

Satao's Cry

Freya Mathews

Can religion play a pivotal role in awakening contemporary societies to the moral and spiritual dimensions of the current environmental crisis? Can the enormity of the crimes that are currently being committed against the biosphere in the name of modern civilization be articulated from the pulpit and the altar? Since morality and spirituality are core to the business of religion it would seem that religion is indeed an appropriate vehicle for a moral and spiritual call to arms on behalf of Earth.

However, as we are all-too-well aware, many of the world's religions – and most particularly the Abrahamic faiths – have historically been resolutely anthropocentric: justice and care have been seen as the province of the human – as the kind of treatment properly extended by humans to humans, exclusively. This has discouraged many environmentalists from looking to religion for moral and spiritual guidance in the face of the ecological catastrophe that is currently overtaking the planet. But without the depth of religion, its permeation of consciousness and culture, it is hard to see how a new Earth ethic can gain purchase in society. No ethic can be conclusively demonstrated in logical or empirical terms alone, in the manner of a mathematical or scientific truth. In order for a particular ethic to gain acceptance, it must figure as part of an entire context of belief, a specific way of perceiving the universe and creating meaning through distinctive narrative and normative lenses – where the provision of such lenses has traditionally been the task of religion.

However, desirable as a religious context of belief may be, new religions cannot simply be made to order. Religions are organic formations that reflect the actual consciousness – the deepest existential truths - of people in particular historical and cultural circumstances. If religious consciousness is to evolve to a point where all beings are included in its moral and spiritual compass, then presumably it must do so from within the 'truths' of existing religions. In other words, instead of seeking simply to replace old religions with new ones, it may be more effective to re-imagine and re-interpret existing religious traditions. It is this kind of work – the teasing out of inconsistency, obsolescence and possibility in the Judeo-Christian tradition - that Jan Morgan undertakes in *Earth's Cry*.

It is a central theme of *Earth's Cry* that religious traditions need to keep evolving in tune with changing historical and environmental circumstances if they are to remain alive. There is, as Jan notes, no 'settled essence' behind scriptural texts, and no interpretation of such texts is interest-free. "Every religious question occasions dispute," she notes, "and we are frequently able to identify several voices in the adjudications in the text." (p. 13) She adds that religious teaching is essentially narrative in form and that in the Hebrew tradition narratives collide and conflict. It is at this point of collision that new meanings have a chance to emerge. "Attending to the collision of narratives is a generative place to begin." (p. 13) Collision of narratives is generative because narratives in collision suggest new narratives.

The tradition founded on the Bible then is made up of stories, stories that are sometimes in conflict with one another, but whose inconsistencies and flaws would, given the chance, flow into new stories, stories of resolution, in which moral vision would be continually adjusted and expanded. From an environmental perspective, one would expect such a process of ongoing storying in time to draw our earth kin into moral salience. But in the Christian tradition, this ever-unfolding process has not in fact occurred: the original stories were 'fixed' by being written down. Literacy itself, Jan speculates, may have intervened to close off the generative process, the process of ongoing spiritual adaptation and discovery. In the religion of the Book, story may have fallen under the tyranny of text, and the living essence of story as a mode of communion with the divine may have become stifled.

Here in Australia we know very well how the divine or sacred can continue to reveal itself anew because we are privy to the continuous creation of Dreaming stories amongst our Indigenous countrymen. Dreaming stories pertain to origins but they were not given merely at an original time, to remain fixed thereafter. Dreaming stories emerge in the poetic idiom of a particular time and place, and are addressed to the circumstances of that time and place. Their meaning is anchored in the eternal but unfolds as knowledge and context unfold. New characters and plots appear, and perhaps, in time, whole new breakthroughs in consciousness occur – but this is only possible because there is a rich and sacred narrative context in which the new stories can ferment and take form. Dreaming stories are fluid and generative in this way because they are not fixed in text. Nor are they fixed even in language, but are danced, chanted and painted as much as they are told. Nor are they enacted by human actors only, but are performed in place, with the collaboration of country and of myriads of other-than-human actors.

So if, as Jan speculates, literacy itself might have silenced nature and stifled communion with the sacred or divine, Christian ministry may indeed need to open up to the prospect of continued revelation delivered not merely in literary mode, nor even merely in human language, but, as she says, also in "the language of birds, the language of rocks, turtles and winds.....Our domination of the conversation needs unmasking, particularly our enculturation through human language....The place of sacred scriptures in a religious tradition now needs to be questioned in a new way.....we must now ask whether our interpretations of biblical texts turn us away from or towards the world." (p. 21-22)

However, by the same token, and under the tutelage of Dreaming traditions, Judeo-Christian ministry may need to be open to the possibility that new modes of revelation

may deliver not merely new interpretations of old stories but entirely new stories, that the stories of the Bible may turn out to be merely early chapters in a larger and continuing narrative. Christianity may turn out to be no longer merely 'Christian', which is to say, a religion that found its terminus in the Christ story, but an unfolding tradition of revelation embedded in rich founding narratives that serve as invitations to further revelation and moral discovery. From this point of view, Christ was one in a lineage of Hebrew prophets who spoke the Word, but not the last instance of revelation in a tradition which has described an expanding ethical circle – from tribe-of-origin to humanity as a whole to.....? What is next?

