

The Challenges of our Collective Trauma, Political Action and Institutional Religion

Mind, Body, Soul: An Integrated Approach to Trauma
10th Annual Conference:
Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

Hotel Grand Chancellor
Hobart
1 April 2003

Opening Plenary

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Your Excellency the Governor, Mr President, Dr Carter, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for your welcome. You will appreciate that I am here - a fish out of water, a mainlander in Tasmania, a priest and lawyer amongst health professionals. A Jesuit lawyer delivering the opening plenary address at a Traumatic Stress Conference seems a sophisticated trick for April Fool's Day. My perception of psychiatrists and psychologists who work in the area of traumatic stress studies is that you as a group have little sympathy for institutional religion, little faith in the law, little interest in politics, and an abiding suspicion about the interface between psychological well-being and spirituality. This perception may be an unwarranted prejudice - disproved by your according me the signal honour of delivering your opening plenary address on Mind, Body, Soul - an Integrated approach to trauma.

John Raftery Vice President of your Australasian Society wrote: "I am interested in the society [ASTSS] developing broad frameworks and encouraging social action and healthy public policy that will prevent some of the trauma perpetrated on people in many different guises." He also wrote: "The Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies has taken a very public stance on the treatment of detainees and their consequent mental health." Given my singular inexperience and lack of knowledge about traumatic stress, it will be best if I confine my remarks and my challenges to areas with which I am more conversant. Given your desire these days to investigate an integration of mind, body and soul in your treatment and study of trauma, I want to put before you three challenges, without presuming to provide the answers:

1. Should we be more concerned about the collective trauma caused to members of the body politic when our political leaders have led us on paths we would not choose?
2. Should we be more committed to political action and political analysis regarding the situations confronting groups of clients suffering traumatic stress?
3. Should we be more inquiring and more supportive of those persons suffering traumatic stress who find sustenance, hope and consolation in their adherence to institutional religion?

Challenge One: Collective Trauma and Stress in a Moment of Great Change

The present state of our world with the war in Iraq, with Australia being a member of the Coalition of the Willing, provides immediate challenges to us who seek a harmony of mind, body and soul. Each of us is living in a social matrix where relationships are easily fractured. Our world of meaning is also fractured. The individual's capacity for finding a stillpoint, their centredness and sense of other-directedness is often uncertain, ungrounded or non-existent.

In Washington and Baghdad, political leaders are invoking the name "God" as if their actions are pre-ordained and justified. Such utterances confirm the prejudices of humanitarian sceptics and call religious persons to a deeper reflectiveness about the relationship between divine presence and human action.

Just 14 years since the end of the Cold War and 18 months since the destruction of the World Trade Centre, we are only beginning to find ways for building and keeping the peace in a New World order. After 8 years of the Clinton presidency, this is the first time that the Republican Hawks have been in the ascendancy in Washington since the first Gulf War. These are very early days in the shaping of the New World order and institutions. There has been no equivalent moment since 1945. Back then, Australia had an unequivocal commitment to multilateralism and diplomacy.

Sadly, Australia has been party to a rash new theory based on militarism and unilateralism. War is no longer the last resort. The UN is no longer the arbiter of justified force in the absence of direct aggression on a member state. Compelling evidence of threat and overwhelming prospect of better outcomes are no longer necessary preconditions for war when the national interest of the world's only superpower is equated with the common good of all. We need to discern new paths to peace honouring the ancient humane principle that the child on the Baghdad school bus and the woman in the Nauru detention centre be accorded the same dignity and place in the balance of events as the child on the Rose Bay School Bus and the woman in the Toorak shopping centre. There can be no peace while the innocent, powerless Other is sacrificed for the sake of those privileged to be nationals or loved ones of the powerful.

