4
Does God Actually Matter?

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is, in the light of three challenges to the way we speak about God (invasion and suffering, a culture that finds little space or need for God, and the claim of Indigenous people about the presence of God in this land), to see if we can draw from the tradition helpful insights to talk about God as one who matters. By asking whether God "matters," I mean that life is different because of God, and that we are not, for all practical purposes, atheists. I am not seeking to offer a definitive response to the challenge that is posed here, but to question some parts of the tradition and to suggest some of the contours that need to be followed as this conversation develops further.

The Challenge to the Way We Speak about God

God and the European World at the Time of Invasion

While a case may be put that those who went to the U.S.A. did so in search of religious freedom and to establish God's colony, the world had changed remarkably by the time the British decided to occupy Australia. In Australia there was no question of God and promised spaces. This country was to be a place to house those caught up in one of the great movements of human life: the growth of modern industrial society and the movement of people to the cities. This was the time of the emergence of the Enlightenment, with its claim that all things could be determined by human reason, that the world could be explained without God, and that if God existed at all, it was as an absent clock maker who set things in place and now sits at a distance watching with bemusement as the

world goes on. From belief in stability, order, permanence, and meaning, people in Europe during the nineteenth century came to feel that "all was not well with the world." There was a loss of a vital framework of values and beliefs, a feeling that life did not have any real meaning. The future became a thing of uncertainty, so that the present was lived as intensely as possible, or there is an escape into nostalgia and the desire for the Golden Age. Part of this unease was the growing sense of the secular, the sense that human life rests in the hands of human beings, and that people could no longer rely on assistance from a transcendent Being. Both survival and happiness became a human burden.

The Industrial Revolution created many of the circumstances that made escape from reality seem such a necessary act. Not only did it create the slums and gross poverty that marked the nineteenth century, it also contributed to the lack of meaning, which infiltrated the societal and individual consciousness. The sense of universal meaning and wholeness is particularized for most people in the meaning they find in their relationships and work. In work, in particular, people are able to give expression to their identity, relationships, and sense of worth. For working-class people in particular, industrialization and specialization removed any sense that they were creating something meaningful. They were simply selling the one thing they had to sell—their labor—in order to live. It was hard to see work as vocation, as an expression of Christian faith in their daily lives (particularly as many did not have that faith). This trend towards meaninglessness was worsened by the separation of the public and private spheres, which also marked industrialization. Alienation from work, and thus from a large part of each day and its activity, meant that life became disintegrated and divided, and lacked an overall meaning and wholeness. The great majority of Australia's earliest "settlers" came from the large cities of England, where this alienation was a mark of life. They brought to Australia a sense of meaninglessness that was rarely tempered by contact with any scheme of meaning provided by Christianity.

The church and community that came to Australia were also shaped by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment saw a repudiation of the idea that human beings needed the tutelage of the church, and an affirmation that each person was in control of him- or herself. As I have explained in earlier chapters, in this period religion became a privatized and internalized reality, even if the church remained a more-

or-less important social institution. In this world, public debate was to be conducted without religion, and religion was a particular, voluntarily joined sphere of life. The church had a role "as legitimators of individualistic virtues and nationalistic values in secular states willing to grant 'religious freedom' in return for unthreatening ideological support."[1]

There is in the Australian community a deep sense of fate; a sense that if there is a God, it is a God who is distant and uninvolved in the world, and who is not concerned for human beings in their daily lives. That is, Australians struggle to talk meaningfully of One who is transcendent yet involved in human life. The response to this is large amounts of gambling, self-depreciating humor that mocks the world and its fate, a search for experience that fills the void of lack of meaning, and—as ANZAC Day celebrations or responses to the Bali bombings show—a deep appreciation of the courage of those who confront that fate. There is admiration for the courage that confronts the hand one has been dealt in life, the stoic acceptance of life, and the ability to get on without fuss.

