Principles for Spiritual Engagement in an Australian Context

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How is spirituality experienced by contemporary Australians? What light does this shed on effective engagement with those around us on spiritual issues? This essay identifies four global and five culturally specific principles that inform a uniquely Australian perspective on spirituality and which have direct implications for the practice of Christian ministry to secular Australians. The application of these principles involves: being present, building relationships of trust, respecting spiritual boundaries, discerning the spiritual in the secular, leveraging the power of lived biblical truth, and preaching hope.

1. The global context

In post-Cartesian Western society, knowledge is no longer regarded as being timeless, universally true, or as having objective authority. Rather, it is seen as contextual, local, pluralistic and "essentially imaginative" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 18). Advances in information technology and the growth of the internet have led to the creation of a "hypertextual learning space" where a vast amount of information is instantly accessible. In this space, knowledge has been redefined as information. Information, in turn, is "neutral, explicit, external, perceptual, and relative..." (Sajjadi, 2008, pp. 185-186). The consequence is that Christian institutions and traditional Christian truth claims have lost their former privilege as mediators of truth (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 9; Kaufman, 1995, p. 50). Knowledge derived from the bible is more likely to be regarded as "human interpretation, which is inescapably subjective, necessarily provisional and inevitably disputatious" (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 16). In this world, what an individual's peers think, feel, and say matters far more than what traditional authority figures might say (Nouwen, 1979, pp. 36-37).

The effect of divorcing knowledge from its historical and ideological context is that people now drift "from one moment to the next, making life a long row of randomly chained incidents and accidents" (Nouwen, 1979, p. 13) with no larger narrative to integrate them. In the absence of a coherent belief framework, people have no choice but to make do with whatever "fluid ideological fragments" appear to make the best sense of any given situation (Nouwen, 1979, p. 15). Priority is given to the present and the personal (Nouwen, 1979, p. 31). The present is taken with an "inordinate and uncritical seriousness, if not absolutized" (Brueggemann, 1993, p. 28), and the priority of the personal has led to people becoming increasingly self-reflective, without a sense of responsibility toward others, and demanding immediate gratification of needs and desires (Nouwen, 1979, p. 33).

Twenty-first century western society, while not entirely abandoning its belief in the existence of God, has largely rejected the view of earlier generations that God is active in the world as a causal agent. Instead, cause is attributed to impersonal and implacable natural processes. In this context, Christian theology has become implausible and meaningless to those accustomed to thinking in naturalistic terms and is perceived as inconsistent with a worldview shaped by the natural sciences (Peacocke, 2007, p. 5). The contemporary relationship with God is now determined by human expectations of God and the requirement that God hold himself accountable to humans for meeting those expectations.

> At one time theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: the chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind (Wuthnow, 1993, p. 1239).
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> We view God as a modern parent, neglectful, absent, too little concerned about us to be of much use… Modern people complain because God does not produce what they demand as their rights from him (Kolb, 2002, p. 445).

The moral consequence of rejecting God as causal agent is that is that he no longer has the right to pass judgement on human actions and he has no ability to enforce those judgements if he does (Scruton, 2012, p. 2). This, in turn, leads to a sense of disappointment with a God who will not or cannot meet human expectations.

The contemporary western cultural mindset is also one in which belief in God is "widely rejected as a sign of emotional and intellectual immaturity" (Scruton, 2012, p. 1). The mature belief is that "everything happens in accordance with the laws of nature; and that those laws are contingent, summarizing the way things are, and being without any further explanation" (Scruton, 2012, p. 5). The mature person is one who has left behind their belief in divine agency. "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant, 1784, para 1). Bonhoeffer agreed that maturity is "humankind's recognition that it must now take responsibility for its own future and not presume that God would do it all for us" (Hall, 2004, p. 11).

Those who persist in the belief that God has the ability to influence the outcome of life events are discounted as ignorant and anti-intellectual. "Only ignorance would cause us to deny the general picture painted by modern science" and those who believe in God must, to some extent, be committing themselves to "the propagation of ignorance or at any rate the prevention of knowledge" (Scruton, 2012, pp. 3-4).

2. The contemporary Australian context

Social identity theory holds that a person behaves in ways that fit with the values and beliefs of the group to which they belong (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 2). This occurs at a number of levels, the highest of which is national identity.

