

Readings of Recognition 3
of the Proposed New Preamble for the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia

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The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.

This third statement among the points noted to be recognised in the proposed preamble seeks to give expression to the acknowledgement that neither God nor awareness of God was absent among the First Peoples. It identifies *law, custom and ceremony* as the means whereby the Spirit revealed God and claims that it was the *same love and grace* revealed in Christ which sustained and taught the First Peoples. As a statement it leaves itself open to a range of possible interpretations, some of which might be affirmed, some of which should, in my view not be. I think a reading is possible which could affirm the statement as consistent with the Church's theology, but that is possible only when one rejects alternative readings. It is always preferable to minimize this kind of ambiguity and I would hope this might be possible.

It is surely uncontroversial to claim that *the First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers*. God was not a recent settler; nor was sin. Nor should it be contested that the first peoples encountered God, for this is true of all peoples, including those quite unconnected with Jewish or Christian thought. Incidental to his argument that his fellow Jews needed Christ's redemption as much as any other people, Paul allows us to see that he presumes such encounter (Rom 1:18-23; 2:7-16), as Luke later has him do at Athens when he cites the poet Aratus (Acts 17:28; cf. also 10:34-35). Paul in Romans even indicates that he can contemplate positive response to such engagement (2:12-16).

The statement at first leaves open the nature of that encounter and the response to it. Its second sentence declares that encounter with God took place through *law, custom and ceremony*. Surely one way in which the peoples of the world may have encountered God is through their cultures, including their religious dimensions. Luke's Paul includes thus the poet Aratus. Paul, himself, notes creation and the law written on people's hearts, both of which belong as much to the statement as do *law, custom and ceremony*, though one can read these as including creation and conscience indirectly, but only indirectly.

The statement could be read as claiming that *law, custom and ceremony*, were not just a context in which people might have encountered God, as in other cultures, but that they were the Spirit's means, perhaps even as divine revelation themselves. Read in this way the statement would be claiming not only that God could speak through culture, but that culture is in some sense the word or communication of God. Such an extreme reading, either in order to reject the statement or to affirm indigenous culture either in patronising generosity or

cultural pride, runs contrary to Paul's stance, whose assessment is that with minimal exception the peoples of this world and their cultures are marked by sin – as is also his own. Idealisation of one's culture as divinely given or inspired, whether it be the British of Britishness, the Americans of the American way of life, the Nazis of Germanic tradition, or the Romans of Romanness, is idolatrous and potentially dangerous. The statement need not be read in this way, but nothing in it blocks such a reading and it would be helpful if this were not so.

The next sentence of the statement further refines the encounter as revealing *love and grace* and anchors its understanding of *love and grace* in Christ. In writing that this *love and grace sustained the First Peoples*, the statement makes a claim about divine providence. One might ask again what *sustained* here means and perhaps draw the conclusion that it means the same as it would for other peoples and generally refer to God's goodness in creation. Such statements can be problematic, but are no more so here than they are elsewhere. To speak of God in terms of *love and grace* is surely unproblematic as is its grounding in Christ. For the rest there is some ambiguity. The notion of providence becomes problematic if it is read differentially, namely that God directly ensured that some indigenous peoples survived and others did not, but it need not be read in this way.

More potentially problematic is the statement that *love and grace ... gave them particular insights into God's ways*, if this is a claim to special or exclusive revelation of some kind, but it need not be read in this way. To speak of *the same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ* is also to raise a range of possibilities, not all of which are consistent with the Church's faith. In *finally and fully* the word *finally* could simply be temporal, meaning something like, in the end; or it could mean definitively. One could read the statement in a way that suggests some kind of progressive revelation, even that in effect Australian indigenous culture takes the place of the Old Testament, and also as suggesting that the Christ event is reduced to revelation as information, particularly difficult in the light of New Testament statements that more is at stake in the Christ event than a kind of topping up or supplementation of previous revelation. The reference at the end to *love and grace giving particular insights into God's ways* could be read as narrowing the meaning of *love and grace* to insight and knowledge. It need not be read like this, but it is a disadvantage that it can be. That in this culture, too, particular insights developed should hardly be in dispute.

The New Testament's most strident claims to present the only way come in the context of intra-Jewish conflict between Jews who follow Christ and those who do not. The famous, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father but by me" (John 14:6) belongs here as does "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). These were spoken in ignorance of other major cultures, from India to China, the Americas to Australia. Taken out of their context they appear extreme, if not arrogant, but they are ways of asserting the centrality of Christ, not out of jingoistic loyalty but on the basis of conviction of the truth Christ preached and lived and normally associated with the event of his death and resurrection as representing the transformative event relevant

for all cultures. Whether in terms of cross or incarnation, the message is one of absolute love calling forth a response of trust and loving engagement.

New Testament writers, like most Jews before them, refused to deny God's presence beyond their own and also refused to harmonise differences into a syncretistic amalgam which naively asserts that all religious cultures are basically the same. They could espouse Stoic notions of order in the cosmos, for instance, as another way of speaking of Torah, while at the same time rejecting idolatry and the discrimination which that philosophy sustained. As noted, Luke and Paul can affirm positive response to God's presence in cultures beyond Israel, but both take Christ's revelation as the basis for recognising where the light may shine elsewhere.

In common with other New Testament authors they acknowledge also the story of God's engagement with Israel as fundamentally formative, as, beside the Church, do also Islam and of course Judaism. Acknowledging that the Christ event cannot be comprehended adequately without that context, we cannot simply exchange the Old Testament as Jewish cultural heritage for the cultural heritage of Celts, or Indians, or Greeks, or the first Australians. The very uniqueness of that light we see in Christ makes it at the same time possible to discern where else such light may shine; and shine or at least flicker it does to some degree in every culture. If in Israel it shone amid brokenness and sin, all the more will this be the case across the rich cultures of other peoples. Amid the brokenness and sin of Celtic Ireland, Hindu India, Egypt of the Pharaohs, and Aboriginal Australia the light shone. Missionaries brought both God and sin to our shores, but both were already here. A preamble appropriately should acknowledge this fact, not least because of the injustices and failures of the past, but also because of the ongoing human condition. A preamble stated with less ambiguity might avert false readings based in cultural pride or patronising naiveté, and reactive ones based on the well-founded fears such readings evoke, and bring us all to humility and respectfulness as we chart our beginnings.

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God through creation and the insights which shone through law, custom and ceremony. This was the same God of love and grace uniquely manifest in Jesus Christ thus seeking also the First Peoples for his own.