



Intenser experiences of creation: Applying Panikkar's radiant events framework (Part Two)

Greg Smith

Panikkar's radiances

In *The Experience of God*,ⁱ Raimundo Panikkar identifies his cosmotheandric principle, where the divine, the human and the earthly are three irreducible dimensions that *constitute the real*: the "three-fold current [that] permeates the entire realm of all that is."ⁱⁱ

Panikkar's neat phrase reminds us of the irreducible unity of these three elements. Consequently, "the experience of God is the total experience of the human being in which nature is not absent." Thus, any revelation of God is mediated through the senses by engaging with nature and the cosmos. An experience of God then is an intense experience of creation (Panikkar 2006:128).

In the previous article, we outlined how radiant events are special because they reveal the cosmotheandric principle unifying all reality. We turn now to apply this framework in reading Australian poet Les Murray's version of the Bethlehem nativity scene in "Animal Nativity." There the numinous dimensions of that unique event radiate or transform the non-human participants. Similarly, his poem, "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow," describes its effects upon spectators and participants. Both poems image the word "radiant" to convey how some greater significance is revealed. In effect, radiant events are those "blessed moments when power and ideology are absent"ⁱⁱⁱ (Murray).

Reading "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow"^{iv}

Many features of radiance subsist in Murray's man weeping in Martin Place that we can call this fictional event a radiant event. His weeping is visible, powerful, attracting and so, even though temporary, must be explained as divine. It stops time, challenges all who see him and benefits some few who engage with him. It begins life-changing narratives. Being both mysterious and quite ordinary, his public weeping expresses the paradox that divine-human-cosmic consciousness brings peace and dignity. His weeping exudes radiance that is trust without power, freedom without evil, and therapy with dignity.

In its nine five-line stanzas and one final stanza of one line, an anonymous observer recounts the event of the weeping man in Sydney's main city street, Martin Place. He situates his unnamed character in the full public glare "in the midday light" to evoke the whole range of possible responses: Stock Exchange scribblers, street beggars, "crowds edgy with talk, "the smallest children, the shining woman, the confused, the amazed and the cynics. He is the focus of attention, the object of their pity, inspiration or rejection. This listing device structures the poem and explores the wonder being manifested in its various receptions. That range of responses critiques society's conventional attitudes, and drives a clear divide between the sophisticated and the instinctive, the truly human

and the veneer of style expected by society. For this weeping man resists even negates contemporary, urban culture in the place of its greatest density. This weeper challenges the conventional repression of instinctive (and thus pristine) humanity, and achieves an equanimity truly surpassing what the ersatz offerings of commerce and finance can ever achieve.

The unexpected event catches people at various stages of readiness, just as the Last Day will find people unready, prepared or doubtful. This last comment is not a singular reading, for this poem explores the inbreak of religious experiences upon everyday life, or to put it in more technical language, an experience of the numinous. The numinous perception changes timeframes, attitudes and values. This poem could be said to be Murray's best demonstration of his unique perception of the world where the empirical and the numinous overlap. Murray calls something sacred when the dreaming experience stops time, and leaps the poet into timeless moments of numinous awareness, so that, "immortality is real and can be expressed in our mortal life."^v

To further this interpretation, this rainbow sign in the weeping man (in an allusion to the rainbow as the standard biblical proof of God's overshadowing and approval) is here presented as "absolutely ordinary." Further to bridge the ordinary and the religious, the setting is immediately recognisable with early references to local clubs, bars, landmarks and distinguishing places: Repins, Lorenzini's, the Stock Exchange, Martin Place and Pitt Street. Yet its effect is to change the ordinary too – streets "which minutes ago were busy main streets" become deserted. This juxtaposition of the rare with the ordinary is just the effect that an embodiment of religious sensibility should have.