> [National identity is] the cohesive force that both holds nation states together and shapes their relationships with the family of nations… an account of the group's origins, its history, and its relationship to the land… [and] a group-level analog to a life story and personal narrative at the individual level (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 3).

a. Australian national identity

A number of studies contend that two centuries of conflict, hardship, and repression have shaped Australia's defining values and beliefs. Our national identity comprises a set of idealized character traits, values, and aspirations that historically have included: mateship, true friendship, strong group loyalty, helpfulness, and honesty (Bean, 1941, p. 606; Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2; Hughes, 2003, pp. 11, 202; Seal, 2004, p. 3); anti-authoritarianism (Hughes, 2003, p. 202; Seal, 2004, p. 3); egalitarianism, broadmindedness, a sense of a fair go, equality of opportunity, and social justice (Bean, 1941, pp. 258-259; Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2; Hughes et al., 2003, p. 11); a casual attitude toward danger, death, and injury (Bean, 1941, pp. 279-259; Seal, 2004, p. 3); informality, irreverence, independence, and larrikinism (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2; Seal, 2004, p. 3); arrogance (Seal, 2004, p. 3); wry humour (Seal, 2004, p. 3); practicality (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2); taciturnity (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2); stoic endurance (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2); skepticism about religion, intellectual, and cultural pursuits (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2; Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 2); and hospitality (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2). Some of these traits have unhelpful negative associations with exclusivity, racism, and sexism.

Interestingly, some of our most significant defining events, like the Gallipoli Campaign, were defeats rather than victories. In a similar vein, life in rural Australia has been, for many, not a victory, but a relentless battle against a harsh environment with the ever-present threat of loss due to drought, flood, or fire. As a consequence, Australians have, over time, normalised hardship, defeat, and loss. These are an accepted part of life. We do not expect to be victorious over the natural world or even to be able to control it. This makes Australians uncomfortable with the American positivity, both secular and spiritual, that assumes the ultimate triumph of the American way. Australians have a "shy hope" (Bouma, 2006, p. 2) that the individual, standing side by side with his mates, will weather the storm.

The traditions that engendered these character traits – the convict era (Hughes,

2003, p. 202), the legend of Anzac (Seal, 2004, p. 3), and the bushman myth (Ward, 1966, pp. 1-2) – do not reflect the actual experience of many Australians. Few are members of an oppressed minority, few have ever participated in armed conflict, and the majority are urban dwellers. Nonetheless, this idealized picture is strongly held because, in the absence of a broadly acceptable alternative, it has provided a much-needed sense of cohesion and confidence in a diverse, multicultural society. It is the "'glue that binds' Australians together" and it provides "the day-to-day reinforcement crucial for maintaining national identity" (Tranter & Donoghue 2007, p. 180).

More recent studies recognize that this traditional paradigm is in a state of flux. Younger Australians identify less with traditional themes and place a greater emphasis on issues of national security and national prosperity (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 2) and a democratic system of government that ensures peace, security, opportunity, and civil rights, freedoms, and protections. Respect for other cultures is highly valued (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 8). So too is an abundant environment that provides for the basic necessities of life and opportunity for citizens. However, economic, scientific/intellectual, and cultural endeavours are not considered important (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 2). This paradigm shift is reflected in the way that younger Australians relate to the nation, prioritizing the personal rather than feeling a sense of obligation or responsibility towards the nation as a whole and its collective prosperity. Younger Australians regard the nation as having an obligation or responsibility to provide them with the opportunity to prosper (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 4). At the present time, the two paradigms overlap.

b. Australian spirituality

National identity meets a deep spiritual need and provides a means for spiritual expression. Harris wrote, "no culture is an island. The meeting of cultures, while sometimes painful – even blood-filled - invariably births something new. This creative new synthesis has theological implications" (Harris, 2008, p. 16). When the Australian cultural identity intersects with Western and indigenous spiritualities, the result is a uniquely Australian perspective on spirituality and religion. A number of observations can be made about Australian spirituality.

First, Australians are reticent about expressing their spirituality. Some American observers, comparing Australia to the United States where religion is a "mega-industry" and half the population are regular participants, have concluded that Australia is spiritually dead (Bouma, 2006, p. 32). This is not the case. Australians simply do religion very differently, "with much less use of neon lights and much less explicit public spirituality. But that does not mean that religion and spirituality is not present; they are just different" (Bouma, 2006, p. 33). Seal

argued that the claim that Australia is a post-Christian country is an erroneous conclusion brought about by the extremely low-key nature of our religiosity (Seal, 2007, p. 148). Indeed, according to the 2009 International Social Science Survey Program, 23% of Australians consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious, 17% consider themselves to be both spiritual and religious, and a further 16% describe themselves as being religious but not spiritual (Hughes, 2010b, p. 3). Manning Clark summed up Australian spirituality as "a whisper in the mind and a shy hope in the heart" that is only spoken about in tentative ways (Bouma, 2006, p. 2). Clearly, spirituality and religion are not insignificant for Australians. They are simply no longer expressed in traditional ways, so that "on the measure of social significance, it must be said that Australia is no longer a Judaeo-Christian country" (Williams, 2015, p. 14).

