

## Towards an Aboriginal Theology

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**Abstract:** What kind of theology can hold together, with integrity, both Indigenous and Christian identity? In answering this question, I will not be seeking a totally new set of theological principles that only apply within an Indigenous context. What I am advocating is that Indigenous cultures be enabled and empowered to engage with the point at which God speaks into the many different cultures of the Bible, without losing touch with the angle on the gospel provided by the missionaries, but giving incarnational weight to our own Indigenous perspective.

WHAT KIND OF THEOLOGY CAN HOLD TOGETHER, with integrity, both Indigenous and Christian identity? In answering this question, I will not be seeking a totally new set of theological principles that only apply within an Indigenous context. What I do intend to discuss are the key features of a biblical theology that relate especially to Indigenous cultures. The focus will be on biblical principles not just because I am a Protestant, but because the development of theology in the Pacific region is weighed down by a history of colonialism. One way of overcoming the effects of this history is to engage with the biblical literature, rather than Western theology, with resources drawn from our own spiritual traditions.

There are two major impediments to the project of Indigenous theology, as I see it. The first is an assumption that Christianity is inextricable from its Western cultural frameworks and it therefore undermines the integrity of Aboriginal identity and cultural expression.

The fact that Christianity in Aboriginal Australia appears to be boxed in by Western European cultures is a fact of history that has to be challenged if Christian faith is to be fully embraced by Indigenous peoples. If evangelisation means the telling of the story of the gospel as it was acculturated in the western world, and translated into the sub-

cultures of denominational religious institutions, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been very well evangelised. But if the process of evangelising includes the telling of the biblical stories in ways which connect with our deepest spiritual expectations, evoking practices in tune with our own cultures, then we were not well evangelised at all.

The second major impediment to the project of Aboriginal theology is the idea that Christian Spirituality not only compromises Indigenous identity, but it actually undermines our dignity and self-worth. On this view, Aboriginal Christianity will always be a demeaning “whitefella” religion, which encourages Indigenous peoples to abandon their own culture on the grounds that it contains only an inferior spirituality.

An authentic Indigenous Christianity will need to pay respects to the spirituality that has long been attuned to the divine presences in this land, rather than seeing the earth as an adversary to be subdued, or a reservoir of resources to be exploited, or a *terra nullius* to be divided up at whim. “Animistic” spirituality has shaped respectful attitudes to the created order, which can hardly be seen now as inferior to the abusive theologies of the colonisers.

One of the meanings of repentance in Australia must surely be a turning away from cultural superiority, whatever the language might have been used to express it: “civilisation”, “protection”, “assimilation”, not to mention the use of “self-determination” to mean its opposite.

In the past, the process of theologising in Indigenous contexts was primarily a matter of taking theological principles – already shaped within a western denominational enculturation – and then asking what they mean for Indigenous people. Aboriginal artwork has been used, for example, to communicate concepts derived from the missionaries’ theology. In general, Aboriginal people have been obliged to adopt western styles of worship and church leadership. There has been very little theological reflection that begins from an Indigenous mindset and engages more directly with biblical theologies and practices.

Some good work in the Northern Territory has seen the Easter story appropriated within the Warlpiri culture through a Christian “*purlapa*” or corroboree. This is as an important step towards the incarnation of Biblical truth within an Indigenous culture.

More recent work has seen the application of the Warlpiri kinship system within church leadership structures. This makes much more sense in an Indigenous context than choosing leaders according to their book-learning or merely individual skills. Just as St Paul had a theology of the church as a “body”, with each part having its own role, so the kinship system has its own logic of complementary parts of the social body.

There are important opportunities to draw what theologians call redemptive analogies between biblical truths and Aboriginal experience. Such analogies will enable Christ to be incarnated within our cultures in ways that are relevant to our Aboriginal life and experience, whether that brings spiritual comfort or challenge.

Any comparison of Aboriginal spirituality and Christian spirituality will reveal the host of opportunities that exist for the creation of a spiritual hybridity.<sup>1</sup> By that I mean taking the best of our Aboriginal spirituality, matching and linking it with the appropriate principles of Christian spirituality, in order to form a whole that for Aboriginal Christianity will be a “creole” greater than the sum of its parts.

This process will be indispensable in the construction of an Aboriginal theology. Of course it means that some parts of Aboriginal culture will be adopted, some will be adapted, and as is the case in all cultural developments, some may be rejected. Cultural adaptation is not a new phenomenon to Aboriginal peoples. It was part of our hunter-gatherer economy and ecology long before we had to adapt to the processes of forced dispossession and dispersion.

