

## Conceptions of the Sacred in Australian Political Thought

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The conventional wisdom has it that Australian culture can only be understood in secular terms. 'Australian society is determinedly secular', claimed Stephen Knight in a recent essay. Knight argued that European Australia does not possess a mythical landscape or a sense of the sacred.<sup>1</sup> This denial of the sacred as a significant aspect of Australian culture has seeped into our understanding of political ideas and practice in Australia. Hugh Collins' characterisation of Australian political culture as Benthamite and utilitarian confirms this picture of Australia as a place in which to search for the sacred and the numinous is to condemn oneself to the margins of the culture.<sup>2</sup>

In the wider international setting it might also be argued that political theory with its concern with technical rigour has a distinctly secularist bias. Yet major political theorists of our age such as Alasdair Macintyre and Charles Taylor recognise the significance of religion.<sup>3</sup> Moreover books continue to be written which focus on the relationship between politics and the sacred such as, in recent years, Thomas Molnar's *The Twin Powers: Politics and the Sacred* and Stephen R.L. Clark's *Civil Peace and Sacred Order*.<sup>4</sup>

This paper argues that an awareness of the sacred has been an element of political thinking in Australia and continues to play an important role. Following Stephen Clark it is not concerned with politics in the narrow sense of the term recognising that epistemology is closely connected with political philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In this regard the core of this paper is an examination of what can be regarded as the two key positions regarding the sacred in the twentieth century, Humanism and anti-Humanism, through an analysis of the writings of two figures who represent these positions in Australia at the present time: Charges Birch and John Carroll.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Knight, *The Selling of the Australian Mind* (Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1990), pp.13-24.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Collins, 'Political Ideology in Australia', in S. Graubard (ed.), *Australia: the Daedalus Symposium* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1985), pp.147-69.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Alasdair Macintyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London, Duckworth, 1988, and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Molnar, *The Twin Powers: Politics and the Sacred*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans/The Paternoster Press, 1988, Stephen R.L. Clark, *Civil Peace and Sacred Order: Limits and Renewals 1* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen R.L. Clark, *Civil Peace and Sacred Order*, p.11.

### Humanism

The humanist position in religious matters can be roughly characterised as follows:

- Religion is an unfolding of the Spirit: its Truth is not fixed but develops and evolves over time.
- This evolution is not random but involves a movement towards the divine as human beings progress towards a higher spiritual goal.
- Human nature is essentially good and capable of moving freely towards a higher state.
- The sacred and the secular are not radically distinguished; it is possible for human beings to progress naturally from one realm to the other.
- The goal of evolution is a state in which individuals are both perfected and in harmony with God and the universe.

This outlook, or variants of it, has had an important influence on Australian liberalism from John Woolley to H.C. Coombs. There is a real sense in which the history of political liberalism in Australia is tied to the history of liberal Protestantism. The connection between the two can be seen most clearly in the writings of philosopher Francis Anderson. Even after the shock of the first world war, Anderson could write that it was possible to 'advance to a further and higher phase of development' in which lower standards of goodness would be replaced by higher ones, inadequate conceptions of God replaced by less inadequate ones and external authority superseded by internal authority.<sup>6</sup>

Anderson's student Bishop Ernest Burgmann also dreamt of a future in which a harmony between individual and collective spiritual and rational, science and religion would be established.<sup>7</sup> Nor was this concern to consider human religious, social and political development together limited to Sydney educated intellectuals. Deakinite liberal Frederick Eggleston argued that modern society needed to adopt what he described as the Christian ethic and follow the path of 'creative evolution' of 'God realizing Himself in the universe and in human life', so that a spontaneous social order founded on duty, unselfishness and brotherly love could come into being.<sup>8</sup>

Equally this image of a unified harmonious society held together by the bonds of religious belief and a common sense of duty could be used to criticise the deficiencies of modern society, in particular its individualistic tendencies. Another student of Anderson was A.P. Elkin, Anglican priest and anthropologist. Elkin believed that the role of religion was to counter the disunity of modern society and 'provide the inspiration for an inter-group ethics',<sup>9</sup> to 'transform all social groups and relationships so that they will express the highest ideals that the saints and seers of society have seen'.<sup>10</sup> The goal was social integration.

Not surprisingly it was this social integration which impressed him most about aboriginal society. Through their rituals and ceremonies the Australian aborigines

<sup>6</sup> Francis Anderson, 'The Present Religious Situation', *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 3 (September 1922), pp.216-22.