Though there has been spirited debate and cabinet resignations in the UK because of Mr Blair's ready membership of the Coalition of the Willing, Canberra compliance with prime ministerial directives has been complete. It was very troubling to hear the mixed messages from John Howard and Tony Abbott about the increased risks of terrorism to Australian citizens. Abbott, the Leader of the Government in the House, told Parliament, "There is the increased risk of terrorist attack here in Australia". Next day, Howard told ABC Radio, " We haven't received any intelligence in recent times suggesting that there should be an increase in the level of security or threat alert." Regardless of who is right, their contradictory statements provided incontrovertible evidence that there has been minimal debate, discussion and discernment within our Cabinet and political party processes prior to making a commitment to war in such novel political circumstances. Even more troubling that such a commitment can be made when all service chiefs who held the key command positions during the first Gulf War have questioned the wisdom of Australia's course and when all key religious leaders have impugned the morality of this course of action. The Army's General Peter Gration has reconfirmed, "My fundamental judgment that it's wrong remains." Before the war began, he said, "I have strong objections to the coming war

as both unnecessary and likely to produce unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences. The real threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction is much exaggerated and that threat can continue to be contained and deterred." The Air Force's Ray Funnell (who continues to serve on the government's Immigration Detention Advisory Group) said, "It's strategic stupidity on a monumental scale." He said the rationale for war was "weak" and the timing "inappropriate". The Navy's Admiral Mike Hudson said, "It's almost immoral." The day after President Bush proclaimed war, Hudson said, "I am deeply concerned that the aggressive manner of the United States, coercing others to join them in the coalition of the willing could irreparably damage the unity of the UN."

Meeting as an Australasian conference these days, you will inevitably discuss the war over drinks, meals and intervals. New Zealand and Australia are very similar societies. But as your New Zealand delegates will tell you, regardless of their party political affiliation, it would be unthinkable for New Zealand to have joined this coalition of the willing. Australia is one of only three countries in the world that was anxious to force the pace for a New World order, ahead of the pack and ahead of Europe. Unthinkable for New Zealand, because the New Zealanders have made a series of incremental decisions over the years about the US alliance, nuclear deterrence, and refugees - decisions which are so different from the decisions made by Australia. Each such political decision compounds and shapes the sort of society that we become. I am constantly intrigued that New Zealanders when comparing themselves with Australians trace back so much of their different perspective on national and international issues to the Treaty of Waitangi and its re-emergence. Australians tend to dismiss such a comparison being readily convinced that a just and reconciled nation can be maintained without such a document or process.

The mind, body and soul of every critically reflecting person is troubled by these perplexing developments in our world. Those of us opposed to our nation's involvement in the war feel a deep sense of shame that it has come to this with such little public agitation. We feel powerless and betrayed. Democracy has been reduced to the simplistic prime ministerial declaration to Parliament, "You have a right to protest, to dissent and to register your concern, but direct those protests to the government, to me, not to those who are overseas on our behalf", followed by the contradictory declaration to the protesters who did just that next day outside the Lodge that they were entitled to their opinion while the Prime Minister was entitled to his, with the rider later in the day, "You have a right to protest but you have to understand that the stupidity or otherwise of individual acts of protests will be judged by your fellow Australians accordingly". Those who are uncertain about our involvement in the war are besieged by a profound ambiguity. Even some of those supporting the war effort have a regretful righteousness - a sense of powerlessness that we could do no other in the face of evil than to participate in evil, hoping that greater evil could be avoided.

Most troubling for us as we watch the scenes of bombed out Baghdad markets hit by smart bombs fired by fallible pilots under direction of righteous politicians is the moral bankruptcy of arguments dressed in the guise of national interest. It is said to be in our national interest that these children and shoppers die as collateral damage in a campaign to make our market places safer now and in the future.

Over 4,000 Iraqis have arrived in Australia since 1999 by boat, without visas, seeking protection from persecution. 97% of them have been found to be refugees deserving our protection. 100% of them, whether they be adults or children, whatever the trauma they have fled, have been held in detention for months on end while their claims were processed. Those who have set out by boat from Indonesia seeking asylum since Tampa have been forcibly transported to Pacific locations. Iraqi women and children are still being held in detention in Nauru while their fathers and husbands are living lawfully in Australia as refugees. Our government which has transported them to such remote detention is now party to the bombing of their relatives in Baghdad, all in the name of Australia's national interest and making the world a safer and better place. Men in grey suits in chauffeur driven limousines in Canberra have judged that some women and children are disposable, as they seek to shape a better world. Many of us feel violated by policies that are so inherently unjust, discriminatory and driven by the politics of fear, punishment and demonisation of the other.