It is Aboriginal spirituality that gives meaning to our pre-history, history, present and future. It provides our identity and purpose. It also establishes the boundaries of our traditional country (habitation). It defines our political, social, economic and spiritual responsibilities both within our kinship systems and within our relationship to the physical environment. It determines our world-views, cultural values and even our marriage partners. There is nothing in our indigenous cultures that is not influenced in some way by our animistic spirituality. It permeates all we are and do.

If, as I think, our Indigenous animistic spirituality is the most important and all encompassing single cultural window through which we should be viewing the scriptures, it can only be done and most certainly must be done by those who have a mature intimacy with God and the scriptures, and a firm grasp of Indigenous cultural world views, values and traditions.

I have neither the space nor the expertise to do justice to such a complex topic, but I offer the following comments as an introduction to the issues – orientated particularly around my experience with the Warlpiri people – in the hope that some collaboration might be fostered among all the animistic Indigenous populations of the Pacific.

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1. Cf. Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999) 62-83.

## ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY AS A CULTURAL WINDOW

First, Aboriginal spirituality arises out of the belief that the world is populated by spirit beings. In addition to human beings, Aboriginal people believe that ancestral spirits are all around us. Totemic spirits also co-exist with us.

Secondly, those spirit beings are responsible for the shaping of creation and animating of all life. Aboriginal creation stories begin in the realm of sacred and secret business in most traditional communities. For that reason, only a brief and surface description can be given here.

An Aboriginal cosmogony begins in the "Dreamtime". This is the time before the world was shaped in the way we know it to be now. Hidden in the sky, in the sea and under the surface of the earth are dreamtime heroes who are part human, in terms of their emotions and intellect, part animal bird or reptile, in terms of their physical shape, and part super-human in terms of their power and their creative ability. At some point in the dreaming they emerged from their hidden worlds and as a result of their actions and inter-actions they shaped the world as we have it today.

Certain stars in the sky, islands or reefs in the sea, and mountains, rivers or natural springs that hold special significance for the local tribal groups may be designated as sacred. Other places may be known as sites of significance depending on their place of importance in the creation stories. Aboriginal people therefore believe that every part of living creation is vested with a spirit being that animates the real life of that part of creation whether it be flora or fauna or any part of the landscape or sea.

Thirdly, the spirit beings are linked to space and place, and in this sense they are territorial. The places from which the dreamtime heroes emerged and traveled, and inter-acted with other spirit beings, all become associated with the particular hero or heroes and are valued according to the importance of that part of creation to the local tribal group. The more important the site is to the well-being of the group the more sacred the site becomes to the group. A place might then become known as the place of the "caterpillar dreaming" or "dingo dreaming", and so on.

Fourthly, the spirit beings are also linked to human identity and to human experience through totems that are allocated in relation to specific incidents or events (e.g., conception, birth, skin clan and moiety).

A typical boy's story might begin before he is even born. As his mother becomes conscious of his first movement in the womb, she has

to take note of the area so that the infant will become identified with the spirit of the particular area in which she is located. This is because they believe that the spirit of that area has energised the infant in the womb and the child becomes inextricably linked with the spirit associated with the dominant creation of that place as his conception totem.

At the point of birth, the child has allocated to him the appropriate birth totem. He automatically receives a skin totem and a clan totem. His spiritual responsibility in life will be to learn the songs and dances, and how to perform the ceremonies, that are associated with those totems so as to energise the relevant spirit within those parts of creation. As each clan family walks their country, the law of averages ensures that different people become associated with different parts, and the whole area will ultimately be cared for.

In these ways, then, each clan is responsible for the stewardship of the flora and fauna of their area as well as the stewardship of the sacred sites attached to their area. This stewardship consists not only of the management of the physical resources ensuring that they are not plundered to the point of extinction, but also the spiritual management of all the ceremonies necessary to ensure adequate rain and food resources at the change of each season.

Fifthly, the spirit beings are arranged in a hierarchical structure. This aspect of Aboriginality is not very well understood by many people in traditional communities today, let alone urban communities. The gaining of power by the acquiring of traditional and ceremonial knowledge is an experience only reserved for the initiated whose personality and character satisfy their traditional elders. Although some Aboriginal academics feel that Aboriginal spiritual society is more like an oligarchy than a hierarchy, all will agree that for any given sacred site or totem there are owners of the sacred business, minders of sacred sites and participants in the ceremony that re-enacts that sacred story.

