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**A DISTINCTIVELY "DOWN-
UNDER" APPROACH TO
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

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A Distinctively “Down-Under” Approach to Theological Reflection

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Introduction

The Ancient Greeks assumed that some place down-under existed. It had to, to keep the world in balance. “Terra Australis Incognita” they named it, the unknown south land. Eventually, on Pentecost Day 1606, Spanish explorer Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, spotting present day Vanuatu, believed he’d located it, and claimed it for Christ, naming it Terra Australis del Espiritu Santu – the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit, the official name of “Down Under”, Australia.

40,000 years earlier, Australia’s Indigenous people had first called Australia home, and according to Bruce Chatwin⁵³ had “wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes – singing the world into existence. Each ancestor, while travelling through the country scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the line of his footprints. In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung (into existence). And the distance between two such sites can be measured as a stretch of song.” This is a distinctively Australian way of relating to the land, and indeed we inhabit a distinctive landscape. ‘Europe has its peaks piercing the sky, but we have the horizon!’ So wrote the poet Mary Gilmore. Rarely has one sentence said so much about Australia. This land is endless horizon.”⁵⁴ If nothing could be more Australian than the landscape, then it is out of this unique landscape, with the help of a group of Indigenous theologians and French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, that I will sketch *A Distinctively ‘Down Under’ Approach to Theological Reflection*.

Paul Ricoeur: on *Texts and Meaningful Human Action*

If Indigenous Australians can read the Australian landscape as a musical score, Ricoeur⁵⁵ sees any written text as a musical score and its readers as orchestral conductors. In order to free the melody from the written text the conductor may prepare for the performance in three ways. The conductor may enter the **world behind the text** by searching out what was going on in the composer’s life or in the world at the time the piece was written, searching for clues as to what the composer may have had in mind in writing the piece. Secondly, the conductor may explore the **world of the text**, the structure of phrases, a recurring melody, finding nuances that a dramatic pause might elicit. Finally, the conductor may enter and engage **the world in front of the text**, where the *text reads you*, as much as *you read the text*, where “the text (discloses) a new world of meaning, a new way of looking at things,”⁵⁶ music, freed from the printed page and played in such a way that it profoundly moves both performers and listeners by drawing them, for instance, into Dvorak’s *New World*, here in this present moment.

⁵³ Chatwin, B. (1988) *Songlines* New York: Penguin p13

⁵⁴ Blainey, G (2001) *This Land is All Horizons* Sydney: ABC Books p15

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, P (1976) *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* Fort Worth: Texas Christian :University Press p75

⁵⁶ Ricoeur, P (1976) p88

Ricoeur⁵⁷ highlights four characteristics of a live speech or an orchestral performance:

1. A live speech is a fleeting event. It appears and disappears. It is soon over.
2. A live speech is inseparably tied to the person who is speaking.
3. A live speech or performance is very specific: an orchestra plays **one particular Concerto**, rather than any of many others.
4. A live speech or performance is addressed to this specific audience who is listening.

Significant changes occur when a live speech becomes a written text, or when a live performance becomes a musical score:

1. Whereas a live performance is fleeting, a musical text is fixed, leaving its mark on time.
2. A written text is detached from the author. Whereas it's always possible to ask a speaker follow-up questions, a written text prevents the author from controlling or clarifying the text.
3. Whereas a live performance offers one interpretation, a written text opens up the possibility of innumerable interpretations, many of them unintended, even unsuspected by the composer.
4. While a live speech or live performance addresses only those in attendance, a written text can reach people, continents, even centuries afar.

From studying the different characteristics of live performances and written texts, Ricoeur⁵⁸ develops the claim that **meaningful human action** may be considered as a text. Ricoeur understands meaningful human action as an “event (that has) *left its mark* on its time”. Do we not bring to theological reflection those pastoral events that have ‘left their mark’ on us, events that have intrigued, challenged, inspired or stymied us?

