

The Beyond is Near

A Rainbow Spirituality

By

Dan O'Donovan

In Australian Aboriginal religion, the rainbow serpent is a creative being that lives in water, and moves under water and under ground as a source of power and life. The rainbow serpent is both a benevolent protector of its people and a punisher of law breakers.

Water is a living, moving substance. It gives vitality, refreshment and preserves life. Jesus gave living water to the woman at the well, even as she gave him a drink of the waters of creation.

Some Australian Aboriginal Christians have found in the Rainbow Spirit a powerful symbol of the Creator known through Jesus, who himself was present in the Creation (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:1).

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Photo courtesy of Vandana Mataji, Himalaya

PRELUDE

– ON A HIMALAYAN MOUNTAIN

Vandana Mataji is a holy woman in India. She is a Christian, and has an open prayer-house, ('*ashram*') high up in the Himalaya Mountains. A youthful *Gangamata* (Mother Ganges) flows peacefully by. All are welcome!

When I visited her there some years ago, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of the presence of God – in her, and everywhere.

The silence and beauty sank into me, like water into a dry sponge. Her gentle word did not break the silence, but helped me to become aware of it...

Her ashram is known as *Jeevan Dhara*, which means, "Living Water". As I was leaving, Mataji ('Little Mother'), gave me a copy of this painting by Indian artist Jyoti Sahi, which is the centre-piece of the ashram.

It shows Jesus sitting by Jacob's Well. (Read about it in Saint John's Gospel, chapter 4.) He is seated in the Lotus Posture of meditation, legs crossed. It relaxes, and removes fatigue of body and mind, making you sensitive to the Spirit within you, and indeed in everything around.

Jesus asks the woman for a drink, because he is thirsty.

She is surprised that he talks with her, since she belongs to another religion – the Samaritan religion – and Jews and Samaritans are not allowed to talk together.

Jesus says to her that if she realised who he was, she would have asked him, and he would have given her *Jeevan Dhara* (**Living Water**).

Below the painting, not shown here, are her words in reply: 'But, Sir, you have no bucket...'

All this is spiritual language, and something most mysterious is going on.

*Two humans are actually **meeting**, in mind and understanding,*

to the point of becoming mystically one.

John 4 is an unfolding story about all of us, who thirst.

Many people of different faiths come to pray at *Jeevan Dhara*. Each finds the sweetness there of what they know. There is Sound and divine Echo.

The painting shows Jesus as the Unifier. On one side of him is the Neem tree, sacred to the Hindu and signifying healing.

On the other, the Bodhi tree, (wisdom), under which the Buddha received his Enlightenment. Jesus does not separate these two great religions. Indeed, they become one in Him.

[Down the deep well, of course, sleeps the Rainbow Serpent.]

The thirsty woman reaches for the **Living Water** with her joined hands, into the dark *Hriday-guha* or, Cave of the heart, spoken of in the Hindu Scriptures.

In the darkness of the Mystery, she finds Light.

In the Bible, the words 'living water' mean water that moves, not stagnant water that settles in one place and soon becomes putrid. A river is 'living water'. So is a mountain cascade, a spring, or waterhole. You can drink it. It is good.

As cattle moan for the running stream
in time of drought,
(sings the inspired songster),
so my soul longs for you, my God.

(Read Psalm 42.)

We are now going to follow the tracks (of the cattle),
Aboriginal way,
to find It – Living Water.

1. LIFE

– EMBODIED

The Rainbow Spirit has been chosen as the symbol for this theology because the Rainbow Spirit represents life and rebirth, say the Elders in Rainbow Spirit Theology.

(Rainbow Spirit Theology, Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology (Harper Collins, 1997, page 13).

In her lecture to an international Catholic convention in Hobart in 1988, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (Naiyu) quoted, with approval, from anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's address to the Association of Social Anthropologists, Australian Branch, 27 May 1961. I extend her quotation for our purposes here.

