



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

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Eternal Return: a theodicy
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As I speak, and in the light of the Ecclesiastes reading, I recommend you have this deeply insightful understanding as a backdrop:

How do we react to pain and loss? We turn most often to ways of thinking that justify and explain our distress, ways that console and give comfort. What if our suffering continues and deepens? What if the familiar ways of thinking fail to heal us? What if they come to feel not only ineffective, but injurious? And what if untold human energy and hope were invested in exactly the wrong ways to react and think about human affliction? What if these ways were called the flowers of the human spirit: philosophy, religion, and science?

Nicholas D. More *Nietzsche's Last Laugh, Ecce Homo as Satire*

(Cambridge University Press [2014]2016, 207)

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth on the reception of his 2016 Templeton prize, reflected prophetically on the state of humanity at that time. He described it as... once a bonfire, become a forest fire, fast developing into what we have now come to call, 'the perfect fire storm.'

He nominated three questions which only religion, he posited, not science, can and should answer:

Who am I?
Why am I here?
How then shall I live?

And if religion is to answer those questions, he argued, it must share its message across a much broader secular humanist public who are equally concerned for the future of

our world and its freedoms. He speaks of building friendship and respect across the face of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the whole of its troubled history of sibling rivalry.

“How much longer”, he asks, “will we kill in the Name of the God of Life? What would a world which replaces the love of power with the power of love look like?”

Rabbi Sach’s questions are the very ones which preoccupied the writer of Ecclesiastes. They are the questions which have fascinated me from my earliest years. Indeed, they are the questions which have brought me, *literally* to this physical space of St Ninians in 1959, at age 13... yes exactly the space where we now meet, but in the older hall which preceded it. More of that later.

At age four (I play and replay the scene like a short film in my mind and at will) ... it was a late Austrian Summer in Lintz. I was attempting in my broken German to explain something very important to my maternal grandparents and extended family. I can see their sitting and reclining forms, see – as I am speaking to you, their blanched patronising faces in the declining afternoon sun, smiling at the cuteness of my baby talk. I remember with great clarity that moment: my increasing frustration at their inability to understand my intentions – that I was plugging the gaps of my broken German with made-up words, which they *interpreted* as baby-talk simply because I didn’t have the words for what I knew was the meaning of what I was trying to say.

Of course, tonight/today, wherever you are in the world, I no longer remember what that “meaning,” was – but the pursuit of the meaning of life, my life, your life our lives together, explains why I am here with you in the hall and on zoom. That’s why after a five-year PhD in Philosophy and Religion I now turn my attention to a Spiritual Direction Course over the next four years. That’s why I have dedicated myself over these next ten years to research the existential and theological implications of the enormous cultural changes Machine Intelligence is bringing into our world. The unintended consequences which come with it as well as the malevolent ones which are being acted out even as I speak, in the drone destruction of so much of the beauty of Ukraine and its peoples. All in the Name of the God of Life. The God Putin and the Russian Patriarch believe so fervently in. It’s his work they are doing, they say. It’s the judgement of God they are executing against a morally decadent society, believing that in the Name of this same God of Life, they are entitled to reclaim territories as part of *their* Manifest Destiny. The rallying cry we all thought had long been stripped of its colonialist pretensions. A pretension which shamelessly raped and pillaged the African, Asian, Indian subcontinents. A self-deception whereby the Continent of

Australia was legally declared 'terra nullius.' A terrible tragic misconception which even to this day misrepresents the Statement of the Heart and would silence its Voice, robbing our first Nation peoples of their identity, culture and the land. Yes, indeed there is a time to die, a time when what is planted is uprooted, a time to kill, to break down, to weep, to mourn, to throw stones; time to shut "them" up, to push down people; to tell people to get lost and in that act to end up getting lost themselves.

This is the context in which I state the first question:

who am I?

I am born premature in Berlin March 1st 1946. I am held briefly in the arms of my twenty-one year old mother, Therese Wölfel, who after persuading my atheist father and demanding I be baptised Catholic, tells him: "I don't want to die." But she does. Thus, every birthday is bitter-sweet for, like our Ecclesiastes reading.

