

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**THE PREAMBLE
FIFTEEN YEARS ON**

Vol 26, No.2

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ISSN: 1323-6377

Published twice yearly (June and December) by United Theological College, 16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151. Phone: 61-2-8838 8927; Facsimile: 61-2-9683 6617.

Digital copies of previous issues of the journal are available via the website of the Camden Theological Library: www.utc.edu.au/library/

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CONTENTS

5 EDITORIAL

THEMED PAPERS: THE PREAMBLE – FIFTEEN YEARS ON

7 The Preamble Fifteen Years On

Chris Budden

15 A Conversation between Ken Sumner and Chris Budden

19 Kungan kaldowinyeri: listening to creation and to story on Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri Yarluwe-Ruwe

Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan

31 Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: between celebration and critique

Rebecca Lindsay

43 In One Breath: partaking in the communion of the Spirit and Creation

Toar Hutagalung

53 Reconciliation and the Framing of the Revised Preamble

John Evans

63 “Created and Sustained by the Triune God”: a pivotal faith confession of the Preamble

Sean Gilbert

UNITED AND UNITING CHURCHES

71 The Afternoon of the United Reformed Church

Susan Durber

REFLECTIONS AND PROVOCATIONS

81 Revisiting the Land, Finding Country

Geoffrey Lilburne

BOOK FORUMS

WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS' *AFTER WHITENESS: AN EDUCATION IN BELONGING*

- 91 Reading *After Whiteness* in Australia: a response to generosity

Willie James Jennings

ROBYN WHITAKER'S *EVEN THE DEVIL QUOTES SCRIPTURE: READING THE BIBLE ON ITS OWN TERMS*

- 97 An Invaluable Resource

Liz Boase

- 100 Considering What the Bible Is and Is Not

Ali Robinson

- 102 Biblical Interpretation Cannot Change the World

Jameson Ross

- 105 An Asian Australian Reflection on *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*

Paul Dongwon Goh

- 109 Contestation and Love: biblical interpretation remains complex

Robyn Whitaker

REVIEWS

- 113 Anna Beresford, *Before You Were Born, I Anointed You: Uncovering Scripture's "Hidden" Female Prophets*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022

Rebecca Lindsay

- 115 CONTRIBUTORS

- 118 ABOUT UNITING CHURCH STUDIES



Editorial

Geoff Thompson

The focus of this issue of Uniting Church Studies is a suite of papers first presented at a July 2024 Conference held to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Revised Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia. These papers have been collated and edited by Dr Chris Budden, the Convenor of the Conference (and a former editor of this journal). I am very grateful to Chris for his contribution to the editing of this issue. His own paper serves as an introduction to the Conference, its background, and the themed papers.

Alongside the themed articles, this issue contains others papers, including those which continue some of the journal's regular features. Amongst these is the latest in the series on United and Uniting Churches, namely an account of the United Reformed Church by Susan Durber. Readers from the Uniting Church in Australia will be struck by the parallels between the developments in, and challenges faced by, those two churches. Contributing to the Reflections and Provocations section is a piece by Geoffrey Lilburne which traces his own engagement with idea of land since the publication of his 1989 book, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land*. (Although Lilburne's piece overlaps with the themed papers, it was produced separately from them.) There are two sections to this issue's Book Forum. In the first, Willie James Jennings responds to the discussion of his *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* featured in the previous issue. In the second, four theologians from the Uniting Church respond to Robyn Whitaker's *Even The Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*. There is a response to these reflections from Whitaker. A review by Rebecca Lindsay of Anna Beresford's *Before You Were Born, I Anointed You: Uncovering Scripture's Hidden Female Prophets* rounds off the issue.

Finally, an announcement. This will be the final issue of the journal to be published in hard copy. The production and distribution of academic journals has, of course, been undergoing significant changes in recent years. Increasingly, journals are opting for online only distribution. There is also an increasing trend to subscription-free open access distribution. Against that background, the Uniting Church Studies Editorial Advisory Committee has decided that this Journal should cease being available in print format and move to being an online, open access journal. In other words, access to the Journal will be unlimited and subscription-free. This decision has been based on budgetary, environmental and access issues. The change will occur with the June 2025 issue. From that issue onwards, each issue of the journal will be uploaded to the Illuminate platform of the Camden library and be immediately available. The arrangements for any refunds on existing subscriptions which extend beyond this current issue are included in the letter to subscribers included with this issue. For further notifications of when online issues become available, please check the Journal website (<https://www.utc.edu.au/uniting-church-studies/>) and the Uniting Church Studies Facebook page. It is the committee's view that this move will make the work of those who contribute to the journal more easily accessible and more widely known.

The Preamble Fifteen Years On

Chris Budden

The Church exists because of the call and grace of God, expressed in the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. We are a gift. As the *Basis of Union* says: “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ And: “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.”²

Who the Church is and what qualities mark out the Church are determined by what it does. And what it does comes from the way its story about the economy of God is negotiated in particular contexts, what Jürgen Moltmann speaks of as the intersection of identity and relevance.³

Both the seduction of belonging, and the need to share the gospel, means that the Church is always open to other stories, and other ways of determining how the multiple threads in the Christian story will be enacted at any time. Stanley Hauerwas says that the church and Christians must understand their own story and language about God and the human good; its own sense of what is real and true. This story must both link the contingent events in life to God’s story, and “make our actions consistent with our identity.”⁴ If churches and Christians do not shape their lives around the stories of Christ (and, I would add, creation), if they are unclear what makes them who they are, they will be unable to understand when the practices and language of the world are similar to theirs and when they are not.⁵ The result is that the way they tell their story allows space for actions that do not properly represent what it means to be a community formed by Christ.

The 2009 Preamble to the UCA Constitution bears witness to a contest about stories: the Church’s stories about God, and the stories of settler-colonial society as they have found their way into the Church. Inevitably, it is about how the actions of the Church (and its relationships) shape its identity, particularly around the task given to it “to be a fellowship of reconciliation” that serves God’s end of “that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.”⁶ That is, it is a contest about story, identity, belonging, and the practices that make a church faithful to Jesus Christ.

¹ *Basis of Union*, 1992 Edition, paragraph 3. In *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations 2018, with Covenanting Statement, Code of Ethics and Manual for Meetings*, Uniting Church in Australia (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2018), 22.

² *Basis of Union*, paragraph 4, 22.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974).

⁴ Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), 31.

⁵ Drawing on Walter Brueggemann, Hauerwas illustrates the point by suggesting that if Israel had not had its own story it would have had no way to resist the claims, the seduction, of the language of the Assyrians and their claim in 2 Kings 19-19 that Israel’s God had been defeated. Only Israel’s story of God could combat what seemed to be the realistic logic and power of the empire. *Christian Existence Today*, 12-13.

⁶ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3, 22.

The themed papers in this issue of Uniting Church Studies arose in a Conference on the Uniting Church's Preamble to its Constitution. The Conference was held 8-9 July 2024, and organised at United Theological College, North Parramatta. People also gathered at a hub at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide (Yarthu Aparinithi, Kuarna Country), and individually by zoom.

I chaired the task group that brought the Preamble to the Assembly in 2009. I have a deep commitment to its importance for relationships between First and Second Peoples. I believe that the Preamble is, or at least could be, of profound significance to the Church. It provides the foundation – theological and historical – for practices that are more faithful to the promises and hopes expressed in the 1994 Covenant Statement.⁷ It offers a theological foundation, alongside the summons of the *Basis of Union*, for the Church to embody in its life in Australia God's desire for the "reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation."⁸ It provides the foundation for an understanding of God's work that takes seriously the work of creation, thus providing a basis for the other significant issue of our time – care of creation.

In his paper in this issue, John Evans reminds us that central to the *Basis of Union*, the original Preamble (1977), the 1994 Covenanting Statement, and the 2009 Preamble, is the issue of reconciliation.⁹ Despite these promises and commitments, it was the experience of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress) that the story and practices of the Church were deeply ambivalent. Solidarity was appropriate, but only if it did not disturb the Church's place in the wider social-liberal order.¹⁰ The Church listened to and responded to the need for justice but was deaf to what First Peoples said about God, because its received theology had closed its ears to this voice. Self-determination was limited by the Church's assumptions about the skills of First Peoples, and by limited understanding about what it meant to honour First Peoples as the first peoples of the land.

I offered a brief history of the formation of the Preamble in the June 2024 issue of this journal.¹¹ In introducing the papers in this issue, I simply wish to note three things about that history. First, the Preamble – a new introduction to the UCA's Constitution – was offered to the Church as a gift. Its final form was negotiated through the various councils and bodies of the Church. Second, it stresses the significance of land and place – creation – in the economy of God. Third, it honours the prior place of First Peoples, and their right to enter the Church as people who knew God before the arrival of the Christian Church. First Peoples bring wisdom and insight that the Church needs to hear.

In this paper I want to place the Preamble in context (political and theological), set out its claims, and then offer a brief summary of how I see its challenges for the Church.

⁷ For Covenanting Statement see, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, 2018, 31-35.

⁸ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3.

⁹ All these documents are available in *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, 2018.

¹⁰ There is a parallel in the way leading ethicists in the USA spoke in favour of racial equality in the USA, but then opposed actions (e.g., lunch counter sit-ins) which would make real change. They argued that social order was more important than justice, and black people should be patient about change. See, for example, Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), 16-17.

¹¹ Chris Budden, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble," in *Uniting Church Studies* Volume 26, Number 1 (June 2024): 35-47.

Context

The heart of the struggle expressed in the Preamble is revealed in the 1994 Covenant Statement and, particularly in the words of the then-Assembly President “My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming”.¹² Indeed, a significant factor in the establishment of the Covenant was the failure to listen to Congress in 1985 when it asked the Church to boycott the Bicentennial celebrations. And a significant factor in the conversations leading to the Preamble was the failure of the 2003 Assembly to honour the voice of Congress within debates about sexuality and leadership in the Church. But the issue is wider than those two events.¹³

The Preamble was an invitation to a Church that sought to be just and inclusive, and to walk with First Peoples, but could not listen. Could not listen, if that meant the need to change in ways that would honour First Peoples and their sovereignty and self-determination. Could not listen because, at least around God, the Church did not believe First Peoples had anything to say. As Miguel A. De La Torre says, well-meaning and socially committed people often “call for justice without challenging the dominant culture’s retention of power and privilege. The end result is a ‘kinder, gentler’ form of oppression.”¹⁴ This is very often a risk for the UCA.

One of the ways in which people with power control others is by defining who they are. Edward Said’s great contribution to postcolonial studies was to unmask the usually hidden ways in which colonisers defined or constructed the colonised.¹⁵ His point is that colonisers used their economic and political power, and their control over knowledge, to shape the way colonised people were seen. The aim was to justify the abuse of labour and dispossession from land, to create allies in the wider society who shared this understanding of the world, and to convince oppressed people that they were not who they claimed to be. This construction of colonised peoples was said to be reality, not something imposed. Said unmasks this lie.¹⁶

In Australia, not only were the people constructed and spoken about as an inferior and primitive, as people without knowledge of God or land – and thus unworthy of being listened to – but God and land were also constructed to serve the purposes of the empire. God was constructed as absent and mute, and One who forsakes Indigenous people. God really only came with Europeans, and this God had only one proper revelation – in Jesus. One story, and one people. Because of this, land was constructed as unblessed wilderness, something that had no relationship with God and had no right to tell God’s story. Land was uncared for by the people, and had no theological significance. It would only be blessed by God when

¹² “The Covenant between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Uniting Church in Australia entered into at the Seventh National Assembly of the Uniting Church at University of NSW, Sydney, Sunday 10 July 1994,” in see, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, 2018, 33.

¹³ See Chris Budden, “The Reason We Do Not Hear: Theology Struggling with Its Colonial Location,” in *Theological and Hermeneutical Explorations from Australia: Horizons of Contextuality*. Decolonizing Theology Series, ed. Jione Havea (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books/ Fortress Press, 2021), 43-54.

¹⁴ De La Torre, *Latino/a Social Ethics*, 5.

¹⁵ Edwards W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Random House, UK; Penguin Classics, 1978/2019)..

¹⁶ It is important to recognise, and this is reflected in the existence of Congress and the Covenant, that marginalised people very often assert their agency and distinct identity. They do this through both actions and narratives that run counter to dominant actions and stories. The Preamble witnesses to the agency of First Peoples in the UCA. See James C. Scott on the importance of the way ordinary people develop counter-narratives in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Europeans came and made it flourish in their way. So, the church could plant its buildings, drive its crosses into the ground, and take bread and wine from the fields for the Eucharist¹⁷ without thinking of what it meant to occupy stolen land.¹⁸

My claim is that the UCA (and by no means only the UCA) has allowed its own story to be so shaped by relationships with colonial society, that it is not always clear about its own identity, and we cannot easily tell when society's story is not our own. We have too often been seduced by that societal story, and then cannot hear the story of those harmed by colonial society. Our practices are then deeply ambivalent and often destructive of the possibility of reconciliation.

One area where this crossing-over of church and wider society occurs is with our general acceptance of social liberalism – with its emphasis on the rights of individuals, and the need to broaden who can participate in society – as a politic that can best make for the common good.¹⁹ The theological difficulty with this is that social liberalism stresses the individual as against the community, and broadens belonging without challenging what it means to belong. And, as the failure of the 2003 Referendum on the Voice to Parliament showed, the commitments and accountabilities of the social liberal polity are interpreted in ways that can still justify invasion and dispossession and sustain Western hegemony. There is no place in social liberalism for special rights based on claims of prior existence in this land or any sense of sovereignty. We saw this position put quite often by opponents of the Referendum: “Why should First Peoples have rights others do not.” Many church people share that belief, claiming this is what it means to be made in God's image.

In sum, the witness of the Church – as the Body of Christ called to be a sign of God's eschatological new community – is rendered ambivalent by a strong commitment to just and inclusive relationships between First and Second Peoples, which is inseparable from a too frequent failure to honour First Peoples as sovereign first peoples, to respect the voice of First Peoples, or to adequately support self-determination. This was Congress' experience.

The Preamble

At a very deep level, the struggle over the Preamble is a struggle shaped by a distorted gospel on the one hand and too close a relationship with the claims of settler-colonial society on the other. It is, as I have suggested, a struggle over the Church's story about God, and how that finds expression in a settler-colonial context.

The original Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution, adopted in 1977, sought to capture the identity of a Church that was emerging through the union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia. It portrays that union as an expression of obedience to God, and of God's desire for unity and reconciliation. The 2009 Preamble continues the Church's commitment to reconciliation, but does so in a

¹⁷ Who is the crucified Christ when he comes to the Church in the form of bread and wine from stolen land?

¹⁸ For an account of the way in which explorers and church people spoke of God as absent, the people as lesser, and the land as unblessed, see Roland Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*. Second Edition (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), particularly chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁹ On social liberalism, see Elizabeth Strakosch, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy: Settler Colonialism and the 'Post-Welfare' State* (Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

changed social, political and theological context where the major issue of reconciliation is the relationship between First and Second Peoples. Such reconciliation requires that each party is recognised as bringing wisdom to the relationship and is heard. The contemporary challenge is to explore what understanding of God, God's work, the land and the people would enable the Church to hear First Peoples as First Peoples, and thus to build genuine reconciliation.

The Preamble's Key Claims

In the numbered paragraphs, the Preamble makes six key points.

- It affirms that God was present in this country prior to the arrival of Christians (# 1) and was known by the First Peoples (#3), thus challenging Christian claims to sole or superior knowledge of God. It affirms Christ as a source of revelation, yet also affirms that First Peoples had "particular insights into God's ways" (#3). This affirmation thus resists any simple replacement or fulfillment theology.
- It claims the land as creation, and the work of triune God (#1), thus affirming the Christian tradition's claims about the triune nature of God, whilst simultaneously challenging a Church focussed mostly on Jesus and soteriology. It suggests a broadening of God's economy, particularly in its affirmation that God nurtured and sustained the people through land (#2).
- It reminds the Church of its place in colonisation (#1), and recognises that while some church people stood with First Peoples (#4), many "shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards First Peoples" (#5). The Preamble confesses that Christian people were complicit in injustice, dispossession, and destruction of language, culture and spirituality (#5). The churches remained silent in the face of "a distorted version of history that denied that this land was utilised, cultivated and harvested by those First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships" (#6). This meant that relationships were broken, and the very integrity of the Gospel was diminished (#6).
- It acknowledges First Peoples as custodians of the land and as a sovereign peoples (#2).
- It affirms the agency and subjectivity of First Peoples who, from the very beginning, took actions to challenge their dispossession and the denial of their rights in the land, and to the telling of history that denied their experience of colonisation (#7). This agency was expressed in the Uniting Church through the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (#8), and by Congress' invitation for relationships between Congress and other members of the Church to be expressed in covenant (#9); an invitation accepted in 1994.
- It affirms the centrality of reconciliation to the identity of the Church, asserting that the deepening covenant will lead to "a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ" (#10). The final sentence of the Preamble says: "AND THUS the Church celebrates this covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation."²⁰

²⁰ These are words that reflect Paragraph 3 of the *Basis of Union*, in *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations* (2018), 10.

The Preamble makes space for First Peoples to be part of the Church as First Peoples and offers a foundation for diverse peoples to equally belong and honour God.

The challenges made by the Preamble

In what follows I propose various challenges that I believe are provoked by the Preamble, challenges which have not been adequately faced.

- i* How do the UCA and individual Christians unpack what it means to speak of God as Trinity in this place? What does this mean for the way we understand God's economy, the nature of the human struggle and salvation, and the importance of place to life?
- ii* How does the Church re-cover the importance of creation, place, and country – both in terms of God's economy, and in terms of human existence?
- iii* How does the Church relocate itself in society so it can better hear First Peoples, and better be a place of diversity, inclusion, justice, and resistance? How, in this relocation, does the Church re-hear its own story, and discern when that story is different to others that try to seduce it?
- iv* How does the Church actually listen to what is said by First Peoples about God, and face the challenge that witness makes to the church's own claims? That is, and this was reflected in some opposition to the Preamble, there is a strong strand in the missional and theological life of the church that says Christians alone know God. The Preamble challenges the church to be open to the claim that others know God, and to be more humble about what it claims, so that together we can explore what it means to confess that God is triune.
- v* How does polity change as a result of this narrative? This includes being open to the way in which theology, polity (and how this polity is expressed in the Constitution and Regulations), and ministry practice and education need to reflect the views and identities of First Peoples and CALD communities, and not simply European traditions. Such a commitment will require open conversation and hard work. It is a step that must affirm the central goal of the Preamble – self-determination and right belonging, and not simply assimilation into the Church as it is.
- vi* Is the Preamble really a postcolonial narrative that aids the struggles of First Peoples, or is it another profoundly colonial document that undermines the identity of First Peoples?

There is one other issue that is worth pondering, not because it is directly related to the claims of the Preamble, but because it highlights what is at stake for the Church if it takes the Preamble seriously. The Preamble arose in large part because of a failure of the Covenant. Part of that failure was about the exercise and mis-use of power, and the way power limits freedom and self-determination. The establishment of Congress, entry into Covenant, and acceptance of the Preamble are signs of freedom. In a settler-colonial space any freedom that is granted is often subverted; it is given but taken back in other ways. What the church needs to be alert to is the way in which it can be assumed that freedom has been achieved, and that what matters is relationships. Belonging (on the church's terms) becomes more crucial than self-determination. The importance of Congress is de-valued, and issues like sovereignty and communal identity are downplayed. Self-determination can be crushed by the need for organisational conformity.

The point of the UCA Covenant is that it is a counter-narrative to relationships of injustice, control, not listening, and not honouring First Peoples as the first peoples of the land. It is meant to be the foundation for self-determination within relationship, and for the ongoing struggle for freedom. The danger is that we assume freedom has been achieved, and that what matters is the relationship. The relationship absolutely matters, but only if it helps sustain self-determination while also combatting attempts to simply draw Congress and First Peoples into the church like everyone else.

The Papers

The papers in this issue of *Uniting Church Studies* are concerned to explore the nature of the Preamble, its ability to suggest other ways of relating to First Peoples and land, the importance of claims about the Trinitarian nature of God, and the need for humility in claims about the Preamble.

John Evans reminds us that the numbered paragraphs of the Preamble were offered by Congress and negotiated through various parts of the Church, but were then placed within a form that actually made it a Preamble, and stressed the centrality of reconciliation to the identity of the UCA.

The article from Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner and the students from The Adelaide College for Leadership and Theology highlights the importance of seeing land as creation (not real estate) and Country, and as a way of hearing the voice of the Spirit.

Both Sean Gilbert and Toar Hutagalung stress the importance of the Preamble's affirmation of Trinity. Gilbert stresses that God – the Triune God – is always present, and always known, because the Triune life is always relational and infused with grace.

Hutagalung stresses the centrality of the work of the Spirit in creation, and the role of the Spirit in “giving life”. It is this presence that ensures that First Peoples have wisdom about God in this land.

Two voices warn of the danger of pride in relation to the Preamble. Ken Sumner, in the transcript of a conversation he and I had at the Conference, reminds us that not only was the Preamble a gift from Congress, but in the process of negotiating words acceptable to the Church, much was taken away. Congress often had to watch as its gift was questioned, dismantled, and watered-down.

Rebecca Lindsay reminds us of the danger that, in its use of the Preamble, the Church will seek to avoid its place in invasion and colonial occupation; portray itself as a passive observer, and also blame its ancestors and absolve itself. Lindsay speaks draws on the danger of “white innocence,” and calls the Church to affirm and critique the Preamble.

Conclusion

All communities have difficult and oppressive pasts and histories. History is tragic in two senses – what was done to some people, and the fact that the past cannot be fixed or erased. It is not unusual for communities to deny the hard parts of their history, because such histories contradict the way we see

ourselves. The challenge, of course, is that people with scars and trauma remain as a reminder of that past and our ambivalent identity.

Both the Covenant and the Preamble offer us an attempt at truth-telling. They seek to deal with tragedy and scars. They offer us a story of God, and thus of the Church, which can allow us to own our history, accept its tragedy, include those whose scars challenge us, and not move too quickly towards a form of reconciliation that will not allow the scars to be seen. It challenges us to have respect for First Peoples so we can listen, honour wisdom, and dismantle our stubborn assumptions. The papers in this issue are intended to re-start a conversation about how the Church can respond to some of the challenges.



A Conversation between Ken Sumner and Chris Budden

Ken Sumner was a leading membership of Congress during the period when the Preamble was being developed and negotiated through the Church. He makes the point that he is not simply an Aboriginal man, because that is a universal term used by colonisers to describe and control First Peoples on this continent. He reminds Second Peoples that identity for First Peoples is located in place and people. He is a Kukabrak Narrindjeri person.

This short article is an account of responses to questions which Chris Budden put to Ken about Ken's and Congress' experience of the Preamble and its ongoing challenges.

Chris Budden: *What do you think Congress was hoping for? What was it hoping to achieve when it suggested a Preamble?*

Ken Sumner: I think there were many things that Congress wanted to achieve. One of the key things, I think, was identity; specifically, identity within the context of land. As an oppressed people, often the first thing that disappears for you is your identity. Which means loss of language, loss of culture. When you lose these sort of things life is very difficult.

I think identity is one of the key things. Identity for many Indigenous peoples, not only in Australia but globally, is critical to who we are. And identity for us is born out of land. Land is the foundation for language, law, kinship and economy.

These – land, language, law, kinship, economy – are the five key things for who we are as a people. They are foundational to who we are as a people of creation. Colonisers forget these things, and particularly the importance of creation, in the zeal and quest to take control of the land.

I think the other important thing is, what we wanted to achieve out of the Preamble, was story. So, there was identity and there was story: an Indigenous narrative.

The land in some places is 65,000 years of history. In other places its 20,000 years of history, and still counting. I don't think we comprehend that very easily. I mean, I've had a number of conversations with various people who say: "You guys were only here 65,000 years. You've come out of Africa and this was not always your land." There is an attempt to minimise who we are; to minimise us as an enemy.

And we are always the enemy. First Nation's people, we are always the enemy, and we never forget that. We always tread carefully.

There are story lines and song lines woven throughout the land that require not only acknowledgement but some serious theological acceptance within other theologies. I don't think there is enough recognition or understanding. What we tried to present was our identity and our story.

CB: *What do you think Congress had to give away in the negotiations? The first draft of the Preamble came from Congress. It was very much a creation theology. So, in order to get identity and story, what was lost?*

KS: In short, there was a lot, including some integrity. We are a people, we are human beings, and the process sometimes challenged that.

Looking back on the process is a bit emotional because as I think about the conversation around both Covenant and Preamble, I am reminded of people. All the people that were there and spoke, and that were part of it, and have passed away.

The Preamble offers only a small part of the story of First Peoples. It's just a glimpse into First Peoples' understanding of land and the Creator and creation. We have to involve creation because it's not just about land. It's about sky, it's about water. It is about everything. The animals and our relationship with all those things. So, the Preamble offers only a small part of the story of First Peoples. There are many stories woven into the depths of the land, and not just the land but all of creation.

Christianity dominates the Preamble. I know that is a challenging statement. And we have to understand that Christianity is just one small story in the whole world. There are many, many stories of First Peoples throughout the whole world. And, so, Christianity dominates the Preamble. And it dominated the Preamble discussion, and left us with not much room to fully explore the Indigenous story; the connection to, and understanding of the Creator God from a First Peoples' perspective.

As I reflect 15 years on, I am afraid that the narrative of First Peoples will again be colonised. There are core aspects to our existence that are missing in the Preamble. We need to understand that. We settle for less.

It is a great document. Don't get me wrong. And I am a Christian. But we need to speak truth and that is part of what we gave up. And it is fair to say that part of the negotiation was being asked to give up the whole of the truth.

CB: *Given the strengths and weaknesses of the Preamble, what do you think it offers Congress and the Church?*

KS: I think it offers so much. I think the Preamble offers a beginning. It opens the door for opportunities – for opportunities to journey, to explore First Peoples' understanding of Creator, of land, of all creation. As something that is sacred, something that is deeper, that is 65,000 years old.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that exciting? Isn't that something we should be discovering together?

First Peoples have a lot to give. We have a lot to offer. There is a door that has been opened, and we have opportunities. But you can only offer so many times, and the offer can only be rejected so many times, before people stop offering and the door gets shut.

CB: *What do you think is the big challenge for the Church from the Preamble for the next little while?*

KS: I remember the debate. Al McRae was the President of the Assembly. He and I travelled to synods and other forums, and I was always grateful for his support and friendship. There were many supportive people, including John Rickard who is a legend. There were many people passionately for the Preamble, and many people passionately against. And a whole lot of people in the middle.

I felt very vulnerable. I did not always have the answers people felt they needed at the time. Sometimes it felt like life and death if people did not receive answers to some of the questions. It was a serious debate and serious struggle. Congress had offered something from our heart, from deep within our souls, something that represents us. It was a sacred gift to the Church, one that comes from deep within this sacred place. It represented us.

I'm not sure what we have done to that sacred gift. Maybe we have set it on the shelf, and it has gathered dust. Or maybe we are too afraid to open the sacred gift. Maybe we are afraid that something like Jumanji will jump out. Maybe we are frightened to open the gift because, if we do, we will have to change the way we think about the Creator God, and the people, and the land, and this place. We need to open the gift and use it. That is the challenge.

Kungan kaldowinyeri: listening to creation and to story on Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri Yarluwe Ruwe

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Abstract

Since 2013 Uniting College for Leadership and Theology has been taking people Walking on Country. This is a significant covenanting commitment with the Preamble offering the frame. Aunty Denise Champion has been a key leader across those years, guiding us and sharing her wisdom. Semester 1 of 2024 was the first time we offered such an experience as an optional semester-long offering in Theology weaving before, during and after theological reflection around the immersive experience. We travelled to the Kurangk (Coorong) with Uncle Ken Sumner, Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri elder and South Australian UAICC State Development and Outreach Officer. We listened to and reflected upon stories of dispossession and loss, as well as paused to attune our six senses to the land, waters, sky and creatures that have sustained Kukabrak Narrindjeri for millennia, kungan kaldowinyeri (listening to creation). This paper collaboratively presents the story of this journey to illustrate what is possible when Second Peoples commit to journeying with First Peoples.

Introduction

In 2013 the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology (UCLT) built into its expectations for candidates for ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia an immersion journey into First Peoples' truth and wisdom.² It was a means for honouring the call to meaningful relationships as part of the Uniting Church's Covenant between First and Second Peoples. Through truth-telling and theological reflection it was hoped to bring the words of the Church's Preamble to its Constitution alive. Over time, these events have widened in scope to include staff of the Synod, church members and participants from interstate. Titled "Walking

¹ Rosemary initiated this article, wanting to profile the wisdom of Uncle Ken Sumner and honour the thinking of students submitted in assessments. All have been named as co-authors with their permission, their contributions woven throughout, and the article reviewed by them. Uncle Ken's words are identified as his in the main text and larger quotes indented. Rather than name student thinking separately each time, their specific ideas and quotes are credited in footnotes, identifying the assessments these came from. Large quotes from their work are indented. Where other participants in the trip have been quoted this is acknowledged in a footnote.

² Rev Dr Steve Taylor, then Principal, promoted the initiative. Then Director of Missiology, Dr Rosemary Dewerse, coordinated the first two journeys with Aunty Denise Champion and Dr Tracy Spencer in 2013 and 2014. In the years since, various College and Mission Resourcing staff have assisted regular journeys led by Aunty Denise into the Flinders.

on Country” these, typically yearly four-day journeys, have been led by Aboriginal elders in partnership with staff of the College and Mission Resourcing. Leading the teaching on those journeys has been Rev Dr Aunty Denise Champion, an Adnyamathanha woman from Ikara-Flinders Ranges, who is Theologian in Residence at UCLT.

From February-May 2024, for the first time, five students enrolled to experience the journey as part of a semester of study, with Uncle Ken Sumner, Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri elder and South Australian UAICC Development Officer, and Academic Dean Rosemary Dewerse collaborating in the delivery of the content, assessment and immersion experience.³ Throughout, we were asking: What is this teaching me about Creator, what it means to be human and, how then, we should live? Mindful of this, students read a range of materials, many by Indigenous authors, and practised dadirri – “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness” – before travelling to the Kurangk (Coorong) for the immersion experience.⁴ During that experience they journalled and afterward they wrote a summative theology-then-theology-now assignment, with postgraduate students also designing a learning resource to pass on understanding gained to others. The students were joined for the days of immersion by four candidates for ministry, three UCLT staff and two spouses.

This co-authored paper, interweaving the wisdom of Uncle Ken with insight from Rosemary and students Max, Julie, Mel, Daniel and Gillian, as well as some reflection from other participants, documents not only our emerging theological reflection, but also the deep relational and paradigm-shaping potential of such an experience. Not only the Preamble, but our aspiration to Covenant relationship has been able to come alive and seed new possibilities for thinking and practice.

Kungan Kaldowinyeri: Listening to Creation

Uncle Ken was keen for those journeying with him to – even if briefly – step into his people’s experience of time and place in the Yarluwe-Ruwe (Sea-Country) to which they belong. We were invited into kungan-il kaldowinyeri-an (listening to creation). As he told participants:

Our connection to country is a universal thing. We have a word for this – Kaldowinyeri. Kaldowinyeri is creation; it’s land, sea, sky, and everything in them. The journey will involve much listening. Not necessarily to my voice but certainly to creation. That will mean tuning yourself into nature and your environment.

We will go through a reflection process and learn to still the mind and the body. There are five senses – hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch – and a sixth we use, which is mi:wi, your spirit or soul, deep in your being. I point to my navel because mi:wi is an important part of our connection to who we are and where we belong.⁵ Part of the reflection process is learning to listen not just

³ Kukabrak leaders, Sean Weetra and Tim Hartman, also lent expertise in teaching.

⁴ Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, “Dadirri” (1988). Accessed April 27, 2024. <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>

⁵ In his 2024 UCA Assembly Bible study Uncle Ken pointed out how Psalm 139:15 speaks of our woven connection to ancestors and to country that occurs during our creation. Pending publication in a future issue of Uniting Studies.

with your ears but with your spirit, seeing not just with your eyes but with your spirit, smelling not just through your nostrils but through your spirit, touching not just with your hands and feet but with your spirit, tasting not just with your tongue but with your spirit as well.

