Faith and Culture in Conversation:

One Theologian at Work

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Abstract: *This article proposes that John Thornhill's ongoing interest in the relationship between faith and culture indicates that he can, in a sense, be described as a pastoral/practical theologian who has something to offer us in this field. First, it outlines (with some observations) his approach to theological reflection viewed as a critical conversation around the three themes he explores in* Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation*. Having established a context, the second task is to present an analysis and commentary of the three main theological assumptions that appear to underpin and give cohesion to John's methodology. These are the Spirit of God at work, the importance of beginning with human experience and the dynamic of self-transcendence. The conclusion brings some final comments on John Thornhill as a theologian.*

Key Words: John Thornhill – theological methodology; faith and culture; dialectic; Holy Spirit; human experience; self-transcendence

The relationship between culture and the Gospel [whether articulated as the Church, faith etc.] received both a new impetus and a positive rationale with Vatican II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. Forty years later, the distinctive features of a 'postmodern' world bring a renewed urgency to the need for an appropriate stance by the Church towards the contemporary world. In recent times, this relationship has been variously articulated in the Australian context, whether it be in terms of faith and culture, the Church facing the postmodern world, developing an Australian theology, or movements of spirituality in relation to the institutional Churches.[1]

The question of faith and culture has also occupied the theologian whose work and writing is the focus of this issue of the *Australian eJournal of Theology*. John Thornhill's contribution has not been confined to thought and developments within the Catholic tradition, in particular within its ecclesial life and more specifically in the field of systematic theology. His ongoing concern has been pastoral, namely to help people blend faith and life.[2] John's scope is clearly 'catholic' in the true sense. It includes the full range of

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[1] For example, Neil Brown, 'The Church in the Postmodern World,' *Compass* 38 (Winter 2003); Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and Methodologies into the Third Millennium* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul's, 2000); Peter Malone (ed.), *Developing an Australian Theology* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1999); Rachel Kohn, *The New Believers: Re-imagining God* (Pymble, NSW: Harpercollins, 2003); David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution* (Pymble, NSW: Harpercollins, 2003); Tony Kelly, 'Reflections on Spirituality and the Church,' *The Australasian Catholic Record* 78.3 (2001): 309-320; Dennis Rochford, 'The Faith of Young Australians,' *The Australasian Catholic Record* 78.3 (2001): 300-308.

[2] Reflected in his *Questions Catholics Ask in a Time of Change* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2001) together with his set of videos *The Emmaus Series: Questions Catholics Ask on their Journey of Faith*.

the '*humanum*' namely, whatever is embraced by the reach of the 'conversation' between culture and the Gospel. This is exemplified in three of John's books published since 1991.[3]

    This article argues that there is a dimension to John's work whereby he can, in a sense, be called a pastoral/practical theologian. Beyond 'pastoral' understood as helping people integrate faith and life, John has engaged in a critical conversation between the Gospel and culture in the form of an extended theological reflection that continues to have something to offer us.[4] To evaluate these three books of John Thornhill against the work of those who describe their work principally in terms of pastoral or practical theology[5] would be beyond our scope here. Ours is a more modest task. Firstly, it will outline (with some observations) the method of theological reflection that is applied in *Making Australia* (1992) as a sample illustrating John's approach; secondly, I would like to offer an analysis and commentary of the theological assumptions that underpin and guide his 'conversation' within the Australian context. Some observations on John as a theologian end the article.

1. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AS CRITICAL CONVERSATION[6]

The overarching and unifying metaphor used by John (and others) is captured in the *Making Australia's* subtitle 'exploring our national conversation.' He sees his task in terms of a dialogue that entails mutuality between the participants and involves listening and responding.[7] It is also a dialectic, namely, a critical interaction.[8] In other words, it is a learning from each other which, while respectful, does not preclude but often requires questioning and challenging other perspectives

    From the outset, John indicates his purpose is not simply one of engaging in a description and analysis of one country's culture. He approaches his task as someone of Christian faith, as a professional theologian but one where he must be an equal partner and not come from a privileged position. Within that context he has a specific goal, one that makes his book a particular form of conversation. He understands his exploration of the tapestry of Australian culture as bringing one to the threshold (in the language of European theologians) of 'political theology.' In other words, it is an 'encounter between

