

**A NEW JERUSALEM
FAITH AND THE CITY**

**CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS
AND ZOE ALI**

02:09:10 - 22:01:11

ST. KILDA
CORROBOREE TREE
JUNCTION OVAL,
ST. KILDA



SERENA HAS A BOOK BY HANNAH ARENDT
IN HER RUCKSACK, THE ESSAYS OF WALTER
BENJAMIN. SHE IS LISTENING TO JONI
MITCHELL ON HER MP3 PLAYER, TO THE
BREEDERS AND TO LAURA NYRO. IMMERSSED IN
THE WORLD OF ALL THEIR WORDS, SHE PAUSES,
SHE STOPS AND LOOKS UP AT THE CLEAR LATE
AUTUMN CYAN SKY OF MELBOURNE. IT'S SO
BEAUTIFUL, SHE THINKS, WHAT MORE DO YOU
NEED, I'M SO GLAD I'M AN ATHEIST.



A NEW JERUSALEM

Faith and the City

Christos Tsiolkas and Zoe Ali

As young children first coming across the illustrated Bible stories (in those books in doctors' waiting rooms in which the Egyptians, the Babylonians and Hebrews always looked Saxon or Celt, and Jesus and his disciples always appeared Aryan) there were two stories that disturbed us in particular. The first was the destruction of the tower of Babel; and the second being Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt for daring to turn back and witness the destruction ravaged on the Cities of the Plain. Both instances seemed a shocking over-reaction by God.

Of course, with age, we came to understand both stories as being allegories of what happens when the authority of God is challenged. But once a story no longer possesses the legitimacy of absolute truth and lays open to imaginative interpretation, then the possibility also arises of reclamation. In the stories of the tower of Babel and the destruction of the Cities of the Plain (both from Genesis, the first book of the Torah, the Hebrew foundation text of the three sibling religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam) the emphasis is on punishment and retribution. In this exhibition we want to, very gently, speak of possibility and redemption. Sin in the city is everywhere and we are a little tired of the frenzied manner our media, our politicians and our religious fundamentalists and bigots are forever seeking it out. In this collection of photography, imaginative and Scriptural text, and items from the collection of the City of Melbourne, what we are seeking to explore is the beauty to be found in the spirit of the city. We are offering, quite deliberately,

an interpretation of the religious experience that seeks peace not conflict, reconciliation not opposition.

It was walking through Melbourne, through discovering the sites of religious and sacred observance in the architecture, design and public space of the city, that we were convinced that our work had to celebrate the communal and compassionate aspect of religious life. Our city is full of churches, the skyline dominated by the Christian spires of St. Pauls, of St. Patricks, of the Presbyterian and Wesleyan churches. The European colonisers that developed the city believed that the spiritual life of the new colony was as important as its economic development. But the churches and cathedrals were built on land stolen from the Indigenous owners. Spirituality and the sacred do not only reside in brick and mortar, and the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples who lived in the lands we now designate as "Melbourne" possessed a spirituality rooted in the soil and the air and the spirit of this place. This sense of the sacred is not a history but a living presence at the heart of our city.

It is important too to acknowledge that from the founding of the city of Melbourne, Chinese and Asian religion was part of the city's sacred expression. One of the delights of working on this exhibition was finding ourselves walking down streets and alleys that reminded us of a long tradition of Buddhist, Hindu and Ancestor worship. If our words and our images tend to concentrate on the expression arising from the sibling religions of

03

CITY OF MELBOURNE
SYNAGOGUE
488 ALBERT STREET,
EAST MELBOURNE



03

04

ALBANIAN MOSQUE
765 DRUMMOND
STREET, NORTH
CARLTON



04

05

ST. PETER'S
EASTERN HILL
15 GISBORNE STREET,
MELBOURNE



05

A

PIN
ST PAUL'S
RESTORATION APPEAL
MADE BY K.C. LUKE,
MELBOURNE
METAL
4.1 x 1.8 CM

KIM-LY LISTENS TO SAMAH TALK
ABOUT THE WAR IN SUDAN AND
CAN'T HELP THINKING,
I'M SO GLAD I'M BUDDHIST.



A

B

PIN
MELBOURNE
CATHOLIC DIOCESAN
CENTENARY, 1948
MADE BY STOKES,
MELBOURNE
METAL
4.8 x 3.5 CM



B

SHE SAYS THAT SOMETIMES,
JUST WHEN LATE NIGHT IS FALLING
INTO EARLY IN THE MORNING,
YOU CAN SEE JESUS HAVING
A COFFEE IN MCDONALDS.

o6

ST MARY'S COPTIC
ORTHODOX CHURCH
1-7 EPSON ROAD,
KENSINGTON

Judaism, Islam and Christianity, that reflects our own heritage and our own way of coming to terms with the meaning of worship and faith in a secular age. Just as importantly we wanted to acknowledge that secularism and humanism are central to understanding the history and lived expression of place. As we walked the city streets we were humbled by the intimate spaces of solace and respite offered by the Seafarer's Mission, the small stores above shops and warehouses that gave the city's first Jews, Muslims and Buddhists their place to pray. In the rush and din and noise of a modern metropolis we discovered that there still exist spaces for hushed contemplation and for simple prayer.