<sup>7</sup> E.H. Burgmann, *The Regeneration of Civilization* (Melbourne, 1943).

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Eggleston, *Search for a Social Philosophy* (Melbourne University Press, 1940), p.313.

<sup>9</sup> A.P. Elkin, 'The Present Social Function of Religion', *Morpath Review*, vol. 2, no. 18 (December 1931), p.29.

<sup>10</sup> A.P. Elkin, 'Evolution in Religious Consciousness', Elkin Papers, University of Sydney Archives, Box 112, p.15.

represented the 'other' which Australian European society was not, a society capable of creating and renewing 'feelings and experiences of social unity and cohesion'.<sup>11</sup> It was perhaps the sacred failings of European society which enabled a more sympathetic appreciation of a world, which the march of progress and the secular had supposedly left far behind, to be made.

This nostalgia for a lost wholeness also informs the more secular approach of H.C. Coombs. Coombs has deplored the alienating effects of modern industrial society and its tendency to diminish social cohesion and a sense of purpose.<sup>12</sup> In his essay 'The Quality of Life and its Assessment', Coombs described the aboriginal lifestyle as 'providing a rewarding sense of well-being'.<sup>13</sup> In true Durkheimian spirit Coombs attacks the problem of the quality of life by considering the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, 'the simplest system which links human needs, the environment and human behaviour, it provides a framework within which other lifestyles can be examined and assessed'.<sup>14</sup> What impressed Coombs about this lifestyle was its ability to integrate the physical, social and spiritual life of the people in their daily interaction with their environment. Every person involved in this lifestyle possessed a balance between a sense of security and of challenge, a personal identity—a combination of belonging and having an individual role, and a sense of contributing to the fulfilment of a cosmic purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Coombs contrasts this holism with modern industrial society and its inability to meet the psychic needs of the individual. Although the words 'religious' or 'sacred' are missing from Coombs' discussion of contemporary society it is clear that he means something similar by the phrase 'psychic needs'.

For this liberal tradition human fulfilment necessarily involves a sacred or religious or psychic dimension. Its conception of the sacred is essentially humanist; it is that towards which humans move as a means of attaining their full humanity. And it is a tradition into which Charles Birch can be placed with ease. This is not to say that Birch is necessarily directly influenced by his Idealist predecessors, only that he shares the same intellectual roots. Birch is a biologist turned metaphysician; he is an avowed disciple of Alfred Whitehead and an adherent to process theology. Whitehead's philosophy was being discussed in Australia in the early 1930s—in Burgmann's journal *The Morpath Review*. Equally like Eggleston (and Bergson) Birch believes in creative evolution. There are clear continuities.

But there is also the context of developments in the scientific world of the 1970s and 1980s. Birch calls himself a postmodernist. He is not, however, a post-modern in the sense of Foucault or Lyotard. Birch's postmodernism is to be understood in the context of the revolt against mechanistic classical science which has taken place over the past twenty years. It is the postmodernism of David Bohm's 'implicate order',<sup>16</sup> Ilya Prigogine's

<sup>11</sup> A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (6th Edition, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1979), p.213.

<sup>12</sup> H.C. Coombs, 'Science and Technology—For What Purpose?' in his *The Return of Scarcity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.61-82.

<sup>13</sup> H.C. Coombs, 'The Quality of Life and its Assessment' in *The Return of Scarcity*, p.108.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.113.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.116.

<sup>16</sup> David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

'Dissipative structures'<sup>17</sup> and Rupert Sheldrake's 'morphogenetic fields'.<sup>18</sup> The key ideas of this 'post-modernism' are irreversibility, process and holism. As Prigogine and Stengers put it 'science is rediscovering time'<sup>19</sup> and they argue, against the classical physicists, that there is an arrow of time in the universe. Equally these writers point to nature as a process developing and changing over time, a nature in which, Bohm argues 'both thought and thing are forms abstracted from the total process'.<sup>20</sup> Sheldrake has gone as far as to suggest that the constants and fields of Nature are no more than habits developed by the universe.<sup>21</sup>

Birch has clear affinities with this group. Like him they look back to Whitehead (and often Bergson) as a pivotal figure. Equally there is an affinity between the evolutionary idealism of the early twentieth century and the new evolutionists of the 1970s and 1980s. Outside the scientific context Birch's postmodernism has a distinctly old-fashioned look about it.