'The whole (Aboriginal) religious story vibrated with an expressed longing for life. Vitality, fertility and growth; the conservation, production, protection and rescue of life... One finds life-signs throughout the myths and rites - water, blood, fat, hair, excrements; the sex organs, semen, sexuality in all its phases, the quickening in the womb; child- spirits, mystical impregnation and reincarnation; the development of the body from birth to death; the transitions of the human spirit from before taking on flesh until after physical dying; things that appear to live, such as green leaves, rain and the seasons, lightning, whirlwinds, shooting stars and the night sky; or things of unexplained origin, unusual appearance and giant size.'

All this, Stanner sees as *'the magnification of life.'* *'It may not have magnified goodness, 'he adds, but it did magnify life.'* *'The known evidence suggests that Aboriginal religion was probably one of the least material-minded, and the most life-minded, of any of which we have knowledge.'*

These three weighty voices, (Rainbow Spirit Elders, Miriam-Rose and Stanner), in agreement on the central place of LIFE in the Australian Aboriginal religious cultural tradition guide us forward now in an attempt to design a clearly Aboriginal Christian spiritual theology, aimed at a fuller experience of God as present, and daily enjoyed faith- living.

Once we recognise the Rainbow Spirit of the Dreaming – a 'symbol', say the Rainbow Spirit Elders - as representing 'life' for Aboriginal Christians today, we are into a properly biblical theology, inviting further exploration.

That is truly a gracious leap – from 'before' to 'after'. As Saint Paul says in another setting: 'Once you were..., but now...' (Ephesians 2:11-13; Colossians 1:21).

And, in the new courage of its Christian faith, Aboriginal theology bravely acknowledges it. Thanks, praise and glory, it sings, to the One who embodies Life for us, continuously with the past, in a positively transcendent way and measure

'I am the Life', Jesus assures it on the eve of his Passion. 'Life now poured out for you.'

As Life in its fullness, human and divine Jesus is able to enjoy life in all its forms:

'He liked the bush as we do', says Deacon Boniface Perdjert (Wadeye).

'He loved nature. He saw in the lilies of the field a glory greater than Solomon's. He loved the big things like the hills and open spaces. He loved the little things like the mustard-seed and the grain of wheat and the corn, drops of cold water and the little sparrows.'

'We have similar things like seeds and berries and yams, small waterholes, and we like the quietness of the hills and the bush. Like him we have a deep sense of God in nature.'

(From, Aborigines: A Statement of Concern. Sydney, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, 1978, page 22.)

While the focus, in the pages that follow, will be on the inner Christ, who is, in his glorified humanity, the Centre-Source, in our heart, where all our religious knowledge originates, these words of one great Syrian mystic, John of Dalyatha, also are true (Addressing Christ, divine Wisdom of the Father, he exclaims in wonder):

'While I thought I had found you within myself, I see that you abide in everything, as a whole, undivided and in fullness...'

Jesus, however, did not idolise created life in any form, not even the land or any part of it. He remembered too well those words of his people's prayer:

*You, Lord, founded the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain.
They will all grow old like a garment.
Like a mantle you will roll them up,
and they will be changed.
But you are the same
and your years will never end.'*
(Psalm 102:25-27)

'Take off your shoes, because the ground you are standing on is holy ground,' said God to Moses. (Exodus 3:5.)

What made it holy was the holiness of God in it, so that it did not 'perish', - not yet. Moses took off his shoes, and listened from his heart, dadirri-way. Listening that way, he was able properly to **hear**.

God told Moses then that he was worried about his people, and about how they were being harshly treated and being made to feel ashamed, though he had chosen them in a special way to lead. He told Moses, there in the desert, *'Go back and lead my people out of that slave-country into freedom. Don't be afraid. I will be with you.'*

Well now, that's where we come into the story. Our Christian Baptism sets us free from all those forces that hurt us and make slaves of us.

