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THE PATHOS AND PATERNITY OF GOD

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Prior to his appointment to Cairns in 1992 Bishop Foley lectured in philosophy at the Provincial Seminary at Banyo and was also a spiritual director.

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From 1976 to 1981 he studied philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. In December 1981 he completed a doctoral thesis on "*Merleau-Ponty's Gestalt Philosophy*".

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THE PATHOS AND PATERNITY OF GOD.

+ James Foley
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The type of this talk is less than clear given that it is God of Whom we speak. We stand on holy ground. It need necessarily work on several levels: a sharing of faith, a homily, a philosophical critique, a contemporary reflection, a spiritual meditation.

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Earlier this year I had one of those disconcerting and disquieting experiences which happen to one in public life. Late on a Friday afternoon I was contacted by a journalist from *The Cairns Post* asking for my views on the controversial film "Lolita". Neither she nor I had seen the film. My advice therefore was that we were not qualified or competent to discuss the matter. However we did spend the next forty-five minutes talking about censorship in general.

On Saturday morning I awoke to find the bold headlines on the front page of the *Cairns Post* - "BISHOP GIVES CAUTIOUS NOD TO LOLITA"! ¹

Needless to say all hell broke loose.

I do not want to distract you by the merits or otherwise of the film "Lolita" or the broader questions of censorship, but I would reflect on that experience of public controversy.

While some of my views were reported accurately, the headlines did not help to say the very least. I felt exposed, misrepresented, abused. Some of my views had been distorted and some of my comments taken out of context. I could but half recognise myself in this report. Parts of what I saw, because they were inaccurate or incomplete, I did not like. I did not like myself as so reported - revealed.

However this turned out to be an instructive incident. As I prepared a homily for that same weekend it came to me that in God's self-revelation, God's own self is distorted: half-seen - unseen, half-understood - mis-understood, half-quoted - mis-quoted. The view of God which appears in public is as if on the front page of *The Cairns Post* - bearing only some faint resemblance to the private and ultimate reality.

Such self - revelations may also be for God an intensely painful and costly business - as anyone involved in public life would appreciate.

However this analogy is predicated on the rather dubious premise that God is an introvert rather than an extrovert: that God eschews publicity. Yet to play with that line for a

¹ *The Cairns Post*: Saturday, May 15 1999 p.1. & 2.

moment, I suspect that anyone, even the un-redeemed extrovert, is at times troubled by publicity and the potential for misrepresentation.

This rather protracted and distracting introductory example brings me to the heart of this reflection.

Ultimately, essentially, indeed exclusively, God is personal. God of Revelation, God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the God of Jesus Christ is intensely personal. God is personal in the fullest and deepest sense.

God is not a thing - an idol. God is not a proposition. God is not a philosophical concept.²

Any of these tools or handles are at best incomplete and inadequate. At worst they are mis-representations and distortions of the reality of God.

There is a convergence around this position in contemporary reflections upon God. In the Post-Modern critique the "god of deism", the classical "god of philosophers", is "dead". That god has bled to death. But such a conceptual god never had blood in it anyway.

Recently someone quoted to me the example that outside Madame Tussaud's **Wax Works** in London there is a doorman, one of those demeaning flunkey positions London indulges. At times it is a real person. On other occasions it is a very life-like wax model. You can only tell that it is the real person, not the wax model, by scratching it. If it is a person - it bleeds.

So too with God. God bleeds. This pathos of God is expressed - revealed - ultimately in Jesus Christ crucified.

God who suffers with humanity has considerable theological currency in recent decades: The God in/of the Holocaust!³ But that God, as Father, suffers and grieves at the crucifixion of his Son is a complex and controverted theological issue known technically as "Patricianism" = "Father-feeling". At the Council of Chalcedon A.D. 451: *"The Synod deposes from the*

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"Everyone who believes assents to someone's words; and thus, in any form of belief, it seems that it is *the person to whose words the assent is given*, who is of principal importance and, as it were, the end; while the individual truths through which one assents to that person are secondary." (Thomas Aquinas - *Summa Theologica* - 11a 11ae, q. xi, art 1.)

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P.S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, - Clarendon Paperbacks, Oxford, 1992.

priesthood those who dare to say that the Godhead of the only begotten is passible (= feels)." ⁴

This is a condemnation of a particular Christological heresy subordinating the Son: denying the Second Person's full capacity to suffer, so that the Father really had to suffer in the Son's stead.