As if to follow the natural sequence of happening in news events, the focus then moves from reports and effects to the man himself in verse 3. The report is plain and clear: "There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him." The diction is everyday and everyman's; it is pithy, plain and problematic all at the same time. His breach of the public custom not to weep in public is unashamed, shocking and mysterious. The narrator's voice is the plural "we" as if spoken by one rather more objective and representative voice in the interested crowd. Through litotes, we come to learn what kind of weeping the weeping man suffers.

We learn he has made a sacred space about him "his pentagram of sorrow," that just recently uniforms could not breach. In this cultural allusion to the pentagram, Murray justifies the space thus made and honours the man in some sort of on-going tradition. We are told the five-pointed star, has always had very mysterious powers ascribed to it. Rennet, Bishop of Peterborough, said of it: "When it is delineated on the body of a man it points out the five places wherein the Saviour was wounded, and, therefore, the devils are afraid of it."^{vi} This man is holy and protected in his extreme.

The poem's discourse is pretty explicit. It soon becomes clear that the tears of this man weeping in Martin Place are cleansing tears, not tears of regret or despair. Only tears such as these can break the drought of self-sufficiency. They throw a healing trajectory for the future. This enactment of the "sacrament of tears" obviously brings healing, for its tears bring a reconciliation so that, with the dignity of one who has wept, the man gets up and walks off down Pitt Street, renewed, done with it and cathartically cleansed. Tears are regenerative, are transformative, for they enable people to dispense with the previous stage and surmount what seems impossible. His absolutely ordinary behaviour is in a different order from everyday life, for it is not socially constructed but instinctively,

essentially human. In its presentation of the ordinary, the poem's clear resistance to metaphor refuses any extraneous explanation via recourse to off-scene metaphoric discourses.

The report of the drama happening continues by contrasting objective observations with the strange facts as they happen. Not yet done with references to religious symbolism, Murray's reliable observer suggests that "in years to come a halo or force stood around him. There was no such thing." Today his weeping and radiates its power and effects begins narratives; into the future it accumulates meanings. Because they "look out of Paradise," children readily relate to the weeping man, so naturally they "sit near his feet." This anonymous man is totally unhindered, liberated and free, enjoying the gifts of salvation even in this present life. His insightful vulnerability saves him, and radiates its power and effects.

Other productive contrasts drive the poem: men doubt but women receive the gift, children act naturally but uniforms attack him, religion and life overlap, interior grief is made explicit, and time stands still for example. Furthermore the observer reports that some few others relate quite fully to this event: "I see a woman, shining, stretch out her hand / and shake as she receives the gift of weeping; / as many as follow her." The drama works out its effects moving from event to reception without intermediary, catalyst or prompt. The enactment has its own dynamics like a computer code just waiting to be triggered. Its effects broaden its importance and significance: "many as follow her also receive it." Clearly undercutting the title in its paradox, this is no ordinary event; it will be remembered with amazement as a fact for its human effects.

The poem concludes on this point of high paradox. The weeping man "cries out / of his writhen face and ordinary body." One cannot doubt it is a serious event, not a staged pantomime or media-sponsored event. He needs no help and leaves with the dignity of one who has wept, and now has finished weeping. The archaic "writhen" subtly strengthens its connection to the crucified Saviour.

Thus the poem describes a radiant event. The event of the weeping man is undeniable and substantive, it is irresistible and declarative, imperative for demanding a personal response from everyone, and although fully comprehensible by only some like the children and the radiant woman, it enacts a comprehensive, unstaged, naturally human process. It has all the hallmarks of a cosmotheandric revelation. While this radiant event is presented as a take-or-leave it event, its uniqueness and genuineness are evident. It discourses that there is no terror in expressing the fullness of universal harmony in timeless human emotions.

