

## CHRISTIAN AND ABORIGINAL INTERFACE IN AUSTRALIA

GIDEON C. GOOSEN

*[The author situates his topic within the ancient culture of Australian Aborigines and the current debate regarding the benefits in the exchange between anthropology and theology. He examines models of the theology/anthropology interface in Australia, noting some of its principal positive outcomes. He then explores several theological issues such as continuity with the gospel, "High Gods," a sense of time, sacramentality, and inculturated liturgy. The developing mutual exchange offers both rich opportunities and notable challenges.]*

SOME SOURCES DATE the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens* on our planet to 30,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> This figure does not tally, however, with what archeologists are saying about the presence of Aborigines on the continent of Australia. The figure given for Aborigines is at least 40,000 years, but they are likely to be a lot older. Some experts, in the light of recent rock art discovered at Jinnium, Western Australia, even suggest Aborigines might have been around from 58,000 to 75,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> Used ochre was found at the Jinnium site dating back 116,000 years. These are thermoluminescence datings, and further work on optically stimulated luminescence and accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon has been initiated to compare results.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the scientific judgment finally turns out to be on this matter, in the Aborigines of Australia we are looking at a people that date back further than any other we know of at this stage. In this sense they are unique among the people of the world. The oldest signs

GIDEON GOOSEN is head of the systematic theology network in the Australian Catholic University, Sydney. He received his S.T.D. degree from Rome's Lateran University, and his Ph.D. from Natal University in Durban. He has published two books, *Bringing Churches Together* (Dwyer, 1993) and *Religion in Australian Culture* (St. Paul's, 1997).

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedic World Atlas* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1990) 33–44; *The Guinness Encyclopedia* (Middlesex: Guinness, 1990); Linda Gamlin, *Origins of Life: Today's World Series* (London; Gloucester, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tacon et al., "Cupule Engravings from Jinnium-Granilpi (Northern Australia) and Beyond: Exploration of a Widespread and Enigmatic Class of Rock Markings," *Antiquity* 71 (1991) 942–65; see also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1996, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tacon et al., "Cupule Engravings" 958.

of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in Europe are from the Paleolithic Age, about 10,000 years, judging by the rock paintings by Cro-Magnon peoples in the Altamira caves in Spain and the Lescaux caves in France. In Canada, the evidence of the Inuit go back some 2,500 to 4,000 years; and the San (or Kung Bushmen) of the Kalahari about the same, although their predecessors could date back to about 30,000 years.<sup>4</sup>

The difference in cultures between the Aborigines, members of the so-called “fourth world,”<sup>5</sup> and the British in the 18th century could hardly have been more extreme. The former was a seminomadic, unsophisticated, and stone-age culture, and archeologists are amazed that they did not follow the path of other stone-age people towards environmental mastery through technology.<sup>6</sup> The latter, on the other hand, was a culture characterized as Christian, urban, industrial, and technologically advanced. The clash of Christian theology and Aboriginal religion in this context posed enormous problems. (Actually Aborigines themselves prefer the term “Aboriginal spirituality” to “religion”; accordingly I will use this term throughout. It also seems that Aboriginal tribes did not have a word for “religion” as used by Westerners.)

Another preliminary point needs to be made. Although I refer to Aborigines as if they were one nation with one spirituality, one needs to bear in mind that in the year 1788 there were about 600 language groups spread over a vast continent nearly as large as the United States.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless they had more in common with each other regarding customs and beliefs than with outsiders. And when we talk about Aborigines today we need to remind ourselves that we are talking about different groups: those still living a semitraditional tribal life, fringe-dwellers in urban areas, and urban Aborigines in towns and cities (the latter two groups outnumbering the former).

The anthropologist W. Stanner in 1967 declared that it was “high time that the Christian churches made a serious attempt to understand the

<sup>4</sup> J. Deacon, “Later Stone Age People and Their Descendants in Southern Africa,” in R. J. Klein, ed., *Southern African Prehistory and Palaeoenvironments* (Rotterdam and Boston: A. A. Balkema, 1984); L. Wadley, “The Pleistocene Later Stone Age South of the Limpopo River,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 7 (1993) 243–96.

<sup>5</sup> A title used by George Manual and Michael Posluns for members of the oppressed aboriginal cultures of the world; quoted in Carl Starkloff, “Aboriginal Cultures and the Christ,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 288.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Stockton, “Sacred Story—Sacred Land,” *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* 24 no. 1 (1990) 10.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation* (Ringwood: McPheeGribble, 1994) 137.

religious background of Aboriginal life.”<sup>8</sup> The missionary anthropologist Cyril Hally notes, 30 years later, that historians have generally neglected Aboriginal spirituality in both their secular and religious histories, and that there has been no serious attempt to understand Aboriginal spirituality.<sup>9</sup> There have been many studies from sociological,<sup>10</sup> historical,<sup>11</sup> and anthropological<sup>12</sup> viewpoints but nothing substantial from a theological viewpoint, although this is currently being addressed.<sup>13</sup>

After these general introductory comments, let me focus this article by saying that it starts by recalling the benefits of the exchange between theology and anthropology, and briefly outlining the anthropological models used in the history of the interface between theology and Aboriginal spirituality in Australia. Next, it identifies positive outcomes for both Aborigines and others arising from the interface of theology and anthropol-

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Martin Wilson, “Aboriginal Religion,” *Compass Theology Review* 12 no. 2 (1978) 11.

<sup>9</sup> Cyril Hally, “Culture Change and Religion,” *National Outlook* 20 (March 1998) 21.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Maddock, *The Australian Aborigines: A Portrait of Their Society*, 2nd ed. (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1982); William H. Edwards, *Traditional Aboriginal Society: A Reader* (Sydney: Macmillan Australia, 1987); Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land* (Melbourne: Penguin Australia, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981); *Frontier, Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Melbourne: CUP, 1993); and P. Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation*.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: MUP, 1947); William E. H. Stanner, *Some Aspects of Aboriginal Religion* (Melbourne: ANZSTS, 1976); Theodor G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monototemism in a Polytotemic Community* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978); Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> William E. H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion*, The Oceania Monography no. 11, and *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1979); Adolphus P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964); Tony Swain, *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion: An Historical Account* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1985); Max Charlesworth et al., *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology* (Brisbane: UQP, 1973); T. Djinyini, “Aboriginal Christianity: Based on Indigenous Theology,” *Nelen Yubu* 24 (1986) 30–36; Djinyini Gondarra, “Father, You Gave Us the Dreaming,” *Compass Theology Review* 22 (1988) 6–8; Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, “Dadirri,” *Compass Theology Review* 22 (1988) 9–11; John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity. A Story of Hope* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1990); James Cowan, *Messengers of the Gods: Tribal Elders Reveal the Ancient Wisdom of the Earth* (Sydney: Vintage Books, 1993); Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift, Spirituality for a Nation* (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1995).

ogy. After that, it examines in detail some theological issues in the debate. Finally, it draws some conclusions from the viewpoint of a Westerner.

