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Nei Neiwa Yi Yu Gali: Towards a Whole Body Theology of Reconciliation

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Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional stewards of the land on which we meet today, their elders past and present, and all elders amongst us. I also acknowledge all whose wisdom has informed what is valuable in what I have to say: in particular, the Darkinjung, Guringai, and Eora peoples, the traditional custodians of the land on which I weekly live, travel and work; the Mingaletta Aboriginal Corporation on the Woy Woy Peninsula and the Potory Minbee elders; and the members, and friends, of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission.

How do we live in this land with joy? This was the question which arose from the first *Five Lands Walk*, the interesting cultural project which has been taking place on the Darkinjung country of the Central Coast of New South Wales. Instigated by the innovative Gosford Council cultural officer Elio Gatti, and led by local Aboriginal elders Phil Bligh and Gavi Duncan, this has brought together artists, business people and social entrepreneurs of all kinds. Together they have assisted the five communities of Macmasters Beach, Copacabana, Avoca Beach, North Avoca and Terrigal, to engage with others in a literal and metaphorical pilgrimage of rediscovery. By walking the land, hearing its stories and those of its peoples, those of us who live today on the Central Coast are thereby woven together in a new understanding of who we are. Indeed, it is for me, and for the other prime movers, a living, practical, expression of public theology and spirituality, even though not all who participate may see it like that. It should remind those who are Christians that spiritual development is neither restricted to ecclesiastical ‘God-boxes’ nor limited to the personal. It should remind the secular to enlarge their understanding of what is required to be reconciled to one another and to Mother Earth. For, how *do* we live in this land with joy? This is a continuing challenge at the heart of our Australian story, wherever and whoever we are in this great south land.

Introducing Reconciliation in the *Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV)*

What meaning has Reconciliation for Australia today? In recent times, the World Council of Churches has offered us four key themes, arising from its worldwide initiative for peace and reconciliation. Known as the *Decade to Overcome Violence* (for the years 2001-2010), it runs concurrently with the UN *Decade for a Culture of Peace for the Children of the World*, seeking similar aims in a violent world. The four central themes are the product of a global consultation to analyse the foundations of violence. These constitute four challenges: to transcend the spirit and ‘logic’ of violence; to do justice; to address the use, misuse and abuse of power; and to value religious identity and plurality.¹ These make good sense. They do not however run easily off the tongue, or connect with the heart. When, in late 2002, I was appointed as Australian coordinator of the *Decade to Overcome Violence*, I therefore sought to rephrase them to connect more directly with our

¹ See www.overcomingviolence.org and www.ncca.org.au/dov for more information on DOV.
See www.unac.org/peacecp for more information on the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace.

individual and community experience, including received religious wisdom. The four related words that arose from our Australian context were: truth, justice, mercy-power, and *koinonia* (or community of respect). Given bodily expression, they are found: in a centred heart and mind; in what Barbara Deming called the 'two hands of nonviolence';² and in grounded feet which are willing to move with others. These are the ways to whole body reconciliation.

Whole Body Reconciliation in the *Decade to Overcome Violence*

The central theme, and hence the title, of a 'Whole Body' theology is the vital importance of a fresh understanding of atonement through a full bodily expression of Reconciliation in its various dimensions. Whereas violence, separation and division characterise historical experience, the call of Reconciliation is to healing, relationship and communion within one body. This is a profoundly incarnational process, requiring, as our Torres Strait Islander Anglican Bishop, Saibo Mabo expresses it, a 'humanising' theology. This is a theology which walks with the other, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting what the other sees, hears, touches, smells and tastes: a spiritual, emotional, cultural, political and practical journeying towards a renewed vision of Land and People.³ At the core of true peace and reconciliation is a coming together of all parts, with all our differences, to form one new body with one new life. It is insufficient for a few wise heads, or a few eager hearts, to meet. All aspects of our world must be linked and renewed and all arms and legs move together in what is a journey out of pain towards joy. For, as Bishop Saibo Mabo has said, 'walk with us, treat us as equals, and listen and learn from us. Our call is for you to come out and join the dance.'⁴