It brings us, spiritually, into a good land 'flowing with milk and honey,' the river of **Living Water** running right down the middle of it, and trees growing on one side and the other, which bear fruit all through the year, healing fruit, sweet to the taste (Revelation 22:1-3).

This Baptism sacrament was called 'enlightenment' in the earliest Church (Greek phōtismos, from phōs, meaning 'light').

2. RAINBOW LIGHT

What is the first word spoken by the Creator-God in the Bible?

'Let there be light'.

That means, not only his Incarnation in time – Light with a capital 'L' – but all that the Bible contains. He desires it to be.

Not so long after creation in the Bible narrative, God made a covenant with Australia's Aboriginal people. It is called 'the Noah covenant', the word 'covenant' meaning agreement, or promise. The sign he gave Noah's people of his constant love and protection was – the rainbow. Any time God saw it he would remember the covenant he had made, and have pity on the people, so they didn't come to any harm.

The God-given sign of the Nature-serpent always spoke to the Aboriginal mind and heart, in mystery and in a hidden way. Whether as 'the Milky Way', or as the bow in the clouds after a storm, or again as the creative power that still moved across the land, it was the one Spirit – the Rainbow Spirit – now recognised by Aboriginal Christians as the Spirit of the Living God, God of the Noah promise and of land and sea, God also of Jacob's Well.

We know that the rainbow is related to the sun. It is caused by the sun's rays playing with rain or spray, giving rise to those different colour-bands in the form of an arch.

Now, our Sun is the 'Sun of Justice', whom the prophet Malachi (4:2) had spoken about long before his coming: '... the sun of justice will rise for you, with healing in its rays.' That is why the sign of the rainbow is the best symbol of the Australian Aboriginal Christian identity theologically.

With its Sun-relationship, the rainbow is, in the first place, light-bearing and light-giving. So, we have in mind a bright, not a gloomy theology. Music, song and lively dance woven through it; spears and boomerangs, carved shields against the wiles of the Evil One, artifacts of every kind, as well as Nature's own wild abundance – all part of the total theological statement, raising hearts to the divine Beyond within and without. That is human prayer with no limit.

Throughout, the spoken word occupies its vital place, but bowing always to silence and the silence-full sound.

This is, indeed, the way Asian ('Eastern') theology in general goes. Differences, even apparent contradictions, are not the problem they often seem to be in the 'West'. Asia prefers the reasoned feeling of 'both... and' to the more rigid 'either... or'.

This 'East' – 'West' variance, or tension, had taken its form already during that period of time in our world history called by some 'the Axial Era', (800 B.C.E. to 300 B.C.E.), a strange occurrence that moved across the great Eurasian landmass, the moment being ripe. It left Australia more or less untouched.

Over the continent of Eurasia, the human seeker questioned, for the first time, and independently, in India, China and Greece, and as far as Egypt, the traditional pattern of life. People became conscious of the 'self' they were, other than Nature and Divinity. There was, says one historian, 'an awakening of the moral sense.' During that time, the so-called 'Great Religions', with their sacred Writings, emerged: Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, and the religious philosophies of Greece.

Australia felt its impact slightly, as it began to meet and talk with Macassans and other seafarers interested in Aboriginal trade. Elements of Shamanism, which were new, came with them to reinforce what was already there, in Aboriginal understanding and practice.

But the handing on of religious knowledge remained oral until modern times. It happened through Law, Culture and Ceremony.

What is orally transmitted, however, stands in contrast with the mystical experience. This is not necessarily passed on through any process of initiation, but has to be personally sought and found. No 'sacraments' – the Christian included – work like magic.

'Seek and you will find', said Jesus – the arduous lifetime's search, with constant maturing in the find. This is the rapturous theme of the mystical Jewish love-poem we call now 'The Song of Songs': 'I have found him whom my soul loves,' sings the bride, (each one of us, standing barefoot at the Burning Bush of our heart).

'Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ', continues Paul, the seer.

'Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or persecution, or the sword? No! In all these things we have overcome through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:35-38).