Second, Australian spirituality is a very secular spirituality, although, in the words of former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, it is "secular in a Christian sort of way" (Williams, 2015, p. 8). While a majority of Australians still profess to believe in the existence of God - the 2009 International Social Science Survey Program (ISSP) found that 67% of Australians still believe in God or a Higher Power (Pickering, 2010, p. 6) - contingent on our origins as a remote colonial outpost far from the centre of power in the British Empire, we have come to think of God as remote, unaware, and limited in his ability to influence local events or provide for basic human needs. We have very a low expectation relationship with the divine (Bouma, 2006, p. 42). When it comes to survival, we are on our own (Williams, 2015, p. 26). Australians do not necessarily regard religion as wrong or misguided, they are simply not interested in it (Frame, 2009, p. 14) or do not have an opinion about it (Williams, 2015, p. 15) because it has no practical relevance to the issues of everyday life. Our very secular spirituality instead places its hope in the human character – in tangible qualities like mateship, endurance, and self-sacrifice – which find expression on occasions like Anzac Day, in the retelling of stories of the achievements of Australians who displayed these qualities in times of conflict (Bouma, 2006, p. 26).

As a result, Australians are hesitant to turn to members of the clergy or religious organisations for spiritual insight or assistance. In addition to the reasons given above, traditional religious forms and practices have failed to provide many with a sense of genuine connection to their spiritual selves (Seal, 2007, p. 135). The bushman myth has reinforced this perception by fostering the view that religion poses a direct challenge to masculinity and imposes restrictions on freedom and independence (Clark, 1997, p. 506). At the same time, the level of trust placed in clergy in Australia has been in decline for decades. A Roy Morgan survey in April 2014 found that only 37% of Australians aged 14 and over gave ministers of religion a "high" or "very high" rating for ethics and honesty, placing them 14th in a list of 30 professions (Morgan & Levine, 2014, p. 1). "This is the lowest ever

rating for Ministers of Religion since being included on the survey for the first time in 1996" (Morgan & Levine, 2014, p. 1). A subsequent Reader's Digest Study published in July 2014 showed that Australians ranked clergy 36th out of 50 in a list of trusted professions (Flynn, 2014). The public exposure of child sexual abuse by clergy and church organisations through the 2013 *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* has contributed to this decline in trust but the downward trend existed before that. When it comes to religious institutions, the 2009 International Social Science Survey Program (ISSP) found that only 21% of Australians expressed a high degree of confidence in churches and religious institutions, down from 39% in 1998 and 56% in 1983 (Kunciunas, 2010, p. 10).

> At the heart of the levels of confidence is whether people feel that the organisations are really there to serve the public or are serving their own interests as organisations, or simply making profits for their shareholders or stakeholders (Kunciunas, 2010, p. 10).

Post-modern thought has further undermined the authority of members of the clergy and church organisations to speak on matters of spiritual concern by challenging the traditional concepts of *a priori* truth, the hierarchical flow of information and knowledge, and the authority of religious texts. Truth is no longer viewed as an absolute, vested in an authoritative text, or communicated hierarchically through the clergy. In the digital world, information is freely accessible by anyone. Rather than having intrinsic value, information is thought of as a tool to be used by an individual to achieve a desired end. In this way knowledge has been relativized and its value is transient. The interpretation of a text now rests in the hands of the reader who is free to go beyond the original author's intention in discovering the usefulness of that text to their personal experience (Sajjadi, 2008, pp. 187-189). Moreover, because of the vast amount of information available, the knower is distanced from it, removing the need for any personal response to what is known (Sajjadi, 2008, pp. 185-186).

In effect, God has been "shouldered out of Australian life and replaced by paganism" (Clark, 1997, p. 506) and by a new spirituality that is "syncretistic, drawing on diverse sources without much concern for their compatibility" and is "essentially about living a good life and treating others with respect" (Frame, 2009, p. 294). This new spirituality is private, personal, individualistic, without formal structures, authoritarian leaders, or an adherence to beliefs that are implausible, undesirable or irrelevant (Frame, 2009, p. 294). We have abandoned the meta-narrative of Christianity into which life experiences were once integrated and we have sidelined institutional Christianity as a source of spiritual interpretation and assistance.