### BENEFITS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY/THEOLOGY EXCHANGE

First I note opinions that others have already expressed. Antipathy and suspicion have been present in the anthropology/theology relationship in the past, as Taylor has pointed out.<sup>14</sup> The work of anthropology always poses the threat of potential cultural relativism for theologians, thus making them defensive. This attitude is captured by Kraft's comment that from an anthropologist's perspective "the discipline of theology seems not to have grown with the world."<sup>15</sup>

However, on the positive side, anthropology has the opportunity to remind theologians how culturally conditioned all their formulations are. Anthropology reminds theologians to think multiculturally in contrast to the unspoken monocultural assumptions of the past. There is real danger that theologians operate in restricted systems of thought that make them closed to views other than their own. They run the risk of producing theologies as final products, whereas anthropology emphasizes many different ways of doing and saying things depending on specific peoples, situations, and needs. Kraft sums it up as follows: "If, as anthropologists contend, no form (*cultural system*) has the same meaning in two different cultural contexts, no theological system can either."<sup>16</sup>

Theologians might also be helped by going behind anthropological methodologies and examining the implicit theologies at work. These might provide useful clues for the development of successful indigenous theologies.

### MODELS OF INTERFACE IN AUSTRALIA

The model of theological anthropology applied over the 200-year period after contact (from 1788 to the second half of the 20th century) would be familiar to many, since similar models were in use in other parts of the world after the voyages of discovery, when Christian theology was coming into contact with indigenous religions. However let me briefly highlight some models.

The first model was the "total imposition" (acculturation) model. This model was characterized by an almost total absence of any sense of anthropology on the part of the colonial administration and colonists, but also

<sup>14</sup> Mark Taylor, "What Has Anthropology to Do with Theology," *Theology Today* 41 (January 1985) 379–82.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Kraft, "Cultural Anthropology: Its Meaning for Christian Theology," *Theology Today* 41 (January 1985) 390.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 398.

of the missionaries. The assumption was that Aborigines were a *tabula rasa* as far as religion went. The aim was to make the indigenous peoples Christian (Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Congregationalists) in the European mold. This was quickly seen not to work in Australia. The Aborigines, unlike the Algonquins in North America and the Polynesians in the South Pacific (Futuna, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu) did not become Christians. They proved fairly impervious to attempts at evangelization.

A second model then came into place. This was a “civilization” (modified acculturation) model. It abandoned the evangelization agenda altogether until the Aborigines should first be turned into Europeans. After “civilization” evangelization could follow.

In the 19th and into the 20th century, the Christian churches in Australia, suffering as they did from European particularism in their missionary work, more or less remained with something of a combination of models one and two: a failure to acknowledge any indigenous “religion” and imposing Anglo-Celtic culture and religion on them. This applied equally to all the mainline Christian denominations. There were some exceptions, such as Threlkeld, who showed some sensitivity to the indigenous culture by translating the Gospel of Luke into a local language in New South Wales; this had its parallels in many other parts of the world, such as Eliot’s<sup>17</sup> ‘Mohecan’ Bible in what is now the state of New York.

There are many instances one could cite to support the view that missionaries, with some exceptions, looked down on the Aborigines. Contemporary authors are searching for and finding examples of such negative attitudes. With the concentration on negative instances, however, comes the danger, for Aboriginal writers especially, of excessive backward looking in anger rather than constructive theologizing for the present and future while acknowledging the insensitivities and sins of the past.

## SOME POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF INTERFACE

### Opportunity for Aboriginal Theologians

As regards the opportunity and challenge to express themselves in their own culture, Aborigines are in the same situation as all other Australian theologians. Both groups have either inherited or had thrust on them a brand of Christianity and theology that came from elsewhere. The task at

<sup>17</sup> John Eliot (1604–1690) was a Presbyterian missionary. In 1632 he became pastor of Roxbury, Massachusetts, and set about learning the language of the Pequot tribe of the Iroquois; see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964) 225–27.

hand that anthropology makes all the more urgent is to forge a theology and liturgy that flows from the culture of the people while being faithful to the tradition. Westerners in Australia have started to do so in the latter part of this century (Banks, Birch, Dicker, Edwards, Fletcher, Kelly, Lilburne, Stockton, B. Wilson) while engaging simultaneously in global theology (Coffey, Lennan, Hill, Thornhill). Aboriginal writers have also begun the process (Gondarra, Rosendale, Ungunmerr, Harris, Pattel-Gray, Dodson, Paulson, Walker, and the Rainbow Spirit Elders).

Because of the enormous personal pain inflicted on them by Western culture and the partial destruction of their own culture over the past 200 years, the writings of Aborigines reflect a difficult time of working through this trauma. They have the added disadvantage of being obliged to move into a written tradition which is foreign to them. In spite of many articles and papers on Aboriginal theology, Pattel-Gray claims that the collection *Aboriginal Spirituality*, which she edited, is “the first major work in Australia to develop a critical Aboriginal analysis of Christianity and Biblical interpretation, and to explore the right of Aboriginal People to create and determine our own Aboriginal theologies.”<sup>18</sup>

### Discovery of Aboriginal Values

The anthropologist Strehlow, decades ago and ahead of his time, maintained that Westerners should adopt some of the social and political tolerance and cooperation of the Aborigines; they could regain lost happiness through a more harmonized way of relating to the universe and earth in particular; they could learn from Aboriginal spirituality and from their behavioral norms.<sup>19</sup>

This trend can be seen in a number of documents. 1978 saw the publication of a statement entitled *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern*.<sup>20</sup> This statement referred to *Nostra aetate*, the document of Vatican II on non-Christian religions, in which Christians were exhorted to acknowledge and promote “the spiritual and moral goods” found among followers of other religions as well as “the values in their society and culture.” This marked the beginning of the Catholic Church in Australia becoming officially more positive towards other religions, an attitudinal change which reflected the rising importance of anthropology in theological debate.

In the same Australian document, a reference is made to the apostolic

<sup>18</sup> Anne Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future* (Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1996) xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978) 52–53.