The four ecumenical themes of the *Decade to Overcome Violence* are each therefore critical to a holistic understanding of Reconciliation. *Truth*, and truth telling, is fundamental: whether, for example, in naming lies such as those of 'terra nullius' or denials of cultural genocide. *Mercy-power* (or compassion) provides the force for transformation of broken lives and cultures, enabling the overcoming of abusive power. This is then given necessary balance and genuine reality by *Justice*, not least Making *Indigenous* Poverty History. Finally, *Community* (understood most richly as *Koinonia*) values and celebrates respect and difference, both as process and goal. Parts of the body similarly correspond to different aspects of Reconciliation: wise heads, open eyes and contrite hearts are required for truth-telling; committed hands and arms to do justice; willing ears to listen, tongues to tell, and legs to walk the journeys of re-connection; and whole bodies to embrace one another in loving covenantal relationship. Thereby, to rework the Pauline metaphor,⁵ Reconciliation is sung and danced by every member.

Towards a more holistic understanding of atonement

For how we interpret atonement, the work of God on the Cross, profoundly shapes not only Christian doctrine but Christian life generally. If, for example, to take one extreme view, reconciliation is understood as essentially a metaphysical transaction affecting only individual spiritual relationships to God, then public reconciliation activity is effectively inconsequential. In contrast, where reconciliation is overly concerned with human

² Barbara Deming, *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands that Heal*, Paulist Press 1997.

³ Rt.Revd Saibo Mabo & Revd.Barry Paterson - "Bishop Saibo's Vision" - Humanising Theology: Model for Reconciliation', *Australian eJournal of Theology*, Feb 2006, Issue 6, (at http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_6/saibo.htm)

⁴ Speech at the launch of the NCCA 2006 Social Justice Statement, Parliament House, Canberra.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:12-26

activity, it lacks both the balance and essential grace of a full Christian understanding, and ultimately issues in frustration and burn-out. To rework the false Australian conundrum, it is not just the case that practical *and* symbolic Reconciliation are required. The ministry of reconciliation⁶ requires both committed, and often sacrificial, action, and also acknowledgement of the, prior, spiritual grace without which nothing substantial can be achieved..

Many classic received theologies of atonement fail to balance these tensions. Indeed, arguably, some approaches can lead to an ideological underpinning of violence and call us to further reflection towards 'nonviolent' approaches to atonement.⁷ What is required is that what is valuable in each is tested by today's lived experience. In particular, in Australia, this involves bringing received atonement theories into relationship with the stories of the peoples of the land. When this is done, the four reconciliation themes of truth, justice, mercy-power and koinonia help light up four major trajectories of atonement found in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures and tradition. These trajectories are, respectively, the overcoming of sin and shame, liberation (or exodus), going home (or return from exile), and new creation. Each is critical for Australian Reconciliation and each, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ can be seen in the recent National Apology, as reflected in the Prime Minister's speech. Let me however, for reasons of space today, look briefly at the last of these.

Renewing Creation through Koinonia

For how *do* we live in this land with joy? St.Paul gives us a resounding answer:

if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.⁹

Unlike other atonement themes, new creation has been downplayed. Either it seen as of little consequence compared to other major theological trajectories, or as merely derivative. Yet arguably new creation balances and fulfils the others. This is to recover the biblical refrain which runs from Genesis to Revelation: the eschatological vision of a new creation where all of life is renewed, as the waters flow and trees bear fruit and leaves for the healing of the nations. We find a renewing of both our hearts and our world as newly restored covenantal relationships enable a new family and what some may call a 'new dreaming'. Instead of a traditional atonement focus on finitude and mortality, the Cross as the tree of life here signifies flourishing and natality.¹⁰ As this is so redolent of the feminine, it is no wonder perhaps that this trajectory of reconciliation has largely been ignored in received orthodoxy. It is however deeply scriptural. Those who follow Christ, as Mark 16:18 attests, are to 'go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation'. Christian mission is then not simply to human souls, or even human bodies, but to the *ktisis*, the whole order of Creation.

