

Christianity and Aboriginal Culture

Peggy Attlee

'Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your people, must not be allowed to disappear.' With these words Pope John Paul II greeted the aborigines gathered to meet him at Alice Springs during his tour of Australia in November 1986.

The stance which the Pope took in giving his strong support to a minority ethnic group was in line with views he had expressed in other parts of the world, notably in the case of the Indians in Colombia earlier in the year, and on his visit to New Zealand, prior to his arrival in Australia, where he praised the values of the Maori culture. Both the Maoris and the aborigines of Australia had welcomed him with a lively and colourful display of traditional dance and song. These occasions would truly have amazed the missionaries of the last century, most of whom worked so hard to wean the peoples of their allotted territory from their native rites and customs.

Has the Church, then, been inculturated in these places? Has it accepted local cultural forms as expressions of Christianity? A beginning has been made, but complex questions remain. The Maoris were disappointed that they were not given their first Maori bishop. The aborigines cannot even boast a Catholic priest of their own race. Besides the theological issues, the question of separate church structures for different ethnic groups is under debate, complicated by the large numbers of mixed race people, who are not sure where they belong.

In supporting aboriginal culture the Pope was joining his voice with the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and with the 'liberal' elements in the Church, though not perhaps pleasing all sections of Church membership. He was also aligning himself with some more unusual allies, secular groups on the left-wing fringe. Aboriginal culture, its art, crafts and music, is in fashion: belated recognition of a long neglected element in Australian life. But there are many who question whether aboriginal culture, in its true sense, can in fact survive in the modern world. This is, on the one hand, a social, even political, issue. But the Church—indeed, the Churches—have always been concerned with the aboriginal people, and are therefore endeavouring to make their contribution to the solution of the many problems which arise from the interaction of two such different cultures.

Christian missions to the aborigines have a history as long as colonisation in Australia—shortly to celebrate its 200th anniversary. Neither colonists nor missionaries had an easy task in adapting to the physical conditions of the country in the early years of settlement; and while the colonists soon gave up hope of any useful contact with more than a handful of the native people—those who adapted to life as stockmen on the vast pastoral estates—the missionaries made slow progress, with many failures, in their efforts to build Christian communities. These were, of course, based on the Western, European way of life: ‘civilization’.

As time went on, relations between the colonists and the aboriginal people deteriorated. Driven from the coastal lands to the drier, barren central regions, confused by an alien legal system, often illegally slaughtered, and weakened by imported diseases and alcohol, the aborigines were soon in danger of extinction, dropping to an estimated 50,000. In fact, although the missions have been blamed by anthropologists for destroying ancient cultures, it was they who not only—almost alone—showed the native people that Europe had a compassionate element, but were largely responsible for their physical survival up to the time when society’s attitudes began to change.

In the new climate of opinion after the Second World War, the Australian authorities became aware of their obligations towards the original inhabitants of the country of which they had assumed control, and began to search for ways of responding with some justice to their needs. Allocation of land—in the main, land that was not suitable for pastoral use—and the provision of some health and welfare services resulted in the increase of the aboriginal population to around 160,000; but finding solutions to the social problems proved more difficult.

Assimilation seemed the obvious first choice; but those who had been hunter-gatherers for 30—40,000 years, and had no tradition of time-keeping, of acquiring possessions or planning for the future, did not take readily to an orderly and static working life. Integration of groups proved no more successful. Even when ‘reserves’ of land were provided, and policies of self-management and self-determination were offered, the economic basis remained shaky. Some viable cattle stations under aboriginal ownership were established, but food production through agriculture was not taken up with any enthusiasm, and the fortnightly welfare payments did little to increase the motivation to adapt to the white economy.

At the same time the breakdown of tribal groups caused by the movement of population, especially to the fringes of the towns and cities, left numbers of families and individuals without their traditional discipline or spiritual base, yet without the disposition or the qualifications for taking part in an alien economy, and open to the

temptations of white culture, alcohol and petty theft.

For the Church, the change in attitude to the native people came, of course, in the sixties, with the Second Vatican Council and the new outlook on missions and respect for other cultures which followed. Up to this time the main thrust of missionary activity had been evangelistic, and native cults had been dismissed as pagan and idolatrous, sometimes as the work of the devil: a view still taken by many of the evangelical sects, which have a considerable following amongst the aborigines. The new approach of the Catholic Church was summed up by Pope Paul VI on his visit to Australia in 1970: 'We know that you have a lifestyle proper to your own ethnic genius or culture—a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce.' Brave new words, which the workers on the ground have since had to try to put into practice.