One may not draw from this that God, as Father, does not feel at all or is incapable of being moved. Otherwise - why pray? Or why would God declare I am "*a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness.*" (Ex. 34/6-7)

At this stage in the human journey, spiritually and intellectually, is it not the God of Revelation: the compassionate, merciful, and even a suffering God, Whom we need to seek?

The advantages of a god of philosophy were a certain certitude and nice neatness - clear and distinct Cartesian ideas, crisp Modern manageable concepts. But such wax figures are inadequate and unworthy of the rich revealed mystery of a personal God.

Yet to say that God suffers, that there is a pathos within the life of God, may suggest that God is thereby somehow helpless and somewhat hapless.

The very first proposition of the Creed is: "*We believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty.*" "*The Father Almighty*"!! Therein lies a paradox:

What would an "Almighty Father" be like? An enduring insight into God as Father is glimpsed in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), where the father, moved with compassion, ran and clasped his returning errant son. This father is clearly passible - a father with feelings. But the parables are like analogies - we may not draw on them with exacting and exhausting rigour. In a simplistic reading: if this father was "almighty", the son would not/could not have gone so far astray!

The word "Almighty" in the Creed has been elaborated into those classical attributes of omnipotence: all-powerfulness and omniscience: all-knowingness. Does it follow that a god so defined would not need to feel at all, because such a god would know all and be able to do all? Feelings would be quite unnecessary! Such a god could readily, easily, spare itself of any need for pathos or suffering.

The theological meaning of "power" needs to be clarified. Nietzsche (1844-1900) observed that power is the one reality you cannot fake. Either you have it or you do not. Power

⁴ J. Stevenson (editor), *Creeds Councils and Controversies* SPCK, London, 1966, page 336

comes in worldly forms: political, financial power, military power, brute force. God's power is surely different!

Does our appreciation of these particular attributes of God have a bearing on the type of world we see and the kind of Church model we have? May not the tensions we presently face within our Church go right back to the elaborations of this first proposition of the Creed? What sort of God do we envisage? If one puts undue stress on either the "Father" or the "Almighty", one risks breaking an intimate connection. Is God a paternity and a potentate?

These two aspects are not easily reconciled. They carry with them strong spiritual, emotional and political connotations.

Recently I went on a pastoral visit to Maytown and Palmerville, now virtually deserted centres on the Palmer River goldfields. In these isolated lonely places about all that now remains intact are the rusting mighty steam engines which drove every piece of machinery on mine sites. Belts and chains carried power from boiler and engine to stampers and grinding dishes, to windlasses drawing up the load and to pumps de-watering the shafts.⁵ All is now silent, still and scattered.

Is an almighty, all-powerful "god" like the boiler and piston engine powering and working directly every piece of machinery?

Such would be a mechanistic god.

Such a model may have had a pervasive influence on some pre-Vatican II thinking about Church structures. Rome became the central powerhouse, the boiler and steam engine, driving the Church across the world - a not inappropriately 19th century industrial revolution model!

Incidentally Ronald Knox, after converting to Catholicism, when asked would he go on pilgrimage to Rome, replied in that rather quaint but curt English style: "If one is travelling on a luxury liner, (hopefully not the ***"The Titanic"***) why would one bother to visit the engine room?"

Our religious sense, our experience of life, our more recently developed ecclesiology and richer biblical mind-set would not allow us to rest comfortably with such a mechanistic model of God or Church.

Mechanistic models such as these come unstuck in a late C.20 Post-Modern mind-set. They had faltered already for the C.18 classical Modern mind.

The great earthquake in Lisbon on the 1st November 1755 killed thirty thousand people, many of them at Mass celebrating All Saints' Day. That event not only shook Lisbon. It shook an already fairly tired and tested faith in Christian Europe. It gave a forceful impetus to the free-thinking agnosticism of the Enlightenment.

How could an omnipotent and an omniscient god allow suffering on such a scale? Not only had the belts and chains somehow disconnected and sent one particular piece of machinery into chaotic destruction, it was as if the boiler-house itself had exploded. Crude mechanical models of all-powerfulness and all-knowingness need further nuance and up-dating.

So is God the railway controller in the signal box with "hands on the levers" (Paul Keating!!) changing the signals and shifting the points?