I should now like to tease out some of the themes of Birch's most recent work *On Purpose* as a means of exploring this postmodern view of evolution and its relationship to the sacred. In particular I want to examine his view of human nature and his picture of the relationship existing between humanity, God and nature and the political implications of this relationship. Birch's view of human nature is essentially an extension of the old liberal ideal of 'personality'. He is opposed to the idea of 'economic man' and believes that modern technological society has a tendency to 'treat people as objects for economic ends'.<sup>22</sup> In Birch's view to treat an individual as a 'mere object without feelings' is 'the worst we can do to a fellow human'.<sup>23</sup> Human beings must be treated as 'subjects' capable of achieving what Birch terms 'creative transformation'.<sup>24</sup> Individuals are not defined by some fixed substance or set of attributes but by their capacity to participate in the creative endeavours of an evolving universe. In his description of individuals affected by love and respect for others Birch again recalls the idea of personality: 'To love ourselves is to be open to influences that press in upon us from all sides, that could transform us all as the energy of the sun transforms a plant'.<sup>25</sup> He contrasts the person transformed by love and the pursuit of the good who is rewarded by 'a new richness of experience which brings joy' with the anxious and selfish individual who withdraws into himself and experiences a feeling of unfulfilment and a lack of meaning.<sup>26</sup> This is essentially the doctrine of 'social sympathy' re-visited; compare for example this passage of John Woolley's from the 1850s:

He who accepts the ideal—who looks out of himself for a rule, is rewarded by internal peace, and a constantly enlarging sphere of sympathy: he who is eager to grasp the real, who makes his own feelings the measure of good, is shut up in the prison of his heart, and finds there nothing but discord and confusion.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos* (London Fontana: 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past* (London: Collins, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, p.xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, p.55.

<sup>21</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature* (London: Rider, 1990), p.108.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Birch, *On Purpose* (Kensington: UNSW Press, 1990), p.19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>27</sup> John Woolley, *Lectures Delivered in Australia* (London, 1862), pp.188–9.

In similar fashion to Woolley, Birch argues that the unselfish 'morally good act' leads human beings into a state of harmony and unity with the universe and the realisation of higher values. 'Good unites, evil divides',<sup>28</sup> claims Birch.

Birch's picture of human history also owes a considerable debt to evolutionary idealism. Like Frederick Eggleston, Birch views human development as the rise to self-consciousness. First the human psyche emerged, then with the agricultural revolution and the rise of cities human psychic development added a rational dimension to itself.<sup>29</sup> Over time pre-rational sources of meaning were increasingly replaced by rational and reflective ones. Birch believes that 'full self-consciousness' and rational religion first emerged in the sixth century BC as religious leaders appeared in China, India, Persia, Greece and Israel 'who proposed new ways of ordering the whole of experience'.<sup>30</sup>

For Birch, however, the crucial distinction is not that of conscious humanity as opposed to inanimate nature. As with the other evolutionists of the 1980s Birch is strongly opposed to Cartesian dualism. Rather, as a monist, it is a question of 'degrees of self-consciousness': the difference between humans and the higher animals is only 'one of degree'.<sup>31</sup>

Birch's picture of the universe embodies this monism and emphasis on self-consciousness. He describes it as the 'ecological model of life'. The universe is 'made up of entities that act and "feel" as one'.<sup>32</sup> In other words every entity in the universe should be considered as a 'subject', possessing a 'degree of selfdetermination'. Evolution is a process involving the whole universe which can be considered as 'mind-matter'; it is also a process which necessarily 'includes values and purposes'.<sup>33</sup>

Evolution involves a progression towards an ever increasing self-consciousness. Consequently it is a creative enterprise as self-conscious entities seek to realise the possibilities inherent in their environment. In this creative evolutionary process Divine Love acts as a sort of 'invisible hand' 'providing each individual with specific goals and purposes and coordinating the activity of all'.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to conceptualise the ecological model of the universe precisely because it considers nature as process and not as substance. It is the relationships which are central. We do not use our minds to discuss the substance 'matter'; rather our understanding and the universe are but two aspects of an interconnected whole. Hence like David Bohm, Birch views knowledge and science as abstractions from the process of the universal flux. 'To really know', claims Birch, 'is to be at one with that which is known'.<sup>35</sup>

This vision of the universe as an evolving whole is set up as the antithesis of post-Cartesian science and its conception of mind and matter as separate substances. The ecological model puts the two back together and defines individuals in terms of their relationship with the whole. The creative impulse of the self-conscious individual should, when guided by Divine Love, result in a greater harmony. Sin, or evil, is the struggle against this evolving process in the name of self.