Speaking about God on Indigenous Land

It is not easy to describe the heart of Indigenous religious life, that which has become known as the Dreaming. It is an understanding of life in which each of the features of the landscape, the markings of the world, is an "icon" of the presence of the Spirit of the earth and a promise that the Spirit is still present and animates life. That Spirit is also present in, and represented by the various animals and other life, which become totems or signs of people's place in the world. From this are drawn complex relationships, and the laws that govern life. That understanding is sustained by sacred story and by ceremonies that mark not historical events (e.g., the life of a political community) or seasons (e.g., the natural cycles of a farming people) but the boundaries and forms of life of people deeply attached to land.

Indigenous Christians believe that God placed them here, and gave them this land. God was already present in this place and did not need to be brought by the invaders. How then do they/ we speak of God who allowed/ purposed invasion and dis-location? What does the church

1. Mudge, *The Church as Moral Community*, 37.

learn from God's presence in this place, and how is God revealed? How can we speak of God and the sacredness of land in this place

The Meeting of Colonizers and People of the Dreaming

Conversations about God are also shaped by the history of invasion, dispossession, and ongoing marginalization. That is, Second peoples in this place are faced with one of the oldest questions in Christian theology—the existence of suffering in a world that is ruled by God. In this case, the suffering is not caused by disease or natural disaster but by human action and invasion, and the question is how such invasion, and the suffering it caused, fits into claims we make about God and God's providential care. How can one believe in God in the face of ongoing Indigenous reality? That is, if God is good, how did God allow for this land to be invaded, the people killed and oppressed by racism, and the people still forced to live on the margins? There is inescapable existential agony in this question.

The Tradition

To step into the theological landscape that is concerned for God is to confront issues about the nature of God, the language we use to speak of God, the way God is known, the mystery of the Trinity, God's place in creation and redemption, God and the end of history, and the meaning of providence and its relation to human freedom and responsibility. Within this wider range of issues, there are some parts of the tradition that are worth particular exploration. These parts are the providence of God, how we speak of God in the face of suffering, questions around natural religion and how we know God, the need for human beings to know God in human form, and the challenge of a theology of the cross.

The Providence of God

The traditional affirmation of the church is that God is Lord of, and offers providential care for, the whole created universe. God is not the absentee clockmaker but remains involved in creation and guides it towards God's desired goal. As John Calvin says:

> It were cold and lifeless to represent God as a momentary Creator, who completed his work once for all, and then left it. Here, especially, we must dissent from the profane, and maintain that the presence of the divine power is conspicuous, not less in the perpetual condition of the world than in its first creation . . . After learning that there is a Creator, it must forthwith infer that he is also a Governor and Preserver, and that, not by producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a special Providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow.[2]

Calvin believed that all events were governed by God, and that there could be no chance or capriciousness in life.

This affirmation of God's providence is most severely tested and challenged by the reality of evil and suffering. Christians are confronted with the question of whether they have to deny the reality of evil (a profoundly difficult thing to do in our age), whether they can restrict or alter the way we normally think about the power of God, or whether to deny God's goodness. One of the issues raised by suffering is, does God care? Indeed, can God feel suffering?

By the third century, influenced by Stoic philosophy and the value of *apatheia* (being above passion or emotion), the church argued that God, being whole, complete, and without need, could not suffer (this is called the impassibility of God). This move to emphasize God's omnipotence and omnipresence over against God's compassion, longsuffering, justness, mercy, and kindness had a political purpose. When the church began to enter the centre of power as partners with Constantine in the shaping of Roman power, there was no place for a suffering God, or for a God who acted in solidarity with human beings. God was made to be distant from the world, to act not in and with the world but towards the world from a distance. God was the one whose power sustained the world and underpinned the power of those who ruled. God worked through representatives: kings who reigned by divine right, and churches whose hierarchical form justified such a chain of power. The attributes of God emphasized power, majesty, omnipotence, sovereignty, and the impossibility that God could feel or suffer (for this would imply change and the possibility of real relationships between God and

2. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 1, chap. 16, para. 1.

people). God is removed from creaturely suffering and becomes the one who lives in unapproachable majesty. God is not only relocated to the political centre of society but becomes unapproachable and dispassionate. God emerges as the one from whom all tenderness is removed, the God of power and might, who requires the church to mediate God's life. As the perception of God changed, the practices of discipleship that transformed Christians into a kingdom people were spiritualized and came to have no real relevance to the political life of society.