Three years later my single parent father has me smuggled across the border into Austria from Germany to join my maternal grandparents, while he himself migrated to Australia. It was only when my maternal grandmother died of breast cancer that my father Ilia now known as Ned ordered that I must join him now. My last words to my maternal cousin, apparently, on some railway platform, were these: "Do I really have to go? I don't eat very much."

So, I *become* an unaccompanied minor under the Post-War Migration Scheme with a berth on a transport ship quaintly named the 'Nelly.' A soft name for a converted aircraft carrier which had defended Australia in the Battle of the Coral Sea. I can still smell the diesel oil of the engines.

In 1997 I reflected on that moment in a poem which I dutifully named, 'Unaccompanied.' (I read the poem).

Unsurprisingly, just turning five, I meet a father in the Port of Melbourne, who has become a stranger to me, his eyes masked by glasses which shield him from a sun whose brightness is painful and strange to me.

So... I am an Australian now – a *new* Australian. Which when I was 11, I realised, at least from the blue-rinse lady next door in East Balmain smoking her fag, that *really* I was actually a *reffo*, or was it a *dago*? But that was only for a minute, because when Dad, who had remarried to a Latvian girl named Lijia (he had met her in the migrant camp in Bathurst), asked me to go get a bottle of milk up the road, when that same blue rinse lady by whom I had been consigned to the status of alien, saw me at the door, little old me with "special

characteristics, none” she says, “Hello, darling.” And so ever since I’ve thought of myself as God’s darling boy.

Now I ask myself... why am I here? – I have to say it didn’t take long for me to work that one out. Just a year or two after that “darling” moment I was lying on the floor, Christmas Eve 1958 in Kirrawee Sydney. My father and stepmother had gone on yet another boat to England – she to practise (as so many did) her Dentistry in London, Dad to try his hand at screenwriting. They’d left me behind to later go to stay with my step-grandparents in O’Connor, Canberra and do my schooling at the newly opened Lyneham Highschool with its state-of-the-art Assembly Hall, classrooms and woodwork and metal work facilities.

Maybe that’s the prospect I was thinking of, lying there watching the Christmas tree lights flashing away... almost asleep... when my step-uncles came bursting in, fighting. It took the policeman next door and my step-grandmother’s hypodermic needle to pacify him. Only the next day did I learn it was all about the land, and who was going to get what... in the inheritance. I thought to myself: these adults have no idea what they’re doing, where they’re going. I cannot trust them, neither can I trust the Boarding School nuns who’d promised to give me back the toy car at the end of the year ... an oops... I found a boy at the annual fete unwrapping it as his own from the lucky dip newspaper.

So much for religion, I thought. **So much adult guidance**. Apparently, this uncle who was to join us in Canberra, was often like that. Step-grandmother said it was the coffee he drank. I now know it was the PTSD he suffered as a boy during the war.

Anyway, that’s the night I decided I couldn’t trust adults anymore. I had to find out for myself why I’m here, living this life. And just a year later, right here in Canberra, I came to this location in Lyneham, to this “right here right now” where we sit and stand, looking for God – riddled with questions. If God wasn’t a Catholic; then what was he? Could it be that he was a pagan Protestant – you know the people I saw coming out of Mass on a Sunday when I was home from Boarding School, because that was what the Sisters said they were - pagans. Well, I came here to St Ninian’s... but I didn’t find God then... in 1960. I just continued in my atheist ways, taking the piss out of religion with relish.

It wasn’t until 1969 on top of Fisher Library Sydney University, with someone from EU (the Evangelical Union) trying to explain the Trinity (which I thought was hogwash) – I mean they’d all been sitting around discussing I John 1 a week or two before, reading out loud “What we have seen with our own eyes, what we have heard with our own ears, which we have touched with our own hands, we declare to you that your joy may be full” and I’d

asked them point-blank, “have you seen Jesus, touched him, heard him?” and when they said “no,” to each challenge I retorted – “well, what are you wasting your time for?” When out of the blue G-d spoke to me, not from a cloud over the city, but calling me by name in the deep interior being of myself which I didn’t even exist – asking me a question, “Nikolai... what are you going to do with what you know?” Unbeknownst to the self-appointed evangelist, who heard nothing and was still stumbling through his spiel, I was shaking like a leaf, trying desperately to convince myself that I hadn’t really heard that voice – but realised that if I denied it, I would be the biggest hypocrite of all.