Challenge Two: A Commitment to Political Action and Social Change

I was a first year law student in 1971 when Sir Richard Blackburn gave his decision that Aborigines had no surviving rights to land recognised by the common law. One of my fellow students asked if he could write his annual "Land Law" essay on Aboriginal land rights. He was told he could not, because there was no such thing.

Ten years later, I was junior counsel in the Alwyn Peter case in Queensland. Alwyn was the 15th Aboriginal male in three years to have killed another Aboriginal person on an Aboriginal reserve. In these cases, the victim was usually the accused's woman partner. Senior Counsel, Des Sturgess told the court that the homicide rate was the highest recorded among any ghetto group in the western world. In each case, the accused and the victim were shaped by life on a reserve; and each in their own way was destroyed by it. To be a member of such a group, one did not have to be bad or mad; one had only to be Aboriginal. We defence lawyers had a good win in the Peter case. Having pleaded a defence of diminished responsibility, Alwyn walked free within weeks of the completion of the court proceedings. A woman anthropologist left me with the chilling observation that our forensic win had removed the one inadequate protection for defenceless women in remote Aboriginal communities - the minimal deterrence of the whitefella legal system. Meanwhile I was privileged to receive the last letter that Professor WEH Stanner ever wrote on 4 October 1981, he having been our key anthropological witness:

I am fascinated by the question: how do general ideas about human conduct change so quickly? I can recall about fifty years ago appearing as a witness for the defence in an Aboriginal murder case in Darwin before Wells J. He was notably unimpressed by my arguments but nevertheless reluctantly took them into account in mitigation, while looking round the court as if expecting trouble. Or do I mean 'remarkably quickly'?

Social change does happen and it occurs as a result of individual actions. For the last twenty years, I have been preoccupied with the interrelatedness of Aboriginal dispossession, disadvantage and marginalisation and I have sought to articulate a publicly coherent policy of reconciliation, justice and recognition for indigenous Australians. But I have remained a foreigner to so much of Aboriginal law, culture

and religion. Aboriginal law though now recognised for the first time as part of the law of the land even in the eyes of the colonisers, has had to survive under challenge from its own practitioners who sense both new horizons and shifting foundations in their lives. If it is to maintain its appeal to contemporary practitioners, the Aboriginal religious worldview has to embrace, or at least encounter and accommodate the worldviews of others. Aboriginal cultures are changing, being lost and retrieved at a rate never before experienced. Aboriginal people themselves know best that their system of law is under threat.

The breakdown of the law, the abandonment of myth and ritual, and violence in Aboriginal communities are exacerbated by readily available alcohol, widespread unemployment and concentrations of population which draw together groups from various clans and language groups for administrative convenience and economies of scale. Communities of such size, variety and outside contact never existed previously except for periodic ceremonial, trading and meeting purposes. As permanent societies, they are new creations in the post-contact era resulting from the push and pull of outside service delivery. Such "communities" as they are felicitously, and often erroneously, described, do not and never have had a simple or uniformly acknowledged law, religion, or culture which could provide the basis for a customary dispute resolution structure or process.

In politics as it is played in Australia, there has been a presumption that it is only the stakeholders such as Aborigines, miners and pastoralists who should be heard in the fray of political debate. There is a place for the person who is not a stakeholder, who represents no constituency, who pushes no partisan barrow, who is professionally disinterested in which party is in power, and who is committed to finding a just resolution of conflicting claims holding in right balance the conflicting claims of the stakeholders and finessing the balance between individual rights and the common good or public interest. I am especially grateful to the pastoralist who urged me during the Wik debate to return to my church and say prayers. He clarified my thinking. An issue as complex as Wik could not be left only to the stakeholders. It could not be resolved by prayer alone. There is a place for honest brokers. Being neither a native titleholder, miner nor pastoralist, I was very privileged to participate in that debate. There are always two sides to every story, and "both sides" need to trust so as to break down barriers ensuring that there are no longer sides - the empowered and the disempowered, the reconciled and the unreconciled.

