended towards the ceremonial and sacramental, rather than the warm hearted 'convertive piety' ... which has been so much more influential in the North American context (5-6).<sup>vii</sup>*

This lack of enthusiasm for organized religion should not be confused with a lack of spiritual awareness. There is, however, a fear of what Fletcher calls “inwardness”. He writes:

*This apathy towards and suspicion of commitment to religious faith has become a tradition such that the ethos of Australia could be the most secular in the world. However, this antipathy to faith commitment is just one symptom of a dominant consciousness which fears all inwardness (65).<sup>viii</sup>*

The suggestion is that the underlying fear may not be so much of a God encounter, but of a self-encounter. Australia’s collective consciousness of its convict past, though lightly dismissed by some, might at another level have been internalized and have led to a slight insecurity and hesitancy to feed the spiritual hunger that so often requires self reflection and inwardness.

Let’s quickly note four possible images of Australasian spirituality, before exploring an additional three in a little more depth.

### 2.1 The landscape

The Hebrews are not the only ones who have attached deep spiritual significance to the land they possess. Both Australians and New Zealanders sense a close affinity to the land – albeit that the landscapes of the two countries are markedly different.

In noting the difference between essays on the religious scene written by New Zealand and Australian theologians, Emilsen and Emilsen note that “compared with the New Zealand contributions, there is a noticeable reticence about taking a broad measure of the Australian religious landscape” and go on to speak about “the reticence of Australian contributors in indulging in broad mapping” (4).<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps it is that Australia is too immense and varied, perhaps there is a fear of reductionism that will distort Australia into being a larrikin former convict colony, and perhaps vast distances have led to a greater geographic isolation and therefore a focus on the local rather than the national scene.

If Australia is largely a desert surrounded by a densely populated costal fringe, images of the desert speak to Australian spirituality. Ferguson and Chryssavgis’ *The Desert is Alive: Dimensions of Australian Spirituality* is a rich resource worth consulting.<sup>x</sup>

New Zealanders face a different setting. It is a land of obvious beauty. This is *Lord of the Rings* territory, and the pride in Peter Jackson’s successful cinematic trilogy of Tolkien’s work, is tangible. Clearly no other spot on the planet is as stunningly beautiful. And if that beauty is the world’s best kept secret, so much the better for the 4 million who at times take it for granted.

However both New Zealanders and Australians face the experience of living “down under” or at the “bottom of the world”. Whilst the locals produce maps placing their country at the centre of the globe, part of the national psyche is haunted (at other times delighted) by the sense of being located at a forgotten corner of the world. Efforts to compensate for this are noticeable, and both Australians and Kiwis are great travellers.

### 2.2 Folk heroes

Frank Fletcher, on noting the folk hero mythology surrounding Australia’s Ned Kelley or Waltzing Matilda, writes of the paradox they illuminate:

*On the one hand they reveal innocence and good-heartedness, but at the same time they are bound up by a bitter collective consciousness that discounts and devalues this innocence. The same paradox shows up in the accent and humour of Australians. With*

*dead-pan flatness we mock the pretentiousness of the gentry... but still long for their approval (65-66).<sup>xi</sup>*

Both myths romanticise the plight of the working class in the face of their oppressors, the landed gentry and their friends, the police.

Waltzing Matilda, which was almost declared the Australian national anthem in 1974, is a story of a tramp who camps by a creek and steals a sheep. When three policemen arrive, he commits suicide by diving in the creek rather than face arrest. No one denies that it is sloppily sentimental, yet a slow, soulful rendition leaves Australians dabbing tears from their eyes. It encapsulates so much of the Australian psyche, which though highly urbanized, likes to think of itself as being made up of ruggedly independent country folk who stand up against authority, and yet are forced to endure many injustices. It's the Crocodile Dundee imagery.

Though Waltzing Matilda didn't make it as national anthem, it's interesting to note that *Advance Australia Fair*, which did, is one of the very few national anthems that make no reference to God.<sup>xii</sup>

### **2.3 Anzac day**

Anzac day, when the sacrifices made by both Australian and New Zealand soldiers are remembered, opens a range of potential missional images.<sup>xiii</sup> Though it remembers the Australian and New Zealand fallen from all wars, the particular focus is on Gallipoli, the location in Turkey where in 1915 both countries saw the massive slaughter of their sons, largely as a result of the incompetence of British politicians and generals. In some ways it is the most religious day in both the New Zealand and Australian calendar, with huge crowds gathering for dawn services in all the major centres in both countries. It's hard to fathom precisely why these dawn remembrance services have found their way into the Australasian heart, but they serve as a clear indicator that the spiritual values of sacrifice, substitution, courage and friendship, are not met with indifference. They also depict something of the pain of being the victim.