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[3] *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age: The Foundation and Task of Theology* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1991); *Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation* (Newtown, NSW: Millennium, 1992); *Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child Reconstructed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

[4] Pertinent here is James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002). As terms, pastoral and practical theology differ in their historical background and in their usage. These days, as Pattison and Woodward note in 'An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology' that opens the *Blackwell Reader*, there is a lot of common ground between the terms and that '[U]ltimately, both are concerned with how theological activity can inform and be informed by practical action in the interests of making an appropriate, effective Christian response in the modern world' (2). This is reflected in Pattison and Woodward's own provisional working definition of '[P]astoral/practical theology (as a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical, and practically transforming' (7). I am opting here for their blended term 'pastoral/practical theologian.'

[5] For instance, as reflected in the content and authors in Woodward and Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader*.

[6] I use the phrase suggest by Pattison since it implies the characteristics noted in the next paragraph. See Stephen Pattison, 'Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection' in Woodward and Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader*, 136-141.

[7] Thornhill, *Making Australia*, xii.

[8] Ibid, 204-5.

an Australian culture becoming critically aware of itself, and the challenge to human existence given to the world in the Christian tradition.'[9]

In the first half of *Making Australia*, John draws on the insights of others in finding the appropriate tools and in articulating a synthesis of the mythological and ideological influences that have shaped and continue to give coherence and direction to the Australian cultural context. He distills this in terms of three themes that appear as central to the Australian cultural experience and form chapters 5-7 of the book. Firstly, 'everyone must have a fair start' is manifested in an egalitarian spirit of 'an Australian society free of the notions of inherited status and privilege.'[10] Secondly, there is a 'wisdom found in adversity and failure,' one emerging from hardship and failed hopes often at the limits of human existence.[11] Thirdly, there is a role of 'the land as our icon,' at once alluring yet alienating, somehow a mirror of the inner landscape of the Australian soul.[12]

Having delineated a culture 'critically aware of itself,' John engages in a dialectic between the Christian story and the 'challenge [it gives] the world' and to the Australian experience. Chapter 8 is the central (and final) section of the work since it is one in which the 'deepest significance of our human story' is brought to light by the Christian Gospel and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, while, simultaneously, 'our deepest existential experiences help us to recognize the true meaning of the gospel story.'[13] John attempts to portray the Gospel and culture in creative, critical conversation, where there is mutual listening and responding.

Conversation as Listening and Responding

How does John go about this process? He does so by probing the three themes in their relationship to the Christian Gospel.

Egalitarianism of spirit converges with the revolution from Jesus of placing ordinary life, the individual, 'the common man and woman in their right place at the centre of history.'[14] So many have been instinctively drawn to this aspect of Christianity only to find themselves rejecting the institutional Church which either blurs or conceals this central message. This is a criticism that the Church must heed if it is to be effective in its preaching and witness to the Gospel. This aspect of Australian cultural experience highlights the God present in the ordinary, the divine hidden in the struggles and triumphs of daily living. This is to meet a God who is neither overbearing, nor external nor intrusive. Further, this is the God who identifies with those on the margins, a 'God who stands with the "losers."'[15]

Wisdom found in failure and adversity is part of the Australia heritage, which can open a door into the Gospel story and receive from it another layer of meaning as expressed in Christ's death and the symbol of the cross. Such a form of experience is part of the common lot of humankind, though in our consumer society, this can be distorted and denied.[16] Constant stimulation by images can blunt our aspirations, deaden our emotions, and stifle compassion for those in need – that everyone has a right to a fair start.

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[9] Ibid, xii.

[10] Ibid, 205.

[11] Ibid, 125.

[12] Ibid, 143-5, 156-8.

[13] Ibid, 204.

[14] Ibid, 206.

[15] Ibid, 208.

[16] Ibid, 208-9.