In 1985, I attended a meeting of Aborigines living in a fringe camp at Mantaka on the outskirts of Kuranda by the Barron River in North Queensland. The Aborigines had lived on a reserve which was run by a church and which had since closed. Some of the people moved to government housing in Cairns but they did not like it much and the neighbours liked it even less. Eventually they ended up as fringe dwellers on land they regarded as their traditional country. They were seeking land title and money for houses from governments in Brisbane and Canberra. At the end of the meeting, the convenor pointed across the river and said, "See that house: that is Mr X's weekender. They don't come very often but when they do they come by helicopter. See that helipad on the roof. It cost \$3/4 million." That was almost twice the amount they were seeking for basic permanent housing.

I have often told this story in schools. Especially in the better off schools, there are

many questions: Why don't the Aborigines build their own houses if they want them? What are they complaining about? If the white man didn't come, they wouldn't even have a water supply. If it weren't for Mr X paying his taxes, there would be no money to pay these people welfare. After many years, I gave up trying to answer these questions or to refute these comments. In response, I ask only one question: Which side of the river are you standing on as you ask your questions?

There is never any doubt about which side of the river people are standing on. Can you see that there are just as many questions that can be asked from the other side of the river? They are just as unanswerable. They are likely to make you just as upset and powerless and confused. Reconciliation is about being able to stand on either side of the river. It is also about being able to assist with the bridge building needed so that others can move more readily from one side of the river to the other. Telling and hearing the stories is often the beginning of the communal healing of mind, body and soul.

Challenge Three: Institutional Religion

In the public sphere, our greatest religious challenge is the relationship between Christianity and Islam. In the personal domain, the challenge is having the faith that religious experience can fire the imagination and sustain hope in the face of suffering and death. The increasing number of self-reliant non-believers will probably become more convinced that God is simply a figment of the human imagination. For them God will remain the word for the Other created in man's image and likeness or the fictional Other who is all that man cannot be.

I recall contemplating religion's future on the eve of the new millennium. I visited the local mosque in my area for a discussion with the imam. It being the lead up to Christmas, I was engaged in the usual round of Christmas drinks and Christmas parties. It being Ramadan, he and his congregation were fasting by day and gathering for prayer at sunset. He invited me to join them for food and prayer. There were two visiting imams from Palestine and Egypt, both of whom knew the Koran off by heart. Their learning and wisdom were greatly prized. There is no Christian who claims to know the New Testament by heart. I remembered the Australian writer Helen Garner's account of introducing fellow novelist Tim Winton to "a recently 'saved' Christian". The conversation ended when Winton said to him, "Why don't you give the book a rest? Why don't you let your life be your witness?"

As dusk fell at the mosque, we shared the familiar things including food, drink, hospitality and a reverence for God. We agreed that our permanent differences demand respect and tolerance. Back then in 2000, the imam's children said they experienced greater acceptance in the Australian school playground but they found the media uncomprehending of their world view. I wonder what they would say today. Returning home, I talked with an Eritrean Catholic priest who says whenever Christians and Muslims are found in equal numbers, there is trouble because people who are not truly Christian nor Muslim are able to exploit religious and tribal differences. While religious differences can highlight other differences, a common religion does not overcome other differences. The terror of Rwandan Catholics slaughtering each other in church is not an ancient memory.

For some worshippers, religion will remain only an ideology - a prop to satisfy their ignorance or to allay their fears, a device to retain social cohesion and moral standards. But with alternative props and devices, and in the face of decreasing social expectations and support for religion, these worshippers will find other shrines. In only one lifetime, we Australians have moved our architectural focus from cathedrals to art centres to casinos. In a pluralistic, democratic, secular, globalised environment, worshippers will need to be more convinced of the truth of their beliefs and the reality of their religious experience.

We Australians have entered an era of such secularism that non-religious persons can confidently and publicly state not just that they do not believe but that all religious experience is false.

Australians generally are growing more weary of the statements by religious authorities. A few months prior to his death, internationally renowned Australian novelist Morris West said, "The pronouncements of religious leaders will carry more weight, will be seen as more relevant if they are delivered in the visible context of a truly pastoral function, which is the mediation of the mystery of creation; the paradox of the silent Godhead and suffering humanity." At all times in the public domain, whether in dialogue with government about social policy or in giving a public account of church policy, religious leaders need to speak with the voice of public reason. Therein lies the tension. Without trust between those whose consciences and world views differ, we will not scale the heights of the silence of the Godhead nor plumb the depths of the suffering of humanity. This mystery is to be embraced in the inner sanctuary of conscience where God's voice echoes within, to be enfleshed in the relationships we share, and to be proclaimed in our calls for justice in the public domain, at home and abroad. Australians know they are abundantly blessed with the opportunity to contribute to a more just world - at home and abroad.