Now, the light the rainbow bears and gives is varied, each shade of colour showing up and beautifying the others. It is not a conflictual sign. Not even competitive.

There is no competition between parts of a healthy body. So it is that Aboriginal society was never, typically, competitive.

Perhaps it is this form of witness it is called to, still today. No winners, no losers, but everyone the gainer for it.

While the world undoubtedly needs competition, it needs even more the non-competitive reminder as a healing ointment, maternally soothing and tranquillising.

There is one rainbow, therefore, with many colours.

Saint Paul sees the Church-mystery itself like that: one Spirit, binding together many different parts. In the Spirit's Body, which we call 'the whole Christ', the hand is not the eye. But both hand and eye help each other for the Body to work well. In the Church-community, unified by the Rainbow-Spirit, there are many gifts and different forms of service. All are given for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12).

Pastor George Rosendale speaks about 'the philosophy of caring and sharing', so characteristic of his people.

He speaks of this with pride, pointing out that you never find homeless Aborigines. Always there is room somewhere. And again, "Kinship or adoption or marriage brought people under these caring obligations. There was no abstract word for love. It was shown in action through the caring and sharing philosophy.'

(In *Milbi Dabaar*, Wontulp-Bi-Buya's Resource Book, 2004, page 9.)

Like the dove with the olive-twigs in its beak, the Rainbow is a sign of peace and calm after the flood. It is also a sign of harmonious living. In theological terms, the Sun-derived **Rainbow Light** is salvation for us today. The Noah-covenant has been taken up into the later covenants – with Abraham and with Moses – all three being assumed together into the one 'eternal Gospel' (Revelation 14:6) in the Blood of the Lamb.

So, we can move on now to the Rainbow-Sunshine in our heart. Or, full **theology**, as the ancients understood it – infinitely more glorious than words on paper.

3. THABOR

– THE MOUNTAIN TOP

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.' (2 Corinthians 4,6).

Saint Paul says the light has shone in '**our hearts**'. He is writing to a large community of people – ordinary mixture, riff-raffs there too – who lived in the town of Corinth.

What we are going to be talking about, therefore – the experience of **close union with God**, which flows out of our Baptism – is not just for a few saintly sort of people. It's for everyone! A lot depends on our personal spiritual hunger and generosity, of course. Grace is always there to help us, no matter what.

Before anything else, then, we have to purify our hearts, to make them fit and ready to receive the All-Holy, so that S/he can come and stay.

What does '**purify our hearts**' mean?

It means trying, with the help of God's grace, to remove from our soul and our behaviour – like Moses taking off his grimy shoes - what are called 'the passions' (bad habits): selfish greed and anger, the main ones.

Over these, it may happen that we have little or no control. They carry us with them and make us do things or say things we know are harmful. Prayer to God, and his grace, help us to overcome these until we have control of them. 'Help me, Lord', we cry out in our distress. And help comes.

As well as working to remove our passions, or to change them for the better, we have to **practise the virtues**.

Mostly, virtues are about that caring and sharing Pastor George has spoken about. So, traditional people are off to a privileged start simply by being themselves, God coming always to meet them first, so much does he long for them.

That is the PRACTICAL side of our growing inner life of prayer and loving union with God: removing vices, practising virtues. The awakening of dadirri¹, like sunrise over the hills, which Miriam-Rose has told us about, will work wonders in our progress.

The CONTEMPLATIVE side, on the other hand, is our quiet awareness, also growing, of God living within us as our Friend and Companion. Jesus even speaks of himself as our Bridegroom, making our relationship with him like a sort of marriage. Saint Paul repeats this same teaching:

'... he who joins himself to his wife becomes one body with her. For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh". But he who clings to the Lord is one Spirit.'
(1 Corinthians 6:17).

Now, what I am naming 'Thabor'² is an event of the heart. The heart is the **place** of our spiritual seeing. The mind is the **agent**, and is like the heart's eye.

¹ **Dadirri** – "a special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation" (Miriam Rose Ungu nmerr-Baumann).