Uncle Ken would later reflect with us while on country that such depth of sensing is a natural reality of an intensely profound kinship with the land, experienced and named as a living body whose inhale and exhale can be felt in the wind and the ocean waves. In Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri language, Ruwe, means both “land/earth” and “body” and places are named as parts of that body. Kurangk (Coorong), for example, is “the place of the long neck” and Mungkuli (Lake Alexandrina) recalls Mungkri, the “stomach” or “belly.” Kumurangk (Hindmarsh Island) is the reproductive organs of a woman’s body, traditionally the place of birthing.

As we arrived on the shores of Mungkuli, Uncle Ken invited us to pick up a handful of sand from the beach and scatter it over the water. This is a customary way for a visitor to acknowledge the land and water as living beings, particularly mindful of the sacredness (narambi) of the womb water (prenguki) that nurtures life. The Murray River mouth is where that sacred water leaves the body; it must flow steadily to ensure health. Standing on soft golden sand, the fresh water of Mungkuli glinting in the sun, the wind bearing a faint tang of ocean, our acknowledgement in fact and in spirit was musically noted as grains of sand chimed in the water.

Inviting us into sensate silence as part of our journey together Uncle Ken observed that, “It’s an art form to get into the rhythm of the land.” Yet as one who belongs to it, to do so is as natural as breathing once the mind and body have been stilled and the spirit opened. “When watching a river I get into the rhythm. My mind slows down to that pace. My body slows down to that pace. My spirit slows down to that pace. I become the river.”

This understanding of being is echoed in the words of Aboriginal singer-songwriter Archie Roach:

All my body is like this land...this land’s the same...
The river is like my veins...
Your river is deep and wide...it’s deep down inside...
And the heartbeat keeps on pumping...
Into the bloodstream.⁶

Such understanding is not, as one participant observed, animism as the West so often accused First Peoples of. Rather, we are part of a long-forgotten story that we are all sisters and brothers coming from the one same Ancestor. This breathing earth is thus connected to us, its elements all truly alive just as we and all creatures are.⁷

For those of us who have inherited in our worldview, as Australian science writer Margaret Wertheim has noted, a Newtonian cosmology that tore kinship of the physical and spiritual realms asunder, the profoundly

⁶ Archie Roach, “Into the Bloodstream” Liberation Records (October 2012).

⁷ This participant wished to remain anonymous.

integrative thinking of First Peoples is difficult to grasp, if intriguing as resonant memory.⁸ We are left asking if a bridge back to an integrated cosmology might be gleaned by welcoming the knowing of science and of Indigenous wisdom, both/and.⁹ One participant reflected in yarnning around the fire on our last evening together:

I've been looking at how Western science and maths can learn from Indigenous understandings. It's been a puzzle because the two worlds seem to have different questions they are trying to answer. These few days have helped me see their similarities of watching, observing and noticing. Western thinking, however, detaches to observe while for Indigenous people it is very personal. In this place you see yourself in the landscape. You become it. I hope we can find a way that both can come together.¹⁰

As Wertheim suggests, Newtonian cosmology sent God into othering Space and spirituality into the realm of the Not Real.¹¹ In modern Christian theology, moulded by this crucible of “cosmologically-inspired trauma,” a key outcome has been an over-emphasis on salvation history and the assuaging of humanity's guilt, needing divine interventionist rescue out of our sinful reality.¹² In his 1993 book *God in Creation*, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann critiqued a too-narrow focus on personal hope this consequently has created.¹³ We are arguably offered a revelation-focused, whole-of-creation corrective in Uncle Ken's invitation to kungan kaldowinyeri – to listen to, breathe with, relax into, and live within the generous, sacrificial and nurturing reciprocity of Creator present with us in life-giving creation. The following riffs off Wertheim's argument that otherwise we are “Lost in Space:”

Where is the soul in space?
Where is the Heaven space?
All creation is our fellow space.
What about the space around us?
What about the space between us?...
Welcome, sharing, gratitude, care.
Yes, it's creation, but also relation.
Could this be Heaven?
And space for the soul?¹⁴

In an extended essay, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose summarised the relationship of several Aboriginal nations across Australia with their country. She notes that it is hard to ignore First Peoples' understandings

⁸ Margaret Wertheim, “Lost in Space: The Spiritual Crisis of Newtonian Cosmology,” in Bill Bryson, Editor, *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 58-81.

⁹ One who posits this is Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London: Penguin RandomHouse, 2013), 39-47.

¹⁰ Roelant Dewerse, reflection around the campfire, April 21, 2024. Permission given to publish.

¹¹ Wertheim, “Lost in Space,” 72.

¹² Wertheim, “Lost in Space,” 79.

¹³ German theologian Jürgen Moltmann came to recognise that he had been exclusively writing of the personal hope found in salvation history but in doing so was missing a much bigger hope in the new creation of all things. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, 1st Fortress Press edition, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Extract from Gillian Powis, “Pre-Intensive Reading 1” (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

of country as sacred. Country is also not just conceptualised as a common noun ('country') but a proper noun ('Country'), making it personal.¹⁵ For those descendants of settlers, and migrants, who experience a sense of disconnect from country that impacts our sense of identity and belonging, the invitation to understand Country as personal is significant. Meanwhile, Trawloolway theologian Garry Deverell has proposed the notion of "Christ as Country."¹⁶ Exploration of that proffers a link between the sacred and the personal that could prepare us in two ways for, as the Preamble calls us to, the "solemn act of covenanting."¹⁷ Firstly, we are invited into deeper richness for responding in worship to divine immanence. Secondly, we are invited into deeper responsibility. We are left then with questions: What does it mean to understand humanity as one part of God's good creation rather than its climatic purpose? Are we able to care for Country by learning to "listen to what country says about itself"?¹⁸ Can Christians learn to live an interdependent covenantal life with creation, valuing all as sacred? Can we understand life in Christ as akin to Aboriginal kinship with Country and, naming the conflict we have created between human and ecological needs, lay down our lives for life itself?¹⁹ The pause these questions create offers us a change in mindset away from the "modernist" conception of progress, action and the jagged line that tilts upward, focused on moving forward and being part of the "Lord's army," preoccupied with a martial or political sensibility. In sitting and listening to creation we are brought back to a time and place that is marked by a presence that need not insist upon itself.²⁰

The invitation we are being offered from Kaldowinyeri is to recognise and interpret the words of the Uniting Church's Preamble beyond the literal. Not only is land (and sea and sky) the means by which God "nurtured and sustained the First Peoples" as paragraph 2 declares – and by implication us all – but the body of Creator in whom, if we recast words from Paul, we [all created things] live and move and have our being (cf. Acts 17:28). This is a profoundly interwoven and divinely animated cosmos where relationship and renewal is as intrinsic to life as breathing. The Preamble declares that "The same love and grace...sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways," which can enhance the understanding of us all should we choose to listen, reflect, integrate and apply them.²¹ But deep appreciation of, openness to, and trust in this is hard to lean into when dominant narratives insist on making First Peoples into "strangers in their own land," denying the insights of Kaldowinyeri.²²

Telling the truth

Before travelling, Uncle Ken noted the compounding series of losses for Kukabrak Narrindjeri since the arrival of settlers on their lands. This makes for a story that is "challenging, difficult and emotional...For me there is lots of sadness." With loss of land and sovereignty came loss of food and water sources, loss of freedom and independence, loss of language, custom and ceremony, loss of identity, family and children. The Church has

¹⁵ Rose, Deborah Bird and Australian Heritage Commission, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

¹⁶ Garry Deverell and Anne Pattel-Grey, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 21-36.

¹⁷ Uniting Church in Australia, "Preamble to the Constitution" (2009), paragraph 9.

¹⁸ Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, 86.

¹⁹ Questions sourced from Melissa Neumann, "Pre-Intensive Reading Response 5" (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

²⁰ Drawn from Max Kowalick, "Pre-Intensive Reading Response 4" (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

²¹ Uniting Church in Australia, "Preamble," paragraph 3.

²² Uniting Church in Australia, "Preamble," paragraph 5.

been not only complicit, but a leader in this reality, believing the Christian protection it felt called to offer Kukabrak from settlers meritorious. Small yet stunning failures of curiosity have also left wounds.

Kukabrak is the proper name for our group, for Ngarrindjeri. “Ngarrindjeri” literally means “people.” When Rev. George Taplin began the mission down at Raukkan, he asked some of the people, “Who are you?” They answered, “ngarrindjeri” and he took that as the name of the tribe. Trying to get our original name back is difficult.

During our time on Yarlwe-Ruwe we stayed in a farmhouse near Raukkan, for thousands of years the gathering place of their Tendi, the governing body and court of justice of their nation which is made up of eighteen clan groups. In 1859 Raukkan become the site of a Christian mission station ostensibly to protect Kukabrak from the encroachment of settlers taking their lands and waters and, as a monument there states, to promote the advance of the Natives “in civilised living.”

Uncle Ken noted:

This is where things began to change for a lot of our people. Children were brought here and kept in dormitories, taken from various locations in the region. My grandmother was one of them. She was brought to the dormitory as an eight or nine-year-old. Her parents shifted here from Goolwa and relocated themselves to up on the hill to be closer to their daughter in the dormitory [who they could not parent or interact with as long as she was there.] Separation is a constant theme in Aboriginal stories.

This building was the ration station. The people living here got their rations for work or whatever they were doing...but only if they attended church. Their attendance at church was critical. By that time hunting and gathering becomes more and more difficult because the land is being cleared and European farming is happening. Even fishing became difficult as the waters started to change. The rations became something important, but detrimental to people’s health because flour and sugar were the main ingredients.

Missionaries were part of the colonisation machine.

Taplin’s got journals. They’re available. It’s his story said from his angle. He says some great things and he says some terrible things. Sometimes you can feel the racism very strongly. We chuckle because we have to, otherwise we will go insane or continually just be angry.

After Taplin, we had a number of missionaries until the government and their superintendents moved in, in 1916. Some of the missionaries were really crooked, really bad, and did terrible things. Taplin’s son Frederick took over when he died. He was a most brutal man.

The church gets used mainly for funerals. There’s hardly any services on a Sunday. Lots of people struggle to come here. I wonder why I still live here. I question that more and more because it’s a lovely place but it’s also a sad place. This history is very difficult. It’s hard to discuss. But

people have endured. Within my people I see a lot of resilience. They are strong in their mind, strong in their spirit, but it comes from real hardship. It comes from pain. It comes from sadness.

Sitting on the hard wooden pews in the church at Raukkan listening to Uncle Ken speak, a discomforting reflection emerged:

White walls, high ceilings,
 Raised platform, lectern,
 Plaques on the wall that commemorate a history imposed upon a land and people.
 Walls held together by the blood, sweat, and tears of the people,
 Only there to perpetuate a voice of control,
 To resolve an error introduced by those arrogant enough to cause it in the first place.
 Salvation?
 From what? From who...?²³

Given what we were told:

I was struck by the profound artifice of the mission – the alienness, the misshapen, haphazard awkwardness. The oddity in seeing how the missionaries tried to plunk their European world into this Australian land.
 The past is done. The wounds had. And nothing can change that.
 So where to from here?²⁴

Travelling to Raukkan and then on to Meningie we encountered what was known as the camps – one-mile, three-mile, seven-miles away from the nearest town. Inhabitants were restricted by curfew, unwelcome in town after dark. These were fragile settlements exposed to the highway, located on leftover scraps of land. Their dwellings were made of whatever materials Kukabrak could scavenge, devoid of amenities like sewage and electricity. The people were dependent on water sources that got scarcer and scarcer as European farming along the Murray-Darling river basin robbed more and more resource for irrigation. Once surrounded by abundantly stocked “supermarkets” teeming with food, the clearing of land and poisoning of the lakes and Kurangk made life barely tenable. Standing sadly near their remains, which once housed his own family, Uncle Ken observed: “My people didn’t know anything about poverty. Poverty didn’t exist. When did poverty arrive? It arrived with the colonisers.”

Those at seven-mile camp resisted being gathered into Raukkan as long as they could, despite multi-coloured babies appearing among them thanks to the attentions of Mr Mason, the Protector of Aborigines assigned to oversee them. In other camps closer to towns, children started disappearing. In 1963, aged eight, Ruby Hunter – Archie Roach’s wife – was taken by authorities from one-mile camp to see the circus one day in Meningie and never returned home. In 1957 Bruce Trevorror, gravely ill at the age of eighteen months, was taken by his deeply worried father from three-mile camp to seek medical help. His hospital records

²³ From Daniel Phan, “During Intensive Reflection-Response,” (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

²⁴ From Max Kowalick, “Listening to Creation: Intensive Journal. Day 2, Saturday,” (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

proving parental concern years later made history for providing irrefutable evidence of his kidnapping, enabling him to sue the State.²⁵ Bruce's father died before his stolen son returned home.

Uncle Ken soberly observed:

We know the history of many deliberate attempts to exterminate our people in many forms, but it never worked. We're still here. As broken as we may be sometimes, we're still here and there's something that continues to remain within us, and that's being who we are as Ngarrindjeri. Despite everything, there is something that remains deep within our mi:wi, deep within our soul.

To grapple with the realities in the story of Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri is to be confronted with disparate worldviews, with collisions, and with the harsh realities of what was and still is a harsh game, producing winners and losers. Uncle Ken invited us to stand as active witnesses, eyes wide open, six-sense-engaged. Paternalism, racism, and the silence spoken of in paragraphs 5 and 6 of the Preamble, born in and of presumption, ignorance, fear and paralysis has made and continues to make Kukabrak strangers in their own land. Relationship humanises us all, however, shifting the dynamic. Engagement with Kaldowinyeri literally earths power in human-and-more-than-human networks of interconnected responsibility. Herein lies a pathway for Second Peoples for a deeper, meaningful way to live well in this land.

How then should we live?

Our theology of dominion is interwoven with how Second Peoples have treated First People and their Country. Hearing stories of greed, dominance and disempowerment while on Kukabrak Country and through some of the readings, has led to me thinking that humans need saving from ourselves...²⁶

In the wake of truth-telling and exposure to Kukabrak understandings of Creator and our relationship to Kaldowinyeri (creation), the invitation to resilient, supple, mindful, woven connection, rooted in the soils of these lands now called Australia is clear.²⁷ The question for those of us who are Second Peoples, is what form could that most truly take?

One response is to welcome the invitation to see that what we are learning about God is an ever-expanding view. The process of blow-painting offers us a metaphor for this, because it is focused on breath, journey, spontaneity, surprise, exploration and experimentation. Paint flowing over the edge symbolizes opportunity to press beyond current ignorance, boundaries and certainties because, basically, our canvas is never going to be big enough to explore all that God is or what it means to be human.²⁸

²⁵ Bruce's story is told in more detail in Antonio Buti, *A Stolen Life: The Bruce Trevor Case* (Freemantle: Freemantle Press, 2019).

²⁶ Melissa Neumann, "Post-intensive Assignment and Learning Resource" (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

²⁷ Words drawn from a poem by Julie Martin, "We the reeds," 21 May 2024 (personal communication).

²⁸ Julie Martin, "Final Assignment," (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

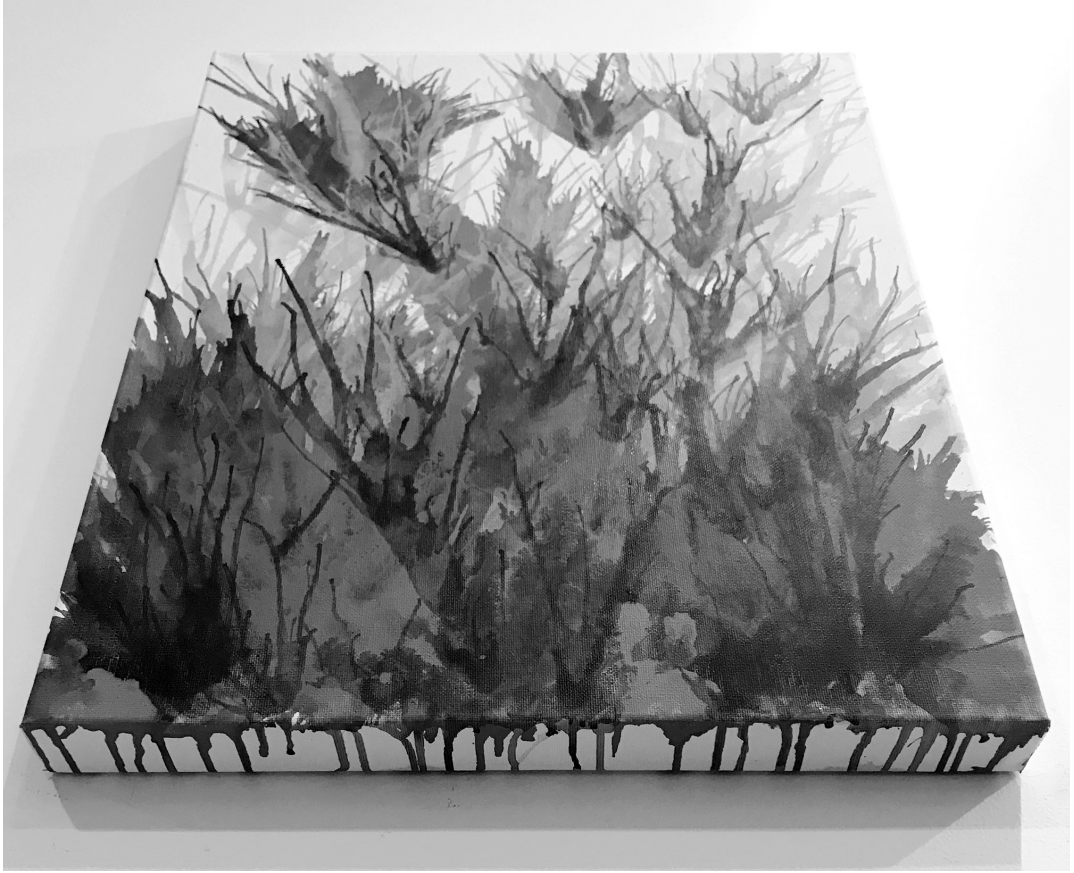


Fig. 1. Julie Martin, "Formerly White Canvas."

(The original painting draws its colours from the palette of the Kurangk using greens, blues, browns, yellows and reds.)

Meanwhile,

I have previously believed that I can find my home anywhere because Christ is my home, but what does that look like for Indigenous people, given Uncle Ken's sense of his Country and how living in other places hasn't carried the same sense of connection? I wonder if I weave Indigenous thinking into my connection with the river and hills of my neighbourhood to see them as kin, then home isn't just being surrounded by these hills and this river but maybe home is being seen and known by these hills and river. This creates a much stronger connection to this place, which raises further questions, given our modern Western culture of travelling and moving that perhaps compounds our loss of identity. Also added to this, if Christ is in creation, then home can be any place of creation which brings me back to where I started.²⁹

²⁹ Melissa Neumann, "Post-intensive Assignment and Learning Resource."

All this suggests a different way of being church on country:

At some point I should like...[to be] a church and community where it's not about getting to the next stage. But simply being present and flourishing as a people in a place. Not so much emphasizing the sojourning of a people – though that's a fine idea that I agree with – but rather emphasising a placed people.³⁰

A Kukabrak story, recounted in 1930 by David Unaipon, suggests where we are to gain wisdom for this work. Weary of gathering to listen to a voice they could not see, humankind turned away from the Great Spirit who had been their guide. They then came to deeply regret this. The Great Spirit refused to speak to the people again, however, and instead sent an enormous Thalung (tongue/speech/language) into a rent tree as a sign that “the Great Spirit is in all things and speaks through every form of nature...in fact, everything that the Aboriginal sees, hears, tastes, and feels – there is Thalung.”³¹

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist of the Potawatomi Nation, suggests a new way of conceiving of identity as Second Peoples. Unlike many introduced species that often “have the colonizing habit of taking over others’ homes and growing without regard to limits” Kimmerer proposes that Second Peoples should follow the example of Plantain in her North American context, a plant native to Southeast Asia.³²

Its strategy is to be useful, to fit into small places, to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds. Plantain is so prevalent, so well integrated, that we think of it as native...Plantain is not indigenous but “naturalized.”...Maybe the task of [Second Peoples is]...to strive to become naturalized to place...to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalised is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives [human and more-than-human] depend on it. Because they do.³³

Perhaps we already feel this sense of being “naturalized.” Perhaps this is a new concept to us. The key to it – which might challenge most of us – is a profoundly intentional connection to community, to the wholes within wholes that make up our home in the particular places on Country in which we find ourselves.

³⁰ Max Kowalick, “Pre-Intensive Response 4.”

³¹ “The Voice of the Great Spirit,” in David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, edited by Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2001), 151.

³² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London: Penguin RandomHouse, 2013), 214.

³³ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 214-215.

Relationship in story

The Walking on Country initiative of UCLT, and this year's Kungan Kaldowinyeri in particular, offers a way to begin to realise our Covenantal aspirations, pressing into the Preamble and beyond. At its heart lies relationship, birthed and nurtured in listening to Elders and leaders, for:

We are story. All of us. What comes to matter then is the creation of the best possible story we can while we're here; you, me, us, together. When we can do that and we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship – we change the world, one story at a time.³⁴

Valuing the deep stories within all cultures and the truth they carry is a key lesson one of the students, who is a biblical storyteller, gained from the experience.

Hearing the stories in the landscape to which they refer has led me to see them in a new light as part of an integrated whole together with the land and community. In the same way that I consider Bible stories to have a message for my life today these stories...teach us how to live, in relationship with the land and one another. [Taiwanese theologian Choan Seng Song notes] "Theology...above all things, is God telling stories through countless people in every land through ages because God loves stories."³⁵ This course has confirmed in me that it is not just in stories from the Bible that this is true.³⁶

Enriched, we are wrestling with our knowing of Creator, our understanding of what it means to be human, and questions of how then we might live and be communities of faith in these lands now called Australia. We are trying to do so in ways that recognise and are deepened by ancient wisdoms, that listen to the truth, that dignify one another.

The following student reflection poignantly captures the essence of the opportunity we had to genuinely journey with First Peoples and the invitation that was extended to us to listen to their wisdom, learn from their history, and allow it to challenge and change us. We have been offered a way to live into the call lying within the words of the Preamble. It is titled 'Yarn Burning.'

It's yarnning time under the starry night sky. The campfire burns brightly, yet its flames shed only a tiny light in the vast open space. She listens to the words of Ngarrindjeri. Carried by the wind, they seep into her ears and mind. Staring now into the flames she imagines pictures, flickering like an old movie reel; a glowing, cinematic abstraction revealing the ancient story of another world, another time.

³⁴ C. Janssens, "Remembering Richard Wagamese," *Sheridan Sun*, 21 March, 2017, <https://sheridansun.sheridanc.on.ca/2017/03/21/remembering-richard-wagamese/>, accessed 22 August 2022.

³⁵ Choan Seng Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 9.

³⁶ Gillian Powis, "Post-Intensive Essay" (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

Lulled by the campfire's warmth and glow, she is captivated by the emerging colours, many more than she thought. After all, flames aren't just yellow. Curiously, she realises, as the fire burns, it breathes. Its skeletal twigs fleshed by flame. Alive, it crackles and pops – a chattering of sorts, punctuating the story with life. Is it laughter? Is it joy? Is it pain?

Language vaporises as the story turns to song, and she's mesmerised by the melody...until a spark jumps out and singes a tiny hole in her clothes. Suddenly the wind changes and smoke blows in her eyes. It's hard to see and she chokes a little. She doesn't like the story anymore. Not all stories are good. Or happy. She can taste the ash. It's real.

As the smoke rises in the air, it swirls up and around, before disappearing into the unknown. But the scent remains. It's lodged in the fibres of her clothes, in her hair, becoming part of her.

She's a storyteller now.³⁷

Conclusion

To journey with First Peoples, listening to and learning from the teaching of Elders on Country within Kaldowinyeri, is to breathe context-grounded life into the words of the Preamble – the truth-telling, the confession, the respect for the insight of First Peoples into the God whom Second Peoples understand as Trinity, and the covenanting that it calls for. At the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology our collaboration with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in South Australia, and particularly Elders like Uncle Ken, is inspiring rich growth in understanding and practice. As we look ahead, the formalisation of this semester-long unit with Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri, as well as one with Adnyamathanha and Aunty Denise Champion, promises more opportunity for “celebrating this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole of creation.”³⁸

³⁷ Julie Martin, “Yarn Burning” from “CT3418M Response 3,” (UCLT/University of Divinity: CT3418M Supervised Reading Unit: Kungan-il Kaldowinyeri-an Listening to Creation, 2024).

³⁸ Uniting Church in Australia, “Preamble,” final paragraph.

Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: between celebration and critique

Rebecca Lindsay

Abstract

The Uniting Church in Australia's Revised Preamble to the Constitution tells the history of the Uniting Church's founding in tandem with the history of colonisation in these lands now called Australia. There is much to celebrate within the Revised Preamble as it centres relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the Uniting Church. The Revised Preamble has also generated critique from both Indigenous and other theologians, who identify within it forms of ongoing colonisation. This paper reflects on how 'settler' members of the Uniting Church might hear and respond to both the affirmation and critique of the Revised Preamble. Drawing on Alissa Macoun's theorisation of "colonising white innocence," I look for how this settler complicity may be at work within the Revised Preamble. I reflect on how such engagement with the Revised Preamble and its critique might help settler members in movement towards decolonising of Uniting Church theology and structures.

Locating the Preamble, Locating Myself

The Uniting Church in Australia was formed and exists within a settler colonial context. Settler colonialism is a way of describing power structures and relationships within particular nation states, where the social and political structures which commenced through colonisation continue.¹ In a nation such as the lands now called Australia there is no 'post' colonialism.² Settlers came to stay. As an institution in this context, the Uniting Church is complicit with ongoing legacies of colonisation. The Revised Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia is one way that this institution and its members have sought to grapple with colonisation. This paper explores celebration and critique of the Revised Preamble, asking that settler/ invader/ colonial inheritor members of the Uniting Church do not use the Revised Preamble as a means to sidestep responsibility to account for colonisation and to seek a more just settlement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

¹ See Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: Cassell, 1999).

² "The lands now called Australia" is a naming I learned from Brooke Prentis, "What Can the Birds of the Land Tell Us?" in *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture: Papers by Australian Women Scholars in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. Jill Firth and Denise Cooper-Clarke (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 19.

I engage in this reflection as a colonial inheritor,³ a beneficiary of structures which privilege whiteness, settler-ness, English language proficiency, and Western epistemologies. As an ordained Minister of the Word, I also hold positional power within the Uniting Church. Those, like me, who hold power and privilege in the Uniting Church and in the lands now called Australia have a responsibility to be part of the un-learning that is needed so that we (*I*) do not replicate colonial power structures and systems. This is not a responsibility that non-Indigenous peoples can defer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. On the one hand, I celebrate the Revised Preamble and acknowledge that it emerged from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) as gift and invitation to the Uniting Church. On the other, I am concerned that it may be used by colonial inheritor members of the Uniting Church to side-step responsibilities to decolonise.

Gadigal and Bidjigal land grounds my feet. This is the place of Banksia scrub where burri burri the humpback whale can be seen on the horizon as the waves crash like thunder at Maroubra beach. It is a place where colonisation is made clear in landscape and social space. The suburb where I live, for example, is named 'Matraville.' James Mario Matra travelled with Cook on the Endeavour. He wrote to British Prime Minister William Pitt in support of establishing a British colony at Kamay, dismissing the people already living there with racist and derogatory language.⁴ My son's primary school logo is a picture of the Endeavour, the school song includes reference to the Endeavour, and the sports houses are named Phillip, Banks, Cook, and Solander. These examples demonstrate colonisation inscribed into institution and landscape. They make colonising legacies present in the community, privileging a particular history. This is also the context for my living and thinking about what it means to belong to people who find connection through Christ.

The displacement of Aboriginal presence, as seen in the naming and symbols within my local community, is common within Australia's urban settings. I resonate with the observation of historian Paul Irish, who reflects that "like most Sydneysiders, I grew up with this belief of Aboriginal absence."⁵ My assumption of Aboriginal absence was challenged through membership of the Uniting Church, where, particularly through the invitation of members of the UAICC, I began to learn about colonial history and its continuing impacts.⁶ The ongoing structures of settler colonialism that place people and land into hierarchical and combative relationships are not only present within local neighbourhoods or political decision-making. These marks are present within the communities, locations, and structures of the Uniting Church and other churches. This means that when the Uniting Church seeks to construct a 'we' that is made up of followers of Christ in this place, this 'we' is not one in which all members sit in relationship to colonisation, land, state, or even church in the same way. Some bodies within the Uniting Church are positioned to move more easily through structures than others.⁷ This is the 'we' that is addressed by the Revised Preamble, named as First and Second Peoples who share "a destiny together."⁸

³ I learned the term "colonial inheritors" from Anne Pattel-Gray, "Colonial Bondage: Liberating Theological Education" (Melbourne, November 2, 2022), <https://vox.divinity.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Professorial-Address-Colonial-Bondage-Liberating-Theological-Education-2022.pdf>.

⁴ Larissa Behrendt, "The Doctrine of Discovery in Australia," in *Discovering Indigenous Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175; Alan Frost, *The Precarious Life of James Mario Matra: Voyager with Cook, American Loyalist, Servant of Empire* (Carlton, Vic: Miegunyah Press, 1995).

⁵ Paul Irish, *Hidden in Plain View: The Aboriginal People of Coastal Sydney* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2017), 3.

⁶ I did not grow up within the Uniting Church but joined as a young adult.

⁷ On colonialism's structuring of bodies see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 111.

⁸ Uniting Church in Australia, "The Revised Preamble," 2019, Para 10, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/covenanting/item/668-the-revised-preamble>.

The Revised Preamble was proposed for adoption at the 2009 National Assembly, my first as a member. Having missed some sessions due to illness, I returned to find members in the entrance hallway rather than the meeting room. Confused, I asked what was going on. I was told that members of Congress had asked to leave the meeting to spend time together, because they had not felt safe in the meeting. The decision was subsequently made for all members to leave the meeting, so that all could re-enter the hall and recommence discussion *together*. The symbolism of this act of listening and respect was profound for me. I understood it as a commitment on the part of the non-Indigenous members of the Assembly to acknowledge the lack of safety provided for Congress and to proceed differently. When the Revised Preamble finally passed I felt relief and pride.

The Revised Preamble has been a part of my learning about history in Australia, opening conversations about the role that churches have played alongside government in colonisation. It counters the idea that God came to Australia with Europeans. It places the Uniting Church's ambiguous relationship with colonisation as the opening element of its constitution and so of its common life. I have appreciated learning from members of UAICC about what the adoption of the Preamble means for them. Aunty Denise Champion, for example, describes the Revised Preamble as a sign of hope, in the sense that this document creates a kind of home for her within the Uniting Church.⁹ The Revised Preamble, along with the earlier Covenant Statement, are also repeatedly celebrated as key markers of Uniting Church identity, as seen in the final report of the Act2 project and in their inclusion in the policies and priority statements of various Synods within the Uniting Church.¹⁰

While I celebrate this affirmation of identity, I remain unsettled by whether the Revised Preamble effects transformation in congregational life, theology and governance in the Uniting Church, or on reparation and material change for the UAICC and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within and beyond Uniting Church communities. The UAICC proposals brought to the 17th Assembly in 2024 note that the Covenant is not working as might be hoped.¹¹ In addition, there is ongoing financial and material precarity within Indigenous led ministry explored, for example, in a radio conversation between Brooke Prentis and Sono Leone.¹² This precarity is demonstrated in Indigenous theological education, given the July 2024 closure of Wontulp-Bi-Buya college and the August 2024 closure of the University of Divinity's School of Indigenous Studies, both with connections to the Uniting Church. Prentis notes that these closures occurred on either side of NAIDOC week 2024, with its theme: 'Keep the Fires Burning! Blak, loud and proud.'¹³

The Revised Preamble is a tool that the big, diverse, messy 'we' of the Uniting Church can use to shape our life together. Given the time it takes to make constitutional change in the Uniting Church, I do not imagine this will happen again soon. As such, I wonder how the Revised Preamble might be used in movement towards change in the Uniting Church, that is, in movement towards something that is other-than-colonial. There is much to celebrate about the Preamble. I am nervous, however, about the tenacious capacity of

⁹ Denise Champion, *Yarta Wandatha*, ed. Rosemary Dowerse (Salisbury, SA: Denise Champion, 2014), 25.