Sixthly, the spirit beings have the power to help or hinder human interests. A healthy respect for the power of spirits is learned from early childhood, particularly in relation to religious or social taboos. Certain spirits are believed to have the power to make rain, foster natural growth, assist in hunting and food gathering and even to the finding of spouses or partners. It is also believed that they have the power to act against the wishes of people if the correct ceremonies and/or rituals are not practised or observed. And it is believed that crossing the boundaries of social taboos will also incur their wrath.

Older men or women who have a track record of observance of spiritual law may acquire supernatural powers and abilities. This area of spirituality is reserved for those elite individuals who are the spiritual and/or social law enforcers in the community. These powers can be

exercised to identify murderers, travel long distances, cause accidents or illness, and even in extreme cases to cause death.

#### BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITIES

Christian Spirituality similarly arises out of what Christians believe the Bible teaches about spirits and their activities. And again, I make just a few points in summary, in order to illustrate some possible analogies.

At the beginning of the Bible's first creation story, God's Spirit (*ruach* in the original Hebrew) is "hovering" over the unshaped earth and waters. This verb "to hover" in Gen 1:2 is also used of an eagle caring for its young, and there are at least two other key points in Israel's Dreaming where God's activity is compared with an eagle's (see Exod 19:4 and Deut 32:11). An Aboriginal reader might be tempted to see an analogy: if God's Spirit is like an eagle caring for its young, then perhaps God is like a totemic eagle.

There is an occasional ambiguity about whether God's Spirit is singular or plural, since in a few verses God speaks of "us", e.g., in Gen 1:26, "Let *us* make humankind in our image" (cf. Gen 3:22, 11.7).

When the Spirit of God brings life, according to Genesis 1, the earth also is called on to participate in creation:

"Let the earth produce vegetation" (v.11)  
"Let the earth bring forth living creatures" (v.24).

This participation of the earth forms the background to the spirituality expressed in Ps 104:30, which says that all God's creatures are given life by the divine Spirit:

"When you send your Spirit (*ruach*) they are created,  
and you renew the face of the earth".

When the Gospel of John retells the creation story, the wording of Gen 1:1 is adapted for a Greek-speaking audience: "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made" (John 1:1-3). John creatively reinterprets Genesis 1 so that the role of the Spirit in the Israelite mindset is seen as the same role played by the Word (*logos*, a Greek word for rationality and order). John agrees that God is Spirit (4:24), but his surrounding Greek culture has prompted him to see creation from a slightly different angle, so that in his re-interpretation of Genesis 1 he focuses on the *logos* rather than Spirit.

In the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that *all* living things have a spirit given by God, including animals (e.g., Gen 1:30; Ps 104), and this is also

suggested in Rom 8:20-25 where all creation shares both the frustration and the liberation of the "children of God". In the New Testament, there is more of a focus on human spirituality, but this need not lead an Aboriginal reader to neglect the wider dimension of the Spirit in all of creation.

In the biblical cultures, the world is also populated by other spirit beings. Christians have to battle against spiritual forces in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). Similarly, in the book of Daniel, Israel's salvation depends on a spiritual battle waged by the archangel Michael (10:13, 21; 12:1).

In earlier traditions, Israel's God is associated with "holy ones" who seem to form a heavenly council (e.g., Ps 89:7; Jer 23:18). We even find the suggestion at some points in the Hebrew Bible that different nations each have their representative spirit being, such as in 2 Kgs 3:27, Micah 4:5 and Deut 32:8, although these earlier hints of polytheism have been over-ridden by Israel's monotheism (see especially Ps 82).<sup>2</sup>

Christians are also "served" by ministering spirits that are called angels (Heb 1:14). In the Hebrew Bible, the stories of Elijah are interesting from an Aboriginal point of view, since at one point Elijah is fed by an "angel" (1 Kgs 19:5-8) and at another point he is fed by "ravens" (1 Kgs 17:4-6). In the latter case, these birds are therefore given the same task as the "angels" or "messengers", something that would not at all be surprising when viewed through the cultural window of Aboriginal spirituality.