Providence and Suffering

Within the Christian theological tradition, the issue of human suffering arises as, how can God be all powerful, and all loving, and there still be suffering (the problem of theodicy)? There have been essentially two schools of thought in relation to this issue: that of St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and that of Irenaeus of Lyons. (c. 130–c. 200). Augustine claimed that God created a perfect world, into which entered the sin of Adam, which was essentially the abuse of human freedom. Suffering is a symptom of sin. It is an act of punishment or chastisement, and is as a call to repentance. Irenaeus, on the other hand, said that the perfection of creation will not occur until the end of history. Suffering is a necessary part of human life through which human beings grow and reach their full potential and perfection. Suffering is both a symptom of sin and a mark of our life as a work in progress.[3]

There is a third part of the tradition, which does not seek to explain suffering but suggests that we must simply trust God because our knowledge of God is very limited. We must patiently endure suffering and not argue against it or challenge its existence.[4]

What these three views hold in common is the belief that God is responsible for suffering. God has the power to control the world and everything that occurs in the world. God has power over nature and the affairs of all people. In this understanding, the main characteristic of God is not love, wisdom, or saving work, but power.

Daniel Migliore provides us with a helpful understanding of some other voices that are emerging in theology. He speaks of Karl Barth's

3. See Dutney, *Playing God*, 68–69; and Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 123–25.

4. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 123–24.

concern for providence that is interpreted in the light of a christocentric and Trinitarian faith that allows God to preserve, accompany, and govern the world while providing space for human agency and freedom. That is, his doctrine of providence is shaped less by assumptions about omnipotence and more by his understanding of grace. The issue that needs further work in Barth is the relationship between God's actions against evil and the work of human beings, and the relationship between patient acceptance of evil and active forms of protest.[5]

Migliore also explores "protest theodicy" (a challenge to the total goodness of God), "process theodicy" (God's power is radically restricted and is expressed persuasively rather than coercively), "person-making theodicy" (as Irenaeus says, evil and suffering help people to grow into what God intends them to be), and "liberation theodicy" (people are called to share in God's redemptive suffering and struggle against suffering in the world).[6]

One of the important questions posed by the tradition is whether we can speak about God without speaking of God's absolute sovereignty, of God's control of the world? If we do not or cannot speak of God's sovereignty, does this mean that, for all practical purposes, we live as atheists, people without God? The issue is, what do we see as the necessary divine attributes; in what do we ultimately put our trust? And, connected with this, what criteria do we have for the set of attributes?

For Christians, the criteria are christological. The attributes of God are those we see in Jesus Christ. While we believe that God is in the entire world, the pain that is in the world stops us from a too-easy equation of God with the world. There is far too much that makes no sense and that contradicts the human search for humanness and wholeness. We know there is a huge gap between God and our reality. But as Christians, we claim that this gap, this temptation to agnosticism and unbelief, "is interrupted by a Word once spoken, by one life lived and death undergone."[7] It is not the case, as some christological debates seem to assume, that we know God from other sources and have to figure out how Jesus could be God, and what attributes Jesus adds to our understanding of God. Rather, we begin with the claim that it is in

5. Ibid., 125–28.

6. Ibid., 129–31.

7. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 156.

Jesus that we have the clearest revelation of God, and this christological claim, linked with our Trinitarian understanding, changes the way we understand "God."