### **2.4 They did it our way...**

Given the small number of people who have made this part of the planet their home, Australasia's contribution to global knowledge, creativity, and well being, is remarkable. While Frank Sinatra can croon that "I did it my way", Kiwi's in particular are quick to note that "they did it our way"... and delight in a global contribution that far outweighs its four million residents. If creativity is a spiritual value, it is one that Kiwi's possess in abundance. A frontier location has led to a "can do" mentality that at times overflows in great innovation and originality. The contribution has spread to the religious sphere. New Zealand can boast that New Zealanders David and Dale Garrett largely shaped the early music of the Charismatic renewal. As discussion on the emerging church grows, Kiwi's find themselves very much a part of the global discussion. Steve Taylor's *The Out of Bounds Church* is one example of the sparkling and original contributions coming from this tiny corner of the globe.<sup>xiv</sup> Australians have also made impressive contributions. Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come* helps set a new standard of reflection on the possible futures for the church.<sup>xv</sup>

## **3) Three dominant images**

Though images of the landscape, folk heroes, Anzac day and creativity are all suggestive of the spiritual climate, perhaps those of tall poppies, mateship and pragmatism are even more compelling.

### **3.1 Tall Poppies**

Though often claimed as a distinctly Australasian trait, the "Knocking the Tall Poppy Syndrome" finds its origins in Aristotle's *Politics*<sup>xvi</sup> where Periander advises Thrasylbulus to cut off the tallest heads of corn, implying that one should do away with any citizen who overtops the rest. An equivalent sentiment is expressed in the Japanese proverb that "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down". If the tall poppy is a metaphor for excellence and endeavour, being those who slash tall poppies would imply being part of nations that neither value nor appreciate excellence. That would seem a strange attribute to highlight in a paper discussing Australasian spirituality.

However, I think there is another way to look at the tall poppy syndrome. In discussing it, Wayne Smith writes:

*We as Australians all share a common belief system, which has, as its cornerstone, the concept that all deserve a fair go and that a true champion is modest and lets his or her deeds speak for themselves. Don Bradman is a classic example.*

*We cheer those who share this belief and disregard those who do not. That is our way, of which we are proud. Any Australian who becomes arrogant, contemptuous or egotistical or exhibits false bravado will quickly be cut down to size, not by foreigners but by his or her own compatriots.<sup>xvii</sup>*

While both Australia and New Zealand display levelling social attitudes, they flow from egalitarian assumptions. All have worth, and none are more important than the others. It is not necessarily that far removed from Jesus' claim that little children will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>xviii</sup> And why not? Why shouldn't they lead the way simply because they are children? In a world where the first will be last and the last first, egalitarian assumptions rest comfortably.<sup>xix</sup> Is it really that important who is first or last if we all matter and are all valued? Tall poppies are those who dispute this, or who leave us feeling inadequate because they imply that they are a superior breed to us. If the first are going to be last, let's create heaven on earth by cutting them back to size now... The logic is compelling.

Another aspect of the tall poppy syndrome is its selective application. You're unlikely to find any New Zealander who will criticise a member of the All Blacks rugby team, or an Australian disdainful of the countries perpetually successfully cricket team. In the sporting sphere, poppies can grow as tall as they like, and we will cheer them on. True, when the national team wins, we all announce, "we won" and would not be amused if we were reminded that it was the 15 rugby players or 11 cricketers that won, and that their victory had remarkably little to do with us. We identify with our sporting icons. They fulfil our dreams. If Freud sees religion as wish projection, our sporting heroes are the projection of who we long to be. Perhaps it is therefore more true to say that knocking the tall poppy is a syndrome where we criticise those we don't identify with. The list includes academics, politicians and religious leaders.<sup>xx</sup>

From a spiritual perspective, it's about being able to delight in the everyday. If the incarnation sanctifies all of human life, this Deity touched planet is saturated with sacredness. Let the people of the earth rejoice, regardless of if located in lofty cathedral, or the outback, or if wandering through Auckland's Waitakere ranges. Why should the one be more important than the other if God made them all? Let the poppies grow, but let's remember that tall or short, the Lord God made them all...