Meaningful human action, a specific pastoral event, may be considered as a text because:

1. The meaning of the action is separate/detached from the originating fleeting event. Watergate was a bungled break-in, but its meaning was so significant that it brought about the fall of a President. Meaningful human action is anything but fleeting. It makes its mark.
2. “Our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend.”⁵⁹ A flippant remark or the unconscious raising of an eyebrow may take on a life of its own, totally unbeknown to its originator.
3. A pastoral event may have ‘left its mark’ on its original setting, but may also leave its mark on settings far from its origins.
4. Even though a pastoral event is restricted to participants, it is open to an indefinite range of possible readings. Meaningful human action is, according to Ricoeur⁶⁰ “an open work (whose) meaning is ‘in suspense’”, available to anyone, anywhere who can read.

Paul Ricoeur: on *Interpreting Meaningful Human Action*

Like any written text, meaningful human action has many possible meanings. Ricoeur, speaks of ‘the plurivocity of the text,’⁶¹ the ‘surplus of meaning’, inherent in any text. Assisted by

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text” *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Ed. John Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni Press. P198 f

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text” p205

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text” p206

⁶⁰ Ricoeur, P. “The Model of the Text” p208

⁶¹ Ricoeur, P “The Model of the Text” p212

this ‘principle of plenitude’⁶² readers are ever faced with the task of interpreting *meaningful human action*. Ricoeur offers a distinctive approach, fuelled by his intention to move “from naïve interpretations to critical interpretations, from surface interpretations to depth interpretations.”⁶³ The crucial question is: what might be going on here in this event? And, how might God be involved in what’s going on here? Given the plurivocity, the many voices inherent in any text, the reader best approaches the text, “like a cube, or a volume in space, from (as many) different sides”⁶⁴ as one’s imagination allows. This happens by assuming there are many meanings latent in the text. “In the beginning, understanding is a guess”, and although “there are no rules for making good guesses, there are methods for validating those guesses we do make.”⁶⁵ Ricoeur names our initial approach to the text “the first naïveté”, for we literally “have to initially guess the meaning of the text.”⁶⁶ However, that is only a beginning, a first guess that needs to be validated by stepping back, and putting the original guesses “at a distance in order to make sense of my own motives.”⁶⁷ A reader takes this step by engaging “a willingness to listen (to the many voices of the text, which Ricoeur calls a hermeneutic of retrieval and) a willingness to suspect (our prejudices and motives)”⁶⁸ which entails what Ricoeur calls a hermeneutic of suspicion. “If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation”.⁶⁹ The ultimate aim of interpreting any text is, according to Ricoeur: “to make one’s own what was previously foreign”. To understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it: it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds.”⁷⁰

Paul Ricoeur’s Contribution to *A Distinctively ‘Down-Under’ Approach to Theological Reflection*

From Ricoeur’s work, I draw four elements suggestive of *A Distinctively ‘Down-Under’ Approach to Theological Reflection*:

1. Meaningful human action/pastoral events have many voices, many possible readings, indeed “a surplus of meaning”.
2. We ‘find ourselves’ and understand the pastoral event by encountering the otherness of the other, rather than by focusing primarily on our internal reactions to what we encounter.
3. Interpretation beyond naïve or surface guesses is possible by engaging the text through what Ricoeur calls both a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion.
4. Are we seeking to understand the pastoral event in terms of the world **behind** the text, the world **within** the text; or the world **in front of** the text?

⁶² Ricoeur, P (1988) “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* ed. John Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni Press p176

⁶³ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text” p220

⁶⁴ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text” p211

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, P (1976) *Interpretation Theory* p75-76

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, P (1976) *Interpretation Theory* p75

⁶⁷ Ricoeur, P (1988) “The Model of the Text” p214

⁶⁸ Ricoeur, P (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* New Haven: Yale University Press

⁶⁹ Ricoeur, P (1976) *Interpretation Theory* p79

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, P (1976) *Interpretation Theory* p91