Importantly, "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" foregrounds a religious sensibility showing the spiritual in the ordinary, a perception Murray pursues in his exploration of the numinous. It offers a discourse upon the failure of verbal language, for he is "speaking with a pure voice." To avoid any reckless slide into any mystical hysteria, the poem's *persona* positions himself to Australian contemporary readers as a shrewd and knowledgeable observer. Just as the weeping man in the poem creates a space of serenity, the poem grants a space to explore tensions in an absolutely ordinary streetscape space where personal and public, sacred and secular meet. The poem depicts some salvation being won in radical freedom, in vulnerability. The character weeping in Martin Place becomes some kind of a prophet, but a prophet expressing the value of the ordinary human

sensibility we repress. The poem deconstructs utilitarianism, determinism, consumerism and violence.

Confirming our interpretation

Finally, intertextual echoes amplify the discourse. This poem ought to be read in conjunction with another poem, "The Burning Truck"^{vii} for its unstated mysteriousness, and with his "Animal Nativity" where Christ's nativity radiates to all creatures present, making them more true to their natures. In both poems, Murray explores the genuine effects of the numinous in quite ordinary participants. The poem is memorable for edging Australian literature into such unspoken areas in our national discourse

Murray's "Animal Nativity"^{viii} also describes the Christmas event in its effects upon its animal participants:

The Iliad of peace began
when this girl agreed.
Now goats in trees, fish in the valley
suddenly feel vivid.

Even humans will sense the lamb,
He who frees from the old poem
turtle-dove and snake, who gets death forgiven,
who puts the apple back.

Nature radiates at its Saviour's birth, even some humans perceive its singularity so the Nativity is the major radiant event. The nativity event is distinctive, pervasive and accessible. Relevantly, Panikkar says, "Nature is a natural place for meeting God . . . in many forms" (Panikkar 2006:128). Appearing as radiance, the spiritual is accessed through conscientious relatedness with the physical world

We are told this manger scene brings an "Iliad of peace" for the saviour's birth is a cosmotheandric event, a divine-human-cosmic radiance where all the animals, both great and small, were made to "feel vivid" as a result. The divine-human harmony being realised here is the promised salvation now guaranteed in the birth of this saviour. Its significance radiates in even the non-human participants who witness it. Its radiance exudes a superabundance of meaning.

Conclusion

Clearly then, radiant events are distinctive, pervasive and accessible. They catch us out by their sheer ordinariness. To see, feel and benefit from them, we need open minds, open to new possibilities, new to inbreaks of the divine. A cosmotheandric consciousness then helps us to be ready and open to read them when they occur.

REFERENCES

Murray, Les. A. "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" in Les A. Murray, *Collected Poems 1961-2002* pp. 28-30. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002. [On-line] Available: www.lesmurray.org/pm_aor.htm [27 May 2010].

Les A. Murray, "Animal Nativity" from *Translations from the Natural World* (1992), and in *Collected Poems 1961-2002* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove 2002), p. 374.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Panikkar, R. *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006, p. 71.

ⁱⁱⁱ The task of writing poetry is a "sacralizing act" for revealing the significance of persons or events as an aspiration to self-completion. Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), 17, 20, 21.

^{iv} From *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969) in *Collected Poems 1961-2002*, 28-30.

^v Murray, "One poet's view of the republic" *Occasional lecture 1996*, 31.

^{vi} "Pentagram" [www.examiner.com] Retrieved 25 May 2010.

^{vii} Les A. Murray, "The Burning Truck" [On-line] Available: pulptheology.com/the-burning-truck-by-les-murray/ Accessed 15 May 2011.

^{viii} Les A. Murray, "Animal Nativity" from *Translations from the Natural World* (1992), and in *Collected Poems 1961-2002* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove 2002), p. 374. [On-line] Available: ajjay.tumblr.com/post/297193858/les-murray-animal-nativity Accessed 15 May 2011.

About the Author:

Greg is a Brisbane teacher, tutor, coach and webmaster. His *Images of Salvation* dissertation (ACU 2007) reads selected poems on themes of salvation by Judith Wright, Les A. Murray and David Malouf.