### **3.2 Mateship**

Anzac day 2006 saw earth tremors at the Beaconsfield mine lead to rock falls a kilometre below the ground.<sup>xxi</sup> Of the 17 miners underground at the time, 14 escaped unharmed, 1, 44 year old Larry Knight, was killed, and two others, Brant Webb and Todd Russell, were trapped in a small cage less than 1.5m square, which was to be their home for the next two weeks. What transpired has been heralded as a triumph of Australasian mateship. While rescue teams blasted their way toward them, the two sang "The Gambler" – the only song they both knew. They stayed alive by collecting dripping water in their mining helmets, and by sharing their sole ration, Webb's muesli bar. They cut this in half and agreed not to eat it for 24 hours. In the end they started to eat small sections from it on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April. The successful rescue has been well documented, and in time will probably be the source for bestselling books and movies.

The response to the disaster is suggestive in trying to understand Australasian spirituality. Heralded as a triumph of mateship, any attempt to make it anything else was dismissed with contempt. In a foolish May Day interview, Australian opposition leader Kim Beasley mused that such disasters were linked to the changes being made to the Labour Relations Act. With the two men located but still trapped underground at the time, the nations fury at the attempt to score political points from tragedy, was tangible. Beasley beat a hurried retreat.

A prayer vigil held at the local Uniting Church was well publicised in the media. The candles burning in the church helped symbolise the nation's hopes and fears. A candle in the dark can all too

easily be snuffed out... On Tuesday 9 May 2006, a full two weeks after the collapse, the two men were freed. The bell at the local church peeled out for the first time since the end of the Second World War. The effort proved too much for it. It was rung with such gusto that it literally broke. Trying to match the churches effort, the sirens at the local fire station also heralded the good news, but somehow their effort was noted only in passing. The church bell captured the mood.

In this secular country, God forgotten even in the national anthem, at times of trial, He is still clung to as the refuge and strength, the ever-present help in times of trouble.<sup>xxii</sup>

The other real help is having a good mate. While we can never know if Webb or Russell would have survived if they had to face their ordeal alone, there is no doubt that their resilience in the face of the unthinkable, was largely related to their being able to face it together.

Though self-reliance is a virtue instilled by a frontier location, it also helps you to appreciate and value the “others” around you. While the search for community as often as not finds its answer in the local pub rather than the local church, the underlying search is essentially the same. Australasians’ concur with God’s first “not good” in Scripture, “it is not good for the man to be alone”.<sup>xxiii</sup> If Stanley Grenz is correct in asserting that community should be the integrating motif for theology, this is an insight that resonates in the Australasian heart.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **3.3 Pragmatism**

Not that we should get too carried away by images. Both New Zealand and Australia are nothing if not pragmatic. Impatience with theory translates in a reticence to value the academic or to bother with disputing finer points of theology. While it is true that Sydney Anglicans are concerned about doctrinal precision, they find few supporters in the broader Christian arena.<sup>xxv</sup> On the one hand this liberates the different sectors of the church to work together co-operatively for the broader goal of missional impact, while on the other, it can leave the impression that religious experience is more important than the realities from which it flows. What I feel about Jesus sometimes seems more important than what he actually achieved for me... Why worry? Feelings are what work in 2006; we can change if the mood shifts. This is the wonderful world of pragmatism.

While having some disturbing aspects, it’s a pragmatism of which the New Testament Epistle of James might well approve. After all, while the USA claims far more evangelicals, it has taken secular Australasia to put the welfare state in place. The unemployed possibly find that a lot more helpful. Perhaps I can provocatively suggest that New Zealand and Australia are the two most Christian non-Christian countries in the world. Our churches are sparsely attended, but there is no shortage of human kindness. If you’re doing life hard, this is the part of the world to live. The underdog has a special place in the Australasian psyche. Not that we should be naïve. It’s a place under threat, as materialism has in recent years captured some of the Australasian heart. Economic rationalism, implemented with increasing rigour in both Australia and New Zealand since the 1980’s, is taking its toll. Australia’s recent treatment of asylum seekers has been less than hospitable, and reflects a worrying territoriality. The neighbour is becoming more and more narrowly defined.