A Distinctively Down-Under Approach to Theological Reflection emerges when Ricoeur's approach to interpreting meaningful human action as a text comes into dialog with an Indigenous reading of the Australian landscape as a text, as a musical score that has been sung into existence across the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. What do the hermeneutics of suspicion and of retrieval look like when sketched out across the broad dimensions of the Australian landscape? A group of Indigenous Christian elders provide one response through *Rainbow Spirit Theology*,⁷¹ an exploration into "Aboriginal culture as a source of mystery, meaning and theology". Determining its bearings from the East, from the freshness that comes with the sunrise,⁷² *Rainbow Spirit Theology* listens to the North (representing past influences) and the South (representing the realities that ground us), with the West beckoning us to embrace the future. The Rainbow Elders regard the **Kookaburra** who heralds the dawn as the totem of the East: "the risen Christ is the risen Son; Jesus Christ is our new life, our new dawn. Christ is our morning star."⁷³ "The symbol of the South is the **Emu**, a bird who tracks the land and who searches with intense curiosity."⁷⁴ The South entertains endless curiosity, tracing the tracks of God in our past and in our present. The North is represented by the **Sheep**, a foreign species introduced into Australia only 200 years ago, by the early settlers, and before long a source of great wealth, but only for some, certainly not for Indigenous Australians. While recognising much of value that was brought from the North, the Spirit Rainbow Elders point out that "while European missionaries were pointing our eyes to heaven above, their European brothers were stealing the land from under our feet."⁷⁵ Finally, the totem of the West is the **Kangaroo** who is able only to move forward, even onwards.

Given that "Rainbow Spirit Theology has something to offer the whole of Australia"⁷⁶ and that "the Aboriginal experience of the gospel (is) not to be viewed as a curio of mission history, but as integral to the work of God in Australia,"⁷⁷ new, and quite exciting possibilities emerge when *Rainbow Spirit Theology* is brought into robust dialog with Paul Ricoeur's work on texts. Ricoeur's perspectives on hosting otherness resonates with Indigenous Australians' close association with, and non-Indigenous Australians' love/hate relationship with the land. For the past 200 years we have clung to the coastline, 95% of Australians huddling in enormous coastal cities, pretending that the vast outback is not there.⁷⁸ Yet in the endless horizons of the Australian outback and in the silence of the bush, we are faced with absence, the alien, the other. Moreover, in recent years, many Australians are mustering the courage to leave behind the familiarity and security of the coastal rim and cross the Great Divide, the range of mountains that have for nearly two centuries kept us from embracing our centre, the dead, though living Heart of our Continent, symbolised by Uluru. In recent years "we have become a nation of pilgrims with our feet taking us into the unknown, into the interior and into the heart of Australia."⁷⁹

The immensity of the Outback ensures that it is no place for isolated individuals. To survive, indeed to thrive in the Outback, demands rejecting, rather than embracing splendid

⁷¹ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* Blackburn: Harper Collins p vii

⁷² The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p21

⁷³ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p22

⁷⁴ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p16

⁷⁵ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p24

⁷⁶ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p6

⁷⁷ The Rainbow Spirit Elders (1997) p27

⁷⁸ For this line of thinking I am indebted to one of my post-graduate students, Catherine Whitehouse

⁷⁹ Tacey, D. (2000) *Re Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* p97 Sydney: Harper Collins

isolation and individualism. So too does a *distinctive Down Under approach to theological reflection*: we do it together, gathering around the camp fire. There, with others, in the light of the fire, people talk, ‘yarn’ as we Australians say, or ‘shoot the breeze’ as I have heard in North America. What do we talk about? About life, about the things that have made a mark on us, maybe the things that have left us perplexed, wondering, even winded; meaningful human action, all of it. What is distinctive about this yarnning? Ricoeur proposes three characteristics:

1. There are many ways of understanding, of interpreting what has made a mark on us, a broad array of possibilities, even though, in our first naiveté, we have an initial hunch. Perhaps a button has been pushed and we have jumped to conclusions. Around the camp-fire, we’re in what you could call a “timeless land” where there’s no need to rush. There’s plenty of time to step back (‘distanciation’ Ricoeur calls it) to consider other possibilities. Because every text has a surplus of meaning, there is an endless range of meanings to consider, often enough evoking the comment: “Oh, I’ve never thought about it that way before!”
2. Around the camp-fire, in the setting of the great otherness that constitutes the Australian Outback, all sorts of otherness beckon, and not menacingly or inhospitably. *A Distinctively Down Under Approach to Theological Reflection* begins with otherness, with the unfamiliar, rather than with oneself, with my reaction to what has left its mark, refusing to allow an initial guess, a first naiveté, to constitute our final understanding of the event. It proceeds via the self discipline of listening to perspectives and voices not our own, voices that come from the north, south and east, or as the Rainbow Spirit Elders would have it, from the Sheep, the Emu and the Kookaburra.
3. Finally, we engage the task of theological reflection out of a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion, thereby claiming a deep or second naiveté reading of the event that has left its mark on us. From around the campfire we look to the ends of this land which is “all horizons” to make meaning of the story that is told, and to take resolute action into the west.

Charting a Distinctive Down Under Approach to Theological Reflection

Theological Reflection Down Under begins by telling a story, in a crisp, concise and disciplined way that brings the listeners into the picture. Next, which specific phase of the event is going to be explored? Think of the task in terms of capturing the event with a video camera, then choosing **one frame** that has left its mark. It’s this frozen frame (rather than any of the possible thousands of other frames) that becomes the focus of extended consideration around the campfire. Having frozen the frame, who (or what) is **the other** in the story? Now it’s time for yarnning, for shooting the breeze, for talking around the camp-fire, with the perspectives of the Sheep, the Emu, the Kookaburra and Kangaroo.

First we turn with both a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion to the north from whence the best and the worst was imposed on our land by the early settlers, engaging the world **behind** the text. There is much of value to retrieve, alongside what might be received with suspicion. What are some generous readings of what might have shaped ‘the other’s’ behaviour? What are some suspicious readings of forces that may be influential on the other’s behaviour in this particular pastoral event? What might the social sciences contribute to our quest to understand the other? What do the media tell us about ‘the other’ in this story? What observations might history offer? In what ways might authority be operative here? To each

emerging respond, the answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘what else?’ The task is to explore the plurivocity of meaning, to access the many possible ways of understanding the other.

The second conversation partner comes from the south, where with the Emu we search what we have heard in order to discern the tracks of God in our past and in our present. Which larger stories help us understand the other’s story? What insights emerge when we locate the other’s story **within** the world of:

- their particular family history
- their formal education
- their role models
- their past experiences
- larger social trends
- gender, social class and various expressions of culture
- God’s story

Finally, with the kookaburra, we greet the dawn, the world **in front of** the text. What is becoming clearer re ‘the other?’ Is there a character or an incident from the gospel that enlightens our understanding or helps us to see the event in a new light? Which elements of Catholic Social Teaching shed fresh light? In what ways has the conversation been enlightened by the rising Son?

Having listened to what the North, East and South have brought, what insights emerge around the campfire? What happens when I revisit my involvement in the event with the help of the Emu, the Sheep and the Kookaburra? What common threads emerge? What are some possible consequences? It’s now into the West, alongside the kangaroo who is unable to jump backwards, that we decide how we might engage the future. In what ways might God be luring us into the future? More succinctly, the West asks ‘so what?’ What might we do differently? Or even, what might we continue to do with renewed energy and confidence?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose that a *distinctively Down Under approach to theological reflection* emerges from a sustained yarn around a campfire, in alien, perhaps even foreboding, certainly unfamiliar territory with three conversation partners, the sheep, the emu and the kookaburra. Then enlivened by the campfire yarning we join the kangaroo and bound into the future. Letty Russell expresses the spirit of this approach when she writes: “Even if we cannot see the alternate future for which we work, by beginning from the other end of God’s promise, we are able to live with a hope that is strong enough to transform the present.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Russell, L. (1987) *Household of Freedom*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. P67