The land as a kind of icon suggests that the struggle to be truly human is a moral quest embodied and enacted in 'values and ideals which are owned in concrete human existence in a particular time and place.'[17] Further, it is an enduring reminder that the land was inhabited long before Europeans made it home. It is now the locus of a shared life while being the reminder of the limits of experience, the testing of boundaries, 'a meeting with what is ultimate in our human existence.'[18] It brings us up against Jesus in the Gospels calling smug self-interest into question. This is an aspect of the Australian cultural experience which, in John Thornhill's view, was ready for the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus' message reveals the ways of God 'first and foremost by inviting us to a testing of the limits and boundaries of the human situation in which we find ourselves.'[19]

This is a summary of John's discussion. But three observations are pertinent before moving on. In the final chapter in which he takes up the Gospel/culture conversation in specific terms, John introduces the topic with an extensive treatment of the historical background to the faith/culture relationship in the Australian context. He goes on to explore the qualities of a Christian voice that is truly Australian. It is only in the final ten pages that John probes in more detail the critical conversation between the Australian story (the three issues above) and the Gospel story. Hence, one comes to the end of the chapter with one's appetite stimulated and looking for more.

Secondly, while, as John notes, the first seven chapters of the book do not have an explicitly theological reference,[20] they do generate material that has theological significance. The cultural conversation provides the events, yearnings and needs of people from which we can decipher the authentic (and inauthentic) signs of God's presence. More specifically, the three issues highlighted by John form part of what Les Murray describes as the 'sub-theological debate' since the spiritual dimension they contain has to be dealt with. Our attitude to issues such as the Aboriginal question, the stranger, or the land and environment places us 'on the threshold which leads to meeting with the ultimate question of human existence.'[21] We enter the domain of self-transcendence.

Thirdly, John's discussion raises question of epistemology and language. While he acknowledges that his analysis is predominantly built on the perspective of philosophy,[22] the texture and range of the Australian cultural experience is as much poetic, intuitive, participative as it is analytical, objective, and critically detached.[23] Further, an adequate understanding of how we know, interpret and communicate about our world must be reflected in our language. Certain realms of our knowing are beyond the 'narrowspeak' of analysis, administration and criticism and the day to day world. We must draw on the 'wholespeak' of the poetic, religious and aesthetic impulse. Again, in the interplay of ways of knowing and forms of discourse, one must sustain, as David Ranson reminds us, a certain mode of attentiveness.

Spirituality is a certain attentiveness to life — an attentiveness which contains within itself a certain desire, a certain hopefulness, a certain anticipation. *Spirituality is attention combined with intention*. Attention animated by desire, or attention become

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[17] Ibid, 212.

[18] Ibid, 214.

[19] Ibid, 213.

[20] Ibid, xii.

[21] Ibid, 170.

[22] Ibid, xii.

[23] Described by Les Murray alternatively as 'wholespeak' and 'narrowspeak.' See Thornhill, *Making Australia*, 175.

intention, awakens within us the awareness of a deepened relationship with ourselves and with others, with the world and with some greater sense of meaning.[24]

These considerations provide the context for our next task. We move now to an analysis with some commentary of three assumptions that underpin John's methodology as he explores the faith/culture relationship in *Making Australia.*

2. THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Our investigation of John's critical conversation between Gospel and culture in the Australian setting has uncovered key assumptions either in explicit or implied form. These offer an insight into the foundations of his method of theological reflection.

Spirit of God at Work

The first assumption is built on John's citing of the words of *Gaudium et Spes* with the call for Christians to 'decipher authentic signs of God's presence in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this people has a part along with the other men and women of our age.'[25] How can this be understood?

In undertaking this process of discernment, John appeals to the metaphor of a conversation undertaken within culture and between Gospel and culture. The way he understands and applies this approach appears to have its theological roots in the Revisionist position of David Tracy who describes the Gospel/culture relationship as one of mutually critical correlations.[26] For Tracy, in contrast with the one-way Radical christian view, dialogue as listening and response combines with dialectic (criticism/confrontation) in a two-way process. Hence, cultural or life experience not only raises questions about human existence for the Gospel to answer but at times it provides answers as well. Why? Because as *Gaudium et Spes* implies above (and below in N. 22), the truth-giving Spirit is not only in the Christian church(es) but is also present and active in the world and in cultures.

Again, there is implied in John's approach, the conviction of the autonomy of the secular order as reflected in *Gaudium et Spes.*[27] As John notes elsewhere '[F]or Christian faith, it must be acknowledged, this autonomy is one of the undeniable corollaries of God's taking created reality seriously in the incarnation.'[28]

Created reality and culture are capable of mediating the divine presence and the reality of grace. Further, John again is in continuity with the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* where it says of God's plan for the world in Jesus Christ that

> All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.[29]

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[24] David Ranson, Across The Great Divine: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2002), 17.

