

# Aborigines and Christianity

## An Overview

---

**Kenelm Burridge**

Sensible though I am of my lack of practical experience in the chosen topic, I have had some experience with missionaries in the field in Australia and elsewhere, and am reasonably well read in the literature about missionary endeavours generally. And since the Aboriginal experience of Christianity has been mostly through missionaries I hope I may be able to make some general remarks about Christianity and the Aboriginal missionary experience which will contribute to a symposium most of whose contributions deal in detail with a wide range of topics.

There are many kinds of missionary, many kinds of Christianity, differing theologies. Some charismatics, particularly Pentecostals, assert that unless baptized in the Holy Spirit, evidenced by glossolalia or speaking in tongues, no one may be considered a true Christian. Others, however, disagree. And while this basically dionysiac experience places many Fundamentalists and/or Evangelicals into opposing camps, they are more or less united in regarding the mainline denominations, themselves divided in their regard for glossolalia and other charismatic experiences, with scarcely veiled hostility, considering them to have strayed from the original simple or apostolic truths in intellectual sophistry and worldliness. For their part, fully aware that much of any religious life consists in the classical problem of reconciling the essentially irrational experience or event with given reason, the mainline denominations tend to be more charitable. Yet Catholics and Protestants remain divided, and Protestantism comprises many theologically diverse denominations and sects.

Accepting common ground in the Old and New Testaments, some Christians interpret these scriptures relatively freely, others base themselves on given teachings or dogmas derived from them. While some sects or denominations eschew icons and highly structured rituals, others, the more traditional, use an array of complex and well developed theologies, rituals and iconographies. Laypersons in every denomination or sect with their own idiosyncratic and divergent views add further dimensions to the spectrum of difference, and there is no lack of non- or ex-Christians very ready to say what Christianity or the Christian life is or ought to be

like. Social scientists, moreover, are apt to measure the Christianity of other cultures in relation to variously conceived Western or Euro-Australian secular middle class cultural values, usually describing them as 'syncretist' — as though at the cultural level a Christian community could be anything other. Despite efforts by many sects and denominations to merge in kinds of ecumenism, difference and diversity inhere in the very nature of the phenomenon that Christianity is.

Accepting diversity, a diversity in a unity difficult to specify but believed by many to exist, it becomes possible to expand on the nature of the phenomenon. To start with, in whatever form it overtly appears, Christianity is a faith, a set of beliefs which, devoid of specific cultural content and based on the narratives and events in the Old and New Testaments, more especially the latter, are concerned with what ought to inform the relations between men and women among themselves and between them and the Creator God: persons in relation to each other, persons in relation to the community (in Christ), and persons in relation to the Godhead. At-onement or being with God, salvation, is to be sought and may only be found not simply in a one-to-one relationship with the Godhead, regarding the world of culture as necessarily corrupt or at least an illusion, but in love of neighbour, through others. The community or fellowship, reconciled to each other in Christ, and necessarily in a socio-cultural context, is an essential ingredient.

As a heuristic device we may call Christian faith a metaculture.<sup>1</sup> Given the context of the Old and New Testaments but going to the apostolic experiences of Christ and his teaching (replicated or approached in what Christians call a metanoia — an enlightenment, that radical change of heart and mind which comes from an experience or inner perception of Christ) this metaculture may manifest itself in culture in a variety of ways. Rationalized or brought into the realm of reason, experiences of Christ or his meaning (which mystics find difficult to describe in ordinary language) are brought into culture and made explicit in a *credo* or its equivalent as well as in particular teachings or dogmas which serve as gateways to the actual experience. As the metaculture is thus inculturated to become a religion, it tends to assume a range of surface differences: the same metaculture gives rise to varying forms of religion as it becomes inculturated. Moreover, for those who lack actual experience of Christ and who, therefore, have to take the meanings and relevances of the experience on faith, the beliefs that make up the faith in relation to the experience tend to move between poles of conviction and scepticism.

From Peter and Paul through Augustine of Hippo and many others the history of Christianity is replete with sceptics who became convinced and *vice-versa*. While conviction tends to be associated with conservatism and conservation in relation to cultural content, scepticism, looking for greater conviction in the light of cultural experience, moves either to renewal and reform — reinterpretations of experiences of the faith in relation to specific cultural ambiances or purposes — or to rejection. Often, attempts at renewal and reform may move beyond the simply pious, adopt a dionysiac mode and become millenarisms. When, however, in spite of or, sometimes, because of attempts at renewal and reform, conviction fails, scepticism may develop into secularization (rejecting the organized church but not necessarily denying the Godhead or the faith) and secularism (denial of the faith and, perhaps, the Godhead).