Andrew Dutney suggests that we can continue to speak of God, and even of God's power, but in a different way. God's power is not power that interrupts life occasionally, but is continuous and sustaining power through which all life is made possible. It is enabling power that cooperates with life, and makes freedom possible.[8] Dutney seems to be opting for a response that is very close to what Hubert Locke sees as the liberal understanding of the way God acts in history. Locke says that in both liberal and evangelical theology, God is seeking to redeem the world, but the issue is whether this occurs by the way the righteous change structures, or the way God changes people's hearts. "In the context of the Exodus story, for example, liberals see God as empowering the children of Israel so that they overcome the oppression of slavery. For evangelicals, God changes the heart of the Egyptian pharaoh so that Pharaoh frees his Jewish slaves."[9]

Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the problem of suffering does not challenge our belief in God, but rather challenges the way we speak about God, the story we tell. It forces us to ask where God is in this suffering and, thus, how we can speak of this God. We are not asking, can we talk of God? "but rather what kind of God it is Christians worship that makes intelligible our cry of rage against the suffering and death of our children."[10] We are not seeking intellectual understanding. There is no hope if all we gain is new information and learning. Rather, as Hauerwas says, the only hope we will have is if we can place alongside our stories of pointless suffering a story of suffering that shows we have not been abandoned.[11]

Involving himself in a discussion with Walter Brueggemann, Hauerwas raises a couple crucial points. First, questions about theodicy became acute in Israel when this people, who were in a covenant relationship with God that seemed to promise them a great place in

8. Dutney, *Playing God*, 83.

9. Locke, *Searching for God in Godforsaken Times and Places*, 31. I don't find his division between *liberal* and *evangelical* helpful, but the general distinction in positions seems helpful.

10. Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*, 35.

11. Ibid., 34.

the earth, are sent into exile. There is a deep challenge to the assumption that good people prosper, and that evil people suffer. Theodicy is never just a question of God's relationship to evil but is also about social arrangements of access, benefit, and the way God is named in that arrangement. So, second, questions about suffering arise in particular power structures and reflect that social situation. When we pose the question of theodicy as a universal one, we obscure the major issue of the situation and experience of the one who asks. Questions of suffering are always asked by particular people in particular times and places. It makes a difference if the person is suffering, causing the suffering, or pretending to turn a blind eye to the suffering. Third, theodicy legitimates the way society is organized, for the very language of theodicy speaks of power and of who has access to that power and of whom it protects. Abstract theories of theodicy, separated from real human struggles, concentrate on explanations. They explain why suffering exists, and why the world order is the way it is. They make suffering an issue about God's relationship to suffering. They allow human beings to take charge of the world, because clearly God cannot deal with suffering, and humans must.

Finally, to return to Augustine and Irenaeus, the important issue is that they were not trying to provide an explanation, a metaphysical explanation, for suffering but were suggesting how people should respond to suffering (with either repentance or growth). For them, history had an importance, a place in which the work of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Their response to suffering had to do with how they would be church, God's people within God's history. The church does not have a solution to the problem of evil or for how to speak of the providence of God in the face of suffering, but is a community that sustains life in the face of that which would destroy it.

How Can We Speak of God in Indigenous Life?

In an earlier chapter, I suggested that in the Reformed tradition there is an understanding that God is known and is revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, as well as in Scripture and through the Holy Spirit. I suggested that we meet Jesus in the least and most marginalized in our society.

A significant issue for the church in Australia in the face of the claims of Indigenous peoples about the presence of God is, to what extent can the church acknowledge truth about God in Indigenous spirituality, and religious and social life?

This question raises in a particular way the more general questions of what place a plurality of religions have within the purposes of God, and the place of Jesus Christ within that plurality. This is a major issue in the twenty-first century, particularly in the present context of terrorism, conflict, and war. In Australia we need to make sure that this important conversation does not exclude or overshadow the question of God and Indigenous peoples.

There are a variety of positions taken within the Christian theological tradition in regard to other religions. These range from "all truth is in the Christian faith, and other religions are totally in error" to "all religions are equally capable of revealing God and offering salvation," with various positions in between.