Knowledge of aboriginal culture and religion was not completely lacking. Apart from the researches of anthropologists, there were always a few amongst the missionaries who showed a sympathetic curiosity in the beliefs and practices of the people they wished to bring to Christianity. Foremost of these was perhaps a German Pallottine priest, Fr. E.A. Worms (1896—1963), himself an anthropologist and linguist, who, working mainly in Western Australia, gathered a fund of information which laid the foundations for an appreciation of the richness of aboriginal spirituality.¹

The fact that the aboriginal people are divided into more than 250 tribes, with a corresponding number of languages and customs, makes a description of their religious beliefs a complex and near-impossible task. Yet there is much in common between the groups. Basic to all are the concepts of the spirit world, originating in The Dreamtime, the creation myth which in a sense continues to the present time. Spirit-beings are ever-present, though often perceived in the form of animals—the rainbow snake or the kangaroo, the emu or the goanna (iguana)—which become *totems* for an individual or group. The spirits are present too in the sacred sites hallowed by long years of tradition. The people make contact with the spirit world through elaborate ritual, with much emphasis on celebration. Strict rules order the conduct of daily life, particularly in the sphere of kinship and marriage. Best known outside the aboriginal world, and perhaps the most enduring, is the initiation ceremony for young boys approaching manhood. While the ceremonies themselves, sometimes but not always including circumcision, remain for the most part secret, the long period of preparation, involving some months of life in the bush, is a frequent source of contention with white men trying to train young aborigines for the modern world. The deeply-felt respect for ancestors has its first expression in solemn funeral rites, for which relatives will travel for many miles and spend many days.

Since life in the bush, for a scanty population, was precious, the incidence of war between the tribes was minimal. A common way of settling disputes was a contest between representative 'warriors'. Personal wrongs sometimes demanded a death in revenge, but often the injured party had not only a right but even a duty to inflict on his offender a clean spear-wound in the thigh; with that, the account was settled.

Aboriginal religion, then, even with its localised myths, was neither idolatrous nor barbaric. The anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner summed up its main features in this way:

The Aborigines universally believed that ancestral beings had left a world full of signs of their beneficent intent towards the men they had brought into being. Men were to interpret these signs and live according to a perennial pattern. If they did so, they could live under an assurance of providence.

Other elements in their belief were the value they attached to the human person, compound of body and spirit; a concern to renew and conserve life; the idea that the souls of the dead shared in the authority of the spirit world. The core of religious practice was to bring men under the discipline of sacred traditions, to accept life as it is and to celebrate it, whether it brought suffering or joy. Over all was a sense of mystery, in which symbols pointed to ultimate and metaphysical realities.²

On the basis of such insights, there are a number of theologians in Australia working on cross-cultural dialogue and exploring the possibilities of building Christianity on the concepts contained in aboriginal thought. Pioneering work in this field is being done by the Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, a research/resource enterprise of the Australian MSC province in northern Australia. The Unit aims 'at the positive mutual cultural enrichment of the two traditions, Aboriginal and Christian'. Its periodical, *Nelen Yubu* (the good way)³, discusses the theological problems which arise in bringing the two traditions together: whether the idea of transcendence is known to the aboriginal mind; how far the symbols of aboriginal cults can usefully be compared with the Christian sacraments; how the apparently 'closed' system of aboriginal time can be opened to take in the historic Christ; and in what ways aboriginal religion can be said to be 'impregnated with innumerable "seeds of the word" and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel' (*Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), 53).

Fortunately such a discussion is now taking place on an ecumenical level, at least insofar as the mainstream Christian bodies are concerned: the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches. The focus for ecumenical work in northern Australia is Nungalinga College, Darwin, where missionaries and church workers, both white and aboriginal, come together to try to develop a truly aboriginal Christianity, rather than one

imposed from outside.

In order to produce an indigenous Christianity it is necessary to shed the accretions of European culture and return to the source. Taking the New Testament in their hands, aborigines find much that accords with their own way of thinking: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth'; 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow'; Mary Durack has argued that the whole of the Sermon on the Mount is in accordance with their own law.⁴

Of course there are also challenges. Christ did not come to leave things as they were. His followers had to learn to broaden their vision of love and forgiveness; to see all men as their neighbours, and to cast off rigid rules which restrict the true freedom of the children of God. Christ's rebukes to the religious leaders of his day have been relevant at many other points in history and could perhaps today free the aborigines from some of the restrictions imposed by their clan structures.

At this point a representative of 'white' culture might become aware of a certain uneasiness. Of course one can understand the confusion of the aboriginal people at the variety of Christian denominations which have offered to enlighten them; but how much more must be their perplexity at the contrast between the teaching of the New Testament and the white culture which, claiming to be Christian, has taken over their country.

When the aborigines were allocated land, the portions they received, or were permitted to retain, were those not needed by the new owners of the country. Now other needs have arisen. Even under the barren earth, wealth can be found. Landowners whose property has been 'improved' are entitled by law to resist the intrusion of mining companies wishing to explore for gold, bauxite or uranium. For the aborigines, the land needed no improvement; their entitlement on this legal point was therefore weak. Yet the encroachment of drilling machines on their sacred sites is a far more damaging act than it is for the pastoralists, who might welcome the financial benefit. For the aborigines the harm would not be merely physical, but spiritual.