The spirit beings of the Bible are arranged in a hierarchical order, and they have the power to help or hinder human interests. This is clear in the Hebrew Bible in regard to the "holy ones" of the heavenly council, and the gods of other nations. Less well recognised are the "holy ones of the earth" (e.g., Ps 16:3; 1 Sam 28:13), who are seen by many scholars as the spirits of the ancestors who are associated with the particular land holdings of the Israelite clans.<sup>3</sup>

In the development of Israelite religion, it seems that all the spirit beings were eventually seen as agents of the one God, or their existence was denied. Similarly, in the New Testament, all the roles and functions of the Spirit are seen as aspects of the one Holy Spirit, and any malevolent spiritual activity is attributed to demons. But the monotheistic development of biblical theology does not negate the diversity of the

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2. Andrew Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 384-85.

3. Christopher Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 151-59; Mark G. Brett, "The Loss and Retrieval of Ancestral Religion – in Ancient Israel and in Australia", in Michael Parsons (ed.), *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) 1-19.

angels" tasks and roles, or the diversity of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12).

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REDEMPTIVE ANALOGIES

Since the beliefs and practices of spirituality cannot exist outside of a cultural context, the question of the "indigenising" of theology applies to many cultures, whether one is referring to the Indigenous peoples of Australia, the Islands of the South Pacific, the Americas, Asia or Africa.

The God of the Bible is a God who introduced at least two religions. In the Old Testament, from the book of Exodus to the book of Deuteronomy in particular, we discover the laws, rituals, customs values and ceremonies that informed the religious culture of Judaism. Genesis, on the other hand, has a different religious ethos which reflects ancestral practice before the arrival of "Yahwism".<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament interprets God's sending of Jesus Christ into the world. His early life is spent in conformity with the lifestyle and culture of Judaism. Much of his public ministry, however, is spent in challenging the assumptions of his contemporary culture and teaching. As suggested previously by Israel's prophets, Jesus taught that God requires more than cultural conformity to religious ritual and law.

We need not conclude, however, that all law is irrelevant for Christian faith. For example, the commandments of scripture indicate that God's people should pursue justice and be open to the stranger. The apostle Paul, however, affirms that those who believe in Jesus Christ are committed to a faith that is multi-cultural, and no Christian can impose the laws of their own culture on others (even when those laws were given to Israel by God). Both Testaments are clear that that people of every race, nation, tribe, people group and language will be redeemed before God.

If, according to the scriptures, God's salvation extends to the ends of the earth (e.g., Isa 49:6; Acts 13:47), then we can be sure that the people groups of the South Pacific are included. And to the extent that we live in the spirit of Christ, the church will seek in every place to overcome the distortions of colonial power. As Sze-kar Wan has argued, the church lives out its identity "not by erasing ethnic and cultural differences but by *combining these differences into a hybrid existence*".<sup>5</sup>

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4. See, e.g., Temba Mafico, "The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors", in Gerald West and Musa Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 481-89; Walter Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

5. Sze-kar Wan, "Does Diaspora Identity imply some sort of Universality?", in Fernando Segovia (ed.), *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,

The theme of cultural hybridity does, however, raise its own problems for us. Many Aboriginal people experience confusion about the nature and content of the cultures they are caught in, or caught between. Many are seeking to regain as much of their traditional culture as possible. For most Australian Aboriginals, particularly those who were caught up in the stolen generation, this process has been slow and painful. How does God redeem our memories? What does God have to cleanse and heal? Can any one theology be applicable across the whole gamut of the expression and lifestyles of Aboriginality, or must the process of theologising be done more at a local level?

Whatever the failings of evangelisation in the past, the responsibility for the incarnation of the gospel into the many cultures and sub-cultures of our region lies with the Indigenous churches. It is imperative that we enculturate that gospel with integrity and dignity. It is imperative that there be a dynamic demonstration of the outcomes of that gospel within the many cultural and sub-cultural contexts of our region.

Having argued for the suitability of Aboriginal spirituality as being an appropriate cultural window through which certain aspects of the gospel may be viewed, one immediately senses a host of qualifications that might be needed. Redemptive analogies are just that. They are illustrations and not blueprints. Though they may bring a powerful introduction of a fundamental concept, or certain aspects of the gospel, both similarities and differences will need to be explored.

Aboriginal religion, for example, is largely a site-based religion and is mostly confined to the regional topography owned and shared by members of a tribe. Tony Swain in his essay "Ghosts in Space" comments on the difficulty Warlpiri Christians have had in locating heroes of Christian spirituality, not only in a temporal historical framework, but also into the context of their geographically based religion.<sup>6</sup>

While it is important to remember that Aboriginal religion has stewardship of the local flora and fauna as one of its most important priorities, this is not to say that Aboriginal Christians can have no understanding of a universal spirituality. Indeed traditional elders can tell stories about the traveling of ancestral heroes from one tribal territory to another and so it is quite clear that spirituality exists outside one's own borders.