[25] Thornhill, *Making Australia*, 193, citing *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 3-4, 11.

[26] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), ch.2.

[27] See *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 41, 55, 56, 59.

[28] Thornhill, *Modernity*, 5 n.1.

[29] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

John's approach to theological reflection, then, entails the working supposition that the Reign of God is already present and its span is beyond the Church. The whole sphere of human life is open to grace. For grace (as truth, value, moral summons and ultimately God's personal self-communication) to be concretely operative in the lives of people, it must somehow be mediated through the actual historical, cultural, and institutional conditions in which they live.[30] The Spirit of Jesus, then, can be present and active in an unseen though real way in Australian culture and in its movement within history.

While a lack of reflective expression, even certain inarticulateness, may characterize Australians when it comes to ultimate questions, this does not mean there is an absence of spiritual experience. John cites Tony Kelly's comment that such may point to a healthy hesitation to name the un-nameable or even a silent waiting for the opportunity and skills to do so. Further, we must recall that 'grace kept on being grace in the silences that inherently resist expression.'[31]

Such a perspective brings to mind Rahner's view that every human being has a transcendent orientation to ineffable mystery which, in reality, is an orientation to the experience of God even if it is not understood or named in those terms. Further, that the experience of grace is not the same as the experience of grace as *grace*. It is the Gospel's task to offer a story, a personal narrative which, when examined, has a conceptual and metaphorical framework to enable awareness of mystery to become self-aware, to be named in some form and to be personally appropriated.

For John Thornhill, the Gospel, then, is not something external or alien to our human experience. It provides a path to meaning which is a gift while being mediated within our experience. It suggests that one's horizons can be expanded, and that one's embrace of, and understanding of, the real becomes broader and deeper. Rather than seeing this in terms of a spatial metaphor emphasizing superiority (a higher source), John inverts the understanding of the metaphor and approaches it in terms of increasing depth of scope and of insight, of the immanent as mediating the transcendent. To achieve this, John draws on Noel Rowe's comment that we meet in the Jesus-story 'a deeper, rather than a higher, authority.'[32]

Starting with Human Experience

The second theological underpinning of John's approach is the central role given to experience. The inhibited Christian presence in the public square had many influences behind it, not least of which was the marginalizing of Christianity in reaction to the quarrels and sectarian bitterness between Churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[33] John points out that historically the Christian movement in Australia, partly as a reaction to being side-lined, presented the Gospel message in the public sphere of the cultural conversation in a form that was objective, intellectual and doctrinal. At its worst, it took on an ideological and polemical tone that was not only divisive amongst the Christian Churches but it further alienated mainstream Australia.[34] Christianity was experienced not as good news but as intrusive, assertive, and even over-bearing.

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[30] Robert Haight, 'Grace,' in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 460.

[31] Thornhill, *Making Australia*, 168 citing Tony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an* Australian *Spirituality* (Melbourne, Collins Dove, 1990), 13-14.

[32] Thornhill, *Making Australia*, 207.

[33] Ibid, 183-5.

[34] Ibid, 193-5.

To counter this, a more effective approach needs to look to human experience as the starting point. This is a form of evangelization whereby one presents the truth of the Gospel as something that will bring people 'to ultimate authenticity and fulfillment.'[35] In other words, it flows from the points made above. God is already at work in people's lives. It is the subjective that is the foundation of the objective. The doorway that best enables this to be appreciated is by presenting the Gospel as the story of Jesus that connects with other human stories. It is truth lived before it is put into words, experience that must underpin meaning. It is the meeting of the truth of human lives with the truth of Jesus' life 'proclaimed in the silent witness of a selfless and dedicated life, the truth for which all men and women hunger in the depths of their existence.'[36]

Such an approach, John points out, leads to a new appreciation of the power of story. This assumption has both a theological and cultural dimension. Narrative enables human stories and the Gospel story to reach a point where they can intersect, offering a space for conversation built on some commonality of experience. John notes the popularity in the late 1980's of *The Search for Meaning*, one of the most successful in Australian Broadcasting. As a series of interviews, we find there a clear indicator that raises serious doubts about the notion of the stereotypical Australian as someone who is inarticulate or irreligious.[37]