There is no space to deal fully with what has been and continues to be a complex debate. I simply wish to suggest that conversations about God in Australia need to take seriously the claims of Indigenous people, and to offer a couple of suggestions for a framework for that conversation.

First, it is helpful to distinguish between what we can know of God in other religions (the issue of revelation), and whether other religions are a source of salvation. This issue is important in Australia; for if I understand Indigenous Christians correctly, they are suggesting that God has been revealed among them, and they have God's law to enable them to live faithfully with God, but salvation is found in Jesus Christ.

Second, I agree with Barth that our knowledge of God in other religions is not simply a claim about the ability of all human beings to understand God by reason. God cannot be known this way, by what may be called natural religion, but can only be known through revelation and the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ.

Barth doesn't provide a simple definition of the Word of God, probably because the Word, like God who speaks it, cannot be easily contained. Essentially, though, it is the Word that God "*spoke*, *speaks*, and *will speak* in the midst of all men."[12] This Word of God is preached,

12. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 22 (italics original).

is written in the Scriptures, and in its fullest form is revealed in Jesus Christ. There are not three Words of God, but it is one Word that meets us in these three interrelated forms. Central to this understanding of the Word of God is that it is revealed by God as an act of grace, it is not what we discover for ourselves. There is no general knowledge of God that people can come to on their own; revelation actually seeks to rescue people from their own idle imagining. This leads to Barth's critique of the claims of natural theology: "Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of man with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ."[13] Natural theology assumes that people can know God apart from Christ, as if people were equal with God and could know God. "By way of natural theology, apart from the Bible and the Church, there can be attained only abstract impartations concerning God's existence as the Supreme Being and Ruler of all things, and man's responsibility towards Him."[14] That is, there is no way for us to know God who is known in Jesus Christ, and his salvation, apart from revelation.

Third, in his later writings Barth claims that the Word that is heard in the church in Scripture and preaching, and which is the source of the church's life, is found outside the church.[15] The church is a more narrow sphere than the whole of creation, which God rules and desires to save (1 Tim 2:4), and so "we cannot possibly think that He cannot speak, and His speech cannot be attested, outside this sphere."[16] That is, Jesus Christ can create witnesses well beyond the sphere of the church. When the church hears these words, it "can find itself lightened, gladdened and encouraged in the execution of its own task."[17]

The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church in Australia was, through its drafters, influenced by both Barth and Bonhoeffer. It gives a great deal of emphasis to Christology and the identity of Jesus as the Word of God. For example, paragraph 4 says, "Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who

13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, 51.

14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3: 117. Barth speaks of "natural religion" in *Evangelical Theology*, in various parts of *Church Dogmatics*, and most important, in *Knowledge of God*. Hauerwas reflects on Barth's work on natural religion in *With the Grain of the Universe*.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3: 114–34.

16. Ibid., 117.

17. Ibid., 115.

gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist." It is also open to Barth's comment about the Word's existing beyond the church. For example, it says in paragraph 11: "In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are opened to an informed faith."[18]

It seems to me that when the church in Australia seeks to speak about God and particularly as it speaks about covenanting and the particular place of First peoples in the church, that it explores this insight in the tradition about the Word outside the church.

Revelation as Personal Life

Barth's reference to the threefold revelation of the Word of God that is revealed most fully in the human life of Jesus Christ suggests that, as Migliore says, "only revelation through a person can be fully intelligible to us, who are persons, and only personal revelation can adequately disclose the reality of God, who is supremely personal."[19]

Yet as central as the revelation of Jesus Christ is, we need to at least tentatively question this claim, and what it implies about the places where God is present and revealed. The doctrine of the Trinity suggests that while God is clearly and centrally revealed in Jesus, it is not possible to describe Jesus as an isolated individual as we often assume in Western culture. God is community, and the true reflection of God's image is the social existence of human life. In some way Jesus is social existence. Indigenous people claim that, for them, it is never possible to understand the person apart from the community or from country.