¹⁰ Uniting Church in Australia, "Act2: The Gift of the Spirit" 2024. <https://act2uca.com/report/gift-of-the-spirit/>.

¹¹ Kickett, Mark and Alison Overeem. "Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress: Proposals to the 17th Assembly," 5 July, 2024. <https://uniting.church/17th-assembly-papers/>.

¹² Lake, Meredith and Brooke Prentis. "Aboriginal Ministry – the who, the what, and the how," June 27, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/soul-search/aboriginal-ministry-across-australia/103924166>.

¹³ Brooke Prentis noted this timing in her social media presence in August 2024.

colonialism to reproduce and recentre its own power structures. In this paper, I explore the tension between celebrating and critiquing the Preamble using the concept of ‘colonising white innocence’ developed by Alissa Macoun.¹⁴ I listen to a range of engagements with the Preamble, to reflect on how to read and make best use of the Preamble in its current form in ways that enable a more just settlement for First Nations peoples. I consider how colonial inheritor members of the Uniting Church might hear and act on the celebration *and* critique of the Preamble without sidestepping their responsibilities. This, I believe, is where the Spirit might be found, already at work in decolonising movement.

Colonising White Innocence

Alissa Macoun is a white/settler Australian scholar whose work is engaged in politics and social justice. She observes, along with Elizabeth Strakosch, that settler scholars cannot think our way out of colonising legacies given that settler scholars are embedded in colonising ways of thinking.¹⁵ This is an observation about academics in settler colonial space. I suggest, however, that it is also helpful for the settler colonial church whose theologies, methods of biblical interpretations, church processes, and doctrines are often founded in assumed and unreflected western ways of thinking.¹⁶ Macoun highlights the stories that social justice focussed white scholars tell of their work:

We imagine our work to be dealing with the impact of a violent and misguided colonial past, sometimes apologising for the role of our ancestors and institutions in that history, and repairing the damage caused by our predecessors in order to build a future founded in equality and justice.¹⁷

Telling stories this way allows settlers to sidestep responsibility for making meaningful or costly change *now*. In other words, everything can stay the same because *settlers* are still the key actors controlling this story. This enables a move to innocence because once settlers have acknowledged and named a colonising past they can be understood as virtuous and good in the present. Macoun draws on the example of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations.¹⁸ This act was a powerful symbol which is understood by some non-Indigenous peoples as an endpoint in itself. When the apology is portrayed as being *enough*, colonial inheritors feel good while simultaneously masking the lack of substantial change for First Nations peoples. Macoun names this process colonising white innocence.

Macoun describes the settler movement to innocence in this way:

We declare ourselves innocent when we assume that non-Indigenous people are basically benevolent bystanders to racism and colonialism, just requiring additional information or

¹⁴ Alissa Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence: Complicity and Critical Encounters,” in *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage*, ed. Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark, and Ravi de Costa (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2016), 85–102.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Strakosch and Alissa Macoun, “The Violence of Analogy: Abstraction, Neoliberalism and Settler Colonial Possession,” *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 506.

¹⁶ See, for example, Mark G. Brett, “Feeling for Country: Interpreting the Old Testament in the Australian Context,” *Pacifica* 23, no. 2 (2010): 137–56; Mark Brett and Naomi Wolfe, “Sovereignty: Australian Stories,” *Zadok Papers* 238, no. Spring (2019): 2–6; Anne Pattel-Gray, “Freedom from Colonial Bondage: Decolonizing Biblical Narratives and Theological Education,” *International Review of Mission* 112, no. 2 (2023): 240–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rom.12478>.

¹⁷ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 86.

¹⁸ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 86.

education in order to do good. We declare ourselves innocent when we assume that we educated white progressives are fundamentally different from other non-Indigenous people, the solution to a problem that lies in the hearts and minds of others rather than in our own institutions, knowledges, and practices. We declare ourselves innocent when we acknowledge a racist colonial past but assume a separation between this past and our racist colonial present. We declare ourselves innocent when we see ourselves as agents of progressive futurity and not also of colonial institutions and racial power.¹⁹

Reading these words, I notice resonance with how the Revised Preamble is sometimes invoked within Uniting Church communities – as beautiful words on a poster placed in a church foyer without having to confront the underlying attitudes of racism within that congregation, or to question how the church acquired its land, or to wonder how God might be present in the history of the lands now called Australia.

Given that settlers cannot think ourselves out of colonial ways of being and given settler tendencies to relinquish responsibility for colonisation, Macoun argues for what she describes as a “modest” project.²⁰ Noting her limited perspective as a beneficiary of colonisation, she asks settlers “to grapple with the conflicts we are engaged in, to try and understand them and how they perpetuate, and to think about strategies for keeping these conflicts visible in the face of ongoing white attempts to erase, suppress or even to transcend them.”²¹ In other words, Macoun asks that those who benefit from colonisation remain in the discomfort this position brings, rather than moving to smooth over or deny colonial violence. Smoothing over ongoing colonisation is a mark of settler privilege and an attempt to control story and power. Macoun’s modest project asks me to enter the tension that the Preamble creates so as to keep material injustice and relationships of uneven power front-of-mind, rather than swept away in a theological movement of yearning for a reconciled, but deferred, future-beloved-community.

In what follows I explore two tensions between celebration and critique that emerge in the words, structure, and interpretive movement of the Revised Preamble. The first is the language of First and Second Peoples and the second is the content of the Revised Preamble’s Paragraph 3. I focus on what might be experienced as unsettling for non-Indigenous members of the Uniting Church and reflect on how remaining in discomfort of these tensions might be productive for the messy ‘we’ of the Uniting Church.

Language for Peoples in the Revised Preamble

In a reflection on the Revised Preamble, co-written with Denise Champion, Chris Budden notes that

the terms First Peoples and Second Peoples came from a lot of work that the Uniting Church and the UAICC did together. There was a lot of talk about how we should refer to ourselves, and First and Second Peoples were the two names that we settled on.²²

¹⁹ The ‘we’ here is a settler we. Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 86.

²⁰ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 87.

²¹ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 87.

²² Denise Champion and Chris Budden, “First Peoples, Ancient Spirit, and the Uniting Church Preamble: Opportunity and Challenge,” in *Postcolonial Voices From Downunder: Indigenous Matters, Confronting Readings*, ed. Jione Havea (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 37.

Champion then tells an Adnyamathanha story of the Gum Tree couple who grew well and tall and strong but whose relationship to country and to each other is disrupted when some people come and dig up the ground and build a road between them.²³ The use of this story to draw out the meaning of First and Second peoples highlights this language emphasises relationship: relationship between peoples and relationship between people and land.

First Peoples names primacy in place. It suggests belonging and emplacement from always, reflected in the language of “time immemorial.”²⁴ The plural resists the colonising tendency which denies that the place now known as Australia is made up of many distinct nations. The term ‘First’ highlights sovereignty, reiterated in the Revised Preamble’s second paragraph where the term “traditional owners and custodians” is explicitly defined as “sovereign.” This link is significant as it may not be clear for non-Indigenous peoples when the language of traditional owners occurs, for example, within an Acknowledgement of Country.

The tension in language comes with the term “Second Peoples,” which is expanded to “Second Peoples from many lands” in the Revised Preamble’s opening statement. This language is a temporal designation emphasising the secondary relationship to place of Second Peoples as compared to the sovereign and prior relationship to place held by First Peoples. This language names and simultaneously obscures power and privilege, particularly in conflating groups who stand in quite distinct relationships to power within and beyond the Uniting Church.

The term “Second Peoples” obscures and minimises the inherent violence of colonisation. It can be compared to a term I’ve been using in this paper: settlers. Settler language is rightly criticised for its perpetuation of the myth that Australia was settled peacefully. Proponents of this myth claim that Australia is exceptional because it is a nation established without violence or war. Such claims have long been refuted by First Nations peoples and the lie of peaceful settlement is attested in the mapping of colonial frontier massacres.²⁵ The language of “Peoples” minimises the violence of colonisation by not offering any context for how this group came to be present in an already peopled place.²⁶

The sidestep enacted by the language of “Second Peoples” is heightened by the Revised Preamble’s description of the arrival of churches to Australia “as part of the *processes* of colonisation.”²⁷ Note the passive here: the denominations that would go on to form the Uniting Church are not themselves colonising but are, somehow, caught up, unawares, in “processes.” The Revised Preamble’s writers may have intended this language to highlight the diverse stories, events, and understandings of colonial history. However, it opens up the possibility to sidestep responsibility and claim innocence, particularly given that in Paragraph 6 the uniting denominations are placed outside of the dominant colonial culture, rather than recognising that colonial attitudes, racist theology, and biblical interpretation founded in white privilege were formative

²³ Champion and Budden, “First Peoples, Ancient Spirit,” 37–38.

²⁴ For a critique of this phrase see Garry Worete Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 33–34.

²⁵ Ryan, Lyndall et al. “Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1788 to 1930,” 2022, <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>.

²⁶ See also, Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 116, footnote 23.

²⁷ Uniting Church in Australia, “Revised Preamble,” Para 1. Emphasis added.

parts of these uniting churches which continued to be embedded, entangled, active co-workers within the colonial culture of the State.²⁸

Trawlwoolway theologian Garry Worete Deverell outlines the subtle distinction the Revised Preamble makes between the uniting churches and the Uniting Church.²⁹ Drawing on Deverell, I argue that this distinction demonstrates colonising innocence in the Revised Preamble. Two declarations of settler innocence named by Macoun are: (1.) when the racist past is acknowledged in disconnection from ongoing racism and (2.) when it is assumed that more and/or better education will free colonisers from colonial thinking.³⁰ These are both present in the Revised Preamble's disconnection between the uniting churches – marked by “good intentions” but also racism and paternalism – versus the Uniting Church – marked by covenantal relationship with the UAICC.³¹ This disconnection is significant because, in naming the Preamble and the covenantal relationship as key identity markers of the Uniting Church today, it is possible for Second Peoples to slip into belief that that the Revised Preamble and the Covenant are our better education. Second Peoples may make a sharp distinction between Uniting Church identity pre- and post- Revised Preamble, as though accepting the Revised Preamble into the church's life would undo “the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples” and the presence of these characteristics within the Uniting Church.³² That is, Second Peoples may identify the Revised Preamble as freeing the Uniting Church from ongoing entanglement with colonialism. The Preamble may have opened transformative possibilities within the common life of the Uniting Church. It did not, however, undo Western frameworks, racist interpretation, or complicity in the colonial project. These are elements of settler church life and culture that the Revised Preamble can work to confront, but from which the language of Second Peoples might enable sidestepping.

The language of Second Peoples is also problematic in conflating all non-Indigenous peoples into one group. There is an element of truth-telling in this move, given that all non-Indigenous peoples living in these lands are *not* First Peoples, no matter where they have come from or when they or their ancestors arrived. Katalina Tahaafe-Williams reflects on this as a Tongan Australian, writing that “it is sobering to realise that as a Second people person my arrival in this country is a continuing of the long history of racist invasion and subjugation of the First Peoples.”³³ Tahaafe-Williams reminds diverse Second Peoples that *all* people in the lands now called Australia reference their being and belonging in this place in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Alongside of this, however, is the capacity for those non-Indigenous peoples who most benefit from the legacies of colonisation to use this language to minimise the privilege that is held in whiteness, in English

²⁸ For a thorough engagement of racism within the relationship of church and state, see Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia: Critically Appraised from an Aboriginal Historico-Theological Viewpoint* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

²⁹ Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 112–15.

³⁰ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 86.

³¹ On problems associated with “good intentions” see Pattel-Gray, “Freedom from Colonial Bondage,” 243–44.

³² Uniting Church in Australia, “Revised Preamble,” Para 5.

³³ Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, “A Multicultural Perspective on the New Preamble,” *Uniting Church Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 52–53.

language proficiency, and in being assumed as the norm both within the church and wider Australian society.³⁴ Writing about English language dominance within the Uniting Church, Jong Soo Park critiques the conflation of white, Anglo-Celtic members of the church with more recent migrants and refugees. He notes that the theological and linguistic positioning of the Preamble is framed from an Anglo-Celtic perspective, arguing that

Second People for me lumps everyone – historical colonisers with recent migrants (different lived experiences); yet appears to be ‘painted’ with the same brush. Although the vision may look great on paper, the reality is the migrant voices are limited or never enacted.³⁵

That is, the language of ‘Second Peoples’ might be understood as power-evasive on the part of the white, Anglo-Celtic members of the church, as those whose theologies and structures are dominant and dominating.³⁶ As Macoun argues

speaking about colonialism without speaking about race allows those of us who are white to evade our greater benefit from and connection to colonialism. Speaking about race without speaking about colonialism ... reduces our ability to understand and contest systems of race that perform colonialism’s work.³⁷

The language of Second Peoples closes opportunity for these conversations.

There is yet another element within the tension of these labels, held for me in conversation with a friend and colleague who migrated to Australia as an adult.³⁸ She named the language of ‘Second Peoples’ as liberating for her because as a non-Anglo-Celtic, non-native-English-speaking member of the Uniting church, the experience of belonging is often of being sidelined. This form of marginalisation comes from being put in a ‘CALD’ or multicultural box, named as a priority of the Uniting Church but often experienced as secondary and dependent.³⁹ From this perspective, inclusion in a broad Second Peoples shifts the primacy of the white church, disrupting the white church’s self-appointed role as mediator of cultural diversity and relationship. Alongside of this freeing inclusion, however, can be another deferral of responsibility to enact structural and relational change. The language is messy, and I am reminded of Anne Pattel-Gray’s observation that the language to describe decolonised relationships and structures is, as yet, uncreated, because what decolonised relationships and structures might resemble remains unknown.⁴⁰

The Tensions of Paragraph 3

³⁴ My argument here does not seek to minimise the different relationship to land held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples contrast to all other peoples now living in Australia. Rather, I aim to highlight the way this language can be used to evade responsibility for ongoing colonisation, particularly by settler members of the Uniting Church.

³⁵ Park, “Language Ideology and White Normativity,” 83.

³⁶ These comments do not mean to undercut the Revised Preamble

³⁷ Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 88.

³⁸ I am thankful to Hee Won Chang for conversation and her permission to include these reflections here.

³⁹ CALD is an abbreviation for ‘culturally and linguistically diverse.’

⁴⁰ Anne Pattel-Gray, Q&A comments, *Walking Together: First Peoples Theological Conference*, 22 October 2022, Sydney.

In reflecting on the Revised Preamble, Paragraph 3 is inescapable. This is the paragraph of greatest controversy.⁴¹ Key issues include how God is named, where God lives, who is allowed to designate where God lives, and who has power to tell and frame this story. Budden is helpful in distilling this contention. He argues that the claim that God has always been in Australia “poses a significant challenge to the church. The church can no longer claim to hold the only story about God, or to be the only source of knowledge about God.”⁴² That is, paragraph 3 punctures claims that the Uniting Church, or any church, controls understanding of God or access to God.

Paragraph 3 states that:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.⁴³

Champion describes her experience of this claim as freedom:

The Preamble for the Uniting Church is a very, very helpful tool for us because it sort of puts into words what my journey has been all along, knowing there was an important connection to this country and not really knowing how to make sense of that, particularly when I’ve heard it said in the church that our culture was evil and demonic and we shouldn’t have anything to do with it.⁴⁴

The experience of freedom is linked to acknowledging that God’s home was already among First Peoples before colonisation. This resonates with the work of the Rainbow Spirit elders who retell the opening of John’s Gospel, as “Christ camped among us, built his humpy among ours.”⁴⁵ Champion celebrates her experience of the Preamble as “it has allowed me to tell my stories in my way.”⁴⁶

Alongside celebration, however, are two key critiques of Paragraph 3 which I outline below. The first is the thread of critique that runs through papers in the special 2010 edition of *Uniting Church Studies* focused on the Revised Preamble. These argue that Paragraph 3 goes too far because it goes beyond the limits of human knowing of who God is and how God reveals Godself. The second critique raises the issues of colonisation within the Revised Preamble, arguing that it reinforces colonial control and Western epistemology.

The first critique is that the Revised Preamble limits the scope of God’s activity, as argued by Benjamin Myers and Alex Jensen.⁴⁷ For Myers, this is through its language of recognition rather than a relational

⁴¹ As seen in Paragraph 3’s strong presence in published reflections on the Revised Preamble, from the 2010 Special Edition of *Uniting Church Studies* up to the 2024 publication of Garry Deverell’s *Contemplating Country*.

⁴² Champion and Budden, “First Peoples, Ancient Spirit,” 42.

⁴³ Uniting Church in Australia, “Revised Preamble,” Para 3.

⁴⁴ Champion, *Yarta Wandatha*, 18. See also Champion and Budden, “First Peoples, Ancient Spirit,” 35.

⁴⁵ The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*, 2nd ed. (Adelaide: Australasian Theological Forum, 2007), 3.

⁴⁶ Champion and Budden, “First Peoples, Ancient Spirit,” 36.

⁴⁷ Alex Jensen, “The Proposed New Preamble and the Barmen Declaration, and Why It Matters,” *Uniting Church Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 63–70; Benjamin Myers, “‘In His Own Strange Way’: Indigenous Australians and the Church’s Confession,” *Uniting Church Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 39–48.

posture of confession.⁴⁸ Recognition suggests an authoritative claim to know where and how God is present beyond the authority or capacity of the church, thus domesticating God's action into the framework of the Preamble. For Jensen, the Preamble moves beyond orthodoxy, detaching God's self-revelation from the person of Christ in connecting God's revelation to law, custom and ceremony.⁴⁹ I am intrigued that both Jensen and Myers draw heavily upon Swiss and German theological thinking in naming their concerns, particularly the theology of Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration.⁵⁰ There is a strange paradox in arguments that suggests that the Revised Preamble domesticates God's action in the world through linking God to Indigenous law, custom, and ceremony while housing these arguments in the theological context of a different and particular people and place, namely mid-20th century Western Europe. This leads me to ask whether the Revised Preamble's language limits the ability of God to move within the world as God desires or whether it shatters the illusion of control that traditional Eurocentric theology has created?

The second critique of this paragraph is alluded to by Budden and outlined more fully by Deverell.⁵¹ Budden suggests caution about the transformative possibility of the Revised Preamble. The continuing colonial context of its formation means that the Revised Preamble required negotiation over how histories would be told. Arguing that Paragraph 3 can be understood as either restrictive or open, Budden asks what relationship exists between Christ and Aboriginal ancestral narratives. He questions whether the Revised Preamble is yet another attempt of colonial control over First Peoples, overwriting Aboriginal epistemologies with Christian categories and names for God and concealing racist theologies.⁵²

Deverell offers a similar, but more pointed, critique that the Revised Preamble replicates "the very coloniality the authors apparently intended to overcome."⁵³ One way this is enacted is as the Preamble equates the Christian God with Indigenous ancestor spirits, law, and lore, overwriting them with Christian understandings. Deverell argues that:

the theological substitution of the Triune God of Christians... for our creator ancestors is as pure an act of colonial erasure as I have seen. And it is immediately repeated when the preamble claims that our law, custom, and ceremony teach us not about country and how to live in it wisely, but rather about the "love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ." This kind of substitution is a centring of the white possessive in its most paradigmatic form: the overwriting of an Indigenous cosmic imaginary with the cosmic imaginary of an invading and totalising force. In this instance by a colonizing Christian church. The moral problem here is a fundamental lack of humility before the continuing mystery of another land, another people, another way of constructing the world.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Myers, "In His Own StrangeWay," 42. Deverell (*Contemplating Country*, 117) also critiques "matter-of-fact" language.

⁴⁹ Jensen, "The Proposed New Preamble," 63.

⁵⁰ Barth and Barmen are both recognised as influential in the crafting of the Uniting Church in Australia's Basis of Union.

⁵¹ Champion and Budden, "First Peoples, Ancient Spirit," 43; Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 107–20. See also Geoff Thompson, *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union* (Northcote, Vic.: Uniting Academic Press, 2016), 182–84.

⁵² Champion and Budden, "First Peoples, Ancient Spirit," 42–43.

⁵³ Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 110. See also, Deverell, Garry Worete, "A Botanical Typology of Indigenous Receptions of Colonial Theology," *Uniting Church Studies*, 25, no. 1 (2023): 98.

⁵⁴ Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 117.

Colonial control is maintained, rather than acknowledging Indigenous epistemologies as Indigenous epistemologies which bring different wisdom and frameworks for understanding the world, including Christ.⁵⁵ The Revised Preamble's assumed direction of communication and understanding is problematic, as Paragraph 3 seeks to understand Aboriginal lifeways by imposing a Western Christian framework over the top of these.

Macoun argues that colonising white innocence tends to displace Indigenous epistemology and agency for white heroics.⁵⁶ In both critiques of Paragraph 3 outlined above, there is potential for this to be at work, either in turning to the contextual theology of a different time and place to out-frame the contextual theology of the Revised Preamble or in the colonial influenced container underlying the Revised Preamble's construction. Alongside these elements of critique, however, sit celebratory voices, particularly from within the UAICC, who name joy and liberation at the way that Paragraph 3 places their stories and culture at the heart of the Uniting Church.

Disentangling and Decolonising

The Revised Preamble is framed through the language of recognition. Budden notes the importance of recognition for members of the UAICC involved in drafting the Revised Preamble, that they wanted "to have something in the law of the church that would name their place in the church in unavoidable ways."⁵⁷ Recognition as means to transform relationship in space inscribed by settler colonialism, however, is fraught. Elizabeth Povinelli talks about the "cunning of recognition," in identifying how recognition frames truth-telling to work for the status quo.⁵⁸ Recognising one thing (such as colonial entanglement) does not automatically mean enacting a different something (such as decolonising). Macoun describes this as settler recognition enabling a form of settler transcendence.⁵⁹ In other words, by recognising colonisation, racism, and the church's ambiguous position in relation to these, settlers seek to transcend their own embeddedness within racist and colonising structures, thus naming themselves as innocent and good. Relating this to the Uniting Church raises the question of whether the recognition offered by the Preamble, including naming the Uniting Church's involvement in colonial processes, works to suggest that the Uniting Church now transcends these issues? As UAICC member Aunty Alison Overeem identified at the *Raising our Tribal Voice for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution* conference, churches in Australia need "less truth-telling and more truth acceptance."⁶⁰

The entanglement of the Revised Preamble with the real life of the Uniting Church is complicated. The Revised Preamble is cause for celebration because it brings colonial history inside the story the Uniting Church tells of its identity. This celebration, however, is held in check by the ongoing colonising realities inside the Uniting Church, even within the Revised Preamble itself. The Revised Preamble emphasises

⁵⁵ In his work, Deverell explores analogies between Christ and Country, for example *Contemplating Country*, 118–20. See also Deverell, Garry. "Christ as Country: Changing the Frame for Christology in Gondwana." (Conference paper, Raising Our Tribal Voices for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution, Melbourne, February 7, 2024.)

⁵⁶ Macoun, "Colonising White Innocence," 85.

⁵⁷ Champion and Budden, "First Peoples, Ancient Spirit," 35.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "The Cunning of Recognition: Real Being and Aboriginal Recognition in Settler Australia," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 11 (1998): 3–27.

⁵⁹ Macoun, "Colonising White Innocence," 96–98.

⁶⁰ This occurred during a Q&A session at the conference *Raising our Tribal Voice for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution*, February 2024, University of Divinity, Melbourne.

relationality, as diverse Uniting Church members are called to revisit histories to forge “a destiny together.”⁶¹ Responses to this encounter are varied; it is a starting point rather than completion. Being a starting point, however, must not mean deferring to a future that does not impact the present. Placing this statement upfront of the Uniting Church’s legal constitution means that it is a document that remains present, even when the page is skipped over on the way to check regulations.

Macoun’s “modest proposal” for settlers is “to grapple with the conflicts we are engaged in, to try and understand them and how they perpetuate, and to think about strategies for keeping these conflicts visible in the face of ongoing white attempts to erase, suppress or even to transcend them.”⁶² Sitting in this tension that the Revised Preamble raises is important for colonial inheritor members of the Uniting Church who wish to see theology and church practice decolonised. This means not simply attending to the celebration of the Revised Preamble and then feeling good about belonging to a denomination that has begun to name its colonial inheritance and to hear the stories of First Nations peoples about their understanding of God in this place. It also means allowing the Revised Preamble to continue to unsettle, both because of what it names and what it tries to erase.

⁶¹ Uniting Church in Australia, “Revised Preamble,” Para 10.

⁶² Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence,” 87.



In One Breath: partaking in the communion of the Spirit and Creation

Toar Hutagalung

Abstract

This essay seeks to retrieve the pneumatic dimension of creation within Jewish and Christian narratives by examining the presence of the Spirit in the stories of Genesis and the annunciation to Mary. These texts demonstrate how creation occurs through the indwelling of the Spirit in a worldly space. However, mere indwelling is insufficient. The movement of the Spirit toward creation should be reciprocated by the movement of creation toward God. This discussion will also incorporate Julian of Norwich's concept of "oneing," which addresses divine union. By bringing a pneumatic vision, this hermeneutic of retrieval, supplemented by the concept of "oneing" drawn from Julian of Norwich, can serve as a bridging method between Indigenous perspectives in Australia and the universality of Christ. This can be achieved by not only recognizing the particularity of Jesus and Indigenous wisdoms but also acknowledging the particular dwelling of the Holy Spirit, who is always fluid yet intimate with creation. In this way, I argue, people can avoid any imperial anthropocentric view of Christ brought by the coloniser, and promote an inclusive yet particular Christ through the Spirit, who hovers over creation and is known by many Indigenous communities in Australia.

Introduction

As a newcomer in the Uniting Church in Australia and part of the Second Peoples or migrants coming to the Country, I am still learning the histories of the Uniting Church and the First Peoples. I noticed the efforts of the Uniting Church trying to acknowledge its colonial history and to pursue better reconciliation with the First Peoples by creating a Revised Preamble in 2009. While it does recognise that the First Peoples, the Australians, already knew God before Christian missionaries arrived, it still has some debatable statements. For example, a chapter by Rev. Dr. Aunty Denise Champion and Dr. Chris Budden addressed their concerns of "the colonial strands that still remain" in the Preamble.¹ For this article, I focus on the third point of the Preamble, which says:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers;
the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.

¹ See, Denise Champion and Chris Budden, "First Peoples, Ancient Spirit, and the Uniting Church Preamble," in *Postcolonial Voices from Downunder: Indigenous Matters, Confronting Readings*, edited by Jione Havea (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 33–45.

The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.²

It seems there is still a difficulty in seeing the uniqueness of both Christianity which came from the Jewish tradition and the Indigenous "spirituality" which has its own knowledge about God. Based on that, some questions that may arise or have been lingering in the conversation are:

- Do we need to say that Jesus Christ is the full revelation for the Indigenous Australians who already knew God before the missionaries came?
- Does it mean that the First Peoples do not fully know God until they learn about Jesus Christ?

If yes, aren't we saying that Christians have superior – and thus colonising – knowledge about God? If not, what about the centrality of Christ in Christianity?

There may be some other questions around the Preamble, but regarding the 15th anniversary of the Preamble to the Constitution of the UCA, I would like to go to a third space. This space is not necessarily detached from Christ-centred understanding, but also affirms the Indigenous wisdoms in understanding God, including Christ. There is no doubt that the First Peoples have their own understanding about Jesus Christ in their own way. For instance, the Adnyamathanha story told by Auntie Denise about Arambarra, the trapdoor spider, demonstrates how the spirit will rise again three days after the body has returned to the ground. This story may not be quite similar to the story of the Gospel, which says that Christ will rise again on the third day. It may sound different again with how Jewish and non-Jewish Christians understand the word "spirit" as inseparable to the "body."³ Nevertheless, this is how Auntie Denise found an understanding about Jesus Christ as the firstborn from the dead and how that gives the assurance of resurrection from the dead, in the same manner as Christ's resurrection. That is the story about Christ in Adnyamathanha's lens.⁴ I am not denying the importance of Christ. At the same time, I do not deny the validity of how other people speak and understand Christ – just as I speak in my own way as an Indonesian. To argue that it is possible to do that, I want to discuss a different direction, which is about the Holy Spirit as the Third Space. The third space seeks to invite us to realise that affirming the presence of Christ is not necessarily addressing the Second Person of the Trinity only. If we see the Second Person and the Third Person of the Trinity as One, as they are indeed inseparable although not to be confused, then there should be no problem to look at the presence of the Holy Spirit and link it to Jesus Christ. The key here is *relationality*. We cannot think

² See, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2018), 41.

³ The question on whether the spirit is different from the soul is quite complex, because in the Bible, the two sometimes are mentioned together. However, in this writing, I tend to agree with Karl Barth's position in addressing that the "spirit" is not another entity in human being, because calling it as a third entity may lead to a trichotomy view which was already rejected at the Fourth Council of Constantinople in 869–70 CE. Karl Barth, "Man as Soul and Body," in *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation §45–46, The Creature II*, edited by G.W. Bromiley and Thomas Torrance (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567690487.0006>. Above all, my point is to show that first, "the spirit" is the "soul," and a body is an ensouled body, or a soul is an embodied soul. Christianity in traditional sense does not separate them. Therefore, when Christ was risen, the embodied spirit also raised up with the body.

⁴ Denise Champion and Rosemary Dewerse, *Yarta Wandatha* (Salisbury, SA: UAICC, 2014), 53–54. Auntie Denise restated this explanation in her second keynote speech responding to a criticism which said that she did not say anything about Jesus in her first keynote speech during ANZATS 2024 Conference, held in the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, in Adelaide, SA, 1–3 July 2024.

of one Person without another. In that way, the Holy Spirit is also the centre of Christian faith. I call this alternative approach a pneumatological work, or, simply, a pneumatic vision.

To pursue that direction, I bring one story from the Hebrew Bible and another from the Gospel to illuminate the intimate union of the people by the power of the Holy Spirit. The former comes from the creation story, while the latter is taken from the story of the annunciation of Mary. To connect those two, I incorporate the work of Julian of Norwich in her concept of one-ing or divine union. I argue that both stories illustrate how the Spirit is always the key Person who makes the creation able to connect to God, which I call later “the oneing.” Scaffolding on that theology, I move to the importance of partaking in that oneing, which can be done through Eucharistic practice. In the end, this language of oneing or union is intended to be a theological vocation for many Second People Christians to understand and affirm, without exercising any validating power, the fact that many First People Christians already understood Jesus Christ through their own Indigenous Wisdoms, while at the same time acknowledging the historical incarnation of Christ in Jesus as a particular name within Christianity. With this, we may have a better vision for a union.

The Spirit in the Creation

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit is often associated with different kinds of forms. Wind and breath are some of the figures of the Holy Spirit. Beginning with the creation story in Genesis 1:1, it says, “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete [unformed], and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”⁵ Continuing the story in Genesis 1, each time God created something, it says: “and God said.” It is important to note that creation takes place when God opens God’s mouth and speaks. The Word is with God when God speaks. I argue that we cannot speak if we do not breathe. In fact, speaking involves a process of inhaling and exhaling a breath. Therefore, when God said, God created. While the Word may refer to Christ as the Word of God, the Logos, or the wisdom, the point of connection between God the Speaker and the ones who are formed or created is on the breath. This then continues to the story in Genesis 2:7 where God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of Adam which then made him alive. The connection to both “soul” and “breath” in the Hebrew “nephesh” bears this out: without a breath, there is no soul or life. This also shows us that without the Holy Spirit, there is no life, *and no creation*. The conviction of the Holy Spirit as a giver of life certainly is not just a linguistic concept. In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in 381 CE, the fact that the Holy Spirit is described as “the Lord and giver of life” shows how the vivifying (giving life) work of the Spirit is central to the third person of the Trinity. This does not mean that the other two persons are not vivifying creation, because as Augustine said, the three persons of the Trinity work together inseparably.⁶ The work of one person of the Trinity is the work of the other two. What I mean by central to the Spirit is to show that in early times, such as in the 3rd to 5th century, churches still found it difficult to mention the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and whether the Spirit is the same one God as with “the Father” and the Son. In fact, the Nicene Creed in 325 CE does not say anything more except “and I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Nevertheless, with the 381 CE creed, as part of the work of Athanasius in rebuking the *pneumatomachianism* (those who

⁵ All verses are from NRSVUE.