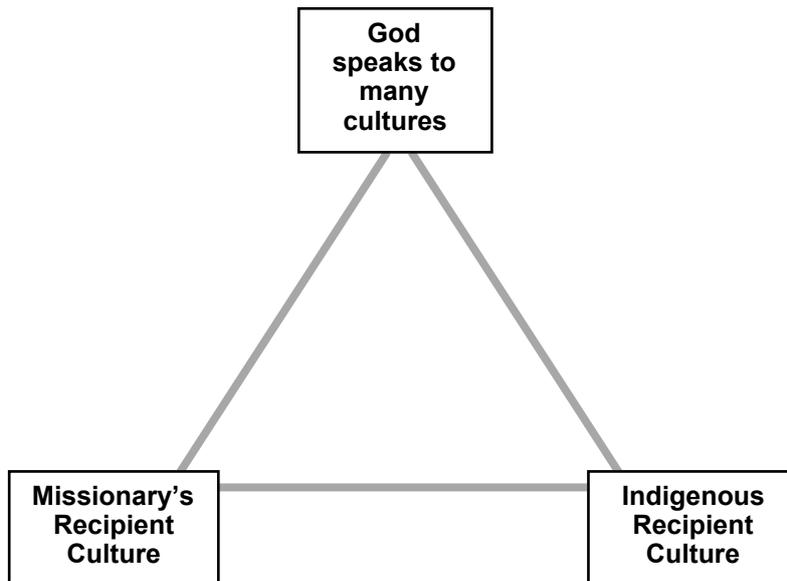
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2000) 126-27, quoted in Mark G. Brett, "Canto ergo sum: Indigenous Peoples and Postcolonial Theology" *Pacifica* 16, 3 (2003) 255.

6. Swain, "The Ghost of Space: Reflections on Warlpiri Christian Iconography and Ritual", in T. Swain and D. B. Rose (eds.), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988) 452-69.

One story recounted to me was of a Christian elder who had died in Darwin hospital after being flown there by the aerial medical service. His tribal clan southwest of Katherine was upset that he was not returned to his traditional area for burial. They feared that his spirit would get lost, until another Christian elder assured them that the Spirit of God could pick him up from Darwin just as easily as from his sacred country. In this case, both the local and the universal perspective were recognised as valid.

An Indigenous approach to the gospel, it is sometimes argued, will introduce cultural categories in a way that simply repeats the older missionary assumption that Western cultures provide the best window on the gospel. Not at all. What Western missionaries have done is perfectly legitimate and desirable for the expression of Christianity within their own culture. What I am advocating is that Aboriginals and Islanders should have the freedom and the capacity to be able to do the same within the various expressions of our own Indigenous cultures.



Perhaps an image might help to clarify the argument. If one imagines the apex of an equilateral triangle as representing the point at which God speaks into the many different cultures of the Bible, the bottom left-hand corner as representing the point at which the missionary has incarnated the gospel into his/her own culture, the bottom right-hand corner can represent the Indigenous recipient culture. Because in

Aboriginal cultures, certain individuals are recognised as the “owners/custodians” of their own sacred sites along with its mythology and ritual, and any participation in the relevant ceremony cannot be exercised without special permission, so many Indigenous leaders have considered the missionaries to be the “owners/minders” of Christian spirituality and its “mythology”. This has meant that the Bible has been normally interpreted with the missionary’s permission.

What I am advocating is that Indigenous cultures be enabled and empowered to engage with the apex of the triangle, without losing touch with the other angle on the gospel provided by the missionaries, but giving incarnational weight to our own perspective.

People sometimes suggest that the Bible contains cultural husks and a theological kernel. The Christian’s job is then to peel away what is culturally relative, leaving only what is theologically binding. Thus, one proposal for overcoming the imposition of Western culture in theology is to try and do away with culture altogether. But, in fact, no meaning can be conveyed apart from culture. If we think we have discerned a theological kernel, “we are simply obscuring the new cultural husk that gives meaning to our claims”. As one Evangelical theologian has recently put it, “Theology does not seek to discern acultural concepts; rather, it seeks to let us see that same work of God and hear that same voice of God in the midst of our own culture.”<sup>7</sup>

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7. Jonathan R. Wilson, “Theology and the Old Testament”, in C. Broyles (ed.), *Interpreting the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 257, 262.