<sup>28</sup> Birch, *On Purpose*, p.15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.43.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.54.



Moreover as all the universe is a 'subject' the ecological model implies a non-anthropocentric ethic because human beings possess only a more highly developed self-consciousness than other entities in the universe. But a non-anthropocentric ethic does not imply a non-humanist ethic; rather the values of self-conscious humanity should be extended to nature as a whole. Birch describes a universal community for mutual participation and sympathy. The degree to which a given entity requires ethical concern in its own right is relative to its capacity for experience.<sup>36</sup>

This picture of the evolution of the universe is awash with an awareness of the divine quality of creation and the power of the Divine Eros to lead a self-conscious universe into a higher state of being. There is a Divine presence in the universe—a God—but it is a God conceived not as substance but as process.

Birch calls his position pantheism: God is involved in the cosmos but is not identified with it. God is thus 'the most natural entity there is' and is not radically separated from the universe with which he involves himself.<sup>37</sup> This involvement is in terms both of order and of creativity. The incarnation of God in the universe expands the possibilities for an increased richness of experience and creativity. At the same time as the universe is transformed through this creativity so God also changes. Birch expresses this process as follows:

As every entity 'feels' the lure of God and responds to that lure then God becomes concretely real in a way God was not concretely real before. And that new reality makes a difference to God. God is the one who cherishes all .... With every creative advance, be it in cosmic evolution or in individual life, God becomes different .... Something happens to the life of God as God saves the world in divine experience.<sup>38</sup>

God and the universe co-evolve; together they progress towards ever richer and ever more creative possibilities.

Where then does humanity stand now in terms of its evolutionary possibilities? Birch argues that for two thousand years there was stability after the first religious revolution. During the past two centuries that religious calm has been challenged by developments in science, psychology and philosophy. A new stage in the history of human societies has been reached:

The life force, which is the Divine Eros, is calling humanity to a new organisation of human societies.<sup>39</sup>

Birch identifies three areas in which this jump to a higher level of evolution is necessary:

- war and peace
- social justice and injustice
- industrialisation and ecological sustainability.<sup>40</sup>

Modern progress, he argues, has led to a dead-end because it is too closely connected with scientific, technological and economic growth. A new conception of progress is required, one which takes account of the third wave of human development, 'the wave of

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.83.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.91.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.111.

postmodernity'.<sup>41</sup> This new wave takes account of the universe as it might be, it is founded on 'realistic hope' and envisages the future as 'open-ended'. This progress is not material or scientific but spiritual—progress is a step-by-step process fulfilling spiritual possibilities, a 'growth ... in richness of experience of all that lives'.<sup>42</sup>

To achieve this vision of evolution as spiritual growth and creative renewal the substance or mechanical modern world-view must be replaced by a postmodern world-view. Birch lists five major constituents of the postmodern world-view:

- It considers nature as organic and ecological, in terms of relations rather than substance.
- It is 'postreductionist' in that it does not always seek to interpret the higher in terms of the lower.
- It is monistic: mind and matter are only 'two aspects of the one thing'.
- Its ethic is biocentric rather than anthropocentric.
- It is postdisciplinary seeking to go beyond disciplinary knowledge to a 'total vision of understanding'.<sup>43</sup>

The crucial elements are holism, evolution and a spiritual vision of the universe. For Birch it is a question of 'a new creation struggling to be born'.<sup>44</sup> This new creation is an expression of a higher law;

the source of all good, the source of all creativity. The moral and spiritual resources for a just, peaceful and sustainable global society are pressing daily upon us, seeking entry into life and blocked only by self-interest. There is a way through. Repentance is still possible.<sup>45</sup>

Only when knowledge has become unified and panoramic and ecology dominates production and economics can this postmodern world come into being. Then a reconciliation can also occur between religion, science and culture. Religion will cease to be a separate realm and move once more to centre stage: 'religion becomes less necessary the more it enables culture to find its real depths. The secular is then swallowed up in the sacred'.<sup>46</sup>