<sup>20</sup> Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concerns* (Surry Hills: Dwyer, 1978).

exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975) on the point that the Church should support those on the margins of life and help them to overcome those impediments that keep them on the margins. The dispossession of land is one such impediment. The churches have tried to do this. In Australia the Mabo decision, the Native Title Land Act, and the High Court decision in 1996 in the Wik case, which ruled that pastoral lease does not necessarily extinguish native title to land, have raised the issue politically. The churches have supported the Native Title Act; the World Council of Churches, represented by Konrad Raiser on a visit to Australia in 1997, did the same in the face of public political opposition and predictable cries that religion should keep out of politics.

In 1983 an ecumenical statement entitled *Changing Australia* stressed the value of the Aboriginal way of life in the context of the growing awareness of the ecological crisis. It acknowledged the contribution to society by Aborigines, "whose traditions carry a deeply spiritual understanding of the relationship between human society and the natural environment."<sup>21</sup> In 1986 Denis Edwards established the point that the Holy Spirit is present in all cultures, that aspects of Aboriginal culture can be salvific, and that their attitude towards the land can be seen as a "providential gift that is offered to Australian Christians."<sup>22</sup> Anthony Kelly, another theologian, noted in 1990 a distinct change of attitude on the part of white Australians toward Aboriginal spirituality.<sup>23</sup> Eugene Stockton saw the change as "a deep conviction that Aborigines in their religion expressed a lived experience and a living voice of the land to which they had long been attuned."<sup>24</sup> John Thornhill maintained that "an understanding of Aboriginal culture and its relationship to this ancient continent is of fundamental importance to all Australians."<sup>25</sup>

More recently, The Rainbow Spirit Elders, as Aborigines, while decrying some destructive Western attitudes, evaluate their contribution to the national scene in terms of values as follows:

<sup>21</sup> Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, *Changing Australia* (Blackburn: Dove Communications, 1983) 9.

<sup>22</sup> Denis Edwards, "Apprentices in Faith to the Aboriginal View of the Land," *Compass Theology Review* 20 no. 1 (1986) 23–31.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: CollinsDove, 1990) 110.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Stockton, *Sacred Story* 10.

<sup>25</sup> John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation* (Newtown: Millennium Books, 1992) 41. Horsely takes it much further, maintaining that all Australians must be converted to Aboriginal spirituality (Michael Horsely, "Dreaming of an Australian Catholicism: A Search for Identity, Part I," *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* 26 no. 4 [1992] 6–10).

In our country, too, economic values often take precedence over human and spiritual values. Genuine cooperation—in which all parties are respected and everyone wins—is replaced by confrontation and competition. The wholesale destruction of our land continues. In the sixty or more thousand years that our people have been in this continent, we have learned to live in this land. We want to share it with all Australians in a way that will ensure a better future for all our children.<sup>26</sup>

Given the history of Western missionaries wanting to save the Aborigines from paganism, Harris, an Aborigine, stands this theme on its head when he states that the first goal of the radical Aboriginal church is to bring the “Australian church away from its paganism and its idolatry and back to the true and living God of the Dreamtime.”<sup>27</sup> He hopes the radical Aboriginal leaders will lead their people to a place where they can revive their culture and spirits and be introduced to the New Testament Christ, as opposed to the Western Christ.

### The Aboriginal Mythopoetic Worldview

The differences in mental framework between Aborigines and Westerners/colonialists are enormous.<sup>28</sup> Fletcher, using Lonerganian insights, has identified the differences in the way the two cultures make meaning and in the way they express their religious experiences.<sup>29</sup> Let me briefly outline Fletcher’s analysis.

First, Aborigines have a different way of making meaning. They have an esthetic, metaphorical frame of mind. We have already pointed out that, like other primal peoples, they have no word for “religion” as a separate dimension of living. Therefore there is no tension between the culture and religion. “Its spiritual tradition has been its creative center. Its mythic stories, overarching all institutions in society, have portrayed humans as

<sup>26</sup> The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards An Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1997) 6.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Harris, “Guidelines for So-called Western Civilization and Christianity,” in Anne Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality* 77.

<sup>28</sup> It seems more fruitful to make comparisons between Aboriginal religion and other religions on whole systems rather than on a point-by-point basis; see Max Charlesworth, “Introduction,” in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, ed. M. Charlesworth (Brisbane: Queensland University, 1984) 14.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Fletcher, “Towards a Dialogue with Traditional Aboriginal Religion,” *Pacifica* 9 (1996) 164–74. John Morgan also sees the connecting point for anthropology and theology as meaning; see “Clifford Geertz: An Interfacing of Anthropology and Religious Studies,” *Horizons* 5 (1978) 203–10. Fletcher explores the Euro-Australian affliction of soul issues (animus, identity, and land) from historical, psychological, and spiritual viewpoints. He further reflects on the historical accounts of the treatment of Aborigines, the cultural story of Europeans in Australia, and the psychic considerations regarding animus, identity, and land (“Finding the Framework to Prepare for Dialogue with Aborigines,” *Pacifica* 10 (1997) 25–38).



participants in cosmic drama.”<sup>30</sup> Its mythic stories are lived out all the time in their storytelling, rituals, songs, art, and celebrations. Westerners, on the other hand, make meaning through a process that values the rational, logical, utilitarian seemingly without any overarching story. Christians have difficulty accommodating their Jesus story as the overarching story of their culture.

Second, Fletcher points out, Aborigines express their religious experience of cosmic manifestations in a unique way: it is expressed esthetically in the life-forms of animals, reptiles, birds, insects, and places in the living land. Aborigines understand that the land pre-existed humans “but was transformed into life by the spiritual figures whose tracks across it are known and celebrated in story.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, some Westerners see it differently. Coming from a top-down, transcendental view of revelation they cannot see any revelation taking place through creatures. Revelation takes place with God speaking to the chosen people and through Jesus Christ. Thus any religion that venerates animals is inauthentic religion.

Contrary to this is the Aboriginal Dreaming (*alcheringa*), the central symbol that informs all other aspects of life. It is difficult to explain because it pertains to a different mental framework. It could be said to be the Aboriginal creation myth, the originating story of life, their “originating from Eternity,” their explanation of the cosmos, their sacred story. It is present, past, and future. It influences the present and can in turn be influenced by the present. Among the Arrente of Central Australia it is referred to as “the time of Great Power.”<sup>32</sup> I will be returning to this Dreaming below.