² Mount Thabor – place of the mountain top experience with Jesus (Luke 9:28–36).

In what we call his Transfiguration, Jesus was seen at prayer by those three chosen ones who were with him.

In silent communion with the Father, he was radiant as the sun.

(Read, Luke, 9:28-36).

Peter was one of those three, and described the scene years later in a letter he wrote to the churches:

'We were eye-witnesses', he says, 'For when he received honour and glory from God the Father and the voice was carried to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased", we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain...'

'You will do well to attend to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.'
(2 Peter 1:16-19.)

The '**morning star**' is, in fact, one and the same Jesus, in his glorified Christ-condition now, rising again 'in your hearts' – like a Dawn.

This has been particularly clear to the spiritual and mystical tradition of the Christian 'East', attracted as it always is by both "Light' and 'Life'. On Mount Thabor, indeed, those two meet in the Person of the Son of God.

The event is also a meeting-point, in time, of the Old Law and the New. Moses and Elijah, those two great prophets of the Old Law, converse with Jesus about his approaching suffering and death in Jerusalem. It was a peaceful conversation.

The three who were allowed to witness the event were lost in great wonder at a vision which was beyond their understanding. They fell to the ground.

'But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up, don't be afraid". And when they looked up, they saw no one but only Jesus.'
(Matthew 17:17). Moses and Elijah had gone.

In the middle of the story there is the **cloud**:

'... a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him".' (Luke 9:34-36).

That cloud refers to the obscure, dark, nature of our seeing. 'Now we see in a mirror dimly', as Paul says in that same letter to the Corinthians. (Read 1 Corinthians, all of chapter 13.)

What we see in the mirror of our soul is *'the glory of God in the face of Christ.'* Naturally, it produces awe: *'they were afraid* (reverential awe) *as they entered the cloud'*, says Luke.

This mystical wonder, or awe, is well-known also in the pre-Christian Aboriginal religion. A work, then undefined, of the one Rainbow-Spirit.

Seeing, we **understand** something of the Beauty of God now. We can do this because ours is a human sharing in the divine knowledge of Christ Jesus our Mediator, whose Image-Face we contemplate in the mirror of our soul.

According to Luke, they stayed up there on the mountain for the night.

Next day, when they came down, a crowd of people was gathered there. A man cried out,

"Rabbi, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child. Sometimes a spirit seizes him. It shakes him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they were unable." "Bring him here", said Jesus.

When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, *"How long has he had this?"*

And he said, *"From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."* And Jesus said to him, *"If you can! All things are possible to him who believes."*

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, *"I believe; help my unbelief!"*

And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again."

And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead". But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Spirituality is theology lived out.

The prayer-experience of Thabor, entirely a work of grace in those who are ready, is seen here to be closely associated with healing of all sorts of ills.

The 'dead' boy's rising up hints at the Life and Light of Baptism. Out of the small seed planted then in the good soil of the faithful heart, all mystical experience grows.

So, in the end, we come back to the beginning, as often happens in spirituality, (Read, Genesis, 1:1 and John 1:1.) – only, each time round in fuller measure.

The Healing (Neem-tree) and the Wisdom (Bodhi-tree) of Jyoti Sahi's painting become One in the Person of Jesus, sitting by Jacob's Well, (our human condition), and thirsting for our reaching up to him.

'Whoever drinks of this water, (of Jacob's Well), will thirst again. But anyone who drinks of the water that I will give them will not thirst any more. The water I will give them will become, within them, a fountain springing up into Life everlasting.'

The rainbow-sign is, at the same time, One and Many. It is symbol of That Which cannot be symbolised, or named. The Unspeakable, spoken.

In the mystical experience it leads to, there is Cave and 'luminous Cloud' (Matthew 17:5). The 'luminous cloud' represents the Holy Spirit, out of whom the Father's voice is heard.

With and in the humanity of Christ, those are *A Rainbow Spirituality's* principal components.