In the process Christianity must be transformed as it adapts itself to modern culture. The early Christian Fathers appropriated a great deal of Neo Platonism; modern Christianity must discover the equivalent 'element of depth' in modern culture.<sup>47</sup> Birch sees much to hope for in liberation theology and feminism. Interestingly Birch is attracted to Orthodox Christianity which he believes possesses 'a more organic view of the universe than the western church'.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately Birch's vision of the universe in which human society is transformed into a holy fellowship bound together by sacred principles is Utopian. But it is not eccentric. *On Purpose*, to my mind, recalls Ernest Burgmann's *The Regeneration of Civilisation* which portrays a similar vision of unity and spiritual brotherhood. For both men, nature and

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, pp.118–19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.128–34.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.135.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.136.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.165.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.66.

humanity move forward together towards a higher spiritual state in which cooperation and creativity flourish. It is a noble vision of the possibilities of human nature, one in which the sacred is portrayed in humanist terms.

### Anti-Humanism

The anti-humanist conception of the sacred and religion leads to other conclusions. There are few examples of anti-humanism in Australia. Apart from Carroll one could also point to antihumanist tendencies in James McAuley's writings. To explain its basic position it is necessary to explore two pieces written by European writers: T.E. Hulme's 'Humanism and the Religious Attitude' and Simone Weil's 'On Human Personality'.

There are three key ideas underpinning Hulme's position. The first is that there is a radical discontinuity separating the three major areas of reality: the inorganic world of mathematical and physical science, the organic world of biology, psychology and history, and the world of ethical and religious values. The 'regions of reality differ not relatively but absolutely'.<sup>49</sup> According to Hulme each of these three realms is completely separate from the others. The realm of ethics and religion is not vitalistic

there is an absolute, and not a relative, difference between humanism (which we can take to be the highest expression of the vital) and the religious spirit. The divine is not life at its intenseness. It contains in a way an almost anti-vital element; quite different from the non-vital character of the outside physical region.<sup>50</sup>

Hulme has not rejected the vitalist critique of positivism. Rather he has extended it a stage further. The human and the divine, the vital and the religious are separated by an absolute chasm and it is inadmissible to introduce the phenomena of one realm into another.

The second key idea is that philosophy is a mixed subject composed of two aspects: a scientific element and a tendency to use philosophy as a pale substitute for religion. Hulme continues 'The machinery elaborated by the first element in philosophy is used to further the aims of the second'.<sup>51</sup> It is this second element, the tendency to use philosophy to satisfy religious needs, which moulds the final picture of the world which satisfies the philosopher. To describe this non-scientific element of philosophy which determines the shape into which its scientific element is pressed Hulme coined the phrase 'canons of satisfaction'.<sup>52</sup>

The third prong of Hulme's approach stems from the idea that there are canons of satisfaction underlying the adoption of any view of the world. These canons of satisfaction, Hulme contended, are 'not inevitable norms, like those of logic'.<sup>53</sup> They are hidden—re-suppositions which do not become conscious until they are denied. More importantly he argued that the humanist canons which underlie the modern view of the world are 'demonstrably false'.<sup>54</sup> This falseness can be demonstrated in two ways: the direct and the historical. The direct method shows that modern humanism confuses two separate spheres of reality, the vital/human and the religious, by placing perfection in the realm of human

<sup>49</sup> T.E. Hulme, 'Humanism and the Religious Attitude', in Herbert Read (ed.), *Speculations* (London, 1965), p.4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

things 'thus giving rise to that bastard thing Personality, and all the bunkum that follows from it'.<sup>55</sup> More importantly this confusion of the religious and the human falsifies the divine by making it seem to be merely an extension of the human rather than something entirely separate from it. There is no human road leading like a stairway to heaven. The religious attitude can only be fully appreciated when it is recognised that all roads are closed. It is this realisation that life has a tragic significance which lies at the core of the religious attitude.

History can also be used, claimed Hulme, as a means of emancipating the 'individual from the influence of certain pseudo-categories'.<sup>56</sup> All of us, he argued 'are under the influence of a number of abstract ideas, of which we are as a matter of fact unconscious'.<sup>57</sup> Once these ideas are brought to the surface of the mind, to the conscious realm they lose their inevitable character. History is the means of disclosing these 'inevitable categories' by demonstrating that they have not always been. For, as Hulme continued,

It is possible by examining the history of the Renaissance, to destroy in the mind of the humanist, the conviction that his own attitude is the inevitable attitude of the emancipated and instructed man.<sup>58</sup>

Humanism is both an historical development which has occurred only since the Renaissance and, more importantly, demonstrably false. To summarise, Hulme sets up an absolute opposition between the religious attitude and the humanist outlook. The religious attitude can be summed up as follows:

1. Religion and ethics deal with objective, absolute values.
2. Man is limited and imperfect, endowed with original sin.
3. Hence there is a need for order, discipline and institutions.