I was involved in a potentially fatal rail crash in the English Midlands in June, apparently a result of human error. An empty commuter train went through a red signal and came out onto the track of our Euston to Glasgow Express. Fortunately no one was killed or seriously injured. Even the best in railway safe-working does not guarantee against human error. And things simply do go wrong.

A more contemporary model of God's omnipotence, and particularly omniscience, could be that of the mainframe computer. Yet the Y2K problem does not recommend that model.

Anyway, steam engines, railway signalling systems and mainframe computers do not bleed when they are scratched. They do not think or feel. They are impassible.

There are other more human models of power: Political power! Some passages of Scripture, particularly in the Psalms, tend towards this: God as "a king", as a "fortress". Yet Jesus is unequivocal: "*Mine is not a kingdom of this world.*" (John 18/36)

Yet the political power model has enjoyed a recurring fascination - ever since Jesus himself was tempted in the wilderness (Mt. 4/8-10). It may have had some medieval appeal with good King Wenceslas and King St. Louis of France. But it is hardly a useful analogy today. Yet it is a model which has distracted Church life through history: up to the dictatorships of this century!!

Many good Catholics, lay and clerical, were more than a little sympathetic to Dr. Salazar in Portugal, General Franco in Spain and Mussolini in Italy. Stalin was the opposite, negative power pole in this equation. Few would now claim Hitler.

Fascist and anti-fascist movements were a feature of civic and parish life in some sugar towns in North Queensland among some Spanish and Italian political refugees and immigrants between the Wars.⁶ Traces of these influences may be latent within Church life still.

But all of this has taken us a long way from God - in both senses!

God's appropriate "Almightiness" must be found elsewhere than in mechanical or political models.

The resolution is there in the Creed itself: reconciling Father and Almighty: the power of a parental influence: the power of love. For St. John this is central: "*God is love. God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son.*" (1 John 1/8-9)

The Hebrew Scriptures abound with such tender images:

Am I to open the womb and not bring to birth? says Yahweh.

Or I, who bring to birth, am I to close it? says your God. (Is. 66/9)

It was you who created my inmost self and put me together in my mother's womb. (Ps. 139/13)

I led them with reins of kindness, with leading strings of love. I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek. stooping down to him I gave him food. (Hosea 11/4)

And Jesus used a similar plaintive imagery of unrequited love:

"How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused." (Mt. 23/37)

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D. Menghetti, *The Red North: The Popular Front in North Queensland*, History Dept. James Cook University, Townsville, 1981.

Our increased exposure to the Word of God has enhanced our images and provided much richer fare than mechanical, political and philosophical models.

Yet, while love can make heroic demands, of its very nature, love lacks an intellectual rigour and precision.

Can the best of our Christian intellectual tradition still save us from soft sentimentalism which may lead, ironically, to fierce fundamentalism?

Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways" argued, out of an Aristotelian world-view, for a prime mover, an efficient cause, a necessity amid contingency, ultimate perfection and a final causality. Each of these demonstrations concluded with the guarded remark, in slightly varying forms: *"And this everyone understands to be God"*.⁷

Thomas was careful in his God talk to speak always by way of analogy. Unfortunately, in lesser minds and clumsier hands, there is the attempt or the temptation to turn analogies into realities.

At the end of his own life Aquinas was given a glimpse, some experience of That for which the soul longs, pines - as in the words of the Psalm, *"It is your face oh Lord that I seek, hide not your face."* (Ps. 27/9)

Three months before his death Aquinas received a glimpse. The veil was parted. While celebrating Mass on December 6th 1273 he was suddenly struck. Something profoundly changed him. After that he never wrote or dictated again. He altered entirely his routine of the previous fifteen years. When pressed by his assistant, Reginald, he finally admitted, on the condition that it not be revealed as long as he was still alive: *All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me*.⁸ In medieval earthiness the expression may have been stronger than "straw"!

Human experience is necessarily perspectival and limited. All is not yet clear, translucent and fully revealed from the God of Revelation for us on this side of the veil: *"now we see as through a glass darkly; but then we shall see face to face"* (1 Cor.13/12).

⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, first part question 2 article 3 (Conclusion of "First Way").

⁸ J.A. Weisheipl, O.P. *Friar Thomas D 'Aquino*, his life, thought and works, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1975, p. 322.

God throughout the Scriptures has many and varied faces - sometimes difficult to reconcile. Revelation is a gradual progressing, purifying, disclosing process.⁹

Inevitably this is not without distortion and misconception. In a dangerous and disrespectful analogy: any passage of Scripture is, in some sense, like any sentence in the *Cairns Post* - with its power and its pitfalls - as my own recent experience attested.