⁶ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 11 and 170. Book one, chapter 5, verse 8, and book four, chapter 21, verse 30.

denied the divinity of the Spirit), we see that the wisdom of proclaiming the divinity of the Spirit as the One same God comes from “the vivifying work” of the Holy Spirit, who is believed as the Giver of Life.⁷

Athanasius began to build the foundation of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit in his *Letter to Serapion*, written around 357 CE. In the first epistle, chapter 23, Athanasius said that “the whole creation participates of the Word, in the Spirit.”⁸ In chapter 25 he says: “Therefore, it is in the Spirit that the Word glorifies creation and presents it to the Father by divinizing it and granting it adoption. [It is the Spirit] who binds creation to the Word.”⁹ In chapter 31, he says, “For there is nothing which is not brought into being and actuated through the Word, in the Spirit.”¹⁰ In other words, the element of “giving life” or giving the existence of creation is divinely foundational to the Holy Spirit as it is understood in relation to creation and to show that the Holy Spirit is God. Using Denis Edwards’ words, “the relationship of continuous creation can be seen as a fully trinitarian act by which God enables a world of creatures to partake of the Word in the Spirit. It is only through this participation that individual creatures exist and interact in the community of creation.”¹¹ Thus, when we look back at the creation stories in Genesis, there is a deep connection between the Spirit and creation.

The Spirit who Moves Both Ways¹²

Further analysis on the stories of creation and the annunciation can shed more light on how the Spirit does not move in a single trajectory. The Spirit always uses double languages: language of creation and the particularity of Jesus. While the particularity of Jesus shows how the divine is demonstrated in the assumed body of Christ, that incarnational event also means that creation is always part of the revelation of the Divine in Christ. Afterall, if Christ represents the whole creation, then creation is also attached to Christ, although Christ is not a creation obviously. This also means that the pneumatological language always involves the matter of creation. For example, we can see important conversations around “deep incarnation” as argued by Niels Gregersen and Denis Edwards. Gregersen argues that incarnation should be understood in a deep sense, where Christ’s incarnation is not just an incarnation in assuming human body, but it is also “the incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature.” Building on that idea, Edwards also points out that “the Christ-event can be understood as God entering into the evolutionary history of life on Earth, embracing finite creaturely existence from within.”¹³ In other words, the fleshly matter of Jesus was and is part of the whole creation. Both theologians explain how the

⁷ The original phrase is: Πνεῦμα ζωοποιόν (*pneuma zoopoion*). On Athanasius’ excerpt on *Letter to Serapion* Epistle I, chapter 23, Khaled Anatolios, for example, translates that phrase as “life-giving.” Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 180.

⁸ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 180.

⁹ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 182.

¹⁰ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 187.

¹¹ Denis Edwards, *Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution, and Ecology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 24–25. What Edwards say about continuous creation is also known as “*creatio continua*.”

¹² I learned the Yolŋu philosophy on “Both Ways” when I visited Nungalinya College in Darwin. Adopted from the flow of the salt and fresh water that meet in one pond, two things are working together which creates a powerful meaning, without losing both uniqueness. This, I argue, is different from the Hegelian dialectic which always thinks to create a new synthesis after conflicting a thesis with antithesis.

¹³ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 60.

incarnation of Jesus entails that Christ is involved in every single particle of all creation, just as Christ has been since the beginning of creation.¹⁴

On another note, about the language of creation, I remember a story that Aunty Denise said during the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the covenant. She explained how the teacher of her granddaughter mentioned how important it is to keep speaking the First Language, the mother tongue, otherwise, she will lose her culture.¹⁵ Integrating that socio-linguistic lesson to theological imagination, I argue that creation is God's first language. Creation is the mother tongue of God. If Augustine argues that we can find a trace of the Trinity inside our human bodies as creation which were made according to God's image – God's likeness, then I argue that the Holy Spirit (*pneuma*) is incorporated into creation as God's language. A pneumatological language of God then signifies creation as well. This is then where it gets more interesting, especially when we connect the story of creation and the annunciation to Mary.

There is a specific part in the incarnation narrative in Luke where Mary says in verse 38, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." There is the active agency of not only the Divine, but also of Mary in affirming, and thus allowing, the incarnation to take place. Mary understood that the incarnation is made possible only when the angel explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon her so that the power of God could overshadow her, *and* after she affirmed it. The Spirit then made a home in Mary's womb. Even if without such affirmation, the fact that the womb of creation is needed for the birth of Jesus Christ demonstrates that the overshadowing power of the Spirit needs a cooperation of Mary. Without the collaboration, God's revelation cannot take place. The annunciation then is a story of union as in affirming the existence and subjectivities of God and creation.¹⁶ Similarly, when looking at the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2, while the creative speech or Word of God made it possible for creation to take place, the further creation took place with the earth. Norm Habel explained how the earth became the co-creator with God. As we look at Genesis 1:11 and 12 for example, while God did the speech in verse 11, the next verse says it was the earth also *who* brought forth vegetation.¹⁷ Even in Genesis 2 verse 7, Adam was formed out of the ground (Adamah), just as every tree in verse 9, and every animal in verse 19. The Adamah, in this sense, was the co-creator of the Holy Spirit for the next creation.

It's important to note that in the process of the formation or creation of non-human beings in Genesis 2, the Holy Spirit is still there too. It might not be in a form of breath, but it is in the form of water. That is why it is worth to note that in Genesis 2:5, no plant or vegetation emerged because there was no rain, but it didn't mean that they were not there. On verse 6, a stream, or sometimes called as mist, "would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground." That watery vivifying (life-giving) character can be interpreted as the presence of the Holy Spirit, as I have argued previously by bringing in the creedal formula. This can bring us also to the theology of baptism. Just as baptism is an invocation of the Holy Spirit as we have seen

¹⁴ See Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 205. Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

¹⁵ Spoken by Rev. Dr. 'Aunty' Denise Champion during the "Yanakanai: Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the Covenant," at Adelaide West Uniting Church on 6 July 2024.

¹⁶ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed: And Its Early Christian Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 38–39.

¹⁷ Norm Habel speaking for his keynote presentation at ANZATS Conference held in the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, Adelaide, July 1-3, 2024. Habel also wrote about this in Habel, Norman C., and Wurst, Shirley, eds. *Earth Story in Genesis: Volume 2* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 43 and 45.

in the event of Jesus' baptism, the baptism of the earth has already taken place during creation process to signify the presence of the Spirit. In that sense, the Holy Spirit always speaks in elemental forms, in the language of creation. Therefore, it is not astonishing to see the creation as the co-creator or the liminal space between God and other creation. The Holy Spirit becomes the Third Space when she is connected with creation. That Third Space enables the *creatio continua* and its connection to the Trinity.

Oneing

As a systematic theologian, I am tempted to speak not only from the Bible and the church fathers and mothers, but also from the medieval mystic tradition, such as Julian of Norwich. I find her focus on "oneing" or divine union is remarkably essential for understanding the intimacy of the divine and creation through pneumatological lens. The word "oneing" comes from the Middle English term which appears in Julian's work where she wrote about sixteen showings or divine revelation as her short version, and eighty-three chapters as the longer version. In contemporary work, the translation that is often used is "union." However, I am grateful for Kerrie Hide's work in focusing the word "oneing" instead of "union," because this oneing is aligned well with other theological concepts, such as "atonement" in a sense of at-one-ment with God, and the idea of "home," in the oneing.¹⁸ I already discussed in some length about this oneing and homely character elsewhere, so my focus here by using the word oneing is more on the work of the Holy Spirit who enables us to participate or partake in a mutual sharing of life between the divine and the creation.¹⁹ Hide uses another word, "knit," which is actually used by Julian, to help us understand more about the meaning of oneing. For Julian, "Christ's beloved soul was precious joined [*knitted*] to him in the making; with a knot so subtle and so strong that it is united [*oned*] to God."²⁰ Hide explains further that "at creation humanity is *knit* and *oned* to the Trinity and kept in this inviolable *oneing*."²¹ She continues to say that we are all knitted together with the divine to form a fabric.²² I argue that the knot is also the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hide also explains the importance of the Neo-Platonic concept from Plotinus as part of Julian's Christian faith. The principle of *exitus reditus* illustrates how creation is always moving out of creation, but then will always return to God. Augustine, for example, is very well known for this neo-platonic concept as employed in his *Confessions*. In Book I chapter 1 he says, "You stir [human beings] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."²³ There is an intense longing of returning to and becoming united with God. Thus, this going out-and-in in Julian's oneing movement has always been a strong traditional Christian conviction. It is the knitting movement of the Holy Spirit to make us, creation, knitted to God. This is the eschatological vision of creation which runs eternally since the moment of creation. Moreover, this oneing is the Love who is present in the relationship between the Father and the Son. This is the mutual (loving) bond between the Father and the Son (*communem qua invicem*

¹⁸ Kerrie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 53.

¹⁹ See my work, Toar Banua Hutagalung, *Toward an Embodied Decolonial Pneumatology: Dishoming Space* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2024).

²⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated by Barry Windeatt (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 119. I used Hide's wording "knitted" and "oned" as she translated this passage discussed in Hide, *Gifted Origins*, 54.

²¹ Hide, *Gifted Origins*, 53–54. Emphases are original.

²² Hide, *Gifted Origins*, 54.

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

se diligunt pater et filius caritatem).²⁴ That Loving act knitted the Lover and the Beloved as in Trinitarian understanding, as argued by Augustine. That same Love is present in the relationship between God and creation. That same Love, which is the power of the Holy Spirit who overshadows Mary – and the essence of God Godself – enables Christ to feel the pain of Adam and to experience oneing with creation in the womb of Mary.²⁵ The Holy Spirit, through that Gracious Love, enables the soul of creation to understand, feel, and sense that we always belonged to the Trinity, the Most High, the foundation of our soul.²⁶ This is the fulfilling reality of creation where we are always drawn to return to God by the work of the Holy Spirit. From creation to consummation, from incarnation to ascension, there are always the descending and ascending or the *exitus* and *reditus* movement from and back to God. This is our present reality where we are embraced in the eternal oneing with God.²⁷

This oneing is not just a reality, but it is also embedded and incorporated in our awareness. With the work of the Spirit, God is always already one with us, with creation. One example that Julian uses is prayer. Hide rightly explains Julian's theology when Hide says all our living is prayer.²⁸ Julian says, "prayer unites the soul to God."²⁹ Reflecting on that, while Julian might not say this directly, I argue that we can also expand the practice of praying, as we pray together with creation, where our souls are united with God. Furthermore, Mother earth has always been in constant prayers with God. She is the co-creator with God, where the Holy Spirit works as the midwife of creation.

If the Holy Spirit is the One who makes it possible for us to connect with God without shoving Jesus Christ aside, doesn't it mean that the Holy Spirit is also the final and full revelation of God? And through the language of creation, which is the language of the Holy Spirit, we should be able to have that awareness that the Holy Spirit can take place and is involved in the communication with the Divine. And if all people around the world, including the First Peoples, claimed that they already knew about God through creation, such a claim then is not alien to Jewish and non-Jewish Christian traditions. The Spirit has made creation as home through oneing. I wonder then if we can edit something to the last sentence in the third point of the Preamble and perhaps turn it to be something like this: "The same love and grace that was manifested in the participation of creation to the incarnate Word in the Holy Spirit sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways just as what happened to the Second Peoples." Above all, my point is to argue through a traditional Christian lens that the Holy Spirit and creation are essential figures in Christian faith, and this opens a more pluralistic approach that is particular but also inclusive to many different realities. As for how the oneing works in church practice, this where I think communion is an important faith formation and practice in the Christian tradition.

²⁴ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 491. Book 15, chapter 17, verse 27. This also leads to the filioque concept, which deserves a separate space for discussion. Yet, my emphasis is on the Holy Spirit as the loving bond itself.

²⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 112. In addition to this, the incarnation can take place only in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Khaled Anatolios gives a significant remark from Athanasius about the relation of the incarnate Word and the Spirit. The Word is giver of the Spirit according to his [the Word] Divinity, but the incarnate Word is also the receiver of the Spirit in his humanity. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 129.

²⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 122–123.

²⁷ Hide, *Gifted Origins*, 180.

²⁸ Hide, *Gifted Origins*, 213.

²⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 27.

Partaking in One Breath

One significant word in liturgical language is “to partake.” Especially in Eastern Liturgy, partaking here is referred to the word “methexis,” which etymologically mean “to share in.”³⁰ Even in the formation of the Trinitarian language, the idea of partaking is greatly emphasised because it directs the church to see the Trinity not just in terms of One Substance of the three or the Three Persons, but on the relatedness of the Three to each other and the relatedness of the Three to creation. That relatedness is the language of participation, partake, or *methexis*. For example, the participation in the divinity of the Trinity, such as in the concept of theosis or deification, shows how we cannot be divinised or move back to God if there is no active work of the Divine. The divinising act then must be from the persons of the Trinity who invites us to partake in that invitation. This is not only to show that the Holy Spirit is God who enjoins us into the divinisation, but also to know that by participating in the divinisation we are partaking in the life of the whole Three Persons of the Trinity as well as of the very nature of the Triune God. The same thing happens when we come into the Breather, the Life-Giver, the Vivifier, the Holy Spirit. Partaking means we come into that invitation of being in the communion of the Trinity.

This is the important part, because partaking in a communion should mean that we are sharing in something of the communion. If communion is about the Body and Blood of Christ, then partaking in it means to share in the things that constitute the presence of Christ. In postcolonial perspective, it is known that the death – as well as the resurrection of Christ – was not a sort of voluntary sacrifice that Jesus offered.³¹ Rather, Jesus fought against the that came from the Roman Empire and the local religious elites which brought him to death. Therefore, partaking in the body and blood of Christ is to partake in his Spirit against injustice that oppressed the marginalised people. That is the breath that he used to speak about the Last Supper, and that resistance was the last breath he gave up to God when he died on the cross. This then is the moment to remember when Jesus said, “do this in remembrance of me.” The partaking of this resistance is the breath that was and is manifested in the bread and wine, the body and blood, that have been broken and poured for many people. In this case, we see how the breath of humanity and creation is the breath of social justice as well.

I argue further that the bread and wine, as part of the continual creation of the earth, is the evidence of the dwelling of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not just exist in the bread and wine because they are fruit of the earth, but also because they are the part of last breath of Christ. We partake in that One Breath through the communion, just as we partake in the One Breath of God who breathed out creation through the event of baptismal water. Therefore, as we partake in the sacrament of Eucharist, in the sacrament of good grace (*Eu+kharis*), we see that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s good grace has been there in creation, and it is always connected through Christ who came through and from the womb of creation. Each time we share in that same breath of God, each time we eat and drink, we are partaking the justice that Christ has been doing which echoes the goodness of creation that God has done since the beginning. I hope this approach gives some clarity of how the Preamble can read the Holy Spirit also as final, fully revealing,

³⁰ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “methexis,” accessed July 4, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/methexis>.

³¹ See for example works of Rieger in addressing the context of the empire in Jesus’ time. Joerg Rieger. *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007).

and fulfilling the meaning of being a Christian as a First and Second Peoples, or even the in-betweens. I hope the partaking invitation creates a deeper connection to creation as we grow together in the Spirit.

Conclusion

I remember the first time I went to 42 Mile Crossing where I came to a magnificent beach that connects to the Southern Ocean. I took a deep breath in responding to the amazing view that was present before me. I then noticed the movements of the waves as they came toward the land but then receded away back to the sea. There I am reminded to the saying of Uncle Ken Sumner who said that this earth can breathe. I then started to feel that the earth, the sea, indeed is breathing. She exhales and inhales. The wind that hovers over the sea makes the sea able to do the breathing and I am involved in experiencing the breathing of the earth as I also breath out and in as well. Julian is correct then to show that we are all oned and knitted in God. As creation, we are all participating in God's vivifying breath, and by partaking in such breath, we can continue to live. This is then the call for us to contemplate what it means to acknowledge that the Spirit, as has been perceived by the First People, has always been here, way before people mention the word "Christ," and yet we are all oned in God.

Reconciliation and the Framing of the Revised Preamble

John Evans

Abstract

This paper explores the drafting of the Revised Preamble against the background of the nature of preambles generally. It explores how the framing of the new Preamble took place and why some clauses from the original Preamble were included and others not. Significantly, it suggests the closing clause of the new Preamble, which connects the Preamble to both the Covenant between the Uniting Church and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and to the Basis of Union's confession of the "coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view of the whole creation" is of itself, a critical statement. The claim is made that the new Preamble is saying that at its heart, the Uniting Church in Australia, in its constitution, in its very existence, is about reconciliation.

Introduction

The focus of the conference at which this paper was first presented, was understandably on the ten numbered clauses of the new Preamble. A blurb for the Conference stated:

The Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution centres creation and land, suggesting a broader sense of the economy of God. It stresses a trinitarian understanding of God and honours the centrality of Christ yet affirms other knowledge about God and the significance of the relationship between First and Second Peoples.¹

All this is true. And at the Conference more was said about these matters and the significance of those ten numbered clauses adopted at the 12th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. These clauses tell an important theological and historical story. However, how these clauses, drafted by the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress) and negotiated with various councils and groups within the Church, were framed and included in the Church's basic constitutional document is also important for the Uniting Church. These ten clauses are not the sum total of the new Preamble. The original Preamble had fundamentally outlined the journey of the three uniting churches to the adoption of a constitution at "the First Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia meeting at Sydney on the 22nd of June 1977" (as the original Preamble says²). By the time of the new Preamble, however, the Uniting Church in Australia had long since been formed! So, what did this new Preamble, with these ten numbered clauses, now point

¹ This was the blurb on the United Theological College website prior to the Conference. See <https://www.utc.edu.au/>

² See *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations Uniting Church, 2018 Edition* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2018) 63. Subsequent citation of the *Basis of Union* and the Constitution comes from this edition.

to? How did Congress's statement indeed fit into an existing constitutional framework? And why is that framework also, now, significant?

This paper considers the structure and purpose of preambles generally, and the drafting of this new Preamble, in particular. It explores how the framing of the new Preamble took place, for example, why some clauses from the original Preamble were included, and others not. Significantly, it will suggest the closing clause of the new Preamble ('AND THUS the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship [i.e. the Covenant from the 1994 Assembly] as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view of the whole creation'³) is of itself, a critical statement, and a challenge for the Uniting Church. As I will argue, this new Preamble is saying that at its heart, this church, the Uniting Church in Australia, in its constitution, in its very existence, is about reconciliation. Reconciliation between God and humanity through the cross of Christ. However, also, the reconciliation of First and Second peoples is central to being the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Constitution Task Group and the Drafting of the New Preamble

I was privileged to be a member of the Constitution Task Group which worked on the new Preamble for the Assembly.⁴ This group initially had a wide brief on matters constitutional for the Church (for example, the Task Group considered what was happening in federal and inter-related council governance structures.) However, the Task Group ended up focusing on Congress' preamble statement, and then presenting a draft, revised Preamble to the 12th Assembly in 2009.

During the period of this work, preambles were the flavour of the times. There were still lingering memories of Prime Minister, John Howard's 1999 referendum on Australia being a republic, and the overshadowed second question of that referendum regarding the insertion of a preamble in Australia's constitution.⁵ Both questions were lost. However, with the second question, the preamble question, there actually was a draft presented to the Australian people as to what that preamble would say. Aspects of this were significant. In particular, this new national preamble would:

honour Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the nation's first peoples, for their deep kinship with their lands and for their ancient and continuing cultures which enrich the life of our country.⁶

This national recognition, through this proposed new preamble, was not to be; but if it was not for the nation, why not for the Church? This especially was the case for Congress. Since the 2003 Assembly Congress had not felt heard. The story and insights of Indigenous people were not reflected in the Church. As Chris Budden says, the "Preamble arose in the conflict between promise and failure."⁷ However, when

³ The Covenant is set out in *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations Uniting Church, 2018 Edition*, 33-37.

⁴ See Chris Budden, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble", *Uniting Church Studies*, 26 No.1 (June 2024): 39 for the membership and the terms of reference of the Task Group.

⁵ See *Australia Electoral Commission 1999 Constitution Alteration Yes/No Pamphlet*, accessed 8 July 2024, <https://www.aec.gov.au/referendums/files/pamphlet/referendum-booklet.pdf>

⁶ See *Yes/No Pamphlet 70*, accessed 8 July 2024, https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/referendums/1999_Referendum_Reports_Statistics/yes_no_pamphlet.pdf

⁷ Budden, "Brief History of the Preamble," 36.

the Constitution Task Group received a statement from Congress in January 2008, it was also not obvious that this statement was in the form of a preamble, let alone being a replacement preamble for an existing constitution which already had a rather fulsome, detailed preamble!⁸ Yes, the Task Group had questions and comments about the numbered clauses, and that aspect of the document did a little bit of backwards and forwards with Congress. More importantly, the statement was the basis of a wide consultation through the Church. However, as a former lawyer and the writer of many constitutions for the Church, I was also interested in how such a rich statement could indeed be the Church's new preamble? How could it fit in? How would it relate to the existing Constitution? And how could a modified preamble, as a preamble (that is, being in the form and structure of preambles), be significant for the Church?

To understand these issues, we need to go back to first principles. What does a preamble do; and how are they framed?

Framing a Preamble

A preamble, as its name implies, sets the scene for what follows. It is 'pre', that is before, what follows. What follows could be, as in this case, a constitution: a document which constitutes something. A new entity comes into existence. However, what follows a preamble also could be an agreement between two or more parties which say, settles a long running dispute; it could be the transfer of money as a gift or compensation; or what follows is just a simple contract. A preamble sets the scene. That scene setting could be stated in terms of what has brought the parties to this point. It tells a story, it is a history, of say, the negotiations. Or a preamble may set out the details of a situation of great complexity, and what follows is the solution: a resolution of a dispute or of some mess. And critically, a preamble is not the constitution or the following contract or deed. It sets the scene.⁹ It helps explain the following document. It is not the document itself.

When drafting preambles, lawyers do this by providing relevant background, in what they call: "recitals". These recitals are usually introduced with the fearsome legalese: WHEREAS. . . And there may be then many 'whereases' following until the preamble gets to the climatic point, a conclusion. There then comes a "therefore": therefore, - this body is now constituted; or therefore, this deed declares that a sum of money is to be transferred with particular terms and conditions; or whatever. So, for example, in the original Preamble of the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia, it begins with a capitalised "WHEREAS", and this recital is then followed by another five "AND WHEREASES" (all in capitals) until we get to the climax, again in capitals: "IT IS DECLARED THAT". So, here is what is said in the first recital of the original Preamble:

WHEREAS the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, through their properly constituted Councils and Courts, have expressed the belief that they have been called by God into organic union.¹⁰

⁸ The Assembly Legal Reference Committee (ALRC), which was critical of the new Preamble, had a point in this regard. As Chris Budden notes, the ALRC "argued that a Preamble should not include theology, and that the best approach was to have a theological statement affirmed by the Assembly." Budden, "Brief History of the Preamble," 44.

⁹ This point was also acknowledged by the ALRC: see Budden, "Brief History of the Preamble," 44.

¹⁰ See *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018*, 63

Then come those five additional AND WHEREASES – basically telling the story leading to union, or quoting from the Basis of Union itself, – until there is the resounding conclusion:

IT IS DECLARED THAT pursuant to the powers conferred upon it, the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia meeting at Sydney on the 22nd day of June 1977 has adopted this Constitution as an Interim Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia for the organisation of her government and administration.¹¹

In a crescendo of recitals, there is then constituted the Church. A constitution, organic church union, is declared to come into operation.

The new Preamble, one will notice, does not have any ‘Whereases’, but it still has this same basic structure. It really is a preamble, and not just a statement of history and theology negotiated between Congress and the Church. Getting to that point, however, there were issues which had to be addressed, and some matters which needed to be finessed. These matters, however, add a richness to the import and meaning of the new Preamble and its ten numbered clauses, and how the Uniting Church is to understand itself.

Issues for the New Preamble

The Church Already Existed: Church Union had Taken Place

The first point to note was that the Uniting Church was not constituted at the 12th Assembly of the Church in 2009. No resounding, “AND IT IS DECLARED THAT the Uniting Church in Australia was hereby constituted”, would be appropriate this time. However, this historical reality that the Uniting Church in Australia already existed, somehow had to be acknowledged. This was important background information for the constitution which followed. The Uniting Church in Australia arose from a process of church union. So, the first clause, the first recital, of the revised Preamble states:

The Uniting Church in Australia was formed on 22nd June 1977 by the union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia after the approval of “The Basis of Union” by the Councils and Courts of these three churches, guided by the belief that they had been called by God into this union.¹²

Simply, this was now a statement of fact (and some important theological reflection). It provided a link between the original Preamble, and the new Preamble. The importance of church union was still acknowledged however, this would mean there would have to be a different final statement, a different

¹¹ The powers referred to here, were outlined in the Uniting Church in Australia Acts, passed in each Australian jurisdiction. For example, in the Uniting Church in Australia Act (1976) Western Australia, section 6 (repeated in the other Acts) states: The Uniting Churches are hereby empowered to unite in accordance with the Basis of Union, such union to take effect from the appointed day.

¹² These words follow the text of the first recital of the old Preamble, combined with the declaration that the Church was constituted on 22nd June 1977.

climax, which still had to introduce fundamentally¹³ the same constitution that was adopted in 1977.¹⁴ Indeed, it had to finesse the fact that the Preamble referred to events which post-dated the formation of the Church itself, such as the formation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in 1985 and the 1994 Covenant.¹⁵ How this was done, will be addressed shortly.

What Clauses from the Original Preamble Should Remain?

What clauses, if any, of the original preamble should remain in the revised Preamble? Was the new Preamble, a completely new document? In a sense, it was. There was no longer needed the detailed reference to the historic steps which were taken leading to union, and the various votes that took place. This did not have to be repeated.¹⁶ The Church was already constituted. This was the import of the new, first recital. However, two clauses from the Basis of Union in the original Preamble were still seen to be important. The first was the quote from Paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union, the clause relating to Government in the Church.¹⁷ Government in the Church after all, was the very heart of what the following Constitution, indeed, any constitution, sets out. In this instance, the Constitution transforms ecclesiological, and theological insights, as stated in the Basis of Union, into formal structures and a framework for the Church's governance. For this reason, quotes from Paragraph 15 remained in the revised Preamble. As it states in the new, and also the former, Preamble, the Church is "governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has tasks and responsibilities in relation to the Church and the world." The constitution which follows implements this principle. And perhaps of more importance, this new Preamble and the following constitution is significant for the world. One might even think, the nation was not able to agree to a revised preamble, but the Church was able to acknowledge the history and insights of First Peoples. This is important for the world. There was one other original Preamble clause, drawn from the Basis, which was repeated in the new. This clause related to the Church, the Uniting Church in Australia, and its law. This is the recital:

The Church in accordance with the Basis of Union acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel and the discipline it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law, the aim of which is to confess God's will for the life of Christ's Church.

This was again a direct quote from the Basis of Union, this time from Paragraph 17 of the Basis, the clause relating to Law in the Church.¹⁸ True, at a basic level "Law in the Church" was what followed – the Constitution itself. However, this statement made the point that the Constitution that followed was far more than just a legal statement, such as a constitution which every other institution or organisation might have. The Constitution's aim and purpose was to express "God's will for the life of Christ's Church." And this would

¹³ The Constitution of 2009 was basically the same as the Constitution of 1977. A noteworthy change however, was a new Division 4 relating to the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

¹⁴ An interesting consequence of adopting the new Preamble, was that the reference to the Constitution being 'Interim' was dropped. In the original Preamble, reference is made to an "Interim Constitution" being adopted. Indeed, in the then subsequent printed versions of the Constitution, it was always referred to as the Interim Constitution. However, after the 2009 Assembly, the Constitution was just entitled: The Uniting Church in Australia CONSTITUTION.

¹⁵ See *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018 Edition, 33-37*

¹⁶ The original Preamble has been retained as a document of record in the *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018 Edition, 63*.

¹⁷ *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018 Edition, 22*

¹⁸ *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations, 2018 Edition, 28*

still be the case. Indeed, in Paragraph 17 of the Basis (though this is not quoted in either the old or the new Preamble), a pointer is given as to what God's will for the life of this Church is: it is "to look to the final reconciliation of humanity under God's sovereign grace." This constitution, this law, is about the "final reconciliation of humanity". This statement about the Church, as we will soon see, actually becomes the climactic conclusion to the revised Preamble. Reconciliation, that grand eschatological vision of God's love in Christ, is to be at the heart of being the Church. This is the law of the Uniting Church. The Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia mandates the Church to look to the "final reconciliation of humanity."

And of course, there was another significant reason to include this statement from the original Preamble. Law was critical in the numbered clauses of the new Preamble itself, especially numbered clause 3:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.

Law served the First Peoples too. Indeed, it was essential for First Peoples. Law, their law, revealed God. The First Peoples encountered the Creator God, through law. As the new Preamble says, "the Spirit was already in the land revealing God." So now, to both First and Second Peoples, the Preamble saw law revealing God's will for the Church. The Preamble through this repeated recital from the Basis of Union reminds the Church of this important insight.

The Placement of the Congress Statement

The next drafting issue was where, and how, would the statement from Congress (revised through extensive consultation) be inserted into this flow of recitals. Where would the ten numbered clauses fit with the statement about the establishment of the Church in 1977 and the above carry-over statements, recitals, from the original Preamble? The answer was in a sense, a simple, prosaic solution – though it did introduce for the first time into the primary documents of the Church, the concept of First and Second Peoples. Echoing the final concluding declaration, it also pointed to why these numbered clauses would be significant for the Church:

As the Church believes God guided it into union, so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek renewal of its life as a community of First and Second Peoples from many lands, and as a part of that to RECOGNISE THAT . . .

This Church, arising from a church union, the Uniting Church itself, would now be renewed by recognising there was also another story to be told: the story of the First Peoples in their relationship with these uniting churches (lower case) and with the Uniting Church itself since that date in 1977. Previously there was just a pre-story as to how and why union had come about. Now there was a further story involving the relationship between First and Second peoples and the uniting churches, and indeed with those who have come from many lands. This new story would inform, seek to renew, the life of the Uniting Church in Australia itself.¹⁹ And so there then followed the ten numbered clauses. This story of First Peoples had not hitherto been

¹⁹ Renewal is also an aspect of the concluding statement of the Preamble. For a discussion of this clause see below.

told in the law of the Church.²⁰ There was no reference to First Peoples in the Basis of Union. Paragraph 2 of the Basis refers to the churches of Asia and the Pacific with whom it seeks a special relationship. (Indeed, these are in large measure the people, the Second Peoples, now coming from many lands.) But with the First Peoples of Australia themselves, the Basis is silent. And then The Interim Constitution adopted in 1977, also had no reference to First Peoples, though subsequently Division 4 of the Constitution was added. This Division of the Constitution refers to the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, but again only in a narrowly defined sense: the power and responsibility of Regional Committees of Congress.

This recital of the new Preamble and the ten numbered clauses introduces, another dimension to the forming of the Uniting Church in Australia. A hitherto unstated story is at last formally recognised in church law. This recognition is to renew the Church.

The Concluding Statement – The Climactic Declaration of the new Preamble.

The recitals of the original Preamble pointed to how church union came about and how the Constitution would implement the Basis of Union. That first Preamble declared there was now a constitution for this “new church”. The Uniting Church was established, constituted. What now was the consequence of the telling of this hitherto silent dimension of the Church’s background story, the relationship of First and Second Peoples (and even the story involving events which occurred after the formation of the Uniting Church itself)? What could be the climactic declaration of the new Preamble? How was this same constitution, once formed through a process of discerning God’s will, going to be introduced given the Uniting Church now already existed? Or another way of saying this, was how did this constitution operate in the context of the First Peoples’ understanding of the Triune God and their relationship with the Second peoples of this land. This time it was not a new constitution, a new church, that was created, but an existing constitution, an existing church which had a new insight, a new context for being the church in this land of Australia. This church now has a particular focus for renewal.

The new Preamble declares the Uniting Church “celebrates this Covenantal relationship (the Covenant between UAICC and the Assembly referred to in the last numbered clause, Clause 10 as being) a foretaste of a coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.” The conclusion of the new Preamble now quotes from the Basis of Union and the paragraph (Paragraph 3) about the nature of the Church. The conclusion of the Preamble points to reconciliation being the context of this previously constituted church.

In Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union, the nature of the church is outlined. So, in that paragraph it is declared that

The Church, as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life, it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.