Humanism stands in stark contrast to the religious attitude:

1. Life is the source and measure of all values.
2. Man is capable of perfection.
3. There is a need for the spontaneous growth of personality and this forms the basis of progress.

Weil's discussion of the human personality took as its point of departure the French equivalent of the Anglo-American humanist ideal of 'Personality', the doctrine of 'Personalism'. Weil argued that what is sacred in a human being is the impersonal. She rejected the notion that human beings produce great things by virtue of some creative spirit inherent in their personal qualities. What is truly valuable and sacred exists in a realm far above mere personality. The level 'where the highest things are achieved' is 'separated by an abyss' from that at which personal qualities are of importance.<sup>59</sup>

There is a Platonic realm of perfection; it is a realm of eternal verities—'Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and the anonymous'.<sup>60</sup> Weil contrasted this

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.33.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.37.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.38.

<sup>59</sup> Simone Weil, 'On Human Personality', in David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.275.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.276.



perfection with the essentially limited nature of the human personality which remains trapped in the realm of error and sin.

She concluded: 'The man for whom the development of personality is all that counts has totally lost all sense of the sacred'.<sup>61</sup> In other words there is no bridge linking the human and the divine such that human beings in expressing their creativity reach out and touch the divine. Instead there is an abyss. On the one side there is the realm of divine truth defined by silence and beyond words. On the other side there is the realm of humanity bound by personality and trapped by language and intelligence where the individual must remain satisfied with partial truth and opinion.

Truth can only be attained by one who goes beyond language and the merely personal, who loses self while standing speechless as a suppliant before the eternal. For Weil it is a gift offered to the afflicted but denied to the proud and cultured. It is not difficult to see why an anti-humanist would consider that Birch's description of the superiority of rational self-consciousness only proves that he does not truly understand the sacred.

Carroll has called himself an anti-humanist. Unlike Birch he does not view the sacred as part of a continuum stretching from humanity to the divine but as something separate and beyond mundane human existence. It is also something with which human beings must remain in touch. 'The human beast', he argues, 'cannot live without contact to higher and eternal values. Cut off, he withers, and then beastliness takes over'.<sup>62</sup>

Humanism, he believes, has been a failure. It cannot maintain a higher moral law.<sup>63</sup> Founded on the assumption that knowledge will make us happier and better, its great achievement has been comfort and the satisfaction of material well-being. Deficient in an understanding of the depths underlying human existence it cannot deal properly with the power of human guilt which 'is at root a spiritual condition, and can only be satisfactorily addressed in religious terms'.<sup>64</sup> Unable to comprehend the spiritual, humanism has unleashed a rancorous guilt which threatens to undermine the social edifice. Humanism has 'led Western culture into a dead end'.<sup>65</sup> In particular Carroll is dismissive of those breezy nineteenth century liberal optimists, such as Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman, who believed that culture and a liberal education would conquer all. For him they are shallow and unaware of the depth of the sacred—especially when compared to their continental contemporaries such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

Carroll emphasises this radical otherness of the sacred. The sacred order is not founded on knowledge and rationality, as it is for Birch, but rooted in myth and instinct.<sup>66</sup> He does not believe that the sacred is in some way limited to religion; he is in no sense an orthodox religious believer. Rather he is looking for sources of the sacred in the modern world and he finds them in two places: culture and what he terms the Law.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> John Carroll, 'The Politics of Culture', in Roger Scruton (ed.), *Conservative Thoughts: Essays from the Salisbury Review* (London: The Claridge Press, 1988), p.219.

<sup>63</sup> John Carroll, 'Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night'—*On the Retreat of Faith and its Consequences* (Bundoora, Vic.: La Trobe University Press, 1986), p.5.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>66</sup> John Carroll, 'The Post-Humanist University: Three Theses', *Salisbury Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (December 1988), p.22.