The mutuality of this relationship between the Christian and other stories implies that the Gospel is not only expansive and life-giving in relation to culture. Its meaning can itself be more deeply recognized and appropriated by touching the profound human experiences within culture itself.[38] For all that, one must be aware of the danger of falling into a blind optimism about the world and the Australian cultural heritage. In other words, one holds that there is only the Spirit of God at work and neglects or denies other forces of deception, manipulation, evil, or influences contrary to God's Spirit and authentic humanity.

Hence, the confirming function of the Gospel with regard to culture is balanced by its prophetic task. The Gospel has a critical, confrontational role in highlighting and correcting distorted perceptions, prejudices, blind spots in personal lives and culture. Specific examples noted by John are the way in which the gospel story can help 'overcome the ambiguities and superficialities which the legend of mateship is in danger of assuming.'[39] Again, John reminds us how the Jesus who reveals the ways of God 'invites us to recognize for what they are the smug worlds our self-interest and timidity makes for us...'[40]

At times, however, the bearers of the Gospel are subject to the same process of criticism and self-appraisal from the surrounding culture. For example, this can be inferred from the negative reaction discussed by John to a form of evangelization built around the assertion of doctrines exercised, at times, in an ideological and aggressive style.[41] The critical and alienated reaction within the Australian culture requires a shift in the Church's stance and strategy in its task of evangelization. Again, explicit instances of this questioning by a culture of itself and of the Church are noted by John, namely 'those

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[35] Ibid, 193.

[36] Ibid, 196.

[37] Ibid, 176 citing Caroline Jones, *The Search for Meaning* (Crows Nest: ABC Dove, 1989), 7.

[38] Ibid, 204-5.

[39] Ibid, 207.

[40] Ibid, 213.

[41] Ibid, 194-6.

who in different ways have been pushed to the margin by the legend of mateship: the Aboriginal people, the women of Australia, and the stranger in our midst.'[42] These examples have an even greater urgency more than a decade later in the light of recent events and policies in this country.

The element of self-criticism has bearing on another aspect of the conversation. It is mentioned by John in his Preface in terms of the scope of his book. He again cites Noel Rowe's remarks about a 'living' conversation – 'its evasions as well as its affirmations, its silences and its words,' its denials and avoidances of the whole truth, together with those elements that so shape the conversation that in some ways it is not free nor even makes sense.[43]

Such observations remind us of the ongoing, exploratory, even tentative nature of the engagement of the Gospel and culture for John and for practical theology. Further, the limits, even distortions, of the 'living' conversation reinforce the need for the self-criticism mentioned above. Discovering the truth together demands both humility and wisdom, which merge in something Margaret Farley suggests as one of 'the least recognized gifts of the Holy Spirit,' what she calls, 'the grace of self doubt.'[44] The context of her comment is that all members of the Church must participate in the process of its moral discernment. Farley's primary reference is to the capacity stemming from 'a grace for recognizing the contingencies of moral knowledge when we stretch toward the particular and the concrete.' But arguably it is also true of the texture and attitudes in any 'living' conversation that moves towards being authentic as it seeks the truth in that '[It] allows us to listen to the experience of others, take seriously reasons that are alternative to our own, rethink our own last word. It assumes a shared search for moral insight, and it promotes (though it does not guarantee) a shared conviction in the end.[45]

The Pattern of Self-Transcendence

Finally, if we review the three themes isolated within the Australian cultural conversation and note how they intersect with the Gospel, we find that John (and we) are engaged in a form of phenomenological or narrative analysis of cultural and historical experience. We have noted earlier how these issues bring us to the threshold of the ultimate and to questions that concern self-transcendence. Now we can ask what is there about such an analysis that indicates whether or not moments or movements of grace are at work? How is God's presence as the offer of salvation present within culture and within the intersection of faith and culture?