Third, and unsurprisingly, Australian spirituality is a "spirituality without dogma" (Frame, 2009, p. 76). It sacralises the secular by adopting ritual practices, symbols, and spaces derived from Christianity but stripped of anything any explicitly religious and led by secular figures. This is again evident in the growth of Anzac Day ceremonies and in the increasing prevalence of weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies conducted by civil celebrants. These non-religious ceremonies are accessible to those who do not hold religious beliefs and enable them to express their secular brand of spirituality in the world rather than by withdrawing from the world into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable realm of religion. At the same time, the continued use of Christian forms suggests that these ceremonies still meet a deep spiritual need to connect with the "values and ideals they symbolise and represent" (Bouma, 2006, p. 25). This is all the more important given that many Australians are "disconnected from their spiritual selves" (Tacey, 2004, p. 30).

It should be noted that religious knowledge and commitment have never been strong throughout Australia's history (Frame, 2009, p. 293). The pattern for religious commitment has typically been "a nominal adherence to one of the main denominations and a studied indifference to all but the most private aspects of religion" (Frame, 2009, p. 75). As a result, religious belief has tended to be "theologically deficient and philosophically unsophisticated" and lacking "cogency or coherence" (Frame, 2009, p. 294). A further consequence is that "Australian religiosity is syncretistic, drawing on diverse sources without much concern for their compatibility" and is "essentially about living a good life and treating others with respect" (Frame, 2009, p. 294). It is private, personal, and individualistic, eschewing formal structures, authoritarian leaders, and adherence to beliefs that are perceived as "timeless, absolute, and unchanging" (Tacey, 1995, p. 126). These beliefs are...

> ...perceived by more Australians than ever as implausible, undesirable or irrelevant. Religious literacy – working knowledge of the Bible, of the function of the Churches, even of basic ethics – is exceedingly shallow (Williams, 2015, p. 14).

Instead, Australians are leaning towards a faith that is fluid, experiential, and transformative although, being introspective and self-serving, it contributes little to the well-being of society as a whole (Tacey, 2004, pp. 30-31, 38).

Fourth, Australian spirituality is essentially a spirituality of hope.

> Religion and spirituality in Australia is about hope, the production and maintenance of hope through actions, beliefs, practices and places that link the person and/or group to a reality or frame of reference that is both

> beyond the immediate perceptual and material frame and deeply imbedded within the person (Bouma, 2006, p. 30).

Manning Clark described Australian spirituality as, "a whisper in the mind and a shy hope in the heart" (Bouma, 2006, p. 2).

Fifth, there is an evident tension between secular and religious expressions of spirituality. Given that 23% of Australians consider themselves to have a secular spirituality and 17% consider themselves to have a religious spirituality (Hughes, 2010b, p. 3), it is not surprising that there is a tension between the secular and religious expressions of spirituality. Edgar wrote that our national identity "draws upon a Christian theme even though it is not primarily expressed in religious terminology and, indeed, has other, more secular dimensions." For example, the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance makes use of the words, "Greater love hath no man," from John 15:13. These words mean something quite different to each group. The consequence is an "awkward challenge to both… religious and secular sensibilities" (Edgar, 2013, p. 11).

Finally, the movement away from a sense of obligation or responsibility to the nation and towards the nation having an obligation or responsibility to provide opportunities for its citizens (Purdie & Craven, 2006, p. 4) has a spiritual parallel. The legitimacy of knowledge, including spiritual knowledge, has come to be determined by performativity rather than provenance. Performativity regards knowledge as a tool that produces real results or consequences in reality outside of itself, "the best possible input/output equation" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46).

> Spirituality is no longer true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along. I am the judge of its worth. If it helps me find a vacant parking place, I know I am on the right track. If it leads me into the wilderness calling me to face dangers I would rather not deal with at all, then it is a form of spirituality I am unlikely to choose (Wuthnow, 1993, pp. 1239-1240).

3. Principles of contextualisation

In summary, four global and five culturally specific principles enable us to ground spiritual engagement in a contemporary Australian context. These principles are summarized below.

a. Four global principles

1. Knowledge is no longer regarded as being universally true or having objective authority. Christianity has no greater claim to the exclusive knowledge of truth than any other faith tradition. Instead, truth is neutral,

subjective, relative, provisional, contextual, local, pluralistic, and open to dispute.