In his essay 'The Politics of Culture' Carroll argues that in the modern world culture has taken over the redemptive role once assigned to religion. High culture represents an attempt to find an adequate substitute for Christianity. Referring to Durkheim he believes that there is an energy in culture which is its 'sacred force'. Particular cultures are vehicles which express and channel this 'sacred force' in specific directions. Hence culture provides, or should provide, 'the bridge to the sacred', it should remind us 'of what is important, of the greater and higher currents of our destiny'.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in opposition to Humanism, culture is not the product of comfort and knowledge but is born suffering. Through suffering the depths of the sacred can be approached.

In cultural terms Carroll believes that western civilisation has two sacred sites: Athens and Jerusalem.<sup>68</sup> Of the two it is the Greeks who interest him most, in particular Homer and the tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles (not Euripides). In the works of these writers Carroll discerns the

existence of an absolute and inexorable sacred order whose laws it is a man's first duty to obey. That sacred order lies behind and above all things, ordaining and controlling.<sup>69</sup>

At the centre of the sacred order is to be found the Law. To transgress that Law, knowingly or otherwise, is to upset the sacred fabric and to bring the wrath of the Gods down on oneself.<sup>70</sup> To obey the Law is to restore and sustain the order of things. But obedience to the Law is not founded on knowledge and wisdom but on an instinctual appreciation of the right order of things. Antigone does what must be done, not out of calculation but instinct, and regardless of the consequences—true order is thereby restored.<sup>71</sup>

The Law is an expression of the universal sacred force but it is independent of culture. For Carroll this is important because he believes that high culture has failed in its task of keeping human beings in touch with the sacred centre of things. This failure of culture is essentially the failure of the cultured elites of western society. These elites are corrupt, saturated with rancorous guilt and unable to face up to their earlier responsibilities. Their values are, to use a term from Carroll's earlier work, 'remissive'.<sup>72</sup>

But the Law remains. Carroll believes that all humans are born knowing it even if that knowledge is unconscious. It is the duty of education, and of the gifted elites, to awaken the sense of the Law in human beings. Like Simone Weil, however, Carroll does not view the Law in terms of knowledge gained through the prison of language. Just as Weil believed that one must stand silent in the presence of eternal justice and that affliction allows the soul to enter into the chambers of Truth so for Carroll suffering is the key to understanding the Law. In his discussion of the Iliad as a poem expressing the 'tragic essence' of human life Carroll speaks thus of Achilles:

<sup>67</sup> Carroll, 'The Politics of Culture', p.220.

<sup>68</sup> Carroll, *Where Ignorant Armies*, p.10.

<sup>69</sup> Carroll, 'The Politics of Culture', p.224.

<sup>70</sup> Carroll, 'The Post-Humanist University' p.24.

<sup>71</sup> Carroll, 'The Politics of Culture', p.224.

<sup>72</sup> John Carroll, *Puritan, Paranoid, Remissive* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

We are also reminded that he who plumbs the depths through his own demonic licence, may come closer than any other mortal to the Law, through transgression, and in that sacred intimacy find his damned self gaining a new authority.<sup>73</sup>

Weil believed that the ordinary people were closer to an appreciation of justice than their educated betters because of their suffering and affliction. Hence her desire that they should be taught Greek poetry. Carroll also argues that ordinary people in western societies have, by and large, not been corrupted by the excesses of high culture, and retain a strong moral sense and a belief in the law: 'The ordinary man knows that everything is not permitted ... He just knows it.'<sup>74</sup>

The Law has survived in the hearts of ordinary people; they have kept in touch with the sacred force. And they have done so because they have not been corrupted by knowledge—in a very real sense the opposite of Birch's position.

But Carroll's concern is less with the ordinary people than with the betraying elite. How are they to be redeemed? On this issue Carroll makes two interesting suggestions. The first is that the 'Lord God of the West's religion, Christianity ... is culturally obsolete'.<sup>75</sup> In place of a concern with a transcendental God, Carroll suggests that just as 'in turning to Buddhism the Chinese chose a religion without a God' so the 'West should focus even more exclusively on Christ, as the Master'.<sup>76</sup> Carroll also argued that Christianity should cease its war on the flesh as the true source of human sinfulness lies elsewhere.