## SOME THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN DEBATE

### Continuity or Discontinuity with the Gospel?

The debate on the relationship of Christianity to Aboriginal spirituality was initially carried on for a brief period of time in the early 1980s in the academic journal *Compass*, in terms of their continuity or discontinuity. The debate was between two missionaries, Martin Wilson,<sup>33</sup> a Missionary of the Sacred Heart, and Don O’Donovan, a Discalced Carmelite. What the debate highlighted was basically two different worldviews and theologies. Wilson saw the Dreaming as a controlling symbol in Aboriginal spirituality, as the Christ-event is for Christians. He identified sacramentality

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Christine Morris, “The Oral Tradition under Threat,” in Anne Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality* 24.

<sup>33</sup> The debate started in reaction to Martin Wilson, *The New, Old and Timeless* (Kensington: Chevalier, 1979).

and celebration as bridges for further dialogue with Christians, insisting he was looking for “an internal consistency” between them.

In order to throw some light on the issue of transcendence, Wilson had recourse to the philosophical category of insight (the intelligent perception of concrete significance) as distinct from its expression. The point he wished to make was that insights can be spelled out in different modes: either in reflective modes such as concepts or in correlatives (concrete models). Thus the Aborigines may not have concepts (rational approach), but they do have concrete models of expression such as stories (mythopoetic approach) about Nugumaj/Baiami/Djamar/Bunjil/Daramulun. In short Wilson believed that the Aboriginal people had a lot of Christ’s “stuff” already, and that when they enter his kingdom, they should not be introduced as paupers. By that he meant that their stories and values were close (if not identical) to the values of the kingdom and thus constituted a certain favorable predisposition for Christ’s Good News.

O’Donovan, on the other hand, rejected the personages of the Dreaming as transcendental beings. For him, aboriginal cosmology has no outside. Sacramentality referred to Christ’s salvation, *the* salvation, and hence sacramentality could not be used as a category for dialogue with Aborigines. He also maintained that a full understanding of celebration presupposes an achieved transcendence: “Life has a name now which it didn’t in the Dreaming, and is different altogether.”<sup>34</sup>

O’Donovan raises the interesting question of Dreamtime Christology. Do we bring the Dreaming into Christ or Christ into the Dreaming? There is a need to bring the Dreaming into Christ and metamorphose it into a new thing, to “christify” it. In the light of this, an Aboriginal theologian such as Gondarra says that Aboriginal spirituality must “grow from within” (bring Christ into the Dreaming) in terms of Christianity. On sacramentality, O’Donovan says that Aboriginal spirituality looks with hope towards nothing.<sup>35</sup> On this score we must admit that there is room for growth in terms of a christological apotheosis. Instead of using sacraments as a bridge, O’Donovan proposes LIFE insight—seeing life as good and unconditionally desirable, but most mysterious. Aborigines are open to life of a fuller kind. And with this one can hardly quibble.

As can be seen, this debate tends to be polarized. One side emphasizes the continuity between Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality, and the other side emphasizes discontinuity. In stressing discontinuity O’Donovan seems not to concede Rahner’s point that God’s grace is present in all peoples of all times. Another way of characterizing the debate is that Wilson is sensitive to the Aboriginal mythopoetic mindset, whereas

<sup>34</sup> Dan O’Donovan, *Compass Theology Review* 14, no. 2 (1980) 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

O'Donovan is locked into a rational, logical, cognitive Westerner's mental framework. Andrew Howley, also a Missionary of the Sacred Heart, suggests that Christianity brings fulfillment to Aboriginal spirituality without destroying it.<sup>36</sup> He suggests law, land, exile, and salvation as themes to explore. He says that Aboriginal stories should be "circumcised" as the Jews "circumcised" the stories of creation they took from other cultures.

Wilson concluded from his research that Aborigines do not feel far from Christianity even in their traditional religion; this is an important anthropological datum. Robert Schreiter makes the same point about African religions: "The bitter irony, as African theologians have pointed out, is that African values and customs are often closer to the Semitic values that pervade the Scriptures and the story of Jesus than the European Christian values that have been imposed upon them."<sup>37</sup> Deacon Boniface Perjert, himself an Aborigine, affirms the same sentiment:

When I read the Gospels, I read them as an Aborigine. There are many things in the Gospels that make me happy to be a Aborigine because I think we have a good start. . . . Christ did not get worried about material things. In fact he looked on them as things that get in the way and make it hard to get to our true country. . . . We find it is easy to see in Christ THE great Dreamtime figure, who, more than all others gave us Law and Ceremony and life centers, and marked out the way we must follow to reach our true country.<sup>38</sup>

### A High God?

The differences in mental framework between Aborigines and Westerners is also reflected in the debate about whether Aborigines had a Supreme Being, "a High God." The topic was hotly debated through the 19th and into the 20th century. The issue whether the Aborigines believed in a Supreme Being who was eternal, all-powerful, and almighty like Yahweh is closely tied up with psychological and sociological/anthropological theories about the unresolved question of the origin of religion itself. It may be best if the latter problem is briefly addressed first.

To those who favored the evolutionary theory of progress (and particularly the unilinear evolutionary theory so popular among anthropologists in the 19th century) it seemed logical that a tribe would progress from fetishism, to animism, ghosts, spirits, magic, belief in supreme beings, finally to belief in All-Fatherism. Not that all anthropologists supported this particular sequence. Tylor, for example, started with animism, and Lubbock with

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Howley, "Letter: Aboriginal Religion," *Compass Theology Review* 15 no. 1 (1981) 34-37.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) viii.

<sup>38</sup> Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern* 22.

ghosts. Lang, forever challenging the received wisdom, thought the evolutionary line might start with belief in all-Fatherism and then degenerate, in some cases to animism and magic.

One anthropologist who was deeply involved in this latter theory was the German priest, ethnologist, linguist, and anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954). He wished to discredit those ethnologists who favored the developmental sequence mentioned above from fetishism or animism eventually to monotheism.<sup>39</sup> But his ideas on religion need to be seen in the wider context of this history of historical origins.

Schmidt considered cultural history on a worldwide scale to be based on a system of culture circles, or culture areas. The oldest culture was that of the hunter-gatherers, evidence of which is found in South-Eastern Australia and among the pygmies and pygmoids; he called these primitive cultures. Next followed primary cultures, who were food-producers; then secondary cultures (Polynesia, India, Melanesia, Western Asia, etc.); and finally tertiary cultures (the oldest civilizations of Asia, Europe and America).<sup>40</sup> Primary cultures which arose from primitive cultures can be further broken down into three other sub-cultures on the same level: a culture based on matriarchy and the cultivation of plants; a hunting, patriarchal culture based on totemism; and a pastoral, patriarchal culture based on nomadic animal husbandry.