2. While not entirely abandoning its belief in the existence of God, twenty-first century western society has largely rejected the view that God is active in the world as a causal agent. Instead, cause is attributed to impersonal and implacable natural processes. Ironically, and contrary to the view that there is no universal truth, this is accepted without challenge.

3. Those who do believe that God has the ability to influence the outcome of life events are sometimes perceived as ignorant or emotionally and intellectually immature.

4. The contemporary relationship with God is shaped by human expectations of God and the requirement that he hold himself accountable to humans for failing to meet those expectations, in particular, the immediate gratification of human needs and desires. God has no right to pass to pass moral judgement on human actions, but people do have the right to pass judgment on God for his perceived inaction.

b. Five culturally specific principles

1. Spiritual concerns are not unimportant to Australians, however, they are reluctant to speak about them directly or publicly. Indeed, they may not be able to do so because of they lack both personal spiritual awareness and the language and conceptual apparatus with which to articulate their insights and they experience discomfort when venturing into the unfamiliar realm of the religious.

2. Australians engage with their spiritual selves in secular ways. They sacralise the secular by taking ritual practices, symbols, and spaces from Christianity and stripping them of anything explicitly religious. This can be seen in the growing popularity of secular/spiritual events like Anzac Day. God is optional at such events. Such expressions of spirituality are syncretistic, unsophisticated, lacking coherence, and "essentially about living a good life and treating others with respect" (Frame, 2009, p. 294).

3. Christian institutions and clergy have been sidelined as a source for spiritual insight or assistance for a number of reasons. Institutions are seen as prioritising their own interests and those of their stakeholders over those of the public. Traditional concepts of absolute truth, the

hierarchical communication of information and knowledge, and the authority of religious texts have been undermined. Trust in the ethics and honesty of clergy has been in decline for decades and most Australians do not have easy access to members of the clergy simply because they don't know any. The 2001 National Church Life Survey found that only 8.8% of the Australian population attended a Christian church weekly (Bellamy & Castle, 2004, p. 8) and the 2002 Australian Wellbeing and Security Survey (AWSS) found that 18.6% of the Australian population attended a Christian church monthly or more often (Bellamy & Castle, 2004, p. 9). Moreover, Australians have low or no expectations of God, regarding him as remote, unconcerned, and limited in his ability to influence events. As the representative of a powerless and disinterested God, religious institutions and clergy are similarly perceived as irrelevant powerless. Instead, trust is placed in the human character as expressed in more tangible traits like mateship, group loyalty, honesty, broadmindedness, informality, and giving others a fair go.

4. Australian spirituality is predominantly a spirituality of hope. Australians resonate with those who "produce and maintain hope through actions, beliefs, practices and places that link the person and/or group to a reality or frame of reference that is both beyond the immediate perceptual and material frame" (Bouma, 2006, p. 30) and which has replaced the traditional Judaeo-Christian belief framework that many have rejected.

5. The value of spirituality to Australians is found in the practical results or consequences that it produces rather than in its consistency to an absolute standard of truth or goodness.

4. The principles applied

These insights challenge a number of our assumptions and expectations about engagement with Australians on matters of spiritual concern. The keys to effective engagement are: being present, building relationships of trust, respecting spiritual boundaries, discerning the spiritual in the secular, leveraging the power of lived biblical truth, and preaching hope.

First, given that most Australians do not know any clergy or indeed many Christians that they can turn to for spiritual assistance, we must be proactive and find ways to be known and recognised. It is essential that we are seen, heard, and present in the community.

Second, we cannot assume that our affiliation with a Christian institution or being

a member of the clergy will open the door to a discussion about spiritual matters. Indeed, these will more likely have the opposite effect and be barriers to communication. Our goal should be to remove barriers wherever we find them. Individual Christians and local Churches can overcome these barriers and earn the trust and respect of their communities. Building relationships of trust generally occurs in non-spiritual ways as we participate in the life of the community.

> In a society of skilled 'knockers' that is sensitive to hollow pretension, clergy first need to present themselves as 'good blokes with the common touch' if they desire to have any chance of being heard (Gallagher, 2006, p. 4).

Third, the spiritual reticence of Australians means that they will downplay, and possibly not even recognize, the spiritual dimension of their lives. Forcing the issue only makes them defensive and uncomfortable and creates a further barrier. However, if we respect the spiritual boundaries that Australians have put in place and instead concentrate on building relationships of trust, they will invite us into their lives when they feel ready.