The second suggestion relates to Carroll's desire to reform the universities so that they cease to be humanist institutions dispensing knowledge and become instead post-humanist in nature and concern themselves with the Law. 'The task of the university', he claims, 'is to teach the Law'.<sup>77</sup>

To bring the elite once again in touch with the Law and the sacred force it embodies the university must once again adopt as its special vocation the teaching of High Culture. Universities may be inherently decadent and constantly in danger of doing more harm than good, nevertheless they are capable, when properly directed, of awakening a fear of the Law in their students.<sup>78</sup>

If culture is to thrive and the dangers of knowledge overcome the Law must be taught. Justice and Truth may yet triumph over verbal cleverness and sophistry. Carroll does remain confident that the Law will survive, if only because of his faith in the resilience of the people and their continuing moral capacities. Perhaps, one could add, the clever country may turn out to be the real test of those capacities.

The wider political implication of Birch's conception of the sacred is support for those elements of modern culture, such as feminism and environmentalism, which he believes will help to create a more creative and harmonious world. In this regard he is clearly an heir to nineteenth century doctrines of Free Trade and universal Brotherhood.

Carroll has become a determined and outspoken adherent of economic protection. Again there are clear connections between Carroll's conception of the sacred and his wider social vision.

<sup>73</sup> John Carroll, 'Homer the Wise', *Quadrant*, vol. xxxiv, no. 8 (August 1989) p.50.

<sup>74</sup> John Carroll, 'The Death of God', *Salisbury Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (December 1990) p.25.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> John Carroll, *Where Ignorant Armies*, p.12.

<sup>77</sup> John Carroll, 'The Post-Humanist University' p.23.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.25.

Economic rationalism is another indication of the failure of the Australian elite to take its responsibilities seriously. Their ethical standards and sense of civic duty have, in Carroll's eyes, been eroded by the quest for greed which economic rationalism fosters.<sup>79</sup>

The disintegration of elite values is related to a preference for abstract knowledge, be it humanist or economic, over instinct and culture. Hence, for Carroll, there is a greater need than ever to preserve the one remaining group in modern society which retains some sense of the sacred—the lower middle class. Carroll idealises this group because he believes that it has maintained its moral sense and consequently embodies the core values of the nation. In the lower middle class 'a sense for what is right and good endures'.<sup>80</sup> Quite correctly he perceives that a major consequence of economic liberalism is to weaken, if not destroy, the lower middle class as a cohesive cultural and social force. In his idealisation of the honest artisan uncorrupted by modern decadence, Carroll is articulating an ideal of Protection which has its roots in his understanding of the sacred.

Strangely for a man usually thought of as a conservative Carroll's programme for the renewal of culture is decidedly radical. His conservatism rests in his recognition of an eternal sacred force with which any culture must be reconciled if it is not to wither and die. His anti-humanism derives from his appreciation that this sacred force is something radically separate from mere human values. The modern humanist social order must, however, be reformed and its values transformed if it is to regain touch with the sacred order.

At the same time Charles Birch has a programme to bridge the gap between the human and the divine thereby radically reforming human society. Birch's conception of the divine is far more humanist than that of Carroll. God is transformed when humanity expresses its creative capacities. The divine is not an eternal order but an evolving natural force moving ever upwards and forwards. Finally whereas Carroll emphasises the law, culture and the mystery and depth of the sacred order Birch characterises the evolving cosmos in terms of an increasing self-consciousness and rationality. Ultimately this is what makes one man a conservative and the other a radical.

But perhaps the difference is one much more central to Western civilisation. Carroll claims the mantle of Augustine and Calvin.<sup>81</sup> Birch, with his optimistic view of human capacities, is clearly a spiritual descendent of Pelagius. In placing their ideas side by side we may be doing no more than continuing, in an Australian context, an argument about the nature of the sacred which can never, and will never, be resolved. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that the Australian setting transforms the nature of the argument. What was originally a theological dispute in the later Roman Empire became in Australia an economic dispute over the virtues of Free Trade and Protection. What the writings of Birch and Carroll indicate is that there is much more than mere economic issues involved in this dispute.

<sup>79</sup> John Carroll, 'Economic Rationalism and its Consequences', in John Carroll and Robert Manne (eds), *Shutdown: The Failure of Economic Rationalism and How to Rescue Australia*. (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 1992), p.25.

<sup>80</sup> John Carroll, 'In Praise of the Lower Middle Class', *Quadrant*, vol. XXXVI, no. 11 (November 1992), p.38.

<sup>81</sup> John Carroll, *Where Ignorant Armies*, p.13.