Australian public figures like the feminist and activist, Anne Summers, who have had a religious upbringing, rejected the lot, and then reflected on the experience offer us key insights into the future of religion. In her autobiography *Ducks on the Pond*, which commences with an abusive father and ends abruptly in 1976 with the death of her youngest brother, Summers recalls the Catholic funeral and the wake: "It was impossible to accept that people might love me for myself, without a motive involving exploitation or gain. That...was the real damage my father had done. His rejection had made me suspicious of love. I was wary of entering those chambers of the heart where trust could not be bartered, and where acceptance of affection meant surrendering dominion of one's self." In future, religion will survive and thrive only in those chambers. A religious person like myself believes they can be prised open only by the religious experience of love, tolerance, hope and forgiveness - against the odds and the weight of the evidence.

In the globalised world, religion will be less a cover or substitute for political control, personal ignorance and fear. Religious experience will be the key to opening the deepest chambers of the human heart. Religious traditions will continue to provide tried and tested entrees to these chambers. Religious people will continually fail to match the rhetoric and the reality. But they will hold out the possibility of life beyond the predetermined and self-willed possibilities. Many will find such a quest irrelevant because they are self-sufficient. For the religious person, it will always be a blessing

ultimately to depend on the Other.

The standard unreflected consideration of the role of religion in international affairs is that either it is not a factor but simply an indicator or reflector of other differences (social, economic or ethnic) or it is a factor in societies which are regarded as less developed in that they have not yet endured the full brunt of secularisation, thereby permitting periodic outbursts of fundamentalism. Despite Henry Kissinger's capacity to write his massive 1995 tome *Diplomacy* without even mentioning the role of religion in international politics, all commentators would now accept that religion has a role to play in the wake of September 11, 2001. The problem is being able to invoke the utterances of religious leaders in a way which is equally comprehensible to those outside their circle of faith as to their followers and adherents.

Talk of Australian values should stop at the Australian low water mark. Talk of Christian values should be addressed primarily to those who profess to be Christian, including those who might be minded to commit unChristian acts on their Muslim neighbours. It is appropriate to conduct our dialogue in accordance with universal human rights which are not externally imposed western constructs but voluntarily appropriated universal standards.

In Australia, Muslims and Christians of good will should be able to dialogue together, being a bridge to their co-religionists in other countries, sharing the burden of the moral quandaries which these problems create. While governments will maintain pragmatic commitments to their national interest and good trading relations, private citizens and those in the NGO sector are the ones with greater latitude to espouse the primacy of human rights and individual liberty. Those with greatest freedom will carry the greatest responsibility for fostering a relationship which is productive for all.

Many Australians will continue to entertain primitive, simplistic ideas about Islam. There will be ample press coverage to feed their anxieties and concerns. Religious persons committed to espousing the human rights of all, whether they be Christian, Muslim or non-believer, rich or poor, will be able to join hands with other persons of good will constructing a bridge of understanding and respect across differences. Religious persons primarily committed to the political and economic claims of their co-religionists, using religion as an added distinction will maintain a strong barrier.

Conclusion

Having outlined three challenges of collective trauma, political action and institutional religion, let me conclude with some observations from those most traumatic of places - our gulag of immigration detention centres. Soon after my return from East Timor in January 2002, I made my first visit to the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, six hours drive from Adelaide, on the outskirts of the small town owned and run by the Defence Department. Afghan asylum seekers had sewn their lips in protest at the government's decision to suspend the processing of their asylum claims, despite their ongoing detention in the middle of the desert, in light of the changing political situation in Afghanistan. From there I went to Canberra. In my wanderings around the corridors of Parliament House, I met with Mr Bill Heffernan, a member of the Howard government, who explained the government strategy starkly and simply. Having been a local councillor and being a lifetime

farmer, he described to me the moral dilemma that confronts you during a major bushfire. You have to build a firebreak. You have to choose someone's property as the firebreak. Destroying their property, you will save the neighbourhood. "It's not pretty. These are hard moral decisions. But you have to do it." The government's boast a year later was that the firebreak seems to have worked, at least for the moment. The boats have stopped coming. The borders are secure and Australia can choose those refugees to whom it wishes to offer places under its generous offshore refugee selection program.