This is a radical, but, from an environmental perspective, necessary message not only for Judeo-Christianity but for any other religion that relies on revelation for its 'truths': there can be no last revelation, because the terms of theophany are always historically and culturally relative. New sources of revelation might moreover be lateral to the old prophetic tradition: revelation might come in non-human form, in non-human voices. For example, the covenant between God and humanity that was perennially renewed in the Hebrew tradition was always 'cut in blood'. First it was cut in the blood of animal sacrifice, then in the blood of a sacrificial Christ. Might a new covenant today be cut in the blood of elephants butchered for their tusks or whales mown down in acts of nationalist defiance? Might we find our prophets now amongst our crucified earth-kin?

Consider the case of Satao, a 45 year old Kenyan elephant, one of the last great 'tuskers' on the African continent, tuskers being bull elephants with mammoth-like tusks that curve almost to the ground. Satao was possibly the largest surviving elephant in Africa, and hence the greatest terrestrial animal in the world. Roaming the vast expanses of Tsavo National Park, he was well known to Kenyans, a beloved icon, cherished and revered. But in May this year, in the midst of the elephant holocaust that has recently engulfed the continent, Satao, in a remote corner of the park, fell to a poacher's poisoned arrow. The poison penetrated his vital organs, causing a long and lingering, excruciating death. The poachers returned to his body - whether before or after he had actually expired is not known – and hacked off his face to get at his magnificent tusks.

"It is with enormous regret," the Tsavo Trust announced, "that we confirm there is no doubt that Satao is dead, killed by an ivory poacher's poisoned arrow to feed the seemingly insatiable demand for ivory in far off countries, a great life lost so that someone far away can have a trinket on their mantelpiece." Sadly they added, "Rest in peace, Old Friend, you will be missed."

Is Satao's life and death a revelation? If so, what does it signify? Surely it throws into ghastly relief the illusoriness of the idea of wealth that underpins our civilization. Satao was brutally cut down because his tusks were 'precious'. It is the fetishization of materials such as ivory and pearl, gold and silver, that has created a runaway concept of wealth divorced from the true source of value, life. Only life, and whatever contributes to the flourishing of life, is in truth precious. Trading a 'great life', such as Satao's, for a bucketful of stupid trinkets, is surely as obscene as the crucifixion of Christ. Christ, in giving up his own 'great life' to his tormenters, reflected our human savagery – or 'sin' – back to us. By bringing this 'sin' to consciousness, Jesus enabled us to aspire to a kinder mode of existence. (He 'saved us from our sins'.) Satao, in

falling into savage human hands and losing his life to the brutality of the global market, likewise holds a mirror up to our human savagery and the barbarism of the modern economy. This is an economy that is not only rapidly exterminating African elephants – 20,000 having been similarly martyred by poachers just last year – but is bringing the entire community of earth-life to its knees. By giving narrative form and image to this savagery and to the tragic blindness of the modern obsession with profit, Satao's example jolts us into acknowledgement of what is genuinely precious – the flourishing of all creatures, human and nonhuman alike.

Of course, the fates of any of the countless thousands of other elephants – or whales or dolphins or rhinos or seals or myriad other members of our earth community – tormented and slaughtered in the last few decades could equally hold up a mirror to our environmental sins. But religion requires not merely statistics but narratives – it opens our heart to our fellows through exemplary stories that invest particular individuals with iconic significance. Different narratives – of gods, prophets, immortals, messiahs - define different religious traditions. The goal of each religion however, and the criterion according to which individual lives are selected for iconic status, is surely the review and renewal of the covenant, the moral law, at the heart of collective existence. As a legend in his own country, Satao was already iconic. Indeed, elephants themselves are iconic amongst the world's species, emblematic of intelligences, modes of communication and systems of morality and wisdom incomprehensible to us. Let us not forget that the brains of elephants are six times larger than ours, and, like prophets, they are endowed with gifts of knowing and understanding that are beyond our ken. Elephants inhabit a moral universe of their own, meshed in bonds of loyalty and care and tuned to signals of good or ill intent not only across species but also over vast distances. Amongst elephants, the tuskers are particularly emblematic, not only for their majesty, but for the poignancy of their plight: it is their very greatness that marks them out for sacrifice.

It does not seem fanciful then to find revelation in nature and prophets amongst our earth kin. Crucifixion is taking place all around us. But whereas Christ's blood flowed to save his human brothers and sisters, today it is the tide of other creatures' blood – of elephants, rhinoceruses, dolphins, whales, kangaroos, the list is endless – that offers mute testimony to our appalling sins. Is this not the blood in which we are being asked to cut a new covenant?

Bear to look at the mutilated face of Satao. Surely this is a wound to set beside the stigmata of saints in the stained glass windows and shrines of contemporary chapels and cathedrals.

References

Jan Morgan, *Earth's Cry: Prophetic Ministry in a More-than-human World*, Uniting Academic Press, Melbourne, 2013

Images of Satao in life and in death may be found on the web. Search for "images of Satao".