To reiterate: God's revelation is most public and palpable, most powerful and painful in the nakedness of Jesus Christ crucified. Yet that exposure leads on to resurrection and the mystery turns again deeper on itself.

"It is your face oh Lord that I seek. Hide not your face." (Ps 27/9).

Yet in this spiritual quest, the intellect does have a part to play.

The Eastern Church tradition cautions against attempts to try to penetrate the inner mystery of the Godhead. It is not for us to speculate whether God is introvert or extrovert!!

But from our side, as the receivers of Revelation, we may reflect and speculate on our part, our response, in this personal relationship. In his recent encyclical *Fides et Ratio* the Pope developed the image of faith and reason as *"the two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."*¹⁰

Moses spoke to God *"as a man speaks with his friend"* (Ex. 33/11). In Exodus 33/18-23 there is a description of a theophany, an encounter with God, which is vivid and detailed in its dynamic. Yet it is curiously overlooked. It is not used anywhere in the Lectionary:

Moses said, "Show me your glory I beg you." And he said, "I will let all my splendour pass in front of you, and I will pronounce before you the name Yahweh. I have compassion on whom I will, and I show pity to whom I please. You can not see my face," he said, "for man can not see me and live." And Yahweh said, "Here is a place beside me. You must stand on the rock, and when my glory passes by, I will put you in

⁹ K. Rahner *On The Trinity* Herder & Herder, New York, 1970

¹⁰ John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican, 1991, par 1.

a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand while I pass by. Then I will take my hand away and you shall see the back of me; but my face is not to be seen." (Ex. 33/18-23)

To complicate the picture and to mix the metaphor further: we somehow see God over our shoulder as God has passed through our lives. Was this the glimpse, the hindsight, Thomas Aquinas had at the end of his life? Is this where and how time and eternity intersect for us??

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) reflected on being human - our being within time. We all live with a past which is thrown, given and spent, a present which hardly exists at all and the immediate anticipation of the future.

Even as I speak this sentence, you hold the words which I have just uttered and you already anticipate the conclusion of the statement. The present is not a point - a second of clock time or the flicker of a digital watch. The actual present is at most the thin tissue between the retained past and anticipated future.

The words of an old hymn provide a useful analogy: *"Time is like an ever rolling stream* ". Heidegger might recast that popular traditional understanding of time's efflux.

Time might be like that *"ever rolling stream"*, but it is a stream which also plunges over a waterfall, like the mighty Barron Falls close to my home. There is a past behind us. The present is that very brink of the waterfall just as the waters plummet and cascade to an uncertain future.

The future, though imminent and anticipated, is not yet given. I could drop dead before I finish this sentence. One of those all too frequent earthquakes at the end of this millennium could collapse this building on all of us before the night's lecture is over. We constantly live on the "cusp" - to use that vogue word.

Being within time and forever on the brink of eternity defines our human existence, our human be-ing.

And yet in this we are not alone. With the eyes of faith: God is with us. Contrary to what the title of a series of presently popular tourist books asserts, this is not a *"Lonely Planet"*.

For Heidegger the human being-in-time stands amazed before the blank fact that we "are" rather than "are not". Later life brought Heidegger a mellowing and a maturity, a certain passivity, a quietism, a sense of gratitude - that merely "to think is to thank". All is seen as gift, a donation, a harvest.

In this contemplative mood Heidegger envisaged a four-fold map, a "totality": gods and men (sic), heaven and earth.

In an interview given in 1966, which, curiously like Aquinas, was only to be published after his death, ten years later, he said:

.... but after long reflection: philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavour. But only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetising we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in our own decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline

We can not bring him ("god") forth by our thinking. At best we but can awaken a readiness to wait for him. ¹¹

These reflections on the human condition, from the side of the receiver, are necessarily subjective and yet they do have a ring of truth to them. They have a personalist, existential veracity to them.

Yet they necessarily lack that rigour, that mathematical certitude and objectivity presumed by previously classical Modern thought.

Contemporary personalist thinking and current spiritualities (New Age "mysticism" = "a fat lazy word"!) tend either towards a vague pantheism or a simplistic pious fideism, each only a step away from an all too prevalent fundamentalism.

The authentic spiritual journey, the ultimate personal quest, has to lead to something better. Hopefully it will lead us into the mystery of God.