²⁰ See Ken Sumner and Michelle Cook, “What Good Is It to Me If I Can’t Eat It? Grounding the *Basis of Union* in Our Lived Experience”, Geoff Thompson and Ji Zhang, Ed.s, *Marking 50 Years: The Present and Future of the Basis of Union* (Uniting Academic Press, 2024), 30

God in Christ has given all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

(Emphasis added.)

This last sentence is from where the new Preamble's declaratory statement comes, though its force and challenge come from the next few words of that paragraph in the Basis. So here is the quote again, though this time with the additional words:

God in Christ has given all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation.

The new Preamble, through the power of the Holy Spirit, points to a constituted church which is to be "a fellowship of reconciliation" shown in the reconciliation of First and Second Peoples. A practical foretaste of this was the 1994 Assembly's Covenant which now needs not just to be noted as an event in the Church's history, but as a part of the Church's law. This law points to "the reconciliation of humanity" and which is also the very purpose of being the Church. Of course, "reconciliation" here in the Basis is not about "race relations," or even the reconciliation of First and Second Peoples. Reconciliation is the end in view of the whole creation, the "final consummation of all things which he (Christ) will bring" (again, Paragraph 3). However, in moving towards such a promised goal, it will involve the Uniting Church in the reconciliation of First and Second Peoples, and such other concerns which the Church has over God's creation. There will be thus questions relating to God's "new humanity" as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ: in other words, questions of justice, peace, and hope for the world. However, importantly, there is a foretaste, a critical starting point, the reconciliation of First and Second peoples in this land of Australia.

There is now not just a constitution which follows such a scene-setting preamble, but a constitution, a church, which has within its life, a specific context and focus: reconciliation.

Conclusion

I remember well the meeting of the Constitution Task Group at which we first received the statement from Congress. Congress wanted this statement to be the preamble to the constitution of the Church. The Task Group met that day in a rather ordinary meeting room at the Church of All Nations (CAN), Carlton, Victoria where I was then the minister. After the meeting, I adjourned to my office next door. I guess I was inspired by the statement we had just received, but I was left wondering, how could it become a preamble? How would it fit in to our then story which established our existing constitutional framework? At this point, I remembered a story attributed to Karl Barth. He supposedly said Christians are to speak, to preach, with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. That late afternoon, however, it was not newspapers and the Bible in my hands, it was for me, the Basis of Union in one hand and this different, additional, critical story from Congress, in the other. The Basis of Union (and the original Preamble) told the background to our Church, but as it turned out, it did not tell the whole story. Yet, still, there were themes in the Basis which could provide a crossover between the two stories, and these themes could be reflected in a new preamble. A new preamble could link those two stories. So that late afternoon, noting as Paragraph 3 of

the Basis says, “God in Christ has given all people in the Church the Holy Spirit”, I felt through the Spirit, we could indeed have a new preamble. The questions and issues I have raised above, could be taken on board, dealt with, and finessed. We could point to a constitution for the Uniting Church which could both bear witness to that unity which is both Christ’s gift and will for the Church” (from Paragraph 1 of the Basis of Union, indeed it is the first sentence of the Basis and the original focus of the old Preamble), and at the same time, have a new understanding of our Australian context, the understanding of First Peoples and their relationship with Second People. Through a new Preamble we could have both a more accurately stated Australian context for the Uniting Church and a refreshed purpose for this already constituted church. Indeed, it was a purpose that was there all along. It was there in the critical Paragraph 3 of the Basis, the paragraph which outlines the context and purpose of the Church: Reconciliation. This was even confirmed in Paragraph 17, the paragraph of the Basis about the Church’s law: this law was to look to “the final reconciliation of humanity.” True, these references to reconciliation pointed to an eschatological purpose: the reconciliation for the whole of creation. However, this new, additional, important backstory to our church, the insights of First People, could now be part of the Church’s story. Already there were signs, a foretaste of this coming reconciliation. The 1994 Covenant was indeed a “foretaste to that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.”

What was written that afternoon went through numerous iterations before the Preamble was completed and adopted. However, what was clear to me, was that this statement from Congress could be incorporated into our Constitution’s preamble. And being a new preamble, framed in a particular way, was also something of profound significance for the Uniting Church . . . let alone the significance of those 10 numbered clauses themselves.

There is a story to be told in the very shape and form of the new Preamble.

“Created and Sustained by the Triune God”: a pivotal faith confession of the Preamble

Sean Gilbert

Abstract

Paragraph 1 of the Preamble to the Uniting Church's Constitution is a bold and paradigm-shaking confession of faith. Not only does it subvert colonial assumptions about entitled supremacies of knowledge, place, and power, it radically reframes a theology of God in accord with what is arguably heartland of the Christian tradition: the confession of God as Trinity. The implication is that God in undivided relational fullness has always been present to the First Peoples of this land in contradistinction to a western dualistic hermeneutic that might countenance partial revelations of the Creator and Spirit but not the missionary imported Redeemer. The ongoing retrieval of trinitarian orthodoxy remains a vital component of valuing and practicing the theological keystones of the Preamble. Rather than imposing a religiously conceptual import, Trinity, by virtue of its effusive and essential ground of relationality, symbolises the wellbeing of all expressions of life, undergirded by unifying giftings of grace, truth and justice.

*You, Who sleep in my breast, are not met with words, but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom within wisdom. You are found in Communion: Thou in me, and I in Thee, and thou in them, and they in me...*¹

Reclamation of the Trinity as a Universalising Symbol

In the week following September 11, 2001, I was invited by the then Adelaide University Uniting Church chaplain to speak at an interfaith gathering on campus. Her aim was to garner good will and trust through respectful dialogue in the wake of that violent and repercussive event. The chaplain also approached a local Iman who agreed to share the lectern and conversational space with me.

Reflecting upon that night, I now realise my approach was counter intuitive. For I'd thought, why not address core faith premises of Christianity that I knew by experience were integrally relational, non-violent, and deeply respectful of otherness? Furthermore, why avoid the confessional heartland of my own spiritual tradition in the quest for a desired but perhaps predictable common ground? I hoped my Muslim colleague might do the same and that our candour and fidelity would generate genuine dialogue between us and the expected large audience. He did and it did. In fact, the Iman presented me with a copy of the Koran at the end of the evening. To my shame, I had come empty handed of such gifts, but for a carefully prepared script!

¹ Thomas Merton, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952" in *The Sign of Jonas* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1953), 349.

In my address I suggested that the Christianity I knew revolved around two peaceable and coinherent confessions of faith. Each an irreducible paradox, yet both, I argue, are intrinsic to the way Christianity can be justly and compassionately embodied within the world. These were, predictably enough, Incarnation and Trinity. And granted, such an approach was something of a risk at that emotionally charged time, particularly so far as Trinity was concerned. The last thing I wanted to initiate was an uneasy and abstracted discussion around divine oneness and a perceived or inferred polytheism.

Still, why mention these nuanced faith confessions at all and run the risk of undermining the worthy hopes of the chaplain? Why not concentrate on what I perceived to be our shared religious values and ethics? Simply stated, I wanted to redress tired caricatures of Christian belief by emphasising, in particular, the transformative potential of trinitarian symbolism. I thus sought to offer something of a Christian reimagining of God and, by extension, a broadening of religious imagination in terms of socially constructive forms of practice. For as the orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas contends: "Trinitarian theology has profound existential consequences."² And as the feminist theologian Patricia Fox comments: "[Zizioulas's] whole theological enterprise is based on the premise that faith in the Trinity is not about accepting a theoretical proposition about God but about a dynamic relationship that exists between all creation (particularly the human person) and the living God."³

So, it was with the Trinity that I focused most of my input at the post-9/11 interfaith event, as it will be in this article. Six years prior I had completed a Master of Arts thesis on the "Triune Mystery"⁴ and felt that its recovery in the West as an eminently practical doctrine, a term coined by the Roman Catholic theologian, Catherine LaCugna,⁵ was true to my own unfolding sense of call. No longer needing to be an artifact of theological abstractionism, and thus a religious and social irrelevance,⁶ Trinity might once again be confessed as a radiant symbol of effusive love, restorative beauty, radical equality, relational goodness, justice and truth. After all, the great theologians from both East and West, prayed, sung, wrote and preached about what they *saw and experienced to be the gratuitous indwelling presence of God*.⁷ Theology in their deft and often artistic hands was, therefore, not merely what they might have understood to be doctrinally, conceptually or philosophically true. Rather, it was a heartfelt yet wise (*sapient*) *response to the ennobling experience of God's presence, alive at the very core of their soul*.⁸ Rowan Williams is a helpful interpreter of Augustine's *The Trinity (De Trinitate)* on this point:

² As quoted by Patricia Fox, *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson, and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 9.

³ Patricia Fox, *God as Communion*, 9.

⁴ Sean M. Gilbert, *Coming Home to the Triune Mystery of God: Paths to Faith and Liturgical Renewal* (Andover Newton Theological School, 1995).

⁵ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁶ A consistent theme of those writing about the Trinity following Vatican II was the notion that its applicability to the Christian life had been "lost" and in need of urgent recovery. For example, Edmund Hill a celebrated translator of St. Augustine's *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press, 1991), suggests, "...it has come about that the doctrine of the Trinity has been effectively detached from the wider movements of Christian spirituality and devotion in the West, and the mystery has come to be regarded as a curious kind of intellectual luxury for the theological highbrows, a subject on which not many priests are eager to preach sermons, nor congregations listen to them." [19]

⁷ Notably, St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, IV, XX. 5, "For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendour. But [His] splendour vivifies them; those, therefore who see God, receive life... For as His greatness is past finding out, so also His goodness is beyond expression; by which having been seen (in Christ), He bestows life upon those who see Him."

⁸ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 201: "You were with me, and I was not with you... You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put flight to my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, I am set on fire to attain the peace that is yours."

We are not able to know or love ourselves 'accurately' unless we know and love ourselves as known and loved by God; so that, for our minds to be re-formed in sapientia their prime object must be God as intelligent and loving. God as creator of beings, who are able to share in his wisdom...⁹

Trinity and the Revised Preamble of the Uniting Church's Constitution

When revisiting the Uniting Church's (2009) Revised Preamble to the Constitution in recent months, I was struck by the first paragraph.

When the churches that formed the Uniting Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation, they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.

The unambiguous naming of the "Triune God" within the context of this land's creation and sustenance, which by direct extension is inclusive of First Peoples, Aboriginal and Islander peoples is, I suggest, a bold theological and historical confession. For it is language commensurate with divine fullness, "pressed down and shaken together to overflowing," (Lk 6:38) symbolising wholeness rather than a bifurcation or even a trifurcation of divine revelation. An undividedness, in other words, of divine presence (*glory / kabod*) that is suggestive of *a weight of completeness* fully home, or even at play, in the very heartlands of this vast island continent. And while my primary interest lies in the use and ordering of the words as they stand within the Preamble, it is important to recognise some of the key complexities of its negotiation, and to best understand various nuances at play, then and now.

In specific terms, this included the shift in language from the 2008 initial draft (These [first peoples or nations] had already encountered the Creator God before the rest of us arrived,) to the final acknowledgement of the "Triune God" (as quoted above).¹⁰ About this significant modification to the original draft, Chris Budden notes:

The change from "Creator God" to "Triune God" was a change requested by the Assembly Standing Committee. While Congress agreed, it was not their preferred language. On the surface, this is simply an assertion of Christian orthodoxy. And yet the language of "Trinity" is what in another context, Jacob Torfing called an "empty signifier." That is, it is a word (like "God" or "nation") without a set and particular content, and it is this lack of set content that enables it to offer a point of unity in discourse. People seek to fill these terms of discourse, but they can never be completely filled by one, universal claim.¹¹

In the current day, Trawlolway man and Anglican priest, Gary Deverell, has argued that by its very nature, the 2009 Preamble, and particularly its ready equating of indigenous spiritual knowledge with Trinity, is

⁹ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2016), 174.

¹⁰ Appendix A in Chris Budden's, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble," in *Uniting Church Studies* 26, no. 1 2024, 47.

¹¹ Budden, "A Brief History of the Construction of the Preamble," 43

a well-meaning, yet circumscribed, product of colonialism. For Deverell, the “Triune God” is an imported creedal belief system, imposed upon generational and deeply grounded human experience. He argues that it represents, “an ‘Australian’ version of the Triune God and... that the story succeeds only to reproduce the very coloniality the authors apparently intend to overcome.”¹² In similar vein he has proffered the following observation in a recent interview, “So I think Christianity and colonisation were like the inside and the outside of the same thing. That meant that Christianity was the social imaginary which animated colonisation, including Indigenous spiritualities.”¹³

I have some sympathy with Deverell’s argument, though I think he, like others, risks obscuring what the Christian Church confesses to be true and *life* giving about the Trinity. For is it a western religious conceptuality that constrains or does it, as an enduring and dynamic symbol of transcendence, seek to point “behind” itself to a grace that exists in unfettered, preconceptual forms?¹⁴

From both early Eastern and Western theological perspectives, the “Triune God,” as confessed in the very first acknowledgment of the Preamble, is not a footnote to the relationally expressive nature of God or an exotic formulation for God. Nor is Trinity but an addendum to Aquinas’s stress on the metaphysical oneness of God in the *Summa Theologica* 1, or the abbreviated conclusion of Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith*.¹⁵ To echo the maxim of Augustine and many others: God is Trinity, Trinity is God.¹⁶ Or in the succinct reckoning of John Zizioulas, “Outside the Trinity, there is no God...”¹⁷

This is an obvious confession in many respects, though still often disregarded as or more significantly, reduced to, mere concept and function. Accordingly, such theological reductionism results in the triune character of God being unnecessarily divided and/or ranked in relation to dominant soteriological and ecclesial frameworks. As Karl Rahner suggested astutely in the early 1970’s, something I still observe to be a truism, the Church could dispense with the Trinity as its pivotal doctrine (teaching) for the Christian life – such has been its loss from the daily rhythms of creation and human experience – that most worshipping Christians would barely notice its absence from the liturgy or the calling to spiritual formation and discipleship.¹⁸

My point is that for the Preamble to use the language of Triunity in direct relation to country and its first peoples, waterways, mountains, skies, valleys, deserts, oceans, fauna and flora, is to confess that God in God’s relational *fullness* was present – creatively, *thus* redemptively – eons before the coming of the colonial invaders. Not a partial presence, therefore, or a near-complete jigsaw puzzle with the “Jesus-salvation

¹² Garry Worete Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2023), 109-110.

¹³ ‘A Conversation with Gary Deverell,’ in *Coolamon: The Journal for the Australian Network of Spiritual Direction*, Issue 9, 07/2024.

¹⁴ The other important question, if not condescension at play in his writings, is his seeming disregard for the discernment and stance of the members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress that first agreed to and then proposed the final wording of the Preamble for the National 2009 Assembly to vote on.

¹⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 1999), 738-751.

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *The Trinity* trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1991), 69-73.

¹⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1993), 41. The full quote reads, “Outside the Trinity there is no God, that is, no divine substance, because the ontological “principle” of God is the Father.”

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1997), 10-11. “Christians are, in their practical lives, almost mere “monotheists” . . . We must be willing to admit that, for should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged... One has the feeling that, for the catechism of head and heart, the Christian’s idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all if there were no Trinity.”

piece" awaiting to be used as the spiritual trump card by later, more illuminated wayfarers! To confess the authoring, companioning and guiding presence of the Triune God, is to envision a non-dualistic experience of saving graces, land, history and culture; life *as it is*, truly spirited yet *grounded* as it unfolded over the millennia through near countless generations.

Trinity as a reconciling and unifying symbol

The trinitarian symbol, and again I am drawing upon the key metaphor of Patricia Fox in *God as Communion*, *always resists being reduced into functions or modes of revelation existing beyond God's ousia*, i.e., being in relation. Therefore, to intimate that it might be permissible to speak of the Creator and Spirit in relation to First Peoples' spiritual experience, but to deny the revelation of Christ, is an unnecessary and potentially injurious rupturing within the coherence of theology and human communities in which it finds application.

Indeed, Fox suggests from the outset of her book that, "the Trinity is a symbol whose time has come."¹⁹ And by that she means a radicalised *revisioning* of God is presently, if not urgently, needed in the depths of Christian liturgical, theological and social consciousness. Specifically in this context, a re-*visioning*, arising out of various forms of theism and dualisms that have, over time, rendered the doctrine of the Trinity virtually impotent so far as the life of discipleship and ecclesial mission is concerned.²⁰ Decisively, she posits, such change will not arise by way of 'right' doctrinal formulations alone. To see and feel *God as communion* is to begin to live receptively as people already within that universal gifting of communion. In similar fashion she concludes;

Only in these times has it become apparent that if humanity is to have any future at all, women and men must heed the imperative to be in relation, in communion, with one another *and with everything in the universe*. I believe those interlocking factors enable Christians today, in a way never before possible in our history, to receive more fully this Christian teaching that is new: that God is revealed as a three-personed God of Compassion whose very being is communion."²¹

Therefore, the symbol of Trinity, by virtue of its relational and reconciling core, can be confessed truly as hallowing all things in their uniquely different identities, whilst simultaneously enfolding each within the gift of reconciling unity. To echo the Chalcedon Christological formulation (451 AD), this represents a relational nexus where there need not be confusion or division between seeming opposites. Consequently, the symbol of Trinity remains an irreducible paradox we are enjoined to existentially and, perhaps even more significantly, this entry into the actional divine life occurs not by conceptualisation or mere ethics but by the means and ways of doxology.²² In the reckoning of Catherine LaCugna:

¹⁹ Patricia Fox, *God as Communion*, 2.

²⁰ In contrast to notions of doctrinal or even symbolic impotence of the Trinity, the Episcopal priest and self-confessed mystic, Cynthia Bourgeault champions a return to the primal and fecund nature of threeness: "Esoterically understood, the threeness of the Trinity simply proclaims that flowingness is the nature of God, that relationality permeates the entire field of manifest reality, and that in every situation the optimal practical orientation is to acknowledge the threefold nature of all process and to strive for the midwifing third force." [205]

²¹ Patricia Fox, *God as Communion*, 249. *Writer's emphasis*.

²² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991), 342-348.

Entering into the life of God therefore means entering into the deepest possible way into the economy, into the person and mission of Jesus Christ, into the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, into the very life of every last creature destined for communion with God.²³

That stated, my repeated use of the word “symbol” in close relation to the Trinity needs further explanation. Does it mean that the Trinity is not real? A *mythos* or phantasy, perhaps? No, not if we understand that symbols of transcendence, such as the “Triune God,” are existentially real or archetypal when they resonate deeply with primal desires for participation in, or return to, the Origin and Giver of all things.²⁴ Paradoxically, echoing Saint Augustine, such a desired state of rest arising out of restlessness,²⁵ becomes the trusting disposition of a fruitful vocational life (Psalm 131).²⁶

Interestingly, the online Oxford Reference defines “symbolism” in a similarly archetypal framework: “An artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind.”²⁷ What is illuminating about such a definition is that a religious symbol can provide soulful resonances that animate human beings towards more expansive, thus transcending possibilities for renewed socialisation, inclusive of social justice and peace. For such symbolism is first conceived then fashioned out of lived, thus grounded encounter.

Charles Taylor, the celebrated Canadian philosopher, writing in *Cosmic Connections* (2024), makes this point specifically in relation to the German romantic poets of the 1790’s and beyond. However, the artistic principles Taylor outlines, are arguably true as much to theology as they are to poetics.²⁸ He considers A. W. Schlegel’s question and answer: “How can the infinite be brought to the surface, to appearance (*Erscheinung*)? Only symbolically, in pictures and signs.”²⁹ In response, Taylor observes that in all things artistic: “The work reveals to us, brings us into contact with, a deeper reality which would otherwise remain beyond our ken.”³⁰

Correspondingly, a transcendent symbol such as the Holy Trinity arises out of what is enduringly real to human experience – an affective sense of embrace and belonging – whilst simultaneously remaining representative of the expansive bounds of Mystery itself. In this way, the symbol of Trinity invites a mirroring of qualitative relationality amongst human beings within the context of creation, yet without losing the essential incomprehensibility of the Divine.³¹ Hence the stress of the Oxford Reference quote on “indirect suggestions” or resonances, or T.S. Eliot’s musing on the Incarnation as being, “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood...”³² One’s imaginative capacity needs only to be engaged, as does a receptive will.

²³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us*, 16.

²⁴ Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 149-157.

²⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

²⁶ James KA Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 46-50.

²⁷ “Symbolism” in Oxford Reference, accessed Nov 29, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198609810.001.0001/acref-9780198609810-e-691>

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2024).

²⁹ Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 14.

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 15.

³¹ Brooks Otis, “Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System,” *Dumbarton Papers*, No.12, 1958.

³² T.S. Eliot, from ‘The Dry Salvages’ in *Four Quartets* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1971), 44.

In this theological and social context, then, Trinity is a powerful symbol of the eternal exchange of love into which the created order is continually invited to participate. And this, I would suggest, has direct implications for readers of the Preamble. For therein, the triune symbol offers a way into not yet another contestable statement of belief or the doctrinal imposition of the dominating caste of colonial settlers.³³ Rather, it offers an invitation into what Simone Weil conceived to be a spiritual disposition of waiting attentiveness (*attente*); specifically, a contemplative beholding and respect of otherness and its dynamic or unfolding state of mystery.³⁴ Perhaps, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says it better than most:

Religion is something infinitely simple. It is not knowledge, not the content of our emotion... It is neither duty nor renunciation; it is not limitation, but in the perfect expanse of the universe, it is a *direction of the heart*.³⁵

My suggestion here is that the versed and visual symbol of the "Triune God" in the Uniting Church Preamble to the Constitution offers not only a direction for the heart of individuals or even whole communities, but an ongoing *reorientation* of the heart by means of practical responses to the reconciling and renewing "end in view for the whole creation."³⁶ Such an eschatological reorientation of second peoples persistently invites a facing and turning aside from hierarchical, colonising, caste-imposing systems of social and religious order based on the forcible dispossession of land and wilful genocide. In this restorative sense, the symbol of the Trinity is not simply aesthetically pleasing, thus rendering it religiously passive or socially benign. As an icon of the eternal mystery of transfiguring love, Trinity retains the innate capacity and potential to confront, move and convert; to lay bare deep-seated fears and prejudice yet within an embrace of beauty, grace *and* the wounding of truth.

Conclusion

While I understand the concern that the language and conceptuality of the Trinity within the Preamble might read as but an incongruous colonial imposition, I also believe that its symbolic nature contains a potential for transcending conceptual limitations that have proven to be impervious or even injurious. I would contend, by way of substantial contrast, that the existing confession of the creating and sustaining "Triune God" can be experienced as a belief and praxis statement *from the heart*. As such, it opens the way forward for renewed relational understandings, restorations of justice, and depths of communion with the earth and its creatures that the universalising Spirit of God yearns for.

³³ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2023). "Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other... Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place... Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial..." 74.

³⁴ See, Rowan Williams, *Luminaries: Twenty lives that illuminate the Christian way* (London, UK: SPCK, 2019), 127. "It's the kind of waiting experienced by the birdwatcher: you have to be very still, relaxed and focused at the same time."

³⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Poet's Guide to Life: The Wisdom of Rilke*, edited and translated by Ulrich Baer (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 163.

³⁶ *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 3.



The Afternoon of the United Reformed Church

Susan Durber

Abstract

The United Reformed Church in the UK has experienced dramatic decline in recent years. This article describes the impact of that, in terms of statistics, projections and felt experience. It also reflects on the several times and ways, since the millennium, that the denomination has taken steps both to celebrate and review its life, and to pursue reform and renewal. Setting the URC's experience within the wider context of secularisation and the decline of institutional life in Europe, as well as within the human experience of loss more generally, the article also describes, more hopefully, the present turn towards an acceptance of the ending of a particular church culture but also the openness to a more radical renewal of Christianity in the years to come.

Introduction

In a celebrated historical novel set during the early years of the English Reformation H.F.M. Prescott vividly evokes the experience of the dissolution of the monasteries. A small number of closures had been happening for some years and the number of monks or nuns in communities had been dwindling over centuries, including the devastating years of the Black Death in the 14th century. But in the late 1530s hundreds of monasteries were closed down in a way that revolutionized society and land ownership, left behind the ruins of former abbeys and religious houses, and inspired a revolutionary protest called the Pilgrimage of Grace. Towards the end of her story Prescott imagines an evening at Hexham Priory, on the day before the King's Commissioners were expected and prayers to be said for the last time. Robert Aske, the leader of the popular protest against the closures, joins the small congregation.

In the silent and darkening church Aske knelt down beside a pillar, leaning his shoulder and forehead against the stone. Far away in the choir the three canons began their Vespers; their voices attenuated and deadened by the emptiness around, but answering steadily and promptly, one to another, in the familiar responses... When Compline was over Aske heard their footsteps die away and the door into the cloister clap to. It had seemed to him that one of the canons lingered, as if expecting him to get up from his knees and come away, but he had not moved, being ashamed of the tears that ran down his face.¹

There are many in the United Reformed Church (URC) in the UK today who have experienced a similar sense of grief as their congregation has closed and a final service has been conducted. There have not been Cromwell's Commissioners to fear, but the slow process of decline in numbers, the ageing or death of key

¹ H.F.M. Prescott, *The Man on a Donkey* part 2 (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 410

church members and leaders, the feeling of being overwhelmed by increasing compliance administration or just the struggle to keep the roof on and the bills paid. The situations are different, but the experiences of grief and loss echo each other. Covid19, like the Black Death of earlier centuries, has had an impact on many congregations today, for some being a last straw. More pervasive has been the slow creep of an increasingly secularised culture, the failure to stem the slow attrition of belief in God in the UK and in European culture more widely, and the reality that whole generations have simply stopped going to church. And, while the 16th century brought a movement of renewal that we call the Reformation, signs of renewal are harder to see today. There are, amongst the congregations that make up the URC, some that are thriving, active, faithful and buoyant. But there are many more where faithful people are tired and fearful, having tried to keep their local congregation going, and who can do it no longer. The number of closures has snowballed in recent years and it is more acceptable now to raise the question of closure when once it would have seemed evidence of lack of faith.

The closures at local level are echoed in challenges at the level of Synod (the URC has 13 regional and national Synods) and denomination. The URC has a structure designed for a much larger number of people and in recent years it has been hard, even impossible, to find volunteers to serve on Synod or Assembly committees and to maintain the conciliar way that a church in the Reformed tradition would expect to live its life. At all “levels”, there is a sense of the loss both of what the URC was and also what it hoped to be. There is continued searching for how to be faithful now, both as a united church and one committed to the unity of the whole Church, but also even in relation to being Church at all. In the URC, the questions about what it means to be the Church today are far from academic, not only structural and institutional, but also profoundly existential and personal. There is disappointment, grief and bewilderment in this time of rapid change.

The title

The title of this article is borrowed from a book called *The Afternoon of Christianity* by Tomáš Halík². A Roman Catholic priest, he writes about the crisis of the Church (particularly his own), and calls for a spiritual and theological renewal that must accompany any external reform. He sees the “afternoon” as a metaphor for the decline of the Church’s intellectual power and political status in Europe today, but also (noting that in the New Testament the evening is the beginning of a new day), a metaphor for what might come to be for a faithful, spiritually renewed Christianity in this very new space. His writing feels relevant to the small URC in the UK, and his message might help those beyond the Roman Catholic church to see what feels like a kind of “dissolution” in our times as also a moment for a really deep and radical renewal. Much is passing away, but something new may be coming over the horizon that could enable a smaller church still to be faithful, to be salt and light in the world that God loves.

Previously...

In previous articles in this journal, Bernard Thorogood and David Thompson have written about the formation and the development of the United Reformed Church, since 1972. In 2001 Thorogood wrote

² Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity*, trans. Gerald Turner (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024)

about the excitement and promise of the 1972 union,³ but also about the early disappointment that the much anticipated and hoped-for further national unions with Methodists and Anglicans did not follow, and the subsequent focus on unions between *local* congregations. He reflected briefly then that ministers were beginning to need to care for more than one congregation. In 2009 Thompson reflected more on the pace of numerical decline in the URC and questioned the conclusion that some had suggested,⁴ that decline was really because of the URC's focus on ecumenism and its neglect of mission.

Now...

There seems little point in writing anything about the URC in the UK in 2024 without reflecting at length on the reality and impact of decline. It would be cruel to those whose grief is raw or weariness deep to remain silent about the realities the URC faces. Even more, denial would mean a lost chance to reflect on what God might be calling us to be in these times now so different from 1972, or what new beginnings might actually be opening up. The experience of decline (as Halik's book indicates) is much broader than the URC. It unites many, if not all, the churches in the Western world in our time.

Looking squarely at the reality: the statistics

The statistics tell a stark story. In 1972, the year of the union of (most of) the Congregational Church of England and Wales with the Presbyterian Church of England, the new United Reformed Church had 2,080 congregations, 192,000 members and 1,093 stipendiary ministers.⁵ There followed two further unions; in 1981 with (54) congregations of the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ and in 2000 with (50) congregations of the Congregational Union of Scotland. However, by 2022 the Year Book of the United Reformed Church listed 1,284 congregations, 40,024 members, 334 stipendiary ministers, 56 non-stipendiary ministers and 14 church related community workers.⁶ Membership has declined fastest, then the number of ministers and, most slowly of all, the number of congregations. The most recent leaflet about the United Reformed Church says that there are 1,198 congregations, 42,000 members and 600 ministers (the higher number of members than 2022 being mostly the result of a different way of counting members in local ecumenical partnerships, and the higher number of ministers likely due to the inclusion of ordained ministers of the URC now working part time, in chaplaincies and in other roles not on "the payroll").⁷ The temptation to make the statistics look better is strong, but, however they are spun, the reality of the changes since 1972 is clear.

John Haywood, an academic in statistical modelling at the University of South Wales, has worked with church statistics across many of the denominations in the UK, examining their projected futures (while

³ Bernard Thorogood, "Introducing a Sister Church: The United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom," *Uniting Church Studies* 7, no.2 (August 2001)

⁴ David M. Thompson, "The United Reformed Church in a new Millenium," *Uniting Church Studies* 15, no.2 (December 2009)

⁵ Kirsty Thorpe, "The Mission and Ministry of the United Reformed Church, 1972-2022," in *Tradition and Transitions: Studies in the history and theology of The United Reformed Church*, eds. David Cornick and Robert Pope, (London, URC, 2022), 176

⁶ Thorpe, *Mission and Ministry*, 198

⁷ "What is the URC?" (updated in 2024), accessed May 29, 2024, <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/what-is-the-urc-updated-2024.pdf>

emphasizing that projections are not predictions). His way of presenting the trajectory of decline is perhaps even more stark than the bare statistics. He writes that “Every optimisation indicates that the URC will end up extinct.”⁸ He projects that the United Reformed Church will end in 2038 (and there are similar projections for other “mainline” denominations in the UK). His thesis is that churches only grow when they can make enough converts to replace those who have died, and to make converts you need to have a number of those who are what he calls “enthusiasts.” Many in the URC today reflect that explicit evangelism is not something with which most members feel comfortable, and there is a recognizable truth in his argument that we do not have the “enthusiasts” to make enough converts to replace those who are either dying or falling away.

Personal testimony

Another way to see the reality of what is happening to the United Reformed Church is to view it through the lens of a particular life. Keith Forecast, a much respected minister of the URC who served a variety of pastorates, as a Synod Moderator and as Moderator of General Assembly 1989-1990, published a memoir in 2008.⁹ He wrote of his growing up in a family where church going was a constant of life and highly enjoyable, of his days as an undergraduate at Cambridge where he was fully involved in both “Cong Soc” and the Student Christian Movement, and of pastorates and appointments that consumed his hours and his energy, and to which he gladly gave the best years of his life. He reflected on the high moments of ecumenical hope building up to and following the union of 1972 and of how many of his generation truly believed that there would soon be a united Church in Britain and were committed to bringing it about. As the story of his life and ministry unfolds, the reader sees the collapse of that hope, the serious decline of the URC itself (as well as of individual congregations) and something of the pain and shock of that disappointment. Reflecting on his contemporary colleagues in ministry he wrote,

We knew the Church was getting smaller but I don’t think it ever occurred to us that when we came towards the end of our ministries people might seriously be talking about the extinction of the Church as we knew it. Now, there are times when we seem to see the Church we have loved, and to which we have given our lives, steadily evaporating before our eyes.¹⁰

He also reflected, more personally, on his sorrow that none of his four children or five grandchildren have a personal faith or involvement with the Church. There was no bitterness in his account of his life of discipleship and ministry, no sense of blame, and no diminishment of faith in God or fading of thankfulness for the blessings of life and ministry. That makes the sorrow he expressed in looking honestly at the decline of the URC all the more moving. He belonged to a generation that saw a brief post-War rise in church attendance and affiliation, but then also a rapid fall over just a few decades. His story is another way of viewing the reality of the statistics, and it could be replicated by others.¹¹

⁸ John Hayward, *Church Growth Modelling 2000-2017*, accessed 29 May 29, 2024, <https://churchmodel.org.uk/church-growth-models/limited-enthusiasm/demographics-2/united-reformed-church-2000-2017/>

⁹ Keith Forecast, *Pastor’s Pilgrimage. The Story of a Twentieth Century Christian Minister* (London: Matador, 2008)

¹⁰ Forecast, *Pastor’s Pilgrimage*, 156

¹¹ See for example, Martin Camroux, *A Serious Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2024)

Moments of reflection: commemorations and jubilees

Of course, the United Reformed Church has been doing more in recent decades than counting statistics or explicitly naming and mourning decline, but decline has been a gradually more insistent background to its life. There have been several key moments of reflection on what the URC has inherited, the gifts it carries and holds for the whole Church and what we might be called to keep on cherishing, remembering and growing into whatever the future will bring. If the past decades have been a time of ‘decluttering’ of the Church (perhaps one way of putting a positive gloss on decline), then the URC has been asking what are those things that we should treasure, keep and carry into the future.