Such an ecological, 'whole Cosmos', understanding of Christ's reconciliation is profoundly important both to Reconciliation between our Australian peoples and to the

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:18

⁷ cf. eg, the work of J.Denny Weaver. Gil Bailie and James Alison

⁸ *Two Cheers for Kevin Rudd?: What is left to do in the Decade to Overcome Violence in Australia?*, address to the AGM of Pax Christi Sydney 2008.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ following Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester Uni1998.

healing of the Land itself, something from which Indigenous Australians at least can never be separated. Indeed, this is vital in the context of our contemporary global ecological crises. For, as Brueggemann and others have affirmed, scripturally speaking, relationship to land is central for life and fertility.¹¹ Sadly this was forgotten in the development of western, especially secular, and urban, society. Recovering the three-way relationship of God, People and Land is therefore crucial. Like other atonement themes it does however require costly sacrifice from us!

Let me offer four pointers, drawn from my personal and contemporary experience of Reconciliation in Australia.

1) 'Reconnecting' with land and culture

Sharing in Reconciliation is sharing in 'the groanings of Creation' as St.Paul expressed it, thereby bringing new life out of the world's birthpangs.¹² Do we however really need Al Gore and the IPCC to tell us about climate change when Indigenous people have always been trying to tell us what we have been doing wrong? The *Five Lands Walk*, which I mentioned earlier, is just one expression of the wider, ecological reconciliation which is taking place across Australia. On the Central Coast, this is what Phil Bligh, Aboriginal elder, calls 'reconnecting' with land and culture. This is the real 'business' of life, as Indigenous people understand business, not limited to economic or utilitarian concerns. Addressing the social and educational disadvantage of young Kooris for instance, requires attending to relationship with land and culture not merely school and society, or even family. It also provides fresh perspective on fundamental development issues: as when Central Coast Aboriginal elders combined with 'natural farmer' Peter Andrews,¹³ to help re-envision seemingly intractable local issues of water supply by 're-reading the land'. Thus the waters of life literally flow again and the trees bear new leaves for healing.

2)'Reconnecting' as New Family

Some of the most powerful features of new creation atonement are certainly the new family relationships which emerge as we stand together at the foot of the Cross. Anticipations of this are found in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly in the relationship of Ruth and Naomi, and in the great vision of Ezekiel 37:1-22, where a new people is formed out of the death, destruction, and betrayals of the past. In Ezekiel, the two sticks are to be bound together in one and held in God's hand, and in Ruth is found the full depth of covenantal relationship. As Ruth declares:

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.¹⁴

Above all however we see new creation flourishing in new family in the Johannine account of the crucifixion, where the Gospel records:

standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman,

¹¹ cf. W.Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Augsburg Fortress press 2nd ed.2002, passim

¹² cf. Romans 8

¹³ Peter Andrews' own reflections can be seen in *Back from the Brink: How Australia's Landscape can be saved* (ABC 2006)

¹⁴ Ruth 1:16-17

behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.¹⁵

True Reconciliation must involve 'reconnecting' people with culture and land but it also offers a new horizon and a new set of relationships for all who live in this land. One notable Australian example of this is in the story of Aunty Ethel Munns and Camilla Cowley.¹⁶

3) 'Reconnecting' by sharing our baskets

Such new relationships are not about erasing difference but about manifesting the Pauline understanding that 'there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free',¹⁷ or, as we might add, neither Koori nor Gubba. Bishop Saibo Mabo again expresses this well in Torres Strait imagery:

The trouble is, we are all carrying our own baskets. In each of those baskets are some good things and some bad things. Our task, as different peoples, is for each of us to throw out what is bad and to put what is good, from each of our cultures into the one basket... Each of us are making rainbows, but one here and one there, you in one place and I in another place. We are all called to form one rainbow throughout our land.¹⁸