Schmidt maintained that each one of these primary culture circles arose only once in a given geographical area and then diffused to other areas. Through the intermingling of primary cultures, secondary and tertiary cultures arose which were “higher” cultures. Changes in the economic basis of a culture had their effects on society and religion. Thus Schmidt’s theory rests on an historical framework rather than a purely evolutionist one which was the dominant trend at the time.

Given this historical framework, how did religion develop according to Schmidt? Based on the data from South-Eastern Australia (Howitt in particular<sup>41</sup>) and elsewhere in Oceania, Schmidt maintained that monotheism was the religion of the extant hunter-gatherers of South-East Australia.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt gives a good summary and refutation of the various theories as to whether animism, fetishism, magic, totemism, etc., originate at the beginning of religion in *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1935) 31–166. The book is a summary of vol. 1 of his work in 12 vols., *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1949) 1926–55; see also “Schmidt, Wilhelm,” in M. Eliade, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 13.113–15.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth* 240–41; see also “Supreme Beings,” in M. Eliade, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 13.168–81.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth* 251–90.

And as these people are the oldest form of human culture, it follows, Schmidt asserted, that monotheism is the oldest form of religion for humanity.

Schmidt also mused that the idea of the Supreme Being that was held by primal peoples was so sublime that they themselves could not possibly have thought it up; therefore it must have been the result of a divine primitive revelation. However as those cultures developed, at least in some cases decadence occurred in religion and ethics which opened the way to the possibility of polytheism or even animism. Schmidt believed, for example, that sun worship and magic came to prevail in totemic cultures. Matriarchal planting cultures tended to give birth to earth and fertility cults, lunar mythology, and worship of the dead. Retrograde steps (degeneration) were thus always possible according to Schmidt's theory. He also believed that nomadic people best preserved the original idea of God.

Not everyone agreed with Schmidt. Evans-Pritchard criticized Schmidt's reconstruction of historical levels (the historical primary cultures that he developed cannot be proven to have existed) and also his historical method.<sup>43</sup> Schmidt's data collection, as well as Howitt's, could be questioned in terms of the cultural-theological bias of his questions and those of other investigators. When one reads the list of the characteristics Schmidt attributed to the Supreme Being in so many primal cultures (such as eternity, omniscience, beneficence, morality, and omnipotence), one feels that the European theological mindset and agenda may have unduely influenced his research. We will return to this important issue shortly. Many anthropologists also felt that Schmidt was stepping outside scientific boundaries in positing an original revelation.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless the historical system Schmidt developed, although very rigid, was useful at the time in providing categories for thinking through possibilities and providing a counterpoise for the evolutionists. However, if one uses Schmidt's theory of the development of religion, there are some questions that can be asked regarding the Australian data. If South-Eastern Australians believed in all-Fatherism, does this mean they were more advanced than the Arrente of Central Australia? Many anthropologists have assumed the opposite. If one discards Schmidt's theory and considers monotheism the end of the evolution rather than the beginning, is it possible their belief came from the missionaries, as Tylor and others believed, rather than from evolution? Unfortunately there are no definite answers.

As regards the issue of an Aboriginal High God, opinions have been

<sup>43</sup> Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon 1965) 103.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Sullivan, "Supreme Beings," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, M. Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 14.178.

split. The anthropologists of the 19th- and early-20th century who did not believe that Aborigines believed in a Supreme Being included Tylor, Lubbock, Hartland, Spencer, and Gillen. Those who maintained, more or less, that there was evidence of such a belief included Howitt, Schmidt, Salvado, Lang, and Strehlow.<sup>45</sup> After them the debate died down somewhat as anthropologists lost interest in that particular issue and functionalism and structuralism gained in popularity. However, scholars like Pettazzoni and Eliade continued to support the idea of Aboriginal deities.

Some contemporary writers on Aboriginal spirituality tend to be rather cautious about belief in a Supreme Being. Eugene Stockton, a Catholic priest, biblical scholar, and archeologist, deals with this issue in his *The Aboriginal Gift*. His argument relies on his own knowledge of Aboriginal communities and his awareness of the huge difference between the worldviews of Aborigines and Westerners. He tends to think that Aborigines would not have had any High God, since the very question would have been unthinkable for the Aboriginal family-model worldview as opposed to the Western hierarchical one. He quotes Worms<sup>46</sup> who likewise denies any evidence of an absolute God. Strehlow changed his mind on the issue. Swain thinks that any evidence such as Baiame in the South-East or the Earth-Mother in the North may well have been the result of European influence.<sup>47</sup>

Stockton's contribution is particularly helpful in contrasting the two different worldviews.<sup>48</sup> European culture is hierarchical in many ways. Its political systems all have various layers of subordination under the head of state. Religion is hierarchically structured: pope, bishops, priests, deacons, and laity. Language is hierarchically structured with main clauses and subordinate clauses. Science abounds in classifications. Any new information or experience tends to be organized with this hierarchical mindset. By contrast, the Aborigines are rather egalitarian with no overall, single boss or leader (although the elders are a very significant group). Some individuals have charge of certain ceremonies or functions. Politically prestige ebbs and flows with no one person in a dominant position. The family is the model for politics and indeed for the whole universe. Thus the question of one, supreme spirit-being would not have occurred to them. Stockton seems to agree with Emile Durkheim's thesis that Aboriginal spirituality reflected the social organization of the Aboriginal tribe.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Tony Swain, *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion* 75–100.

<sup>46</sup> Ernest Worms, *Australian Aboriginal Religions*, trans. Martin Wilson et al., 57, cited in Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift* 47; see also Theodor G. H. Strehlow, *Central* 47.

<sup>47</sup> Swain, *Interpreting* 131.

<sup>48</sup> Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift* 46–47.

<sup>49</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

Christian Aborigines themselves are divided on the topic of how to compare the Christian God and their spirits. The Christian Rainbow Spirit Elders certainly consider the Creator Spirit as another name for God. They say they had many different names for God, not unlike the Old Testament peoples with their YHWH, El Shaddai, Elohim, Adonai, etc. Some of these elders identify the Rainbow Spirit with the Creator Spirit; others believe that the life-giving power of the Creator Spirit is manifested through the Rainbow Spirit.<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that these elders are Christian Aborigines. What the whole issue does raise, and this is a positive outcome, is the question of our concept of God. To what extent have we in the West domesticated our concept of God to fit in with our views on power and hierarchy? The completely different Aboriginal view can encourage us, as Gordon Kaufman might say, to engage in the deconstruction and then reconstruction of our concept of God (and the world).