To the discomfiture of the Australian authorities, the Pope spoke up loudly in favour of aborigines' land rights, deploring the loss of their ancestral homes, the fact that tribes were split apart and that so many had to live as exiles in their own land. Once again he was taking a position supported by a number of different groups, secular and religious, including the World Council of Churches, the Australian Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishops' Conference. To this stance the bluff and intransigent Premier of Queensland, Sir Joh Bjelke-Peterson, made an indignant reply: 'I am surprised that the Catholic Church encourages and supports rituals and practices that are quite contrary to the beliefs that it espouses and that are, according to the

Bible, of no benefit or advantage in attaining eternal life.’⁶

On another occasion the Premier put his point this way: ‘One day we say we are a Christian nation and that we believe in one way of salvation. The next we say, “Preserve all the rituals and spirits of the goanna and the rest of it that they had in the earlier days...” Don’t we want to bring them into modern society? Don’t you want to make them a bit more equal with yourself?’ Though not always put so bluntly, these are probably the views of a great many white Australians, though one might question how far they arise from concern for the eternal salvation of the aboriginal people. The issue of aboriginal land rights versus the mining companies is still undecided, but it seems likely that, at least in some cases, the ‘national interest’, in other words, the material values of white society, will prevail.

The struggle over land rights has, however, had two indirect consequences. One is to make the aboriginal people more conscious of their own identity and of the possibility of political action. The second is to make clear to them that Christianity is not synonymous with white culture.

What, then, are the prospects for the survival of aboriginal lifestyle and culture? The lifestyle of the free-roaming hunter-gatherer, used to unlimited space, undisturbed by contact with other peoples, seems unlikely to remain for long. Land reserves there will certainly be, and here aboriginal communities will have opportunities to develop as they wish. The danger here is that these may become ‘museum’ societies, artificially preserved, maintaining their cults for the sake of anthropologists and producing traditional artifacts for the tourist trade. Even if these communities prosper, contact with ‘white’ society is inevitable, and no culture can expect to remain unaffected by relationships with its neighbours. Their young people will surely seek, more and more, to ‘join the modern world’, to become ‘a bit more equal’ with their communities in white society. Whether they are successful, according to the standards of this society, or find themselves remaining on the margins of an alien culture, it is difficult to see how their traditional customs, discipline, spiritual background, could be maintained.

Perhaps it is here that a truly aboriginal Christianity, such as the missionaries of the north and their aboriginal colleagues are seeking to build, could play a vital role, keeping what is best in the old culture and, through Christianity, adapting it for a wider world, whose encroachment has disturbed the age-old pattern of isolation. But if the Catholic Church is to take a full part in this process, its institutions will have to be considerably more flexible. Where independent aboriginal communities exist, there is a strong case to be made out for separate aboriginal churches, worshipping according to their own traditions, with all the

warmth and colour this can bring. But to reach their full development, these churches cannot rely on white leadership. They must produce their own leaders: a situation which may demand changes in scholastic and canonical requirements for the priesthood. Rome now hears this plea from many parts of the world.

Where aboriginal settlements are scattered over the country, as may occur more frequently in the future, there may be need for yet other structures, perhaps on the lines of the base communities of Latin America, with a travelling pastor to minister to them. But it is in and around the cities, where the old Australians try to live and work with the new, that the greatest sensitivity will be required. The leadership, the language and the forms of liturgy will obviously have to be adapted to the needs of the actual—or potential—congregations. Most important of all is the need for churches where the enduring values of aboriginal culture are proclaimed, together with a true Gospel Christianity.

Speaking to the Maori people of New Zealand Pope John Paul paid tribute to the values of their society in these words:

an acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension in every aspect of life; a profound reverence for nature and the environment; a sense of community, assuring every individual that he or she belongs; loyalty to the family and a great willingness to share; and acceptance of death as part of life and a capacity to mourn the dead in a human way.

These values, which the Pope pointed out were those which modern society was in danger of losing, are those which have enabled the aboriginal people of Australia to survive for so many thousands of years. If they can not only be preserved but be enabled to extend their influence to the newer culture which surrounds them, and which has drifted so far from its proclaimed Christian ideals, the chances of survival for the whole community could be greatly enhanced.

- 1 Durack, Mary, *The Rock and the Sand*, Corgi 1985, p. 280ff. This book, first published by Constable in 1969, gives a vivid account of Catholic missionary work in North-Western Australia.
- 2 Wilson, Martin J. (MSC), *New, Old and Timeless. Pointers towards an Aboriginal Theology*, Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, PO Box 13, Kensington, NSW 2033, 1978. p. 48. Wilson dedicates his book to W.E.H. Stanner and quotes him extensively.
- 3 *Nelen Yubu*, Periodical of the Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit.
- 4 Durack, Mary, op. cit. p. 86.
- 5 Catholic Bishops to the Prime Minister, 20 May 1985, quoted by Frank Brennan SJ in 'Land Rights in 1985 and Beyond'. *Nelen Yubu* No 26 Autumn 1986.
- 6 *The Age*, 8 November 1985, quoted: Frank Brennan, op. cit.
- 7 14 QPD 2396 19 November 1985 quoted: Frank Brennan, op. cit.