In Richard North Patterson's novel *Exile* there is an important conversation between an American Jewish lawyer and his Palestinian lover. She is trying to explain why she cannot marry him. She says to him that he is an individual, complete in himself, obligated to no one, and able to satisfy whatever desire he has. She, on the other hand, is not simply an individual. She is defined by family and culture, and the fact

18. See, Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union*, 7, 10. I am grateful to Damien Palmer for drawing my attention to this connection between paragraph 11 and Barth's thoughts on the Word beyond the church.

19. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 35.

that she is a Palestinian. She lives inside a culture of shame (not guilt) that is concerned for image, name, and honor. To marry is a decision of the family, not just herself.[20]

Granted that Jesus is a personal revelation of God, does this not have to mean more than just the individual and personal life of Jesus? Is there not something about relationships and country that makes him who he is? That is, is the revelation in Christ not just God crucified but God who is the Word in creation, inexorably related to the earth? Is not the comment about the need for a person to reveal God to persons too narrow in its conception of humanity?

The Crucified, Suffering God

Drawing on the work of Martin Luther and Jürgen Moltmann, Douglas John Hall explores another part of the tradition around providence and suffering that has to do with the way love and power are part of the character of God: a theology of the cross, as opposed to a theology of glory. A theology of the cross begins with the assumption that God's primary desire is that there be free creatures, and that the world be preserved and redeemed. The issue is not whether God has power or could not use this power, but what exercise of power, what relationship with human beings, will achieve this goal. A theology of the cross begins in the purpose of God in creation, and in the incarnation, as a critique of the idea of God as the *deus ex machina* who rescues us from the things we cannot solve ourselves, including finitude and death. It affirms that God desires to be our God and wishes for us to be God's people. The only way in which God can achieve God's purposes is through the power of suffering love, through a providence that works within the movements of history rather than being imposed on them. God is one, as Hall reminds us, "who is obliged by his own love to exercise his power quietly, subtly, and, usually, responsively in relation to the always ambiguous and frequently evil deeds of the free creatures; a God who will not impose rectitude upon the world but labor to bring existing wrong into the service of the good; a God, in short, who will suffer."[21]

A theology of the cross begins in incarnation. The very idea of incarnation is concerned for embodiment in a particular time and place.

20. Patterson, *Exile*, 119–21.

21. Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 87.

We have tended to treat the incarnation of Jesus as a moment or point in time in his life and divinity. We have treated humanity as flesh, blood, and bone, and thus the concern is how Jesus could be born as a human being (the Christmas event). Yet the incarnation is really about Jesus being fully human and, thus, is about the sociocultural and political particularity of Jesus's life. It is about what Luther described as God's "deep sympathy with human weakness and wretchedness."[22]

Any discussion of the work of God needs to begin with the principle of divine unity, at least in the sense of the unity of God's work. That is, there is a mutuality or interdependence of being or action of the three persons of the Trinity. Whatever is done by one person within the Trinity is done by all, and each person reflects the others (see John 10:28–38). For example, if we speak of the "suffering" and self-emptying of the Son (Phil 2:5–11), this must also be taken as a claim about the totality of God's being. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 8). He was speaking not just of the comfort we could find in Christ in the midst of human struggle and weakness, but of the way God is present to humankind.

A theology of the cross presupposes a church that shares in God's suffering in this world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, the church is called to sustain itself as a human community immersed in the world, identified with struggle and suffering, finding our identity not in being religious but in being there for others in God's suffering.[23] The gospel of the suffering God suggests that the church is not above the world but is deeply immersed in it. We are to live unprotected, in dialogue with life, engaged in and by our context, and participants in God's suffering in the whole of life (not just religious life).

Does God Matter in Australia?

Can a Second peoples' theology find any real assistance in the tradition to deal with the particular way in which the question of God arises in this country? I believe so, and would like in the remainder of this chapter to suggest some marks, or contours, of such an ongoing theological conversation.

22. Ibid., 21.

23. Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, 279–82, for example.