Fourth, Australians, while not averse to spiritual engagement, may not be sufficiently connected to their spiritual selves to understand their spiritual needs or be equipped with the skills to articulate them. We must look beyond their words and use other paradigms to discern deeper spiritual needs and we must learn to translate the secular language, forms, and concepts with which Australians attempt to articulate their spiritual concerns and struggles. These communications are unlikely to follow traditional religious forms but will instead involve everyday images and virtues that can facilitate an acknowledgment of the spiritual in the course of everyday life rather than requiring a withdrawal from the world into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable realm of the religious.

Fifth, even if we have been invited into a spiritual conversation, we must accept that Christianity is granted no greater claim to the exclusive knowledge of truth than any other faith tradition, and that any truth claims we do make will be regarded as subjective and open to dispute. Despite what we may personally believe, we cannot assume that the bible will carry any weight with people who don't accept its absolute truth claims and are more concerned with practical benefits in the present moment. In a consumer driven world, our actions must demonstrate that the Christian life is a better option. Lived truth speaks powerfully, but even then, the relativism of our age means that this can still be discounted as what works for us while they are free to hold an alternative truth of their own.

Sixth, the danger in all this is that of a shallow reductionism where we so reduce our message to accommodate the demands of Australian society and culture

that what we offer are isolated acts of first aid for the spiritual scrapes and scratches of life, or disconnected fragments of biblical truth, rather than a larger coherent narrative that calls for the complete reorientation of people's lives around Jesus. The former is consistent with the consumerist world in which we live. The latter is the core business of Christian ministry. Given that Australian spirituality is predominantly a spirituality of hope, I wonder if the message of a specifically Christian hope that "looks beyond the fulfillment of urgent wishes and pressing desires and offers a vision beyond human suffering and even beyond death" (Nouwen, 1979, p. 81) might not provide that narrative. The goals and pathways of this hope are determined by Christ, the only certain future is Christ's future, and a good outcome is one that is consistent with Christ's unchanging character and purposes. This hope involves confidence in Christ's agency which, in turn, fills a person with impatience and "a permanent disquiet, a longing for the true life from God" (Moltmann, 1969, p. 153) and motivates them to move toward that future.

5. Conclusion

Four global and five culturally specific principles enable us to ground spiritual engagement in a contemporary Australian context. The global principles are: knowledge is no longer regarded as universally true or as having objective authority; twenty-first century western society has rejected the view that God is active in the world as a causal agent; those who believe in divine truth and causality are regarded as ignorant or emotionally and intellectually immature; and the contemporary relationship with God is shaped by human expectations of God and the requirement that he hold himself accountable to us for failing to meet our expectations. The culturally specific principles are: spiritual concerns are not unimportant to Australians but they are reluctant to speak about them directly or publicly; many Australians engage with their spiritual selves in secular ways; Christian institutions and clergy have been sidelined as a source of spiritual insight; Australian spirituality is predominantly a spirituality of hope; and, the value of spirituality is linked to performativity - the practical results or consequences that it produces rather than in its consistency to an absolute standard of truth or goodness.

These principles challenge a number of our assumptions and expectations about engagement with Australians on matters of spiritual concern and result in six keys for effective spiritual engagement in an Australian context. First, given that most Australians do not know any clergy or indeed many Christians that they can turn to for spiritual assistance, we must proactively find ways to be present in their lives. Second, an affiliation with a Christian institution or being a member of the clergy can be a barrier to communication. We can overcome this barrier by building personal relationships of trust. This will generally occur in non-spiritual

ways as we participate in the life of the community. Third, Australians are spiritually reticent, and we must respect the spiritual boundaries that they put in place. If we concentrate instead on building relationships of trust, they will invite us into their lives when they feel ready. Fourth, Australians, express their spiritual needs and struggles in secular ways. We must look beyond their words and use other paradigms to discern these needs and learn to translate the secular language, forms, and concepts with which they attempt to articulate their spiritual struggles. Fifth, we must not assume that the bible will carry any weight with people who do not accept absolute truth claims and are more concerned with practical benefits in the present moment. We must leverage to power of lived truth to demonstrate the validity of Christian life. Sixth, to avoid the danger of a shallow reductionism, we must proclaim a specifically Christian hope that "looks beyond the fulfillment of urgent wishes and pressing desires and offers a vision beyond human suffering and even beyond death" (Nouwen, 1979, p. 81).

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