For a year, I have visited centres such as Woomera, Port Hedland and Baxter every month; each time coming away emotionally drained by the contact with desperate men, women and children behind the razor wire. Every two months I go to Parliament House Canberra and meet with the political architects of this policy, thinking there must be a better way than rhetorical stand-offs in the media. The politicians are as convinced of their decency in implementing the policy as am I in decrying it.

Wrestling with the moral and political difficulties, I have been inspired by the resolute hope in the midst of the despair of the detained asylum seekers. At Woomera for many months, I would meet with a group of Palestinians whose refugee claims had been rejected. They were awaiting removal to the Gaza Strip. Not surprisingly, the Australian Government was having great difficulty in moving them. In the end, one of the Palestinians, Akram Ouda Mohammad Al Masri decided to challenge the legality of his detention in the Federal Court. His case was then listed before Justice Merkel. I felt obligated to inform the Palestinians that the judge was Jewish with a fine reputation for upholding human rights. Akram won his case and was released from detention. Next time I returned to Woomera, the three remaining Palestinians decided they would also like to take a case to court. Their first question to me, with a smile: "Do you think we could get the Jewish judge?" In the middle of the Australian desert, some of the most complex conflicts seem resolvable. There is hope when persons are treated with dignity and respect under the rule of law regardless of the history and the politics.

After the 2002 Christmas fires in the gulag, one detainee who offered to assist police with their inquiries was given a guarantee by senior immigration officials in Canberra. He would not have to return to a detention centre. He was moved to a motel for nine days and provided information to the police. The guarantee from Canberra was then withdrawn. He had no legal remedy and no political leverage. I thought the treatment he received was unAustralian. But on reflection, I concluded in the wake of Tampa that the treatment was very Australian. Asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia without visas have been used by government as a means to an end. Their detention has been used to transmit a double signal - warning other asylum seekers to take a detour to any other country but ours and luring those voters who appreciate a government prepared to take a tough stand against the one who is "other". It is time for the nation once again to respect the dignity and basic rights of those who come to our shores seeking asylum.

Walking through Sydney Airport one day, Walid, one of the Palestinian asylum seekers whom I had known in Woomera, greeted me. At first I did not recognise him. He had been granted a temporary protection visa (TPV). He was wearing new clothes and his bearing was confident and graceful. In Woomera, in the desert dust, detainees

do not have or wear good clothes. They are often downcast and despairing. I then met Geoff Clark, Chairman of ATSIC, and asked if he would have time to meet Walid. He greeted him with the words, "You and I have the same minister." Philip Ruddock is the Minister for Immigration and Minister for Indigenous Affairs. At that moment, I realised that he was minister for everyone who is "other" in contemporary Australia. Clark explained to Walid, "I have told our minister, 'I don't mind you making tough laws for boat people PROVIDED you make them retrospective.'" Then pointing at me, he said, "This is the trouble in this country. This mob, they're all boat people. But now they think they can run the show." Six months later, I received a phone call from an Aboriginal community asking how it might be possible for them to retain the services of an Afghan asylum seeker whose temporary visa was about to expire. If we stopped tampering with asylum and granted protection decently to those on our shores who deserve that protection, we might contribute to the well-being of mind, body and soul for all who come to this land.

Conferring about "Mind Body Soul" as practitioners in traumatic stress, you come as neither romantic idealists nor unprincipled compromisers. You are committed to building the bridge, seeing the problems from the other side of the river. The secularism and materialism of Australian society, the simple majoritarianism of Australian democracy, and our own spiritual impoverishment can cloud the vision allowing us to substitute our self interest for the well being of the other, and our self-definition for the integrated self of the other. I wish you well in your enlarged tasks as healers of the nation. Together we have a whole planet to heal.