So we begin with the story of the tower of Babel but instead of seeing it as a story of God's punishment, is it possible to reinterpret it as a story of God's reward? The multitude of language, religion and culture, which makes up this city is one of its most vital joys, one of the great pleasures of being Melbournian. Multiculturalism poses questions and challenges but this exhibition takes as a given that communality can be gained through diversity, that negotiating difference is more creative and productive than instilling conformity and homogeneity. We are seeking to celebrate a spiritual life that is opposed to the authoritarian tenets of fundamentalism. It is an exhibition that proposes that the continual lived expression of spirituality in our city is one way through which our communal relationships are nourished and sustained. Certainly, our asking the viewer to read our



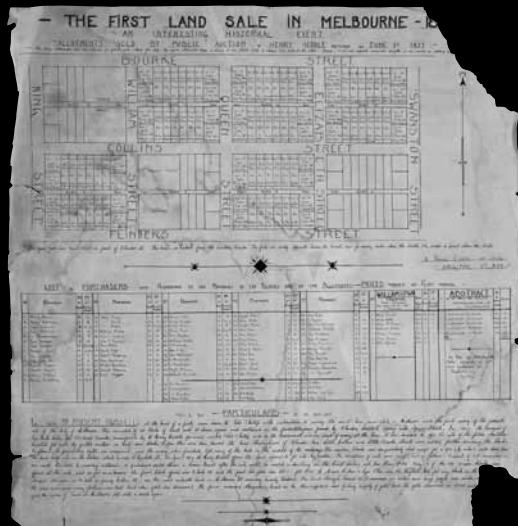
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version of Babel as a gift is a challenge to the received orthodoxies but it seems to us that it is undoubtedly the way forward. It is a common understanding across global religions that God is known by many names. God also speaks through a multiplicity of tongues.

In this spirit we also wish to reinterpret the story of Lot's Wife. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a pivotal story in the Torah and the Qur'an, has been used for over a millennium as a justification for the continual oppression of sexual minorities. A now long-standing theological reading of the story has reinterpreted it to argue that God's punishment is about hospitality and civility, that it is in denying this hospitality to strangers that God punished the Cities of the Plain. Both of us share a Greek heritage and there is a word in Greek, philoxenia, which, opposed to xenophobia, makes a virtue of kindness to

{DETAIL}
ST PAUL'S
CATHEDRAL
CORNER FLINDERS
AND SWANSTON
STREETS,
MELBOURNE





C

THE FIRST
LAND SALE IN
MELBOURNE, 1837
COPY OF ORIGINAL
PLAN PRODUCED BY
J. WESTLY, 1920
INK ON PAPER
70 X 70CM

D

MEDAL
PAULUS VI PONT MAX
ANNO VIII, 1970
MAKER UNKNOWN
METAL
4.5CM DIAMETER

E

MEDAL
JERUSALEM
CITY MUSEUM
MAKER: I.G.C.M.C.
6565
METAL
5.8CM DIAMETER



D

E

the stranger. Philo is friendship, xenia is the stranger. Philoxenia rather than xenophobia strikes as a much more imperative and necessary virtue in a cosmopolitan globalised world. We offer this exhibition in that spirit. But regardless of the sins of those who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah we also find a compassion in Lot's Wife turning back to glimpse the apocalypse. The people destroyed were her neighbours, her family, her friends

Jerusalem is the City of God. The various claims to possession of this ancient city have led to tragic consequences for the Peoples of the Book. But in reading the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an we are interested in an understanding of Jerusalem as any place in which a communion with God is evident.

and colleagues. We find in her disobedience of a vengeful God a turning towards a different understanding of God. A God of compassion. We too prefer to turn to this God.

The texts of the three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – frame our work. Partly, as we have indicated above, because it is through these traditions that our own personal histories have been formed, but also because of the central role these religious philosophies have played in the colonial, modern and present history of Melbourne and Australia. But we do not see them as any more or any less important than the other ancient religious expressions that

form the life of our city. In the monotheistic faiths the city of Jerusalem is the City of God. The various claims to possession of this ancient city have led to tragic consequences for the Peoples of the Book. But in reading the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an we are interested in an understanding of Jerusalem as any place in which a communion with God is evident. In this sense, Jerusalem is not the city of stone and walls, of temples, mosques and churches, but a city of souls. This Jerusalem belongs to everyone. This is an ideal, a hope, a faith. It might be read as a romantic ideal, an impossible hope, a hopeless faith but it is to this city our images and texts point to. In the exhibition there is a gift from Israel to the city of Melbourne, a round bronze medal with the word Jerusalem written in a multitude of tongues. This is our Jerusalem.

There are mythologies across religions that view the city as the site of alienation, misdirected power and of decadence. This is one truth to the city but in walking the streets of Melbourne, finding respite by entering shrines, temples, mosques and cathedrals, contemplating a natural spiritual world in the heart of the concrete city, we also have come across moments of kindness and compassionate interaction between strangers. In our city there is joy, there is transcendence, there is ecstasy and generosity. In a world of xenophobia, fear and violence we believe it is imperative that we find moments of contemplation, prayer and meditation by which we can be reminded of the best of what we can be.

All quotes by Christos Tsiolkas.

All numbered images by Zoe Ali
Medium: Silver Gelatin Print,
Selenium Toned, Size: 7 x 7 inch,
Editions of 3.

All lettered images and artefacts from
the City of Melbourne Art and Heritage
Collection.



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Christos Tsiolkas and Zoe Ali

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LEFT

—
THE CHRISTIAN
(JOSHUA AKOBO), 2009
RICHARD BUTLER-
BOWDON
OIL ON LINEN
51 X 36CM

ON LOAN FROM ARTIST

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—
THE SCOTS'
CHURCH CARPARK
CORNER OF
COLLINS AND
RUSSELL STREETS,
MELBOURNE



GALLERY HOURS

MONDAY 10^{AM} - 2^{PM}

TUESDAY TO FRIDAY 11^{AM} - 6^{PM}

SATURDAY 10^{AM} - 4^{PM}

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