Perhaps Indigenous people, by necessity, are impelled to recognise what is of value in whitefella culture. Does the same however apply in reverse? Cultural protocols and the integrity of intellectual and cultural property are important to get right. Yet does the fear of colonising, as well as more evident racist attitudes, sometimes constrain attempts at Reconciliation? When does, for instance, rightful recognition of difference become distancing from 'the Other'? Will we ever make significant progress until the Other is also seen as Us, and when the human rights of a poor Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child are as important to every Australian's self-respect as that of anyone else? Can we see ourselves, in the scriptural sense, as grafted on to one living stock, the ancient heritage of this land?¹⁹ There is some way to go!

4) 'Reconnecting' by Dancing Together (or moving from boiled lollies to Kup Mari²⁰)

How do we live in this land with joy? Can we respond to Bishop Mabo's invitation to 'come out and join the dance?'

Among the many moving moments of the *Five Lands Walk* have been the opening and closing gatherings, led and inspired by local Aboriginal elders, but also involving, and enhanced by, other spiritual, artistic and imaginative contributions. One image I carry with me is of the finale of the first *Five Lands Walk* where the key local country totem of the whale was re-created in bodily, danced, form. Firstly Aboriginal elders took their place as the eye of the whale. Then Aboriginal children and young people, joined by others, formed the heart of the whale, rising and falling in the powerful rhythm supplied by a chorus of drums: this, symbolically, was the beat of Bouddi, the heart, after which our beautiful national park is named. As the heartbeat continued, representatives carrying flags of the many nations who have enriched the Central Coast then came forward,

¹⁵ John 19:25-27

¹⁶ Told in the video *Your Hand, My Hand* (NATSIEC)

¹⁷ Galatians 3.18

¹⁸ Bishop Saibo Mabo, NATSIEC 'Light of Australia' address 2004, www.ncca.org.au/natsiec

¹⁹ Pauline image used by Elizabeth Pike of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne in her writing.

²⁰ Bishop Mabo's story from his childhood of the Protector giving out boiled lollies on meeting Torres Strait Islanders contrasts powerfully with his own call for us to feast together, with food baked in the land itself.

fanning out around the scene to form the outer body of the whale, until, as others joined, the whole totem was completed in a mighty crescendo of unity in diversity, and harmony in many tongues. I Am, Christ seemed to say, I Am the Whale: I am, you are, we are the Whale - a powerful enactment of Reconciliation in public ritual. Or, as the *Five Lands Walk* theme song has it, in local language, *Nei Neiwa Yi Yu Gali* – ‘We walk together with Mother Earth.’

Reconciliation as New Creation – New Dreaming?

Let me leave the last word to Betty Pike, the remarkable theologian of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne who has written much about the need for ‘New Dreaming’.²¹ Betty offers us this reconciliation prayer, grounded in the Spirit and the land:

Today, we make a covenant with this land.
As a branch is grafted onto a mature stock,
So we want to be grafted onto the ancient heritage of this land,
So that its life may flow through us.
We commit ourselves to the land we live in and to all who belong to it,
Most particularly our Indigenous people
And also the newcomers to this land.
We will care for it with gentleness, patience, simplicity and compassion,
Rather than merely something to be bought and sold.
We will see the land as a gift for which we are truly thankful,
And undertake the privileged duty of respecting and looking after it.
We thank God, the Great Creator Spirit, for all the earth provides:
Water, food, and all the riches above and below the ground.
We undertake to use them sparingly and thoughtfully.
As we enter more deeply into the Spirit of the land,
We see the land as a Sacrament and Icon of our mothering Creator Spirit.
Be still.
Listen to the breath of the Spirit which has blown through it for ages past,
Today and always.
For this is:
The Spirit of the Dreaming.

²¹ cf. her DVD presentation used in the NATSIEC ‘Hearts are Burning’ tour in 2005