2012 marked the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection in 1662. This was the year when more than 2,000 Presbyterian and Independent ministers were thrown out of their livings because they would not accept the provisions of the 1662 Act of Uniformity by using only the newly authorized Book of Common Prayer or by accepting the necessity of being episcopally ordained. This was the moment in English history, shortly after the restoration of the monarchy at the end of the Commonwealth period, when a religious settlement meant that from then on there was to be a split culture with “Dissenters” decisively separated from the national Church. The URC marked the anniversary by holding a service, jointly with the Church of England, in Westminster Abbey. The Congregational Federation, with whom this was also shared history, were included and involved too. The preacher was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and his sermon was remarkable in presenting “old Dissent” as a force that urged upon the whole Church in England a mature and critical faith, putting aside those things that sometimes render faith infantile. He said, for example, that “episcopacy and monarchy have been changed forever by the questioning presence of English dissent, chastened by history and theology.”¹² He relished the prospect of a church shaped by both George Herbert and Richard Baxter, a church rooted in the classical and essential doctrines of Christianity to which both bore witness. How, he asked, do we all grow now, from this day, into the maturity (of Christ), and together? His reflection on the maturing influence of Dissent on a, sometimes infantile, Church took many listeners (in both parties) by surprise, as he left them wondering what it could mean to bring an end to the rupture of 1662 and to find a grown-up future together. How might we recognize that both have moved far from the caricature of the other that each still sometimes nurses (and that the Archbishop did much subtly to deconstruct in his preaching) and recognize that as we look at each other “in the afternoon” of history something very different is needed?

2017 was the centenary of the ordination of Rev Constance Todd Coltmann and another key moment of reflection within the United Reformed Church. Here was a moment the URC could be proud of, celebrating a pioneering spirit, since amongst our forebears could be claimed the first woman to be ordained to a Trinitarian church in the UK, in 1917. There were several events organized to mark the centenary: a conference,

¹² Rowan Williams, “Joint Church of England and United Reformed Church service of reconciliation and commitment,” Dr Rowan Williams: 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, accessed May 29, 2024, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2346/joint-church-of-england-and-united-reformed-church-service-of-reconciliation-and-commitment.html>

a lecture, services in churches and colleges, the publication of a book,¹³ and the creation of a film.¹⁴ There was even merchandise; T-shirt, mugs and tote bags! And all in partnership with the Congregational Federation and the Council for World Mission (CWM). Encounters with women from around the world and reflection among women in the UK led many to conclude that there needs to be more work on the full inclusion and participation of women. But there was also a sense that the tradition celebrated at this anniversary must continually be broadened. The URC has learned to be open, understanding and affirming, of the inclusion of LGBT+ people, as well as of those living with different abilities or with neurodiversity. For some decades, and particularly since its expressed commitment in 2005 to be a multicultural church, the URC has been addressing racial justice, working on anti-racism and facing up to the legacies of slavery. The election, in 2022, of Tessa Henry-Robinson, an ethnically minoritized woman, to be the next Moderator of General Assembly was a step forward in this tradition of radical inclusion. The ordination of women (though numbers were admittedly few for decades) also began to challenge a model of ministry that had its roots in patriarchal, paternal and authoritarian narratives. Other steps towards inclusion, or expansion, beg questions about how the URC's understanding of ministry and of church might mature and change.

2022 brought the 50th anniversary of the formation of the United Reformed Church. There were two significant publications, reflecting on the past 50 years¹⁵ and plentiful merchandise. A service of jubilee was planned for October 2022, had to be postponed twice, first by a train strike and secondly by a coronation (!), but eventually it went ahead in April 2023 in Methodist Central Hall, just opposite Westminster Abbey. Many came in person, while others joined on-line, watching the livestream. The service was joyful, and in many ways informal. The music ranged widely from traditional hymns to jazz. There was a choir dressed in bold colours. There was not one long sermon, but three shorter ones; a former General Secretary (David Cornick) spoke about unity as God's precious gift (memorably reminding listeners that unity is not "ecclesiastical joinery" but about growing into union with Christ),¹⁶ the General Secretary of CWM (Jooseup Keum) spoke about mission as that which transforms the world and a young theologian (Victoria Turner) spoke of her pride in the 'messiness' of the URC that can include much diversity and disagreement and yet can also be a radical voice seeking a better world. She said, in a brief aside at the end, that "we know we are going to change and we won't look like this quite soon,"¹⁷ but that we should keep the fire of hope alight (at a time when it's going out). The jubilee service said little explicitly about decline. The atmosphere was one of celebration and there was a sense of friends re-uniting and of gratitude, after Covid, that people could meet face to face and celebrate together. The URC's commitments to the inclusion of women, of young people, of those ethnically minoritized, of those differently abled and those from global partnerships were made visible and evident. The service was very different from the service that took place just across the road in 1972. The black and white photographs from then, with just a few women (wearing hats) reflected a different world from the colourful informality of the present day. But the empty seats in the gallery in 2023, with

¹³ Janet Wootton, *Constance. Pioneer, Pastor, Preacher* (London: URC, 2021)

¹⁴ A film made by Kevin Syman, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=FiIm+Constance+Coltmann&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:84b568db,vid:kmgFSkG7hi4,st:0>, accessed 29 May 2024

¹⁵ Stephen Tomkins, *That they may all be one. The Story of the United Reformed Church* (London: URC, 2022) and David Cornick and Robert Pope (eds) *Tradition and Traditions. Studies in the History and Theology of the United Reformed Church* (London: URC, 2022)

¹⁶ David Cornick's sermon, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8K4MZWjH7I&list=PLtV0Wy0Q-tkLKRpaZFFr8qm-GMi7VvEeF&index=8>

¹⁷ Victoria Turner's sermon, May 29, 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRD7G4zGNYc&list=PLtV0Wy0Q-tkLKRpaZFFr8qm-GMi7VvEeF&index=11>

their neatly placed gift bags left unclaimed, spoke a story of hopes not quite fulfilled. The loving, wistful hugs of those who were glad to see each other but who wondered if they would ever do anything like this again, brought a lump to some throats.

Reviews, Reports and Recommendations

There have also been, in recent decades, a number of moments in which the United Reformed Church has sought to reflect on its life. In 1999, Tony Burnham, the then General Secretary, presented the “Growing Up” report to General Assembly, urging the church to be clear eyed about its situation (by then the membership of the URC had halved since 1972), to see this decline within its wider cultural and ecclesial context, and to recognize that growth is God’s gift while the task of faithful disciples is simply to follow Jesus. The report went on to propose that the URC develop a new kind of mission strategy based on the Five Marks of Mission.¹⁸ In 2004, John Ellis, as Convenor of the Ministries Committee, presented the “Equipping the Saints” report to Assembly, suggesting that churches move from expecting each congregation to have a fraction (increasingly small) of a minister and encouraging a deeper appreciation of the role of elders, as well as the importance of the dispersed lives of church members in the community.¹⁹ In 2006, under the leadership of the then General Secretary, David Cornick, the General Assembly considered proposals as part of a wider project called “Catch the Vision,” that led to the abolition of District Councils (so that the conciliar layers of the church would now be reduced to three; local church meetings, Synods and General Assembly). From 2008-2011 a programme called Vision4Life encouraged all local URCs to explore the Bible, prayer and evangelism, in a bid to ensure that structural changes to the denomination were accompanied by spiritual renewal.²⁰ The records of General Assemblies reveal reviews and proposals to reform and renew the life of the denomination in various ways. But there is a repeated pattern of ideas and initiatives being affirmed, but not really taking effect, often because initiatives from the Assembly found a less than full reception in local congregations. In 2021, General Secretary John Bradbury spoke to Assembly of the need for the URC to review the life, structures, resources and work of the URC (a Church Life Review). He cited the pandemic as a moment that had revealed challenges, reflected that ministers were feeling overstretched, that the finances of the church were held in places not necessarily most appropriate for meeting the needs of the hour and that the structure of the URC (despite the 2006 reforms) is too large for the present size of the membership. In a paper presented to Assembly, John Bradbury said

Our decline seems inexorable – and our task is to ask what it is to be faithful in this immediate context. Ironically, perhaps, our dying to the forms of church life that once were thriving, releases resources which, with careful discernment, will allow the seeds of new, resurrected forms of church life for the future to be sown.²¹

¹⁸ Report to Assembly 1999, Appendix 1, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://urc.org.uk/images/General-Assemblies/Archives/1999-ASSEMBLY-REPORTS-RESOLUTIONS-AND-PAPERS.pdf>

¹⁹ Report to Assembly 2004, Appendix 2, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/book-of-reports-2004.pdf>

²⁰ Vision4Life Factsheet, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://urcarchive.org.uk/vision4life/vision4life-resources/articles/vision4life-factsheet.html>

²¹ Paper presented to Assembly 2021, accessed May 29, 2024 https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/March-2021/A1_Future_of_the_URC.pdf

In the closing paragraph, he wrote of the pattern of death and resurrection at the heart of the Christian faith and asked what needs to die, and what do we need to let go, so that new life can spring up. There could hardly have been a more blunt and honest approach to the experience that many in the churches were facing. The tone was different from earlier reports, as the felt experience of decline became more stark.

Seeking an outsider view (outside of the URC) as part of this Church Life Review, the think tank Theos was commissioned to prepare an in-depth study of the United Reformed Church, within the context of their interest in how historic churches in the UK are facing challenges and adapting to the contemporary world. The report was published in 2023.²² It appreciated the URC as a church with a high commitment to equality and to participation, as well as to living creatively with difference while maintaining unity. It highlighted the high priority given by many local congregations to community engagement and noted the importance of the ministry of church related community worker within the URC. However, it also pointed to the decreasing number of volunteers to engage in even the high priority work, the reality that community engagement does not always lead to new members, and that many people within the churches are tired. The URC, it reflected, is

top heavy, with structures forged in, and arguably fit for a different era, yet vibrantly activist at the level of local congregations. It is people poor, as a result of ongoing congregational decline, yet for the same reason – and somewhat ironically – ‘cash rich’, with a solid financial situation resulting in part from the sale of closed church buildings.²³

The Theos report held up a mirror to the United Reformed Church and showed clearly what was, in one sense, already known; it is a church with admirable commitments (inclusion, participation, community engagement, the renewal of creation for instance), but with a weakness in evangelism. Recommendations for the future (“pathways to flourishing”) focused on improving training for leadership and ministry and reforming the structures of the denomination, echoing the impulses of previous reports and reviews.

The United Reformed Church has, over recent decades taken many, often brave, steps to renew and reform its life. Alongside the big moments like *Catch the Vision* there has also been: the development of Special Category Ministries (through which ordained ministers serve in situations outside of local church pastorates and engage with the wider world in a whole variety of ways, from being based in centres of pilgrimage to working in new housing estates or within a city night-time economy); the opening up of Certificates of Eligibility so that ministers from other countries can transfer to the URC and work in the UK; the development of an advertising campaign to focus on the URC’s inclusiveness (though in the end this did not happen for complex reasons); an initiative to encourage prayer through shared Daily Devotions on-line; the setting up of a Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) with the Methodists and the Baptists; and the working up of a brand called “Walking the Way” to deepen discipleship within the churches. The URC has issued an apology for its historic legacy associated with the transatlantic slave trade, worked hard to embed a stronger safeguarding culture and to seek justice within its life. It has engaged in thoughtful debate about

²² Nathan Mladin, *The United Reformed Church. A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads*, accessed May 29, 2024 <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/URC-report-Final.pdf>

²³ Mladin, *A Paradoxical Church*, 64

sexuality (over decades), and held together different views and understandings while also enabling those local churches who wish to do so to register for the conduct of same-sex weddings. It has continued to contribute people and resources to ecumenical bodies and discussions and to give sacrificially to the life of the wider Church. None of this has worked to turn back the tide of decline. That does not mean that these were the wrong things to do, or that the URC was doing them for the purpose of arresting its own decline. Indeed, in recent years the URC has, it might be said, let go of a desire to save itself and has begun to focus more on what being faithful to Jesus demands right now. The Church Life Review has not had the implied agenda of “saving the URC,” but of finding ways to manage better the resources we have for the people we are and for those we serve. There may be a deep sense of mourning amongst some in the URC for a kind of church culture that is passing away before our eyes, but there is also an emerging sense that something radically new is coming. A high proportion of our (small) number of ministers in training do not have long background in the United Reformed Church, but have found a home within it. They are not so much focused on the kind of church that Keith Forecast lived and ministered in, but on finding ways for today to live as followers of Jesus and as those who minister in his Church. There is a growing acceptance that what is coming will not be a revival of the past, but something really quite new. In terms of ecumenism, many of those who have recently come to the URC understand the Church in a much more fluid way than as a collection of determinedly different denominations or traditions. There is little interest in or passion for institutional union, but plenty for the kind of working together and learning from one another that leads to the informal koinonia that echoes the cultures of our post-modern world.

In the afternoon

In his book *The Afternoon of Christianity* Tomáš Halík presents a view from the Roman Catholic church of the present state of the Church. He argues that the Church needs not just external reform (that will bring only shallow results), but a renewal of theology and spirituality. The Church has lost, he argues, political power and also, in many ways now, moral and intellectual power. In this new space, every Christian is called to make Christ present. Christians now live in a secular age, but the Church has a long tradition of re-contextualising faith in new times and of finding ways to dialogue, and this is what the Church needs to do again. He identifies three ‘enlightenments’ (the first in the 18th century that sought to liberate reason from domination by tradition, the second in the 1960s that called for the liberation of emotion and sexuality from cool reason, and a third in the present day that rejects Western colonialism, racism and industrialization and affirms the value of creation). It is not difficult to read the story of the United Reformed Church and its forebears as one of responding to these different moments of enlightenment. Halík believes that a time of crisis in institutional religion often brings a revival among the people, a renewal of the *experience* of faith. He recognizes the dangers of divorcing experiential “spirituality” from either rationality or morality, but says that faith must always be more like going to the theatre than reading the score of the opera! He calls for places and centres where the experience of faith can be vivid. He profoundly believes that God is at work in the world beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and that the Church needs to trust that and find God there. He writes that “barricaded Christians can hardly be the salt and leaven of society. Christians are not to create ghettos, their place is in the midst of the world.”²⁴ He, further, urges the Church to keep on defending and creating good ground for the things that Christianity has made possible in the

²⁴ Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity*, 194

contemporary world: human rights, social justice, good family life. In short, he calls for a Church where the experience of faith is real and connects with the expressed need of the world for authentic spirituality, where engagement with the world is open and deep, and where Christians, having lost political or cultural power, are nonetheless salt and leaven, called to make the Christ who is incarnate, crucified and risen present in a suffering world. Halík's insightful and inspiring book speaks into the situation of the United Reformed Church in the UK. From its roots in a history of marginalization (in 1662), a measure of cultural "success" in the late 18th and 19th centuries and being in the vanguard of what looked like the ecumenical future in the 20th century, the URC has been humbled by a relentless tide of secularisation and decline. Now, the challenge is to live faithfully when Christianity, once again, is culturally despised and marginal, while its witness to the presence of God is all the more needed amongst people filled with longing for meaning and hope.

Conclusion

The reality of decline, both in numbers and of influence, has had a powerful impact upon the United Reformed Church in recent years. The sense of grief is acute in many places and lives. However, the discourse about the present and the future is changing. There is no longer such a sense of searching for "the answer" or finding strategies to reverse the decline, but an acceptance of a different place for the Church than the one it once had or to which it aspired. If grief comes in stages, then perhaps the denial, anger and disbelief is moving towards a mature acceptance and renewal. This sentence of Tomáš Halík's resonates strongly in the present-day URC: "The Church must...abandon its 'little self', its fixation on just its institutional form at a given moment in history, or on its institutional interests."²⁵

Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his sermon at the 2012 service in Westminster Abbey, reminded the congregation of the call to grow into the fulness of maturity (with Christ). Pre-occupation with self is a kind of immaturity, and though of course someone has to sort out the structures and the finances, the Church has to find a much wider horizon as it seeks to serve the Christ who gave his life for the world. It may be that the URC has begun to face the realities of the present day, while letting go of trying to save its own "little self" and to re-focus on finding a renewed faith with those who are committed to living as salt and leaven in the world and to looking for Christ's presence. There are URC communities where prayers have now been said for the last time and where the "For Sale" sign is on the door. There are causes that have ended and hopes (including ecumenical hopes) that have come to naught. But Christ is still present and there are many signs that the Spirit is still working in both Church and world. Perhaps this is the afternoon of the United Reformed Church, but Jesus Christ is risen, and a new day *will* begin.

²⁵ Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity*, 204



Revisiting the Land, Finding Country

Geoffrey Lilburne

Abstract

In revisiting the theme of land the author reflects on an earlier publication and his recent experience as a farmer to reframe a theology of the land in and for the Australian context. Drawing on recent biblical scholarship on “land ideologies” and the call to de-colonise biblical interpretation, and listening carefully to Indigenous voices on the meaning of “country,” the argument is advanced that a theology of the land calls for a wholesale repentance in relation to understandings and policies regarding land and a total revision of farming practice. The suggestion is that a discovery of country in the Indigenous sense could supplant a focus on land and lead to a theology of the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

The year of 1989 was pivotal for me: I returned to the land of my birth and published in the United States, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land*.¹ Land was very much on my mind as I pondered the emerging environmental crisis and reflected on the emphasis on land in Aboriginal spirituality. In October of the same year I purchased a rural property, my long desired first “farm.” Being now a land manager, I surveyed degraded soils and dying trees, and the issues came into even starker focus as I wondered about the future for our land of Australia.²

This was nearly 40 years ago! Since then, what was perceived as an “emerging crisis” of the environment has become a living catastrophe. New disciplines have emerged: eco-theology, eco-feminism, regenerative farming to name just a few. The conversation with Indigenous Australians has deepened over the years as more voices have joined and our country stumbles towards some kind of reckoning with past injustices. As both theologian and farmer, I now return to the themes of my earlier work and ponder what an emerging theology of the land will look like in Australia today. As I do so, I clearly write about a contested reality as a partisan: I am a colonist-settler who writes from the perspective of a person who has been born into a colonial heritage. As I encounter those who were here first, I do so with deep respect and regret for past wrongs. I propose that a theology of the land must encompass a range of disciplines and that our conclusions need to address multiple issues of land management as well as ownership and ecology.

¹ Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

² I have written about the experience of being a farmer in my recent collection of poetry, *The Poetry of Farming*, (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2023).

A “theology of the Land” places reflection about the land in the purview of theology, where “land” stands for the environment as a whole. A *Christian* theology of the land is an attempt to account for the environment within a Christian understanding of God and Christian proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Today such an enterprise needs to consider biblical material, the history of its reception, the experience of Indigenous peoples and recent theological reflection. As a placed discipline, theology needs to acknowledge that it works within a clear contextual frame.

In what follows I draw these resources together to develop a theology of the land. To a remarkable extent each element supports a theological conclusion with massive practical implications. As a settler colonist, I will argue that a Christian theology of the land in the Australian context calls for a far-reaching act of repentance on the part of all who have so benefited from our gross acts of land theft. Only then can we begin to hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God in our land.

Biblical material

When I wrote *A Sense of Place* I was enthralled by Walter Brueggemann’s 1977 book, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*.³ Brueggemann’s statement that land is “a central if not the central theme of biblical faith”⁴ seemed to me to be rich in potential for one seeking a theology of the land. Perhaps his suggestion that there is one theme here also encouraged me to think of doing a single, normative theology of land. Since that time, however, some of these ideas have been seen to be misleading. First off, Norman Habel’s 1995 publication, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*,⁵ points to a plurality of interpretations of land in the Hebrew scriptures. While the centrality of land in the bible is affirmed, this plurality indicates that a “theology of land” will have to engage multiple perspectives and perhaps to be more of a dialogue than a single statement.

Habel’s work dispelled the popular myth that the bible offers only a “conquest narrative” to account for possession of land. This ideology has supported so many colonial enterprises in the modern world, but in Habel’s analysis must be set alongside other ideologies, most notably that of the Abrahamic practice in the “Immigrant ideology”. Here we see Abraham come not as a conqueror but as an immigrant who negotiates with local landholders, acknowledging their gods and using purchase and agreements to acquire land. Abraham is perhaps the original heir of the promise of the land by Yahweh and his methods offer an alternative to that of Joshua and the Conquest narratives.

When I first compared Indigenous and Hebrew spirituality I was struck by the similarities, especially in terms of the centrality of the land. Further, I wrote:

In the covenantal view of land tenure we see a set of relationships which define the nature of the possession. The relationships exhibit a threefold pattern similar to that noted in Aboriginal religion. There is, first, the relationship between human persons and their God; second, the

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁴ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 3.

⁵ Norman Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

relationship between the various members of the community; and third, the relation of human persons to the land itself.⁶

While these similarities can be seen, what strikes me now is the great differences. A dominant understanding of a Hebrew understanding of the land is that land was primarily territory, to be claimed, possessed or lost.⁷ For the Australians, before the disruption of colonisation, land was much more than territory. It was living place, a living Subject guiding their lives and their hopes. I now see that “Country” was much more than “land” and as such it dominated the lives of the Indigenous in ways beyond our understanding. Further, knowledge of the land governed usage, and the ecological insight of the first Australians outstrips that of anything seen then or since.

There is a strong “creation tradition” in the Hebrew Scriptures which tell of God’s creating work. The impact of Brueggeman and Habel’s work is to draw the land in the traditions of God’s great redeeming work. The end of that work is the vision of the Kingdom of God, and to discover land at the centre of this tradition warns us against any interpretation of the kingdom which is couched in purely “heavenly” terms. If the land is central to God’s redeeming work, then the Kingdom of God is also about the future of the land., This is where Brueggeman and Habel’s work is so central to the quest for a theology of the land.

My earlier work suffered from a methodological error. I sought to move directly from the biblical material to theological reflection, and to avoid issues related to the uses made of the biblical material. Reflecting on the Palestinian experience, Mitri Raheb argues that, “ignoring the reception history of land ideology in modern settler colonial history while writing about land in the bible is irresponsible at best.”⁸ In seeking to fashion a theology of the land today in Australia we must give attention to the ways in which the bible has been used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous Australians from their homeland.

The experience of Indigenous peoples

In the last forty years there has been a burgeoning in writing by Indigenous thinkers, so that settler work must now take more the form of dialogue than bald assertion or comparison.⁹ Is there a point of contact between what “land” connotes in the biblical tradition and the richness of “Country” in Indigenous spirituality? Fellow Western Australian and *Palyku* woman Sally Morgan writes how: “this is the great Australian conflict: conflict over country; who it belongs to, what it is, what it means, and how it should be valued.”¹⁰ I share Morgan’s view on the centrality of this issue for Australians, and in the light of the failure of the Referendum on 2023 I believe these issues call for urgent attention.

⁶ Lilburne, *A Sense of Place*, 50.

⁷ There are, of course, other views grounded in 1 Kings 21 and the idea of Jubilee that suggest it can also be considered that it is living space that ties people to God. Genesis 1 and 2 would also suggest that land and people have a relationship of mutual care.

⁸ Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books, 2023), 75.

⁹ See Anne Pattel-Gray, Norman Habel and Australian First Nations, *De-colonising the Biblical Narrative*, Volume 1, *The First Nations De-colonising of Genesis 1-11*, (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2022); Volume 2, *A First Nations De-colonising of Genesis 12-25*, (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2023).

¹⁰ Sally Morgan, “The Balance for the World” in *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*, ed. Sally Morgan, Tjalamina Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008), 264

We can now draw much closer to an understanding of the nuances of the place and use of “Country” in Indigenous thought and practice. I am indebted, in particular, to Garry Worete Deverell’s exposition of country in his recent works, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith*¹¹ and *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology*.¹² Deverell proposes that if parallels are to be drawn then it might be that “Country” is analogous to “Christ” in traditional Christian discourse. Country is a living reality in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality and functions more as a Subject for relationship than an object for observation. The gulf between an Indigenous and a Western colonial perspective is wider than scholars first imagined.

The rich resonances of Country are further explored in the work of Denise Champion: *Yarta Wandatha*¹³ and *Anaditj*¹⁴. Champion points to the Adnymathanha story of Virikathanha as a loving parent who goes to great lengths to find her lost children. In this story...

there is a revealing of the Triune God....enlightenment happened....I count it as a privilege to be shown by way of revelation that that’s what is. And that opens the whole story up: Virikathanha, the old women from the story, actually depicts God.¹⁵

For Champion, the stories which emerge out her Country, when placed alongside biblical images and stories, bring “revelation”. In this way, Country enables interpretation of biblical themes.

If Country is a living Subject, what might it be saying? The answer from an Indigenous perspective is clear. “Country is crying!” The Rainbow Spirit Elders detail ways in which the Country is crying which embrace the whole history of dispossession and subsequent land use.¹⁶ From an environmental perspective we can see the damage done by two centuries of European settlement as a cause for grief to the land itself and to those who would live in sensitive relationship with it. A theology of the land in the Australian context needs to open itself to these rich perspectives from Indigenous thought and settler theologians must challenge the manipulative approach to land which our settlement has adopted.

Recent theological writing

Recent theological writing has sought to draw on these rich resources. One early attempt to correct Christian preaching was offered by the Uniting Church’s Preamble to the Constitution of the Church. Where the Uniting Church’s preaching might have reflected a view that God arrived in Australia with the emergence of the first Christian Churches here, the Preamble issues a strong corrective, declaring that God was already

¹¹ Garry Worete Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir, VIC: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

¹² Garry Worete Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

¹³ Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, *Yarta Wandatha* (Salisbury: Denise Champion, 2014).

¹⁴ Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, *Anaditj* (Salisbury: Denise Champion, 2021).

¹⁵ Champion, *Anaditj*, 39.

¹⁶ The Rainbow Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards An Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 42-45.

present, and active in the lives of the Indigenous inhabitants of this land. The Preamble seeks to be specific about which God was present and it affirms the Triune God of the Christian tradition.¹⁷

In what ways was the Triune God active? Here perhaps the Preamble oversteps itself, by claiming that God was giving a special revelation through Indigenous law and ceremony.

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace which was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.¹⁸ (Paragraph 3)

Indigenous theologian Garry Worete Deverell pointedly asks how the framers could possibly know this. While the epistemological foundation for this claim is not clear, at the very least it needs to be read as already a confession of Christian faith by its authors. Nevertheless, the intent of the statement would seem to be to forbid any denigration of the spirituality of the First Peoples of this land. As such it is a critique of popular and widespread devaluations of the spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Christian churches.

Beyond that the Preamble calls for a fundamental reorientation of the settler church in its relationships both with Indigenous Australians and with the land itself.

Issues of land ownership were avoided in my earlier work but this issue has now been raised and calls for attention. In 2009, Chris Budden published *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*.¹⁹ He has boldly gone where I was too careful to go many years earlier! Employing tools from his social justice background and insights from liberation theology, Budden has taken the history of invasion and its resulting dispossession and disruption as his starting point. He writes:

The primary defining context for those who live in Australia is invasion. Invasion is about land and country, social location, power, place in the world and meaning. It is about the place of nations in the world. The violence that accompanies invasion is a reminder of the defeated in society.²⁰

Whereas for settler thinking discovery or fresh beginnings might be considered as starting points for contextual theological thinking, Budden's choice of invasion sets his work firmly within a liberation perspective. In keeping with this decision, Budden boldly locates Jesus in Australia among the Indigenous.

In the Australian setting, this means that Jesus is present with Indigenous peoples, as they struggle with the impact of invasion and continuing marginalization. For Jesus is always located with

¹⁷ "Preamble to the Constitution," paragraph 1, in *In Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations 2018* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2018), 40.

¹⁸ "Preamble to the Constitution," paragraph 3, 41.

¹⁹ Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series, no. 116 (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009).

²⁰ Budden, *Following Jesus*, 17.

those whose land was given by God but who have been dispossessed, and whose dispossession is therefore an act of unbelief.²¹

Little room is left here for debate, but surely debate is called for. Given the multicultural nature of Christian churches there is need for recognition of the presence of Jesus in the faith and experience of a great many Australian Christians who are not Indigenous.

Budden draws upon particular meanings of “land” and “invasion.” In this telling “land” means “country” rather than “landscape” in a European sense, the foundation of a network of relationships between people, animals and places. For Budden, in solidarity with Indigenous people, and in echo of the Rainbow Spirit elders, “the invasion of this land was an assault, not just on Aboriginal peoples, but on all life in country. Invasion destroyed the nurturing connections, ceremonies, and presence of the people. Invasion disordered country because it removed it from its own story and defined it within the story of the invaders”.²²

. While this reversal of the usual biases in the telling of our history is welcome, in a multi-cultural reality, many histories will need to be heard before we can claim an encompassing theology for the whole church. More nuance needs to be added to this account before we can arrive at a theology of the land, one that must always recognise the disruption of invasion.

A second response comes from Peter Lewis, *Acting in Solidarity? The church's journey with the Indigenous peoples of Australia*.²³ Lewis argues that Christian theology in Australia can only be a theology that develops in the shadow of Empire, so that the post-Christendom setting of the theology is paramount. This theology must emerge from a praxis of solidarity with the Indigenous people of Australia. Lewis sets this theology of radical discipleship within a Trinitarian setting. It is a theology of the cross, where the encounter with Christ is seen to occur in the encounter with the crucified other of Indigenous experience.

Confessing the Church's complicity with the state in the oppression of Aboriginal people, Lewis calls for an act of repentance on the part of the Christian Churches for their role in sustaining the myths of Empire. Beyond the event to the National Apology in 2008, the Church needs to engage in acts of covenanting with Indigenous peoples with a threefold aim of securing Indigenous self-determination in Australia, the advocacy of human rights for indigenous people and the continuing conversion of the church from its white empire delusions.

As we reach for an embracing theology of the land, I believe that Budden's liberational and Lewis' imperial emphases need to be drawn together in a focus on the Kingdom of God as the end in view for all creation. In this frame, both the ethical and the agricultural emphases of land theology may be set within the frame of the creative and redemptive work of the Triune God.

²¹ Budden, *Following Jesus*, 70-73.

²² Budden, *Following Jesus*, 7.

²³ Peter Lewis, *Acting in Solidarity? The Church's Journey with Indigenous Peoples of Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2010).

In their call for a new style of Christian discipleship, both Budden and Lewis in effect call for a fundamental act of repentance in the settler Christian community. Repentance as a theme is not lacking from my earlier book. In the first page of my earlier publication I wrote, "It may be that only an act of economic repentance and conversion on our part – an act that would cut right to the quick of our industrial economy – will be able to effect the salvation of the environment."²⁴ Now I want to push that call even further, and to argue that it is time for Australians to review the entire history of our settlement and our mode of "development" of this country we call Australia.

As a former colony, there is much to regret about our past. We could begin with the Doctrine of Discovery by means of which our ancestors "took possession". "Terra nullius" amplified that first mistake. What would it mean to repent of these past errors? They cannot simply be reversed, rather we need to claim them as errors and to seek to reverse the harmful consequences of these ideas in our present lived reality. Fundamental acts of solidarity with the living survivors of these fateful errors are called for. A history based upon lies calls for a fundamental reorientation of our mode of living.