Which brings us to our third and last question, *how then shall I live?*

Well after God spoke to me that lunch hour, I had to find out what the implications were for what it was I was going to do with what I had come to know. Theological studies after graduation, missionary service on Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean – visitation to the two prisons in St Denis and St Pierre, youth and University work, Theological Education by extension, and so-called church planting in Saint Benoît for three-and-a half years, where my first daughter Kate was born – three and a half when we left, and my daughter Sarah born soon after we returned. And so back to teaching English Literature and History (Ancient and Modern), Philosophy, in State and Private schools: Port Hacking Highschool, De la Salle Cronulla, St Patrick’s Strathfield where I was also Drama Master, Barker College Sydney and then Trinity Grammar School, Sydney.

But how *does one live* when your wife Ellie dies after 28 years of marriage of the very cancer she used to treat as a nurse? How do you ***then live?***

When you find out that the Catholics were wrong about the Protestants, the Protestants were wrong about the Catholics? Protestants *and* Catholics wrong about divorced people being able to be happily re-married. Catholics wrong about obligatory celibacy. Protestants and Catholics wrong about women’s ordination – I can still see pictures of Susanna on the front page of the Canberra Times crying bitter tears because Sydney had imposed a legal injunction against women priests – and now priests, Protestant/Catholic not allowed to bless same sex married people even when they’ve been fervent Christians for years and more faithful in their same sex relationship than many heterosexuals and when the science says that this sexual orientation is biologically driven.

How then shall we live?

You do what the English Bishops did, what the Archbishop of Canterbury did – made it possible for priests who felt they should, *could* then bless same sex marriage couples. The

Gafcon Protestant Anglicans in the Kigali Rwanda Statement said this was the last straw. But then again they'd said that about divorce – this is the line we've drawn in the sand, they said over women's ordination, women bishops (Susanna when she was finally ordained in the Adelaide Cathedral, heard someone shout out, 'cursed be the man who allows women to be ordained'). And now with this act of understanding and compassion, this blessing of same sex marriage, the Holy Spirit is going to leave the Church of England, Gafcon claims, that the Seat of St Augustine in Canterbury is empty very empty, that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby is an apostate.

Where was this Conference held? In Kigali Rwanda where a country of over 90% nominal Catholics and Protestants, Hutu and Tutsi hacked each other to death (a million people in a hundred days in all of Rwanda). "We were all doing it" a Hutu said, right there in Kigali. The Evangelist to the Gafcon Conference intoned at least twice that if "they" didn't repent, "they" would press the nuclear button. Oh no, there's no turning back he said. We're crossing the Rubicon with others repeating the cry. We're on the right side of history— Protestant reformed history, and we are on a "re-set," to bring things back to our *Re*-formed roots.

If only the Evangelist knew the Rubicon context, one which pointed to a Julius Caesar returning from the Gallic Wars, bankrupt about to be rolled by the courts, deciding that force of arms was the only way out – and so proscribes the properties of his enemies, kills if resisted to pay his disgruntled troops. And when honesty, realism and compassion fail, I ask, is *that* not evidence of another kind of bankruptcy?

The Prophet Micah (6:8) realised that the essence of true faith is "to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" and that the only sign Jesus of Nazareth offered this last generation, was the sign of Jonah – the evangelist who ran away because he *knew* God was going to be "too merciful," where in that sheer silence and stillness of self-emptying love, can the voice of the Good Shepherd be heard and his compassionate heart revealed. Thomas Merton (*Spiritual Direction and Meditation & What is Contemplation*, ([1950, 1960] 1975: 17) highlights what such self-emptying is all about, especially in the Spiritual Direction interview:

The whole purpose... is to penetrate beneath the surface of a person's life, to get behind the facade of conventional gestures and attitudes which people present to the world and to bring out a person's inner spiritual

freedom. This is entirely a supernatural thing for the work of rescuing the inner person from automatism belongs first of all to the Holy Spirit.