The “High God” debate is rendered all the more difficult because of the two distinctive mental frameworks involved. The Aboriginal framework is esthetic, metaphorical. The European framework is rational, utilitarian. The former’s religious experience of cosmic manifestations is quite different from the Westerner’s experience of private enlightenment.

The way forward lies in recognizing the two different way of thinking and mediating meaning. Hear again Fletcher uses Lonerganian terms to make distinctions. The Aboriginal way of mediating meaning is through the logos tradition, that is, through the intentionality of consciousness, in order to gain cognitive knowledge. The two ways of mediating meaning are complementary, not mutually exclusive. We need to acknowledge both ways.

### A Sense of Time

There is no doubt that this aspect of Aboriginal spirituality provokes us to thought. Their understanding of time is elusive for the Western mind. Superficially, Westerners think in terms of the past, present, and future as three distinct dimensions of time. These dimensions are seen in linear sequence. The past is over, the future is not yet here, so all we have is the present. But now we are being told that time is tied to space. Astrophysicists like Stephen Hawking<sup>51</sup> and Paul Davies, who write about the origins of the universe and the beginning of time, have unsettled our complacency about time. They stress that the concepts of time and space are related, and are tied to the creation of this universe. Events are now to be located in four dimensions, the fourth being time.

<sup>50</sup> Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow* 88.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam, 1988) 15–36.

Aborigines, on the other hand, do not think of time in a linear way as past, present, and future. The Dreaming is present with them now. And they appear less interested in the future, although they believe in life after death and expect that in the future the Spirits will come and take them to be with the ancestors.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless it could be said that Aborigines are not future-oriented<sup>53</sup> in the way that Christians are as we await the Second Coming and the fullness of the kingdom.

How are we to understand the Aboriginal concept of time? Stockton cites Stanner's phrase for the Dreaming time as "everywhen." Dreaming time co-exists and penetrates ordinary time. Stanner said that time as a continuum is very hazy in the Aboriginal mind. There is no past, no future, only an ever-expanding present.<sup>54</sup> To capture this a number of phrases have been used, such as "timelessness," "suspended time," or "cycle time." One is inclined to think this is utterly different from Western time. Yet, before we make that judgment, we need to explore further. Westerners do know the phenomenon of "time standing still." When people are recalling an incident in the past at some length and with some relish, they often speak of "reliving the past" (making it present again) and say that while they were doing this "time stood still." Thus the experience of timelessness is not unknown to Westerners, even if only infrequently experienced.

Westerners too, in a particular way, attempt to bring the three dimensions of time together. As Peter Phan observes, through memory they can bring the past into the present, and through anticipation they can bring the future into the present.<sup>55</sup> As individuals make decisions, they give their lives a personal configuration. Their "past" then stays with them as they move forward. It defines them to some extent. Each individual struggles to bring the three dimensions of time together successfully in a holistic, unified way. People who cannot do this are said to live in the past or in the clouds, are considered too idealistic or unreal. When one dies, says Phan, one brings these three dimensions into perfect unity which we call eternity, where there is nothing like earthly time. I think the Aborigines are closer to doing this successfully in this life than Westerners. Stockton attempts this in his own way. His solution is to think of a three-dimensional image with time as a spiral. It is forward-moving if viewed from the side, cyclic if

<sup>52</sup> William Hall and Marjory Hall, "Dreams, Visions and Aboriginal Spirituality," in Anne Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality* 39.

<sup>53</sup> Graham A. Paulson, "The Value of Aboriginal Culture," in A. Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality* 86.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Family Education Centres: A Final Report to the Bernard van Leer Foundation 1969-1973* (Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney, 1975) 42, cited in Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift* 96.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Phan, *Responses to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 27.



viewed from above, and spiraling outwards if viewed from inside. Thus there do seem to be points of coincidence between Aboriginal time and Western time.

Furthermore, with regard to Aboriginal time, not only is the past present with Aborigines now, but one can also influence the past. Stockton develops this interesting point, which he calls a reversal of time. He takes Strehlow's little story as the first example of this. A *tjurunga* (sacred object linked to the Dreaming) had been chipped but it was not permitted to smooth the edge "because the *tjurunga* was regarded as the now-changed body of the ancestral spirit."<sup>56</sup> In other words, the being was injured retrospectively. As a second example of time reversal he quotes Eddie Knee-bone as implying that the spirit of the dead will return to the Dreamtime and "carry out memories to the Dreamtime," thus changing it. The third example of time reversal is taken from Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr's *Australian Stations of the Cross*, where Christ lies dead in Mary's arms, yet is alive in her person as the resurrected Christ; the Resurrection took place in Mary through faith before it happened historically.

This phenomenon of time reversal resonates with some aspects of the Catholic tradition. In discussing salvation, one would say that those millions of people, Jews and pagans, who lived and died before the historical birth of Christ were saved in anticipation of the merits of Christ. We might say further that the mystery of Christ (as opposed to the historical Jesus) encompassed them and their lives. Is not this in a way a reversal of time? People were saved in the past through a historical event, the salvific death of Jesus on the Cross, before it happened in time. I think the Aboriginal people might have fewer problems with that than Westerners.

Let me continue this line of thought. For Westerners, eschatological events lie in the future, "at the end of time," "at the final judgment," when "Jesus will come again" or "the just will rise again." These events are all held at a distance as belonging to the future. But an alternative way of looking at them is more along the lines of a realized eschatology. Eternal life has already begun, we are already judged. This is a very Johannine way of seeing, but one to which Aborigines might easily relate.

Notwithstanding the above, the Aboriginal concept of time, and time in general, is difficult to grasp. Not surprisingly, given that time is a mystery, Stockton concludes his chapter on this subject with the apophatic sentiment: "I am not sure I have come closer to understanding the Aboriginal sense of time, but at least I have questioned my own as the only way to view time."<sup>57</sup> This caution is echoed in a more general way by Deborah Bird Rose who, after living for 13 years with Aboriginal people, concludes: "I have come to think that I understand very little of Aboriginal engendered

<sup>56</sup> Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift* 93.      <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

spirituality, and I am not fully satisfied with anyone's written work, including my own."<sup>58</sup>

### Sacramentality as Common Ground

Segundo's contention that the sacraments as religious actions form the most obvious bridge between Christianity and other religions needs to be qualified.<sup>59</sup> One can certainly say that Catholicism has a good point of commonality with Aboriginal spirituality because of its understanding and use of sacramentality. However some Protestant churches, without a sense of sacraments or sacramentality, have greater difficulty in finding natural bridges. Some who rely entirely on the Word of God have difficulty relating to a religion that is not based on books and whose adherents do not relate well to written material. Aborigines, however, do relate easily to ceremonies, rituals, and stories. A basis for dialogue with "Scripture only" Christian churches is missing. Extreme churches, those very fundamentalist or highly "evangelical," simply reject all primal religion as "worthless" "pagan," or even "satanic." This attitude is found in parts of Australia.