Yet what measure can be put on to a personal relationship? What spirit-level does one place on love? To reiterate that cry from the heart, *"It is your face oh Lord that I seek. Hide not your face."* (Ps 27/9) Yet Scripture is ambivalent on this very point (See Ex. 33/11 v. Ex. 33/20), as are some of the liturgical prayers of the Church.

God made it clear to Moses that he may not see His face. (Ex. 33/20) St. John asserts that "*No one has ever seen God.*" (John 1/18). We do not see God's face. But we may see God's back passing. God has passed by. Yet God is not past. God is also present and future: the abyss over the waterfall.

Again to mix metaphors/analogies: While it may be God's face that we seek, at present it is not God's face that we see. It is only God's back which we may glimpse as we reflect back upon our lives. And we live in hope of eventually seeing God's face coming towards us.

Perhaps the most we can have now is access to God's ear.

In recent months the remnants of our naive Modern optimism have been knocked severely by the tragedies of East Timor. The weekend papers of 11-12th September were full of reports of atrocities, wanton destruction, human cruelty and perversities.

Coincidentally, in the Books/Review section of that same *Australian*, and there only in the form of a post-script, was this item on a Gloria Emerson, who had covered the Vietnam War for the *New York Times*:

Once, I got so desperate - the Americans had started bombing Hanoi - I ran to the National Press Centre, where they gave briefings a forty year old woman running through the streets in the middle of the night... and I wrote on the wall in Magic Marker "Father forgive. They know not what they do." And I don't even believe in God! Who is Father? "Father, forgive. They know not what they do." But there were no other words in the whole English language.

*.... "Father forgive. They know not what they do." But afterwards I thought, how there's no way ... no one, (no one else) to whom you can say you're sorry.*¹²

It could be as distracting to end, as I started, by developing another line of reflection.

If one wants or needs an argument for God's existence which may be plausible in our own time, as Thomas's Aristotelian - Platonic "Ways" were for his own time, now it may be a moral argument. This was most carefully formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He was

¹² *The Weekend Australian*, September 11-12, 1999. Books/Review p.15, "How's your Father?"

satisfied that he had demolished the metaphysical arguments for God's existence: *"I have destroyed reason to make way for faith."*

Yet Kant had a disquiet. He returned to the ethical question in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) after his epistemological triumph the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Human nature seeks the highest good. The human mind demands that justice and equity be fulfilled. Yet it is acutely apparent that such a moral balance is rarely struck on this side of life. Hence an after-life, a beyond, an immortality is needed for ethical settlement. And there must also be an ultimate moral arbiter so that equity and justice will be restored.

Kant would present this moral argument in terms of perfectibility rather than punishment. We do not have to have a powerfully vengeful god (of which there are remnants in the Scriptures and which still preoccupies parts of our religious consciousness.)

Without going down the eschatological corridors of heaven, hell and purgatory at this late stage, is it not possible or plausible that a personal loving caring and compassionate God will ultimately set things right and right things wrong? There is something hauntingly compelling in the Last Judgement scene described in Mt. 25:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats Come you blessed of my Father for I was hungry and you gave me food; (Mt. 25/31-35 ff)

Exactly how this future will turn out we know not. And yet is it not unreasonable that we so hope.

There is an appealing symmetry, an economy, even an ecological propriety in this line of thinking, which may be intellectually satisfying for our own time and place.

It may be simpler and indeed better to hold on to the image of God's ear into which we may call for justice and cry for help.

While it is God's face that we seek, ultimately, the intellectual part of us may have to be satisfied, intermediately, with the prospect of God's ethical ear.

Anthony Kenny, in his negative critique of the classical arguments for God's existence, poignantly concluded:

*One thing is clear. There is no reason why someone who is in doubt about the existence of God should not pray for help and guidance on this topic as in other matters It is surely no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift in the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard, or fires a signal which may never be seen.*¹³

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"It is your face oh Lord that I seek.

Hide not your face." (Ps. 27/9)

Or in Psalm 41:

"My soul is thirsting for God,

the God of my life;

when can I enter

and see the face of God?" (Ps. 41/2)

Or again in the "très intime" poetising of the Song of Songs

"I opened to my Beloved,

But he had turned his back and gone!

My soul fainted at his flight.

I sought him but I did not find him,

I called to him but he did not answer." (S of S 5/6)

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¹³ A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, p.129.