### **4) Towards an Australasian Spirituality**

What does this all amount to? Are Australia and New Zealand, like much of the Western world, simply two secular states softened by acts of human kindness? Though in times of crisis we are aware of a transcendental longing - the struggle of the heart that is restless until it finds its rest in God – most days that spiritual quest is on the backburner. Is there a way ahead?

In Australasia, religious pretensions are unlikely to impress. The wagging finger that tut tuts over sexual indiscretions and the latest hangover, will be met with sour resentment. Colonial overlords overstepped that mark, and will no longer be tolerated.

Incarnational ministry is a different matter. If Jesus was a bloke who got alongside others and leant a hand, passing on some helpful wisdom in a way that birthed hope and humour, he might find a special niche down under. Tall poppies don’t have a place, but those who value what each one can bring, and who take the risk to become real mates in a down to earth kind of way, will find that roots are established more readily than might initially seem to be the case. Once planted, these roots will stand against the fiercest storms, and will sustain even the Australasian heart.

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<sup>i</sup> David Crutchley, "Being Fully Human: A Spirituality out of Africa," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* XLV, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>ii</sup> Charlesworth correctly points out that one should not talk of either Aboriginal culture or people in the singular “we have to speak of Aboriginal cultures and religions in the plural.” Max Charlesworth, ed., *Religious Business: Essays on Aboriginal Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) xvii.

<sup>iii</sup> John Dunne, "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions," in *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (WW Norton, 1962).

<sup>iv</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>v</sup> See e.g. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 32.

<sup>vi</sup> This thesis is strongly rejected by some. Col Stringer argues that Australia has a strong Christian heritage, and that rather than portraying it as a settlement of convicts, it should be seen as the “South Land of the Holy Spirit”. However, Stringer’s reading of Australian history is selective and tends to read Australian history outside of the context of the overarching “Christendom” model that undergirded Britain’s programme of colonization. Col Stringer, *Discovering Australia's Christian Heritage* (Robina: Col Stringer Ministries, 1999). A more sober rejection of the thesis of a secular Australia is to be found in Stuart Piggin, *Spirit of a Nation: The Story of Australia's Christian Heritage*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Strand, 2004).

<sup>vii</sup> Brian S. Harris, "Straddling the Tasman: The Relevance of Grenz's Revisioned Evangelical Theology in the Australasian Context," *The Princeton Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>viii</sup> Frank Fletcher, "Drink from the Wells of Oz," in *Discovering an Australian Theology*, ed. Peter Malone (Homebush: St Paul, 1988).

<sup>ix</sup> Susan Emilsen and William W. Emilsen, "Introduction: Mapping the Landscape," in *Mapping the Landscape: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Christianity*, ed. Susan Emilsen and William W. Emilsen (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>x</sup> Graeme Ferguson and John Chryssavgis, eds., *The Desert Is Alive: Dimensions of Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: JBCB, 1990).

<sup>xi</sup> Fletcher, "Drink from the Wells of Oz."

<sup>xii</sup> By contrast, New Zealand’s national anthem *God Defend New Zealand* is steeped in religious language. However, there is mounting pressure to change the anthem and to adopt one that more clearly reflects New Zealand’s South Pacific location, and ties the country less closely to its colonial past.

<sup>xiii</sup> An excellent study of some of the possibilities is to be found in Steve Taylor, "Scars on the Australasian Heart: Anzac Day as a Contextual Atonement Image," *New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* 6 (2001).

<sup>xiv</sup> Steve Taylor, *The out of Bounds Church: Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>xv</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century* (Erina: Strand, 2003).

<sup>xvi</sup> Book 5, chapter 10.

<sup>xvii</sup> Wayne Smith, *Daily Telegraph*, Friday September 29, 2000.

<sup>xviii</sup> Matt 18:3-4.

<sup>xix</sup> Matt 20:16.

<sup>xx</sup> Though usually not the Pope. Australasian Roman Catholics – regardless of their attendance or otherwise at mass – are most often loyal to their faith. However, if an Australasian Pope were to be elected, it might be a different matter. The issue would be that “one of our own” has risen above us.

<sup>xxi</sup> The symbolic significance of this happening on Anzac Day should not be missed.

<sup>xxii</sup> Psalm 46.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Gen 2:18.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See e.g. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 26-31.

<sup>xxv</sup> Sydney Anglicans are noted for their strong commitment to the branch of evangelicalism that closely aligns itself with the Protestant Reformation.