It might be best here to describe the contemporary Catholic understanding of sacraments and then make comparisons with Aboriginal spirituality. Catholic theology has struggled with a broader understanding of sacraments and sacramentality that is constantly threatened by a narrow, legal understanding of the seven sacraments. In Catholic theology, there are many ways of defining sacramentality and sacraments in the broad sense. As a basic statement one could say that a sacrament is a sign or symbol of something which is sacred and mysterious. Or to put it in the words of Martos, "the theme underlying all others is that sacraments are doors to the experience of the sacred, and the basic trend is toward more experiential accounts of the sacraments."<sup>60</sup> There has been a shift in Catholic sacramental theology from considering sacraments mainly as causes of grace to seeing them as signs of grace as well. This shift explains Schillebeeckx's definition of sacraments as "outward signs that reveal a transcendent divine reality."<sup>61</sup> This shift in emphasis helps to overcome the previous mechanical understanding of sacraments nurtured by incorrect interpretations of *ex opere operato*.

<sup>58</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "Flesh, and Blood, and Deep Colonizing," in Morny Joy and Penelope Magee ed., *Claiming our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars* (Wollstonecraft: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1994) 329.

<sup>59</sup> Juan L. Segundo, *The Sacraments Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974) 12.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Christian Church* (London: SCM, 1981) 140.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Martos, *Doors* 141.

The sacramental dimension of Aboriginal spirituality was detected soon enough in the postcontact era. Stockton noted that Strehlow and Stanner had commented in one way or another on the sacramental dimension of Aboriginal life. Stockton accepts Wilson's notion of mystery theology and sacramentality as "time interpenetrated by eternity." In fact he accepts the insights of Strehlow, Stanner, Wilson, and Pat Dodson. He sees that sacramentality (outward, visible signs referring to inner realities) applies to ceremonies, sacred objects, and sacred sites. Edwards likewise acknowledges the sacramental nature of the land: "When the landscape is recognized as symbolic mediation of the healing and liberating presence of the Spirit then it becomes the place for encounter."<sup>62</sup>

Thus Aboriginal spirituality is full of signs. Creation is full of signs pointing to totems, ancestors, sacred places where sacred things happened, etc. These signs point to events, spirits, occurrences. Uluru ("Ayer's Rock"), that most sacred of Aboriginal sites, is a sign pointing to the Dreaming. The Rainbow Spirit Elders see the land sacramentally. They say openly that the Creator Spirit spoke to them in many ways, especially through the land which links them with the Creator Spirit.<sup>63</sup> The Aborigines also talk about the Creator Spirit renewing the earth. By performing sacred rites at sacred places they see themselves as cooperating with the Creator Spirit in the task of renewing and replenishing the earth.<sup>64</sup> The sacred places themselves are seen as places where spiritual forces are concentrated (what we would call sacred symbols). These sites are linked to their personal story and to those creatures with whom they have a personal spiritual connection.<sup>65</sup> The landscape thus becomes a spiritual map that can be read by Aborigines but is virtually meaningless to most others. The land can be read by Aborigines as Westerners read the Bible.

Rahner's insights are helpful here. He wrote that in every action beings symbolize what they are. A carpenter symbolizes what he is by working with wood, a teacher by teaching pupils, etc. But sometimes people do something new. When a girl learns to swim she does something new, or transcends what she was before, and in performing these actions she symbolizes or embodies something new. So too, grace can be seen as nature going beyond itself. Christ consistently went beyond what it was to be human. His whole life was full of grace, which came to its fullness in his complete union with God. Thus any sacrament, any contact with the sacred, is something new, something of human nature going beyond itself, transcending itself on its journey to perfection, to complete union with God.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, "Apprentices in Faith" 28.

<sup>63</sup> The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit* 12.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

Another important contribution is Stockton's discussion of the concepts of sacramentality. Stockton has the Aboriginal story of the youth who went beyond himself and changed the *tjurunga* and thus in effect changed something in the past. This concept seems to be one example of going beyond, transcending. Indeed the very stories themselves are sacramental in a sense. The Aboriginal way of life is a tradition of telling and sharing stories. And each story can well have a sacramental value for another person. Each story reveals and releases a life-giving pattern. In this way Aboriginal stories can be signs and reveal life-giving ways of understanding creation. Morris supports this view with reference to the Dreaming. She says of the Arrente tribe: "Every time the Dreaming is re-enacted it is re-created. Or, to put it another way, every time the Arrente women re-enact the Honeyant Dreaming they are creating the honeyants and the food supply associated with it."<sup>66</sup>

Because of the Aboriginal feeling for sacramentality, one could say that there is a common pattern of sacramental thinking, a platform of commonality for dialogue at least with those Christians who have a strong sacramental tradition. Aborigines would have no trouble seeing Christ as the sacrament of God, and the Church as the sacrament of Christ.

### Celebrations and Liturgy

Commenting on the central Aborigines at Ellery's Creek, Strehlow notes, "Every full-scale ceremonial festival was, in fact, regarded as an occasion when Time and Eternity became one."<sup>67</sup> Thus ceremonies and ritual were and are very important to Aboriginal life. As Yunipingu expresses it, "Our faith grows stronger when we have ceremonies, song and dance, when our people are close to us every day of our life, mainly in ceremonies, and there is a feeling of unity and wholeness."<sup>68</sup> The need for Christian theology to express itself in terms of Aboriginal ritual was all the more urgent and, unfortunately, largely neglected.

A missionary told me of a Catholic bishop some decades ago, in the Northern Territory of Australia, who actually said that "no one can be a tribal Aborigine and a Catholic at the same time." The uproar over this was predictable. So many comments like this have made Aborigines feel alienated in the Church, whereas the same missionary explained to me that the goal is to make the Aborigines feel at home in Christianity.

The place of worship is a good place to start if one wants to make

<sup>66</sup> Christine Morris, "The Oral Tradition under Threat" 29.