For many the issues of agriculture and theology may appear to stand far apart, but just as ecology and ethics come together when we consider environmental issues, so I argue the practice of agriculture reaches deeply into our value system and that brings us to theology, as a grounding discipline. Repentance must also embrace our agricultural practice. Our attempt to turn Australia into a European-style farm has wreaked havoc on the environment. For example, in Western Australia dryland salinity has devastated vast areas of agricultural land. Between one and two million hectares of land has been lost since settler agriculture commenced. Of course, we could also add mining and forestry to the general point here. While there is much to be celebrated in the achievements of Australian agriculture over the last century, it has come at a large and unaccounted environmental cost. If we add to the problems of soil erosion and declining fertility, the effects of salination and deforestation, we can only envisage a dark future for the agricultural project which has so shaped Australian history. In all these areas we call for an act of repentance and revised practice.

Many now see these facts clearly, and some are seeking the restorative practices of "regenerative farming."²⁵ A band of farmers and conservationists are proclaiming a whole new set of practices to reclaim productivity and enterprise in rural communities. In doing so, they are learning from Indigenous land practices and correcting many of modern errors. As settlers learn more about Indigenous land management, there is emerging a rich and fruitful dialogue on the ways in which industrial agriculture must change to be truly "regenerative."²⁶ But will it be enough? Can farming be reclaimed in this way, or is a whole-scale project of rewilding required? It remains to be seen. So long as the practices of modern industrial agriculture still claim the majority there will not be anything like the turn around required. I hope we can move forward in dialogue with Indigenous Australians to fashion a truly regenerative agriculture in this place.

²⁴ Lilburne, *A Sense of Place*, 9.

²⁵ See Charles Massy, *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, a New Earth* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2020).

²⁶ See Bill Gamage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011), Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu* (Broome WA: Magabala Books, 2018). Massey, *Call of the Reed Warbler*, 16ff.

Conclusion

Encompassing such a broad array of issues under one notion of repentance may seem to be ludicrous and unrealistic! Clearly there is a range of initiatives needed here. The agricultural changes will no doubt be driven as much by economic factors as spiritual, as industrial agriculture becomes less and less profitable with climate change and environmental degradation. It's as if we need to reverse a whole series of fundamental mistakes in this place, beginning with the brutal invasion and the wanton acts of land theft which commenced the European history of this land.

The "Uluru Statement from the Heart" called for a Makarrata, and it seems to me that is where we need to go to now that the Referendum for a Voice has been rejected. Perhaps there is a need for something like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Australia similar to those held in South Africa and Canada to deal with the ongoing issues of Indigenous justice and reparation.²⁷

Indigenous thinkers look back beyond this history to a more balanced and blessed time. Invoking this kind of memory, Sally Morgan offers a sobering reflection on what might have been here in Australia.

The unrealized possibility of the lost mystical magical land of *Terra Australia Incognita* was not its vast material wealth, but the concept of balance that it offered humankind. The dream of a thousand years came as a counterweight to plunder and privilege, a push to pursue a path of balance in order to nourish a global future where all peoples, all life, thrived. If we as human beings, continue to cut ourselves away from the web of life, then we embrace a story like the bitter lie of *terra nullius* can have only one ending – death.²⁸

But there is another way to read this vision. By looking back to her own people's story, Sally crafts what to me amounts to a vision of the possibility the Kingdom of God might embrace.

Far better then, to embrace a story which not only honours life, but returns to it a thousandfold to all those who will come after us. We are the mothers and fathers of the future, we stand at the crossroads and behind us are our children. What will we birth here in this ancient southern land? The land which my grandmother once told me she saw in a dream as a place where everything lived and nothing died. A place far older than she or anyone knew.²⁹

This offers to me a vision of the Kingdom of God, where everything lives and nothing dies, the end-point of God's work of creation and redemption. A theology of country can end with such a vision as the divine gift that lies at the other side of the acts of repentance and reparation to which our nation is called. To have the Kingdom of God as its *telos* seems to me the most appropriate direction for a theology of land/Country in the twenty-first century.

²⁷ See E. Sheryl Johnson, "Truth, Reconciliation and Climate Justice: Application of Truth and Reconciliation Process to Climate Debt and Climate Crisis," in *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*, ed. S. Lily Mendoza & George Zachariah, Eugene Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 131-143.

²⁸ Morgan, "The Balance for the World," 278.

²⁹ Morgan, "The Balance for the World," 278.

It would be one thing for the churches to call upon their membership to undertake repentance in relation to past injustices but quite another for a whole economy to be reoriented around real sustainability and justice for Indigenous Australians. But perhaps part of the problem is with “land”. This objectifying term perhaps blinds us to the greater resonance of “country”, which even settlers may begin to grasp. By entering into a sense of Country the settler church might be enabled to enact a new relationship with it and its First inhabitants. I believe a theology of the land with a focus on the Kingdom of God calls for nothing less.

Book Forum: Willie James Jennings' *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*¹

Three scholars, (Monica Jyotsna Melancthon, Sean F Winter and Toar Hutagalung responded to Willie Jennings' *After Whiteness* in the previous issue of the journal² Professor Jennings responds here to their reflections on his book.

Reading *After Whiteness* in Australia: a response to generosity

Willie James Jennings

I was planning on waiting a few more years before I wrote *After Whiteness*. I had other writing projects that I wanted to finish before I turned to the matters I explored in that book. I also was not sure that the world was ready for the kind of truth telling I wanted to offer through the book. But my friend, Dr. Ted Smith at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia convinced me it was time. He invited me to participate in a group writing project that brought together a marvellous set of scholars and wonderful people to each write a small book around theological education from their unique vantage points and contexts. So, I committed to writing. I was, however, not prepared for the response.

As of summer 2024, I have heard from people from all over the world, from Vancouver to Argentina, from Germany to Scotland, from California to Montreal, from Bristol in the United Kingdom to Melbourne, from Sidney to Winnipeg, from Peru to Hong Kong, from Ghana to South Africa, from Israel to Kenya to Aotearoa me Te Waipounamu, and a vast number of places in between, all sharing with me their testimonies regarding the uncanny connections between the stories I tell in the book and their own stories, the problems and pain I expose in this book and their own problems and pain, and the hope we share for a different kind of education, and a different kind of becoming educated in God that gives witness to the life of God and not that man. As one senior scholar from Oxford said to me after reading the book, "All my life, I have never been able to name my burden, until now."

After Whiteness was never a book only about American theological education. It is a book about the formation at the heart of western education, especially the formation that emerged from the global operations of colonial education. Even now, several decades into people reflecting on the comprehensive effects of educational systems formed through colonization and thereby the effects of being formed in the colonial wound, we are only beginning to understand the depths of struggle bequeathed to us from the educational vision of the white master class. The us, of course, is everyone, not simply nonwhite peoples, indigenous peoples, formerly colonial subjects, but everyone touched by the aspirations of the colonial Christian master who imagined himself *in his children*. He imagined himself honoured in them, glorified in them,

¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

² See Uniting Church Studies Volume 26, no 1 (2024): 85-96.

and most importantly, perfected in them. It was a vision of how he wanted *to be seen* and how he wanted his legacy to continue in his children. That vision funded the massive building projects all around the colonial theatre which established the education system we all now inhabit.

Aspiration, let's call it white aspiration, is a relentless energy inside western education, as Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon points out so powerfully in her reflections on *After Whiteness*. Her own family's desire for her to have a better life through education brought her into the troubled realities of a formation in the master's desire. If aspiring to something is human, then white aspiration is inhumane. It denies the humanity of people who are caught up in the desire for a better life for themselves or their children, because it binds hope to whiteness. Hope is necessary for education, but what happens when hope is compromised, misdirected through a process that wounds us, drawing us toward intellectual performativity that constantly reduces our presence in the academy to markers of self-sufficient masculinity?

Bookbinding

There was the history
 I always sought to leave
 this bookish troubled world
 that demanded I abandon
 my old life for important
 thought. What could be better
 than gravitas – worthy
 of abandonment if not death.
 I decided to struggle for a
 new recording – my life
 aimed at the opening of a
 bound book at the end of
 a hopeless dynasty.

My poem honours the challenge that Melanchthon articulates so wonderfully in her essay. It is the challenge of how to offer a pedagogical vision for her theological work that is a “new recording” that affirms the freedom for living, a freedom in education, especially for women of colour that does not make the price of that freedom white self-sufficient masculinist identity. Theological education suffers most acutely in this regard when it neglects the freedom that is at the heart of our work – a freedom to gather people who are enemies and/or who are separated by class, caste, race, gender, and power and to offer new strategies for shared life. In this regard, India and Australia share in the colonial constraints that exist wherever western theological education existed and established its pedagogical empire – it knows *with depth and certainty* only one form of intellectual witness and therefore only one trajectory of formation – toward the master's son. Theological education everywhere needs a rethinking that is worthy of the complexity of all our lives, especially this scholar with Dalit roots who understands marginalization.

The truth telling of Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon's essay joins the same kind of truth telling we find in Sean F. Winter's essay. Winter reminds us of the real cost of facing the problem of racial and gender formation

in western theological education – challenging the ways we are taught to see ourselves and see the world. It is not new news to most scholars or to most lay folks that whiteness is a social construction. But that statement, like a bad confession, has never done, especially in the academy, the real work of unmooring the operations of whiteness. As I argue in *After Whiteness*, whiteness is a form of identity *reconstruction*, and is, therefore, a particular historically formed way of being in the world and a way of seeing the world, simultaneously. As such, it presents to many people an optionless form of existence because it is both a way of being embedded in seeing and a way of seeing embedded in being.

This means it has been difficult and often undesirable for many white people to imagine life and certainly enact life outside of whiteness. The academy in general and the theological academy specifically has been a bulwark against questioning whiteness as a way of life because it would mean questioning the real-life processes of seeking possession, control, and mastery of knowledge. This is why I appreciate Winter's attempt to turn to wonder to reframe what it means to work in and with knowledge. He is right to dwell with my idea of the fragment, because therein lies a way around the white masculinist intellectualist persona that stands guard at the doors of the academy, saying to all, "You may not pass, unless you yield your life to becoming the finished man and seeing the world the way he must." To take fragment work seriously, however, is to engage willingly in dismantling an academic self, formed through doctoral study, advancing in our guilds, and achieving the awards promised to those who show their self-sufficiency.

I remember my presence in a small faculty (only) seminar in Canada where the topic was my book, After Whiteness. Five white male professors, and two post-doctoral students doing visiting stints at the school, one white American and the other Korean American. The white male professors, all established scholars in their fields, took strong issue with my book. My argument, they said, lacked historical specificity. "Which white men are you talking about? What historical period? In what colonial setting?" These were their questions. "Surely, you are not saying, that all white male scholars are colonialists?" Said one. "This is too descriptively vague to be helpful." Said another. The two women scholars, who were doing their best to maintain a proper scholarly demeanor, kept looking at the white men with shock and amazement in their faces. I could see they wanted to say something but dare not. They looked at me wondering what I would say in response. The irony of the moment was thick like heavy smoke, as if the room was on fire.

The crucial question that Winter's essay raises is what kind of practice of knowing honours God's call to us for communion? We need a practice of knowing that baptizes acquisitionist and acquisitive practices in the life of Jesus where knowledge is aimed at healing life together. This is what being a fragment worker means – entering a shared project of putting pieces together for the sake of thriving life. Such fragment working might then challenge the evaluative ecologies that continue to govern the western academy. The way we have been taught to see and evaluate as fundamental to the intellectual life needs salvation. At this current moment, people in educational institutions around the planet are being judged, severely, by how well or poorly they speak the languages of the western world, English, French, German, Dutch, and Spanish. Their intelligence, their ability to reason abstractly, their insight into the world, and therefore their worth in terms of being heard, considered, and followed are yet being judged by colonial measures. Indeed, there are some people who are reasserting these measures as the basis for universal truth and knowledge, as the very ground of the common (intellectual) good established by the academy itself.

Whether we operate in the liberal-conservative binary and its multiple schemas, or if we imagine conceptualities inside orthodoxy or heterodoxy, we remain captured by an abiding Eurocentrism that establishes voice and the “intellectual quality” of that voice. We are in urgent need of epistemic justice that challenges the epistemic regimes of the western world. Those regimes continue to turn knowledge into commodity and all of us into intellectual merchants who are forced to live in an intellectual economy that mirrors western economies, with its wealthy and its impoverished, and with its class stratifications. Too many students, especially students of colour sense that they live on the edge of dismissal, if not already always in its abyss because of the way they talk and write and reason, such that whatever intellectual positions they articulate the first struggle is to make themselves visible in the academy and especially visible to themselves in academic spaces.

This brings me to Toar Hutagalung’s important essay. Hutagalung spies out two of the matters to which I want to draw sustained attention in the book – fatigue and desire. Theological administrators, faculty, staff, and students have often failed to take seriously the exhaustion that comes with living with and negotiating self-sufficient white masculinist intellectual practice and its multiple instantiations in people who live in the academy aiming always to perfect its enactment. The exhaustion comes from two directions. Many scholars, especially scholars of colour, trying to secure teaching positions, must show themselves to be the finished man. They therefore take onto themselves an impossible task of presentation. They must be “him” and yet be “themselves.” They must show their own contextual difference while at the same moment show disciplinary sameness. The more sanitized way to put this is to say that the successful candidate for most teaching positions must show mastery of their discipline’s body of knowledge and yet show knowledge of their body in a constrained way such as to make clear to the institution that such bodily knowledge will not be an impediment to the quest for possession, control, or mastery, but, in fact, that bodily knowledge will enhance possession, control, and mastery. This is exhausting work, because it demands of so many scholars of colour – they must change a discipline while leaving it precisely the same. In turn, their bodies carry abiding hermeneutic responsibilities that form a second job that runs alongside whatever job they carry in the institution. They represent the discipline, they represent their people, and they represent their difference to both.

Exhaustion indeed.

Exhaustion comes from a second direction in relentlessly dealing with those colleagues who refuse to see their own embeddedness in the quest to become the finished man. They evade every critique by claiming their oneness with their subject matter, their untainted commitment to the task of creating knowledge, or imparting wisdom to students. They wait for someone to show them *exactly* where white self-sufficient masculinist practice lay in their scholarship or their discipline. Until such evidence can be shown convincingly to them, they will continue in their important efforts.

The Excused

We excused the
brilliant one
who suffered no fools,
demanded everyone keep up,
was cruel at the sight of mistakes.

We excused the
insightful writer
who hated the slow
bound to emotion not ready for
rigor and completely outdated in their thinking.

We excused the
cunning voice
who argued like we breathe,
admitting some in and keeping others out
of the circle of respect if they could not think
in sharp crisp gnosis and defend their thought with blood.

Until the day came when our compensation ran out,
and we were left with the bare fact that no one would excuse us.

If exhaustion forms from life inside the master's desire, then we must search for life inside another desire, the one for communion. To touch that life requires we renounce the way of academic life that honours self-sufficient masculinist performance. As I note in my poem, too many educational institutions house and then ignore scholars whose anti-sociality borders on pathology, who lack emotional intelligence, genuine kindness, or any interests in building community other than in their own image, all because they are seen as brilliant, insightful, and necessary for the reputation of the school. As I note in *After Whiteness*, many people enter the academy because they want to escape community having lived through its most demonic and harmful manifestations. They commit to a scholarly identity as an act of salvation. They resist community because they simply do not trust it and see it in abiding suspicion. There is something honourable and beautiful about such a commitment but when it is formed inside the desire to become the finished man, then we have left the site of freedom and moved even more deeply into captivity, not to a community, but to the imagined community of the master's children, carrying out his deepest desire – to create new masters.

My goal with *After Whiteness* was to offer a way forward for theological education and western education that would mean that we would not need to bequeath to future generations a trail of tears in becoming educated, especially in theological education. That trail of tears reaches from us to them and marks a suffering unearned, unnecessary, and in constant denial of redemption. Yet more tragically, it refuses the desire of God for us to come and reason together. I am thankful that these three scholars were able to see in this book that desire and offer their important reasons why we need to sense more deeply what God wants in theological education – for us to want one another.

Book Forum: Robyn Whitaker's *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*¹

An Invaluable Resource

Liz Boase

From the moment I heard/read the title of Robyn Whitaker's book on interpreting the Bible, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*, I looked forward to reading it. My initial response was playful intrigue – I loved the title and was curious about where Whitaker would position her argument. I know Robyn as a colleague and fellow biblical scholar, and we share interpretive sensibilities. So, my curiosity was piqued – what was she thinking in choosing this title, and where would the book take its readers?

I was right to be intrigued, and I have enjoyed the read. This short volume (189 pages) is a careful and astute exploration of the need for informed biblical interpretation.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture is addressed to a range of audiences. One of the gifts of this book is the combination of deep scholarly learning, clear and approachable writing and personal experience. Whitaker introduces the volume with a memory of receiving an NIV bible as a teenager, with the words of Jesus highlighted in red, the inside cover inscribed with "May you have the wisdom to discern the kernel from the chaff" (11). Interwoven through the book are traces of Whitaker's journey from an earnest conservative, evangelical teenager determined to read the Bible literally (her self-description) to a mature scholar who takes the Bible seriously but not literally. Whitaker's journey of discovery grounds the argument built across the chapters. The Bible was and remains the starting point for Whitaker in her scholarship, teaching and preaching. Because of this commitment, Whitaker raises and responds to three core questions through which she challenges her readers to examine their assumptions about the Bible: "What is the Bible? What do we expect from it? And how do we best read and interpret it?" (p. 11).

The first chapter, "What is the Bible?" sets the foundations and the tone for what follows. Whitaker suggests at least two ways of responding to the question. The first is the scholarly, literary, and historical response, while the second is the enduring significance of the Bible for people of faith with a focus on the Christian community. Throughout the book, Whitaker explores an interpretive position true to contemporary scholarly insights and the significance of these insights for the church. What emerges is an interpretive framework in which both scholarship and the voice of faith are mutual contributors.

¹ Robyn Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023)

The following six chapters can be broadly divided into two groups; chapters 2 to 5 explore the Biblical case about the necessity of interpretation, with chapters 6 and 7 focussing on what Whitaker refers to as the hermeneutic of love.

Chapter 2, “Bible Interpreting Bible”, sets out the conditions requiring biblical interpretation, including the linguistic, contextual, and historical distance between the biblical world and our own. The chapter emphasises that there is no such thing as a neutral reader. Our worldview and life experience will inevitably influence how we read the Bible. For those who have done introductory biblical studies, there is little to surprise in the opening of the chapter (17-29); however, Whitaker’s insistence on beginning with the Bible starts to bear fruit in the remainder. Whitaker identifies places where the Bible itself refers to biblical interpretation, which illustrates that even before the Christian Bible became a (more or less) fixed entity, there was an awareness of the need for interpretation and that the community played an essential role in discerning faithful interpretation.

Chapters 3-5 dig deeper into Biblical evidence supporting interpretative practices. Chapter 3 delves into examples that show the multifaceted nature of the Bible. The different renditions of creation accounts in Genesis (two accounts), Job, Psalms and Isaiah, and places where different perspectives about the same issue coexist (redemption for enemies, marriage to foreign wives). Chapter 4 explores “Scripture Rewriting Scripture”, examples where stories are retold or updated to keep the traditions alive and relevant for each new generation or changing context. Whitaker suggests that “rewriting the Bible affirms the Bible, keeping it alive and relevant” and that Scripture models an ongoing conversation between God and God’s people as they grapple with (interpret) their stories of faith across time.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Jesus as Interpreter.” Whitaker demonstrates that Jesus was an active interpreter of the Scriptures, which, for him, were a version of what is now called the Old Testament. As Jesus taught his followers and entered into disputes with his contemporaries, he was a constant interpreter of Scripture. Whitaker refuses to force Jesus into predetermined categories, showing that the portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels reveal a complex response to Scripture, sometimes radically reinterpreting it and at other times calling for a “deeper and more demanding allegiance” to Torah/law (116). She notes that:

Amid this complexity, a picture emerges of a Jesus who was considered an authoritative teacher of the Bible, someone who frequently appealed to the Scriptures in his teaching and who assumed the Scripture speak to the present with authority and relevance. Jesus as interpreter, we shall see, is a Jesus who prioritizes people, mercy, and compassion (116).

The conclusion of chapter 5 moves the reader to the heart of this book, what Whitaker refers to as the hermeneutic (interpretive lens) of love. Based on Jesus’ use of Scripture in the Gospels, she suggests Jesus modelled an “ethic of love” and an “attitude of mercy” (135), which leads to a list of nine attitudes through which we might imitate Jesus’ approach to Scripture; deep knowledge of the Old Testament, approach reading and interpreting with prayer, expect Scripture to speak, an attitude of openness, expect to have to interpret, prioritize people over rules or ritual, look to Bible to help to loving those who are different, interpret with integrity and act with compassion (135).

The final two chapters continue to build the case that an ethic of love should shape contemporary interpretation. Chapter 6 begins with an illustration that brings to the fore perhaps the most contentious interpretive issue of our age, the use of the Bible and the church's response to LGBTIQ+ people. It is essential to assert, though, that *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture* is not written to make a case about inclusivity but to argue for an interpretive posture that takes the Bible seriously. It is in exploring what the Bible reveals about the need to interpret Scripture in conversation with the issues of the day, a posture that Jesus himself took, that Whitaker asserts the centrality of love. She writes that interpreting faithfully begins with "a core theological assumption that God embodies loving-kindness and wants us to do the same" and declares that "If I'm erring in that interpretation" (ie loving and affirming LGBTIQ+ people) "I am erring on the side of love" (144).

In the final chapter, Whitaker leaves the reader with two key questions that can be asked of any biblical passage: "1. How does this interpretation lead me to love God more? 2. How does this interpretation lead me to love my neighbor more?" (167). As she has done in previous chapters, Whitaker illustrates her point with Scriptural reading, in this case the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Interpretations of this passage are contested (172), and Whitaker takes her readers through a process of reading with compassion, of doing no harm, of reading in our contexts, of prioritizing people over institutions, rituals or laws, and exploring the question of how the passage might help us to love God more (172-176). She summarises the ethic of love of God and love of neighbor in her final words: "This, the greatest of commandments, is also the hermeneutical key. If our interpretation does not lead to love, we have, frankly, missed the point" (178).

It is hard to find fault in this interpretive lens. And yet, of course, some will. No one book will address all questions about the nature of Scripture and the place of interpretation in the life of the church. For those who have questions about the Bible, or who are struggling to reconcile the uncomfortable, complex, or contradictory parts of the Bible, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture* offers a wealth of insights. The combination of Whitaker's personal voice, scholarly insights and clarity of expression makes this a valuable contribution. Congregational leaders looking for material to facilitate Christian education and for small groups to explore, this is an ideal resource.

However, not everyone will be convinced of Whitaker's argument. As Whitaker herself notes, how one person understands the best way to love may be different to another's (139). Debates over gender and sexuality, and about other hot topics that have dominated discourse in the Uniting Church and in the wider Christian community will continue, and readings of Scripture will remain at the centre of many of these debates. It would be a sad indictment, however, if Whitaker's insights were dismissed because of a declared theological position that the church is currently at odds about.

Whitaker's aim is not to resolve debate. She sets out an approach to biblical interpretation that takes the Bible seriously by looking to the Bible itself as the beginning point. Her approach to Scripture and its interpretation is shaped by her teen years immersed in evangelical Christianity, which places the Bible at its centre, and the realization of a vocation as Biblical scholar and teacher. While her understanding of the Bible and its interpretation has changed over time, expanded and honed by academic rigor and scholarship, what remains constant for Whitaker is the centrality of the Bible as her starting point. Whitaker demonstrates that for the Biblical writers and for the Christian community today, interpretation is a living

tradition, flexible and adaptable, and, at its best, grounded in an ethic of love and compassion rather than doctrine and dogma. That Whitaker is one of Australia's leading scholars and public theologians is a rich testimony to the importance of her work.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture is not a book which aims to tear down treasured beliefs about the nature of the Bible and its place in the life of faith. Rather, in taking the Bible seriously and looking to the Bible for clues about interpretation, Whitaker enables the reader to look to their own assumptions about the nature and function of Scripture and to think through what it means to interpret faithfully when guided by an ethic of love. I hope that this highly accessible book is itself taken seriously as it opens rich opportunities for rigorous, respectful, and, I pray, love-shaped teaching, preaching and learning in the life of the church and in our communities.

Considering what the Bible Is and Is Not

Ali Robinson

In discussions on ethics and Christian conduct, it is not uncommon to hear the phrase “the Bible says” (e.g., “The Bible says women should be silent”). Such statements are often made without acknowledging the inherent biases that accompany one's understanding of scripture or the complexity of biblical interpretation itself. These matters can feel particularly daunting for those without a formal theological education. This makes the arrival of Whitaker's book most welcome.

Robyn J. Whitaker's *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* helps readers consider what the Bible is – and is not – and the lens through which we understand its texts. Whitaker's initial objective was to see how the Bible “talked about” and “modelled interpretation” within its pages (65). In other words, she set out to understand how the biblical writers themselves exhibit and embody the act of interpretation by demonstrating the many instances where one writer reads, exegetes or adapts another. Through this investigation, Whitaker also underscores that no reading of scripture is truly neutral. Even an attempt to read the Bible in a “plain sense” is, in itself, a form of interpretation (39).

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into seven main chapters. In Chapter 1, Whitaker considers what is meant when referring to “the Bible.” We are alerted to the issues related to the compilation of ancient manuscripts, the translation of biblical languages (13), and the diversity of religious traditions (i.e., Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), each with their own conception of what is meant by “the Bible.” Following this, Whitaker discusses translation problems that have left their mark on our English Bibles (15–18). In her examples, she carefully shows the intricacies surrounding some of the most debated passages (e.g., 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10). Her goal is not to undermine trust in the Bible but to broaden our understanding of why the simplistic phrase “the Bible says...” (8) is inadequate as a claim for invoking biblical authority.

In Chapter 2, *Bible Interpreting Bible*, several examples are given to illustrate the principles of interpretation. For instance, Whitaker discusses how the word “hypocrites” has been misleadingly conflated with “Pharisees” (47–48). She helpfully alerts readers to the significance of context, offering the example of Leviticus adapting

the Babylonian code, “an eye for an eye” (Lev 24:19–20), and demonstrating that interpretation is both natural and necessary for each generation and context (57).

Chapter 3, *Stories That Invite Conversation*, tackles the challenge of handling parts of the Bible appearing to differ or contradict each other. Whitaker invites us to resist the urge to harmonise the Bible in the hope of finding “the real account.” The fact that the Bible has conflicting accounts, which often sit side-by-side (i.e., Gen 1:1–2:4a and Gen 2–3), should inspire confidence to hold our disparate readings of Scripture in tandem. As Whitaker writes, “For Christians who have been told their difference excludes them from the community or who feel constricted by a particular interpretation of what it means to be a “real Christian,” knowing that God’s community has always included a variety of people, perspectives, and experiences can be helpful” (81).

In Chapter 4, *Scripture Rewriting Scripture*, Whitaker explores how biblical writers reinterpret earlier texts. She examines how ancient authors engaged with and reimagined their stories. For instance, the account of David in Samuel and Kings is reworked in 1 Chronicles as the writer speaks of Israel’s monarchy (100). This theme of reinterpretation continues in Chapter 5, *Jesus as Interpreter*, where Whitaker examines Jesus’ use of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. She demonstrates how Jesus contextualised the law while still upholding the authority of Torah (113–15).

Chapter 6, *A Hermeneutic of Love*, traces the history of the iconic notion of loving God and loving neighbour (129). Whitaker looks at this command from Leviticus 19:18b, tracing the concept through Second Temple Judaism to the Gospels, highlighting its sparseness in the Hebrew Bible, and its deliberate emphasis in the New Testament. She points out that this love ethic, seemingly self-evident today, has a specific historical development that many may not have considered (130). Then, in the final chapter, *Reading the Bible for Love*, Whitaker concludes with an appeal to approach the Bible through the lens of love (155). This means reading with “a spirit of generosity toward the views of others both in the text and in the tradition to see what it might provoke in us. The more we do this, the more we learn about what it means to love God and neighbour from the Bible itself” (155).

Whitaker’s inclusion of her personal experiences and perspectives adds a unique dimension to her work. Her anecdotes and humour are engaging and make complex theological discussions more accessible. In the opening chapter (2–6), she offers a candid reflection on her own religious background, a relatable starting point for many readers. Her statement on page 3, “I have learned that it is impossible to read the Bible in a literalistic way, and I now believe we are not meant to. We are meant to take the Bible seriously, not literally,” encapsulates her thoughtful approach to biblical interpretation – respect for the text but a willingness to ask hard questions of it. In a field that can often be polarising, Whitaker’s balanced and thoughtful approach should be the tenor of discussions to come. She steers clear of conspiracy-driven and ideological narratives, instead encouraging readers to think deeply and critically about the Bible’s more ambiguous areas. The tone is inviting rather than confrontational, creating a space to explore and question one’s own beliefs.

Whitaker’s analysis of inerrancy and infallibility (24–29) may present a challenge for those who transfer a strong belief in divine sovereignty directly to the irrefutable authority of the biblical text. I cannot say

whether or not spending more time on these concepts would have ultimately convinced this readership, but the scope of the book does not allow for a deeper assessment of these various debates. Additionally, Whitaker introduces intriguing concepts, such as the distinction between viewing the Bible as a “sacred object” versus seeing it as a “testimony” (21–22, 26, 33), but these ideas are not fully developed. A more thorough exploration of these distinctions could have provided readers from diverse backgrounds with a more comprehensive understanding of her arguments.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture significantly contributes to biblical studies, offering a nuanced and challenging approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible. Whitaker’s blend of scholarship, personal reflection, and critical analysis makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of the Bible and its role in contemporary faith communities. I especially recommend this book to laypeople and believe it should become a core text in theological colleges.

Biblical Interpretation Cannot Change the World

Jameson Ross

I think the aim of Robyn J. Whitaker’s book, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, is to convince readers that serious, loving biblical interpretation can save the world, or at least make the world a better, less hateful place. Before reading the book, I might have believed this to be the case, but it was an implicit, unknown assumption, and probably even more powerful for being so. Reading the book was a gift because I can now say, in contrast to what I take to be Whitaker’s view, I do not believe that better, more informed, more serious, more loving biblical interpretation can save the world. Whitaker’s book helps us get to this place, and it is a good place.

Where in the book, though, is it claimed that biblical interpretation could save the world? It is nowhere stated, as such. It is, though, stated everywhere, established less by assertion and more by demonstration. Whitaker uses various resources – stories, worked examples, academic discussions, etc. – to bring about that conviction. In short, if one wants to be on the right side of contemporary social and political and religious issues, then one would do well to adopt Whitaker’s approach to the biblical text (what it is) and to interpretation (how to read it). Even shorter: If one wants to save the world, one will read the Bible seriously, but not literally.

This conclusion was not, it is important to note, clear to me as I was reading the book. In fact, little was clear to me as I was reading the book. For some of this lack of clarity, I am, no doubt, responsible; I was reading the book alongside far too many other seemingly urgent and important tasks. But some of this lack of clarity is objectively lacking in the book itself. In the spirit of giving the benefit of the doubt, however, I can take responsibility for sixty-five percent of the unclarity; I can be dense. The other thirty-five percent, though, I will put on the book. I found the book to lack clarity with respect to audience, concern, and conceptuality. (This is not meant to be only a cheeky, rhetorical gambit, but is meant to underline the fact that every book and book review is an interpretive affair, one marked by greater and lesser amounts of human subjectivity. We write our books and respond to books as people.)

Who is this book for?

At no point was I clear about the audience for whom Whitaker was writing, a situation which makes both commendation and criticism difficult. Sometimes this book felt like it was a textbook for an introductory class on biblical interpretation. Corroboration for this suggestion is supplied by an occasional sidebar (functioning like a textbox in a textbook, 10, 87, 113, 133), an excursus (19-20), a table (11-13), footnotes throughout, and the comments Whitaker made about her students, maybe some of whom will read this book for a class she teaches on biblical interpretation.

Sometimes, though, it felt like it might be for those frustrated with their Christian experience or community, looking for a more progressive approach to thinking about and reading the Bible. In this memoir-mode, it felt like a volume comparable to one of several books by Peter Enns or Rachel Held Evans (both of whom are mentioned here and there, sometimes in epigraphs, sometimes in footnotes). As readers we were privy to Whitaker's take on her on development as a Christian, watching her work out various points of tension in that process. In this mode, I got the impression that she was employing this primarily to try to help theological students through the often-tricky terrain that is theological education.