The answer is found in tracing in such experiences the trajectory of genuine self-transcendence. Grace, the authenticity of the divine presence is revealed in its centrifugal momentum. It is inherently other- (or Other) directed, taking us beyond where to are to

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[42] Ibid, 207. By way of an *obiter dictum*, at a distance of twelve years from the original text, I wonder whether John's reliance on cultural anthropology and literature could have been supplemented by greater use of insights from psychology and sociology. Such a move may have helped to give a more detailed treatment and hence a sharper focus to the specific prejudices, distortions, biases at play within culture as too in the understanding and interpretation of the Gospel.

[43] Ibid, xii.

[44] Margaret Farley, 'Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,' in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy E. O'Connell, and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington: Georgetown University, 2002), 69 cited in James A. Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology: Fundamental Moral Theology at the Beginning of the New Millennium: Looking Back, Looking Forward,' *Theological Studies* 65.1 (2004): 122.

[45] Farley, 'Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt,' 69 cited in Keenan, 'Notes on Moral Theology,' 122.

something 'more.' This is the benchmark against which John evaluates the mutually critical correlation of the three characteristics of the Australian cultural conversation. 'Everyone must have a fair start,' 'wisdom found in adversity and failure,' 'the land as our icon' are pointers to something more. This 'more' is embodied in Jesus in his death and symbolized by the cross revealing the self-giving of God in love.

The meeting of the truth of human lives with grace, with the truth of Jesus' life (however it is experienced and names) prompts the process of conversion – 'the set of judgments and decisions that move the human person from an established horizon into a new horizon of knowing, valuing, and acting.'[46] This inevitably involves moments in which we must correct distortions and biases in the ways we understand and judge reality as well as reshape the images that inform our decisions. Such a process not only brings one to a fuller consciousness about one's horizons and how one views the world. It may also mean, as Frank Fletcher suggests, that an Australian's horizon must be determined through a decision as to 'where one stands, or better with whom on stands' in Australian society, especially with those who are marginalized and specifically the Aboriginal people.[47]

These cultural beliefs and their inherent values together with the ordinary historical situations of human living (especially those of suffering and limitation) call us forth to reach out in a pattern of self-transcendence. They reveal divine grace summoning us to cooperate with God in transforming our society, culture, environment, world, relationships in what they ought to be. This process of growth should involve an openness to, and action within, a broader and deeper reality in terms of social, environmental and personal responsibility. The beliefs and values of the culture find their deepest authority, an unlimited horizon and fullest realization in the Gospel and the person of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined John Thornhill's method of engaging in theological reflection as it is found in one of his works *Making Australia*. It underscores the three issues in the Australian cultural conversation that John brings into a mutually critical correlation with the Gospel according to the Revisionist model of David Tracy. In uncovering the theological underpinnings of his method, it is clear that they make it possible for John to pursue the interplay between the Gospel and culture within the setting of a two-way conversation. They also enable him to avoid the monochromatic, one-directional approaches of those who see the Gospel as opposed to culture (Radical christian) and those who collapse the Gospel into humanism (Radical secular). While John does not claim to offer a detailed method of theological reflection, the process and assumptions embodied in his governing metaphor offer a model that is both flexible and durable.

I would like to conclude on a more personal note.

As a colleague and fellow Marist, I should say that John Thornhill has a profound love of the Church and of his Marist family. It is a privilege to make a contribution to this issue of the *eJournal* which is a special tribute to him. There are three other things about John that have struck me over the years.

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[46] Richard Fragomeni, 'Conversion' in Michael Downey (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 231-235 at 234.

[47] Frank Fletcher, 'Drink from the Wells of Oz,' in Peter Malone (Coordinator), *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1988), 59 cited in Thornhill, *Making Australia*, 174.

First, as a scholar, he has the uncommon ability to put his finger on the undercurrents prompting events, movements and ideas whether in the Church, society or in the realm of history. He can uncover them, trace their sources and bring them into the light of day.

Second, that same gift of sensitivity stamps him as an educator and communicator. He is able to listen to a question from the floor and, in his response, can simultaneously acknowledge the emotion (sometimes troubled) beneath the question and the truth within it.

Third, I wonder whether Jürgen Moltmann's definition of theology as 'hope seeking understanding' best captures John Thornhill as a theologian. He leads people gently along the path of truth. He wants to build up rather than to undermine people's faith. His overall goal is always to sustain confidence and renew hope that ultimately it is all God's work.

John, for yourself and your gifts, nourished and shared, thank you.

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