<sup>67</sup> Theodor G. H. Strehlow, *Central* 43.

<sup>68</sup> Djungadjunga Yunupingu and Dhanggal Yunupingu, "Mungalk Dhalatj: A Calm Wisdom," in Anne Pattel-Gray, ed., *Aboriginal Spirituality* 95-96.

Christian Aborigines feel at home. Aboriginal liturgies suggest an outdoor venue for the celebration. This is so because a space surrounded by four walls is not a sacred place for Aborigines. They are not comfortable in confined spaces; they like to be in touch with the natural world of the land, wind, rain, sun, and sky. All their sacred places (rivers, waterholes, rocks, trees) are outdoors; so it stands to reason that for Christian Aborigines the Eucharist should be celebrated outdoors. And not only outdoors, but around a campfire. A campfire is the center of their lives, the focal point of activities, the hearth, the symbol of unity, warmth, kinship, love, in fact of the values Christians associate with the Eucharist. As Christian lives are christocentric, so Aboriginal lives are campfire-centered—not in the sense that they sit around the campfire all day, but in the sense that the important things in life, the big and small ceremonies, the story-telling sessions, the rituals, the dancing are all done around a campfire.

For the Aborigines, direct contact with the earth is also important. This is obvious in the many ways they paint their bodies with ochres and other natural paints. In some cases, in the Eucharist, the chalice and bread are placed on a cloth on the ground rather than on a table. The celebrant too may be decorated with appropriate feathers or clothing. Thus Aborigines are gradually expressing their faith in culturally appropriate ways.

Instances of inculturation of Aboriginal spirituality into Christian liturgies are certainly not plentiful. In the words of Maisie Cavanagh, inculturation is “only getting started.”<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless one can cite a few cases. Aborigines have the smoking ceremony, which is a purifying ritual. This is in use now in Catholic Aboriginal liturgies instead of the normal penitential rite. It was in fact used for the papal Mass at the Randwick Race Course in Sydney on the occasion of the beatification of Mary MacKillop in 1995. This ceremony may in some ways be analogous to the Amerindian sweatlodge ritual.<sup>70</sup>

Other examples can be cited. On Bathurst Island children role-play each of the Stations of the Cross and have body painting, traditional songs, and dancing. At Santa Teresa on Ash Wednesday the bark of the tree is cooked and made into powder for the ashes. At Daly River on Good Friday people are rubbed with red ochre as a sign of new life before kissing the feet of Jesus on the Cross.

There are also special Aboriginal eucharistic prayers which are good examples of liturgical inculturation. Many are available, depending on the language spoken. The East and West Kimberley region of Western Aus-

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Maisie Cavanagh at the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, St. Mary's, New South Wales, April 20, 1998.

<sup>70</sup> Carl Starkloff, “American Indian Religion and Christianity: Confrontation and Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 8 (1970) 317–40.

tralia and the Northern Territory areas like Daly River, as well as urban areas throughout Australia, are all experimenting with inculturation in various ways.

Some examples from the actual liturgy will be the best way of communicating what inculturated liturgy is like. I will quote from an English liturgy used in New South Wales for Aboriginal communities. At the beginning of the penitential rite the leader says, "May the Father in heaven make you good in your hearts," to which the congregation replies, "May he make you good in your heart."<sup>71</sup> Then in the actual anaphora, part of the dialogue is as follows:

Leader: Father in heaven, you love us. You made all things.

ALL: Father, you are good.

Leader: Father, you made the rivers that gave us water and fish. You made the mountains and the flat country. You made the kangaroos and goannas and birds for us.

ALL: Father you are good.

Leader: Father, you send the sun to keep us warm, and the rain to make the grass grow, and to fill the waterholes.<sup>72</sup>

A more general observation is in place here: one of the main hurdles Catholicism has to overcome is the ambiguous stance of the Roman decision makers and the ecclesiastical bureaucracy toward inculturation, and not necessarily toward liturgy in particular. There are many fine official statements on culture and people, and more recently on inculturation in worship, such as the 1994 Instruction.<sup>73</sup> But when it comes to the weightier issues pertaining to structures, discipline (e.g. the request of Canadian Catholic bishops in 1993 to ordain married native Canadians), or even some liturgical practices, permission is not forthcoming. Roman decision makers appear reluctant to move away from centuries of uniformity in practice in spite of the living example of the different rites and practices within the Catholic Church and beyond. Perhaps it is time for national episcopal conferences to speak louder and more insistently.

## CONCLUSION

From the above considerations a number of general conclusions can be drawn:

(1) Although most of the last two centuries has been characterized by a lack of culture awareness and a virtual absence of any interaction between anthropology and theology, at least in the last quarter of this century both

<sup>71</sup> Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift*, Appendix 3, 191.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Congregation for Worship and Sacraments, "Instruction: Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy," *Origins* 14 (April 14, 1994) 746–56.

Aboriginal theology and liturgy are actively searching to grow from within their own Aboriginal cultural settings. Liturgy might find this somewhat easier than theology, since Aboriginal theological writings are striving to work through the painful negativities of the colonial past.

(2) The evidence of the closeness of Aboriginal values to gospel values and their critical view of Western Christian churches should make Westerners humble and cautious about what they promote as Christian values and be prepared critically to reappraise whether their lifestyle corresponds with the New Testament Christ.

(3) The rediscovery, through the interface of anthropology and theology, of the value of the mythopoetic worldview as seen in Aboriginal culture can point our Western society in a more balanced direction in its appreciation of life and religion.

(4) The Aboriginal understanding of time raises questions about our adherence to a linear and frequently absolute understanding of time. It raises the possibility of a greater openness to allowing eternity to penetrate time-space, a perspective that fits in well with a reclaiming of our mystical tradition in the West.

(5) The broad Aboriginal concept of sacramentality might liberate Westerners from our narrow, legalistic understanding of sacraments. Witnessing Aboriginal liturgies might help others by raising the question how well liturgies are in touch with the culture of those who celebrate them.

(6) The issue of the continuity of Aboriginal spirituality with Christianity is best seen in the light of God's grace pervading all human situations. This does not deny the need for the purgation and refinement of some customs and rituals.

(7) Finally the issue of the existence of a High God in primal cultures raises the profound question of how we today create our image of God and the need for continuous reconstruction.

So the interface of Christian theology and Aboriginal spirituality has provided all those engaged in this venture with many new challenges to their own theologies and practices and thus has created a time of theological opportunity for both Aborigines and Westerners.