Of course, an author writes whatever kind of book they like and for whatever kind of audience they like, and they are also free to creatively blend in whatever way they please. The difficulty lies in the struggle to discern the kind of book one is reading and thus the kind of response one should be making to it. The textbook would be evaluated and commended in one way, while the memoir would be dealt with in other, very different ways. Because I am not sure what kind of book this is and who it is for, I have struggled with how to respond to it, hence the italicised, impressionistic language of feeling above and the attempt to state and criticise its effects rather than its mechanics.

What is this book about?

At no point was I clear about the primary subject matter the book was addressing; I wanted to isolate the main, explicit claims but struggled to do so. I can pin my confusion to a couple features of the book. The first is the sheer range of contemporary issues touched upon throughout the book. I am sure I missed some, but I made a list: patriarchy, sexual abuse, vaccine hesitancy, colonialism, imperialism, crusades, conquests, slavery, racism, feminism, sexuality, gender, abortion, assisted-dying, war, climate-change, science, ordination of women, politics, male headship, and, broadly, inclusion. I want to be on the just and loving team with respect to all these things, but I found that Whitaker's tone and my desire combined to stunt critical reception.

The second feature is a blessing and a curse of the book: the case study. On the one hand, this is necessary, and as such, it is a blessing. It is important to see how the approach described can be worked out, especially in contrast to that against which it is opposed. The case study can be an illustration of a point made discursively elsewhere. I would put the extended case study at the end of the book on 2 Samuel 11 in this category (158-164). On the other hand, the case study or worked example can be a curse because it can smuggle in concerns that are not illustrative of something said elsewhere but can itself serve to advance claims made much more subtly. The examples in the list above fit into this category, and to be specific,

I would put the treatment of “sodomite” in this category (41-42). In a section devoted to word meanings, it is easy to conclude that another word could have illustrated the point being made. Why, then, use this example, an example fraught with so much contemporary angst?

Having been taken in by the similarities between Whitaker’s story and my own, I had a false sense of intimacy with the book. The style was working on me, causing me to want to align myself with views being expressed, feeling myself patted on the back, and, at some points, patting myself on the back in a self-congratulatory fashion. But what was I resonating with? Thinking about the Bible this way? Interpreting the Bible this way? Specific ways of articulating this or that position on such and such an issue? I am not sure.

What is a hermeneutic of love?

At no point was I clear about the meaning of a “hermeneutics of love.” My major point of contention with this is that it seems like a rhetorical flourish rather than a notion that can be clearly explicated and practiced. This does not mean, it must be said, that Whitaker does not provide explication of the concept; she does, in chapters six and seven. There is, though, a fatal flaw in this: most readers of the biblical text would want to claim they are interpreting lovingly, so how does one discern what counts as loving or unloving biblical interpretation? Whitaker is aware of this tension, but she ventures forth to talk about, describe, and display such loving interpretation. I applaud her effort, but I do not see how an intractable difference of this kind, which is fundamentally a matter of discernment, can be resolved. I do not understand how a method for reading the Bible can be deemed compatible with a hermeneutical aspiration. This is, it seems to me, a straightforward category mistake.

With so little clarity, how can I so confidently assert that this was a book about biblical interpretation saving the world, and that insofar as it was about that, that it succeeded only in helping me resist that conviction?

Things clarified when I reread the story of the encounter with “the head of a conservative Christian lobby group” (126). His group was advocating for gay-conversion therapy because, “What is more loving than stopping someone going to hell?” Whitaker writes, “He thought he was being loving in trying to save people from eternal damnation he believes awaits anyone who acts on same-gender attraction.” She continues:

The disagreement between myself and my Christian brother in that hotel lobby was partly about love but mostly about biblical interpretation. We both agreed that following Jesus means living out our faith in tangible ways; we agreed that love involves action, but we disagreed about what kind of action because we disagreed about how to interpret the Bible (127).

If both accounts are construed as loving, then what makes Whitaker’s account distinctive or better suited to adopt? I did not find anything internal to the explicit proposals to commend Whitaker’s approach over the approach of this conservative Christian with whom she disagrees. Whitaker thinks her account is better than his because she is reading the Bible on its own terms. The problem is, of course, that he would claim to have been doing that as well. He sees what he can see, and Whitaker sees what she can see. Descriptively, this is unobjectionably the case. Normatively, Whitaker wants to claim that what he sees is not there to be seen, but she can only claim this because of what she sees, supported by the resources she employs to see in this way.

Complex issues cannot be solved (read: the world cannot be saved) by better biblical interpretation, as if all the bad Bible readers could enrol in a biblical interpretation class that used Whitaker's book at some stage. If that guy learned this method for reading, then he would come to see what she sees, right? I believe that is the basic logic at work in the book, but it is simply not the case that this would happen.

Where does that leave us, then? Are we left in interpretive indeterminacy, locked into a zero-sum game in which my interpretation is better than yours because my interpretive paradigm is better than yours? Yes, I think so. No method can save us. But it is here that Whitaker's most explored and fruitful insight can make a return to help us.

According to Whitaker, one aspect of taking the Bible on its own terms is the recognition that the biblical text is itself constituted by a variety of voices, multiple forms of reading and rereading. These voices and perspectives are never fully reconciled; they sit uncomfortably in conflict alongside one another in the Bible. As with the biblical text, so with us. Every interpretive venture about how to read the Bible, about what the Bible is, about how to read specific texts, about how to engage the Bible for specific contemporary concerns is another piece of the ever-proliferating puzzle about how to understand who we are and what we are doing as Christians. If a hermeneutics of love is called for, I think it would need to be less directed to the biblical text in terms of a methodology (something I remain convinced is not possible) and be more directed to other readers of the Bible with whom we are contemporary, a point Whitaker would surely affirm, but that may have been muted.

Conclusion

Whitaker's book reminds us that biblical interpretation is contested territory, complex off the charts. It is a territory for all of us, not just those who can practice biblical interpretation in specific ways. It leaves room for the multiplicity that is Christianity, a problematic and frustrating multiplicity with which all Christians must live. The book allows us to see that it is itself just one contribution along the lines that I have mentioned above, and as such, it can inform the ways we interpret biblical texts and people, hopefully more rather than less lovingly.

An Asian Australian Reflection on *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*

Paul Dongwon Goh

A Lifegiving Gift for the Church

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. (Basis of Union, Paragraph 11).

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) values biblical scholarship. Along with those of evangelist, prophet, and martyr, the Basis of Union – the foundational document of the UCA – sees the work of scholars and

“scholarly interpreters of Scripture” as a continuing witness to the Church to guide it towards truth and renewal in faith and mission.² A biblical scholar can be a gift to the church, as their scholarship and works can help us discern and participate in the work of God, who is alive and active in the world today. Being both a UCA Minister and a biblical scholar teaching at a Uniting Church theological college, Robyn Whitaker provides a scholarly, well-researched, and accessible book titled *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* for the church to understand why biblical interpretation matters, and what we can learn about interpreting the Bible from the Bible itself and how we best engage it (4). Whitaker hopes this book will be a valuable resource for the church and for those with less familiarity with biblical interpretation. I believe many of us, including theological students and church leaders, would like to thank God for her engaging scholarship, which bridges the gap between academic learning and everyday life experiences of faith.

As someone who has dealt with the challenges of navigating historical-critical scholarship and faith, I deeply resonate with the author’s journey of deconstructing and reconstructing faith through the study of the Bible: “a faith that can embrace the rigor of academic insights but retains an evangelical heart that recognises the way the Holy Spirit continues to speak to God’s people through the Bible” (ix). Throughout the book, she compels us that (re)interpreting the Bible for new times and places is indispensable in discerning how God continues to speak to us through these “diverse, vibrant, living, breathing, wondrous” (166) scriptures. This book is a much-needed gift for the church urging us to reclaim “the Scriptures as a lifegiving, transformative and faith-building gift of God to the Church.”³

“Believing the Bible and living under its Authority”

The UCA regards the Bible as authoritative.⁴ In paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union, UCA members are tasked with “the serious duty of reading the scriptures.” The Bible – “the books of the Old and New Testaments” – is a “unique prophetic and apostolic testimony,” and it is in the Bible that we (the Church) hear the Word of God. We read the Bible to hear God’s Word. The Bible nourishes and regulates the Church’s faith and obedience. In his commentary on it, Davis McCaughey emphasizes the importance of the Bible within the life of the Church: “The Word of God can only be heard if scripture is opened and read, preached from, and meditated upon in the worshiping, witnessing life of the Church.”⁵ Reading this paragraph in the light of its Christological and ecclesiological context in the Basis of Union, Geoff Thompson refers to it as “the hermeneutical primacy of the Church,” highlighting the theological significance of the Bible and the identity of the Bible as the church’s book.⁶ Therefore, the Bible is meant to be read within the church’s active life, rather than merely through private devotional reading or academic abstraction.⁷

² Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal: The Shaping of a New Church*. Revised edition. (Unley, S. Aust.: MediaCom Education Inc, 2016), 148-149.

³ “Reading and Understanding the Bible,” *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 461.

⁴ Davis J. McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne, Victoria: Uniting Church Press, Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1980), 29.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Geoff Thompson, *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 67-68.

⁷ Geoff Thompson, *“In His Own Strange Way”: A Post-Christendom Sort-of Commentary on the Basis of Union* (Unley, SA: MediaCom Education Inc, 2018), 47-48.

In accordance with the Basis of Union, Whitaker is correct in asserting that the authority of the Christian Bible stems from the church community's decision to recognize these specific books as special, unique, trustworthy, and as bearing witness to the Word of God, that is, Jesus (see 32). Nevertheless, "believing the Bible and living under its authority" should not be viewed solely as an individual "choice" (33). Rather, for members of the UCA, it represents a communal commitment and a fundamental aspect of discipleship within the life of worship and witness of the Church.

(Mis)Use of the Bible in the Church

It's important to recognize that simply quoting the Bible doesn't always lead to a true understanding or correct interpretation. The Bible has unfortunately been misused to support actions that go against its intended message. As Whitaker rightly points out, it takes more than just quoting the Bible to truly grasp and live by its principles: "Anyone can quote the Bible, but that does not mean they know it, understand it, or have interpreted it well. After all, even the devil quotes Scripture" (4). Without careful and faithful interpretation of the Bible, it can be misused as a prooftext or to justify unjust systems and ideologies.

The Task Group, formed after the Eighth UCA Assembly in 1997, highlighted the danger of the misuse of the Bible within the Church: "Texts from the Bible are regularly quoted in the Church, but in a time of conflict and confusion they are as likely to be used as weapons in a battle as read as gracious invitation to dwell within the purposes and grace of God."⁸ The Task Group acknowledged that debates about biblical interpretation often lead to division and lack of resolution. They urge the Church to move on beyond the present impasse towards fresh ways of valuing, using, and interpreting the Bible and presented seven compelling recommendations: 1) Reclaiming the Bible by reading the Bible; 2) Reclaiming the Bible in Christian community; 3) Reclaiming the Bible as a conversation partner; 4) Reclaiming the Bible with the help of Biblical scholarship; 5) Reclaiming the Bible from within our particular cultural setting; 6) Reclaiming the Bible in ethical decision-making; 7) Reclaiming the Bible in spirituality.⁹ Whitaker's book epitomizes the spirit and aspirations found in many of those recommendations.

Neither Liberal nor Conservative: "Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms"

Whitaker argues that both liberal (historical-critical) and conservative (literal-fundamentalist) approaches to biblical interpretation have distorted our understanding of the Bible by treating it as a collection of facts, based on Enlightenment ideals. Instead, she advocates for new voices and approaches that challenge existing interpretations in light of gender, power, culture, race, and politics. She sees cultural changes as an opportunity to interpret the Bible for new audiences and contexts, rather than a threat to ecclesial and biblical authority (154).

To interpret the Bible in a way that stays true to the gospel, Whitaker recommends reading the Bible with the understanding that biblical writers themselves used and interpreted their own sacred texts (4). She reveals that nearly 50% of the Bible is made up of rewrites, demonstrating that ancient priests, prophets, scribes,

⁸ "Reading and Understanding the Bible," 448.

⁹ "Reading and Understanding the Bible," 461–474.

Jesus, Paul, and others reinterpreted earlier biblical texts – later declared sacred by the church. They have “adapted, edited, rewritten, and variously interpreted earlier biblical texts in order to help the Bible speak in new contexts and situation” (127). This approach models how we can view the Bible as a conversation partner between God’s people then and now, a living God, and contemporary contexts and new questions. This “inter-biblical interpretation is flexible, adaptable, and highly contextual” (5), keeping the Bible alive and relevant for each new generation and context (102). The crux of the matter is faithfully interpreting the Bible and determining the ethical and theological principles that should guide our interpretations (129).

Only One Universal Hermeneutical Norm?

Based on her understanding of Jesus and the authors of the New Testament as interpreters of the Old Testament, Whitaker proposes “a hermeneutic of love” as a guiding ethic that “transcends any particular context or time” and “exemplifies the very nature of the God Christians worship”: love of God and love of neighbour (129). This hermeneutical principle is not new. It has been commonly claimed by Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley. For the Reformers, she insists, the goal of Scripture is to produce more love for God and God’s creation (143). In conclusion, she calls for the reading the Bible for love in today’s world with two key questions (155):

- i* How does this interpretation lead me to love God more?
- ii* How does this interpretation lead me to love my neighbour more?

When we turn our attention to marginalized groups such as First Nations People and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse People (CALD) in Australia, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in America, as well as LGBTQ+ individuals globally, what does a hermeneutic of love signify for them? What if they have different interpretations and visions of ‘love? Who has the right to define ‘love’? We also need to consider how this would apply to those whose neighbours follow different religions or hold no religion.¹⁰ Do we have the right to expect the same hermeneutical norm and interpreting strategies to apply universally, without accounting for differences in gender, race, class, culture, language, and politics?¹¹

Reading the Bible in a Multicultural and Multifaith Context: An Asian View

In a multicultural and multifaith Australia, it’s crucial to consider how to interpret the Bible with CALD neighbours from the Majority World, including Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. The questions shaping Western discussions about the Bible and its interpretative strategies are not the same as those relevant to their communities. The approaches to the Bible and theology from the Majority World and minority communities are diverse, not uniform.

¹⁰ Almost 40 per cent (38.9 per cent) of Australia’s population reported having no religion in the 2021 Census, an increase from 30 per cent (30.1 per cent) in 2016 and 22 per cent (22.3 per cent) in 2011. Australian Bureau of Statistics (27 June 2022), 2021 Census shows changes in Australia’s religious diversity, ABS Website, accessed 9 September 2024.

¹¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Growing up in a multi-religious Asian society has convinced me that biblical interpretation needs to be flexible and adaptable to cultural and religious diversity. Asia, as a multicultural and multireligious continent, boasts a rich tapestry of religious texts from major traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism. These texts are revered as sacred scripture (*Gyung* in Korean; *Ching* in Chinese), and their understanding is deemed essential. Consequently, Asia has a profound tradition of scriptural interpretation. Within each religious tradition, followers diligently study their texts with specific aims. For instance, in the Taoist tradition, individuals aspire to master their scriptures, while in the Confucian tradition, scholars seek to emulate the Sage through the study of their scriptures and self-cultivation. Similarly, within the Buddhist tradition, monks and adherents endeavour to achieve Buddhahood by meditating and chanting their scriptures. For them, scripture is not merely a source of knowledge, but a pathway to enlightenment and salvation. In the realm of Asian Christianity, the goal of reading the Bible may be to emulate the life and teaching of Jesus as a living embodiment of the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). Yet, as asserted by Kwok Pui-Lan and other Asian biblical scholars and theologians, it is imperative to acknowledge the diverse nature of interpretation and recognize that a singular norm cannot be universally applied across different cultures and communities.¹² In a multicultural and multifaith context, it is important to adopt diverse and intercultural hermeneutical principles. This approach to interpreting the Bible can lead us to love our multicultural and multifaith neighbours more deeply, as suggested by Whitaker's hermeneutical key: love of God and love of neighbour.

Contestation and Love: biblical interpretation remains complex

Robyn J. Whitaker

How we interpret the Bible really matters. In fact, it may be the single most significant and divisive issue for contemporary Christianity.

I recently attended the largest global meeting of biblical scholars in the world – the *Society of Biblical Literature* annual meeting. Thousands of people gather at this conference, which itself embodies the sharp divisions of global Christianity and biblical scholarship. Sessions range from the theological to progressive to atheist, from patriarchal to feminist, colonial and postcolonial, and across a cultural spectrum (although Western views still dominate). Evangelicals who claim the inerrancy of Scripture meet separately beforehand and some say they do not feel safe in the main conference due to the disparaging language used by scholars towards those of such faith. I myself witnessed such language on many occasions – a dismissiveness and even mockery of “those” people with their “naïve” theological views. And while I think there is no place for such derision, I can also see that it sometimes comes from people who have themselves felt marginalised and oppressed by the biblical interpretation of people from more conservative Christian churches. This is the nature of global biblical studies, one that Australian churches reflect in their own embattled way.

My book, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, was not an attempt to solve all these problems, but it was an attempt to write something accessible for people who might never go to

¹² Pui-lan, Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

seminary but wanted to think a bit more deeply about what the Bible is and how we interpret it faithfully and ethically in the modern world. What the Bible *is* and how it works is, I think, central to interpretive debates. Contra Jameson Ross' claim, my proposals for biblical interpretation are not oriented to "saving the world". That is up to God. I do, however, think we Christians can embody more loving communities and contribute to the common good if our biblical interpretation has love as one of its goals. Where Ross and I find agreement is in his observation that such a hermeneutic (if one accepts it) would do well if "directed to other readers of the Bible with whom we are contemporary". The increasing polarisation within Christianity, particularly in relation to biblical interpretation, is something to be lamented.

I wonder if Jameson Ross and I model the aforementioned ecclesial divide in our different ways of engaging the issues. He wonders about my audience, my purpose, and why I chose examples "fraught with so much contemporary angst" (e.g. "sodomite" language). The answer to the latter is easy – precisely because they are fraught. Boase has captured my intention well when she writes the book "is not written to make a case for inclusivity but to argue for an interpretive posture that takes the Bible seriously". Yet, to write a book about biblical interpretation and not deal with at least some of the most contested texts seemed to lack both integrity and courage. I was aware in doing so, I would lose some readers early on who were unprepared to have their beliefs about such matters challenged, even by the Bible.

The book gives a brief overview of theologically-loaded words like "inerrancy" and "infallibility". Ali Robinson wonders whether more time on these concepts would have helped. It is something I wondered about too and ultimately resisted, as there are volumes already in existence on such things should people be interested. But I take the point that spending a little more time on other "intriguing concepts" (her words) like thinking of the Bible as "testimony" as opposed to "sacred object" might have been useful for readers.

I appreciated Paul Goh's framing of his response within a Uniting Church theology of the Bible. While I wrote the book for a wider audience, I am formed by the Uniting Church's theological traditions and find the way the Basis of Union speaks about the Bible to be both profound and nuanced. It offers a vision of a certain kind of biblically literate and engaged church that remains a lofty goal worth striving for. I agree with Goh's emphasis on the communal commitment, as church, to living under the authority of the Bible and recognise that in writing personally, the personal or individual may have been over-emphasised. I would, however, maintain that while any Christian acts as part of a community there is still a need for personal commitment at an individual level.

Offering "an Asian view," Goh challenges the idea that a hermeneutic of love can be universal and asks whether we can expect the same hermeneutical norm for those of various genders, cultures, and even those of different religions. A reminder that Western approaches continue to dominate biblical studies is crucial. As a white woman it is too easy for me to stay within Western ways of thinking: learning to be self-critical, as well as intentional and committed to disrupt Western thinking, remains a personal challenge. I think, however, that Goh and I are not as far apart as he might think. He argues for diversity and flexibility, not uniformity – precisely what I aim to support in showing how the Bible itself reflects a range of cultural and contextual interpretive approaches. If we in the West can better acknowledge the cultural and theological diversity within the Bible, then perhaps we might be better able to recognise the ongoing importance

of such diversity in the modern church: diversity that is not just 'important' but, according to Christian confession, reflects the very nature of God.

I did not address other religious traditions in my book, but Goh raises this multi-religious question. The 'hermeneutic of love' I propose is inherently biblical and therefore takes on the particularity of the God revealed in Jewish and Christian traditions. It is love as defined by the self-giving Christ of the incarnation and a God who calls, liberates and enters into a covenant with God's people. In this sense I think it *is* a universal principle but *only* for those who would call themselves Christian. I do not, however, assume that such a hermeneutic applies to the sacred texts of other traditions who should rightly be guided by their own texts, values, and understandings of divine revelation. Where Goh and I agree is in recognising that love, biblically defined, is still culturally expressed and therefore diverse in its forms and application.

Deconstruction is far easier to do than reconstruction, yet I wanted to attempt to offer something for Christians who desired a hook, guide, or principle to work with. As I argue in the book, love of God and neighbour is presented as the hook on which "hang all the law and prophets" within the Bible itself (Matt 22: 40).

What love looks like in hermeneutical application or any other practice is, of course tricky, as Liz Boase, Ali Robinson, and Jameson Ross point out in various ways in their reviews. As Boase writes, "how one person understands the best way to love may be different to another's." I was aware when researching and writing the chapters that attempt to offer an interpretive ethic for the modern world, that love was complicated. If we think of parental love as an example, we can note how radically different love can look in different cultures and even within the one culture a decade or two apart. To give due weight to the philosophical and theological writings on love or the cultural nuances of human love would have needed many more chapters or perhaps a whole other book. So, I recognise, that what I have offered is a starting place and one that requires both further investigation and will be embodied differently by different communities. My hope is that the idea is picked up and developed in practise.

I think that in writing about love I could have made two things clearer. Firstly, that, at minimum, love does not harm. In the example I use of a colleague and I disagreeing about sexuality and whether people go to hell, I did want to make a distinction between causing immediate harm to people (in forcing, for example, LGBTQI+ "conversion" practices) and potential divine harms. For humans to harm people because we are worried about possible future divine judgment seems both arrogant and counterintuitive to me: we harm to prevent God's assumed harm?

Secondly, love for Christians should primarily be defined by the love of God as revealed in the Bible. It is the nature of love embodied by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. It is love based on a divine love that is itself expansive and embracing of difference, as I argue. I do not think I explicitly said this in the book and as I have thought about it further this is the theological emphasis I would want to make and the starting place for thinking further about love. This does not make it simpler by any means. But does point us back to the One who is the Source of love.

Lastly, I want to clarify that a 'hermeneutic of love' is not a method *per se*. I refer to a range of methods in the book, including scholarly methods that I think can and should be employed in seeking to interpret

these ancient, sacred texts faithfully and ethically. Rather, love is an interpretive “lens” or ethic (I also call it a ‘principle’ at points) – one perhaps best thought of as a posture towards the text *and* towards our contemporary neighbours.

All this means I am willing to say, perhaps controversially and even offensively to some, that there are interpretations of Scripture that are theologically invalid. Invalid because using the Bible to harm other humans, or nature itself, stands in contradiction to the loving God revealed therein. (There are of course interpretations that are invalid on linguistic or historical grounds too – we cannot make the text mean whatever we like).

I would like to end by thanking the reviewers for their thoughtful and critical engagement with *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* and the journal for inviting these reviews and response. Biblical interpretation remains one of the most contested and emotive areas within global Christianity. It is an honour to have esteemed colleagues engage in one’s work in such a way and I hope the conversation may continue in other forums.



Review

BERESFORD, ANNA *Before You Were Born, I Anointed You: Uncovering Scripture's "Hidden" Female Prophets* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022 (ISBN: 9781666737486)

In *Before You Were Born, I Anointed You*, Anna Beresford searches the gaps of biblical stories, to focus on characters who may be found at the periphery of interpretation and preaching. Her aim is to expand the definition of the biblical prophet so as to recast silenced, unnamed, unidentified women characters in this role. In widening the scope of prophetic characters in the Bible, Beresford makes connections to contemporary questions of injustice and compassion, asking “who (or what) are the hidden prophets of our time?” (160). The book is aimed at a non-academic, Christian audience and would be engaging for preachers and for Christians who hold curiosity towards the biblical texts.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 provide background for the later analysis of women characters as prophets. There are two foundational claims in these introductory chapters. The first is that “a distinction between *being* a prophet and *acting* in a prophetic manner cannot be maintained” (32, emphasis added). To support this, Beresford points to the varied tasks undertaken by biblical prophets and the diverse contexts of their work. Noting that named prophets, male and female, act differently according to both needs and constraints within their context, she argues that other characters who act similarly are also *acting* prophetically, and thus *being* prophets.

Beresford's second foundational claim is that men and women communicate differently. She draws on the work of linguist Deborah Tannen to argue that men communicate primarily to report information and maintain status, whereas women focus on the

relational aspects of communication (38). While influential, Tannen's arguments are controversial and continue to be debated in linguistics, gender studies, and psychology. Beresford's central point, however, is that patriarchy impacts the portrayal and identification of women as prophets in the biblical texts, both in the context of composition and the subsequent interpretation of these stories. The focus on modes of communication is Beresford's method of grappling with the question of why even named women prophets – such as Huldah – remain relatively unknown within Christian communities. Having been trained to identify prophets according to the stereotype of wild men speaking wild words and enacting bizarre rituals, readers are also trained to miss other forms of prophetic action ‘hidden’ in the texts.

Chapter 1 outlines the multiple roles and portrayals of male prophets in the Hebrew Bible, ultimately endorsing Walter Bruggemann's concept of prophetic imagination. That is, Beresford characterises prophets as those who critique injustice and invite reimagination of an equitable social framework (15). Chapter 2 argues that such critique and invitation often occur beyond words, in embodied symbolic actions – enacted parables – intended to make a theological point. Chapter 3 then outlines prophetic characteristic of the women explicitly identified as prophets in the biblical texts (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, Isaiah's wife, Anna, and Philipp's daughters) and in Jewish tradition (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Sarah, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther). Beresford argues that the form of prophetic action engaged by these women is different to those of the Bible's male prophets so that their leadership is minimised and they tend to act outside institutional power. They show resolve from a position of vulnerability with Hannah, for

example, correcting Samuel who criticises her prayers and Sarah embodying an enacted parable, a witness to God's reimagination as she conceives and bears Isaac in her older years. Drawing on Tannen, Beresford argues their prophetic style is relational.

The prophetic styles of identified female prophets is then used to establish other Hebrew Bible women in the prophetic role (Ch 4). Beresford identifies the 'trickster' – a well-known character type in the Hebrew Bible – and the 'dismissed' as prophetic roles. She argues that Tamar, Ruth and Naomi, Shiprah and Puah, and Judith are prophets who critique the constraints imposed on them and invite "God's plans" through trickery and subversion of societal norms and expectations (56). In this way, in patriarchal settings, they forced the men around them to live according to "their covenantal responsibilities" (58). Alongside these tricksters, dismissed women, such as Hagar, bear prophetic witness to God's seeing and valuing what others have discarded (68). The dispossessed wailing women in Ezekiel and Jeremiah are retold as "God's oracles," who lead prayer and lament, speaking God's words amidst community trauma (70).

A shift takes place in Chapter 5, moving from the Old Testament to focus on New Testament characters. The second half of the book (Chs 5–9) offers more sustained analysis of five characters: the generous widow (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4); the forgiven woman (Luke 7:36–50), the woman with seven husbands (Luke 20:27–44), the woman caught in adultery (John 7:55–8:11), and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15: 21–29). Each is recast as a prophet through reading her stories as enacted parable. That is, Beresford suggests each woman becomes a kind of oracle as she embodies a truth of God's reign in the narrative and confronts both other characters and her readers with this incarnated prophetic message. The in-depth attention given to these characters is the highlight of the book. Beresford examines the context of each narrative, the traditional

interpretations associated with each character, the insights of feminist thinking, and the story as enacted parable including each woman's interaction with Jesus. She claims a unique prophetic identity for each so that the woman who anoints Jesus, for example, embodies the repentance spoken of by John the Baptist, thus preparing the way for Christ (96–97). Similarly, the Canaanite woman takes on the mantle of confrontational prophet, who shocks even Jesus, drawing attention to the expansiveness of God's table (154–55).

Before You Were Born, I Anointed You is an innovative exploration of woman characters in the Bible and the role of prophets. This book weaves through critique of the ways in which interpretation carried out by predominantly "middle-class, middle-aged, white male" limits understanding of the biblical texts. It offers creative, alternative reading strategies to uncover and see what has been 'hidden,' with the aim of interpretations that will be liberative. The book is grounded in prior scholarly research but, given its focus on characters who have been minimised, I was surprised by some omissions in its bibliography (for example, Wil Gafney's, 2008, *Daughters of Miriam*). The conclusion mirrors the prophetic call for transformed community, inviting readers to pick up where Beresford has left off in interpreting texts and contexts. Her recast prophetic women calling readers "to see our own prophets, judge what is we need to do, and then, in conjunction with our 'denied ones,' act to create a society based on justice, compassion, and equity" (162). Stepping, perhaps, into prophetic voice herself, Beresford concludes: "Will we?" (162).

Rebecca Lindsay



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Uniting Church Studies is a fully-refereed, multidisciplinary journal focused on a specific subject – the Uniting Church in Australia. The journal aims to promote scholarly reflection and understanding. It does so by means of a dialogue: between the academic and the practitioner; between church and society in Australia, and between the Uniting Church in Australia and other Uniting and United Churches throughout the World.

Uniting Church Studies is published twice yearly (June, December) by United Theological College, 16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151.
Phone: 61-2-8838 8927; Facsimile: 61-2-9683 6617.

Uniting Church Studies website: www.utc.edu.au/uniting-church-studies
The website contains a subscription form, sample articles, letters to the Editor, etc.

Subscription requests and enquiries should be addressed:

Subscriptions Editor

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United Theological College,

16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151.

Email: utc@nsw.uca.org.au

Make cheques and credit card payments to 'Uniting Church Studies'.

Personal subscription: \$45.00 (includes postage within Australia)

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For places outside Airmail (including airmail):

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Uniting Church Studies is indexed in the *Australasian Religion Index*; *Religion Index One*. Periodicals, the *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*, *Religion Indexes*: RIO/RIT/IBRR 1975- on CD-ROM, and the *ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606, Email: atla@atla.com Web: www.atla.com

CONTENTS

5 EDITORIAL

THEMED PAPERS: THE PREAMBLE – FIFTEEN YEARS ON

- 7 The Preamble Fifteen Years On
Chris Budden
- 15 A Conversation between Ken Sumner and Chris Budden
- 19 Kungan kaldowinyeri: listening to creation and to story on Kykarak Ngarrindjeri Yarluiwe Ruew
Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan
- 31 Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: between celebration and critique
Rebecca Lindsay
- 43 In One Breath: partaking in the communion of the Spirit and Creation
Toar Hutagalung
- 53 Reconciliation and the Framing of the Revised Preamble
John Evans
- 63 "Created and Sustained by the Triune God": a pivotal faith confession of the Preamble
Sean Gilbert

UNITED AND UNITING CHURCHES

- 71 The Afternoon of the United Reformed Church
Susan Durber

REFLECTIONS AND PROVOCATIONS

- 81 Revisiting the Land, Finding Country
Geoffrey Lilburne

BOOK FORUMS

- 91 WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS' *AFTER WHITENESS: AN EDUCATION IN BELONGING*
Reading *After Whiteness* in Australia: a response to generosity
Willie James Jennings
- 97 ROBYN WHITAKER'S *EVEN THE DEVIL QUOTES SCRIPTURE: READING THE BIBLE ON ITS OWN TERMS*
An Invaluable Resource
Liz Boase
- 100 Considering What the Bible Is and Is Not
Ali Robinson
- 102 Biblical Interpretation Cannot Change the World
Jameson Ross
- 105 An Asian Australian Reflection on *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*
Paul Dongwon Goh
- 109 Contestation and Love: biblical interpretation remains complex
Robyn Whitaker

REVIEWS

- 113 Anna Beresford, *Before You Were Born, I Anointed You: Uncovering Scripture's "Hidden" Female Prophets*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022
Rebecca Lindsay

115 CONTRIBUTORS

118 ABOUT UNITING CHURCH STUDIES