The many Christian denominations and sects, associated as they often are with region, social class, specific cultures and subcultures, may thus be seen as culturally as well as theologically differentiated reinterpretations of a faith or metaculture held

more or less in common. Although there are always some Christians who have reservations in relation to what they consider 'true' Christianity, the Christian communities to be found in, say, Arctic Canada, the Kurdish hills, south India, Guatemala, Alabama, or in a Scottish, West African, or Melanesian village are generally acknowledged as Christian despite wide differences of cultural expression and theological bases.

Seated today — as indeed it used to be from northern Europe to Ethiopia and from Gibraltar to the Caspian and beyond until Islam confined it largely to Europe — in a wide range of very different cultures, Christianity is as it claims to be, transcultural. The experiences, beliefs and teachings which make up the faith or metaculture not only require culture through which to find expression, for culture in Christian belief is a means given by God through which men and women may communicate with each other and God, but from the days of Paul's missionary journey with Silas and Barnabas (Acts 15:19-30) through Gregory the Great and many another pronouncement<sup>2</sup> to Vatican II (eg. *Lumen Gentium* in Abbott 1966:36), in theory cultural variation poses difficulties only where the faith is contradicted, obscured, or endangered. The metaculture, all that goes with faith in God and in the saving grace of Jesus Christ and loving one's neighbour as oneself, is what matters. Changing inculturations of the metaculture are a continuing process.

Much, however, hangs on the conditionals of contradicting, endangering or obscuring. For while the metaculture requires and seeks cultural expression to become relevant, it is in fact antithetical to any culture as it happens to be. Wherever or whenever Christianity is or has been embraced it rejects parts of a given culture, changes other usages. 'Putting on the new man', which refers to the cultural implications of a metanoia or enlightenment and is hoped for in the case of simple conversions, implies and necessitates changes at both personal and collective levels.

Non-Christians who are or have become wholly identified with their own cultural representations tend, at first if not more persistently, to reject Christianity and its teachings. Thus the Jews of Jesus' time, as attached to their Law and traditions as are or have been Australian Aborigines to theirs, rejected Jesus and his teaching in spite of his claim to be fulfilling the Law rather than perversely attempting to change it. They saw in Jesus' teaching, especially in the inclusion of non-Jews as neighbours deserving compassion, inevitable and necessary changes to what had been and should remain as it was, sacrosanct, the cradle and context of their identity as a people wholly distinct from others, the chosen of God.

Nevertheless, the first Christians were Jews. Having experienced Christ, they became subject to an imperative. They began to grasp the purport of the command to love one's neighbour as oneself even if he or she were an enemy or one towards whom socio-cultural rules prescribed no obligation; they reached for the completions Jesus had taught them. Looking for a Messiah who would free them from the Roman yoke, they found, paradoxically, a liberation of the spirit in this apparent extension of obligation, this love which Jesus had loosed on the world. They converted gentiles who, much as they had done, began to perceive in the new faith not only a viable relation with the Divine but a disposition towards others that was culturally creative. Or who, having become detached from their own native cultural traditions within the conditions of the Roman hegemony, a secularized and materialist world in which many varied kinds of philosophies and religious and secular cults were competing for adherents, were looking for and found in Christianity a new

consciousness: an address to the divine in social life which yielded a completion and quite new fullness of being and cohesiveness in love.

Before his metanoia or complete change and reversal of heart and mind on the road to Damascus, Paul had been obdurately anti-Christian, had joined in the stoning of Stephen, had perceived the threat to Jewish exclusiveness and sought the extirpation of the new sect. Following his enlightenment, however, moving in a flash of time from rejection and logically through scepticism to conviction, Paul became the staunchest of Christians. However one may try to rationalize the nature of Paul's metanoia, his enlightenment, his experience of Christ, what proceeded from the experience and moved him in later life was the love that Jesus had taught: a disposition or, more strictly, an ontological quality capable of overcoming or transcending the divisions and exclusivities of socio-cultural orders, and which reached out to unify and reconcile those whom these orders discriminated against or rejected. Slave, freeman, Greek, Jew, Roman, female, male, oppressed, privileged, poor or rich could all be one in Christ.

In preaching such a doctrine, such love, Paul (as Jesus before him) could not but run counter to all that any culture inculcates: explicit and implicit allegiance to tradition and the in-group whether of kinship, tribe, village, or association; opposition to outsiders. Paul suffered for his witness and, like the Master he served, was eventually executed on a cross. An exemplar of the Christian experience, moving from rejection to conviction — a movement which in others may take an opposite direction — Paul's martyrdom also shows what Christianity ultimately offers in a worldly sense. That inner experience which manifests itself in culture as love and reconciliation transcends and overrides the rules of any culture, and, as the Jews of old saw, must gradually if not more rapidly change extant given traditions. And in doing so it arouses the active opposition and even hostility of those definitively attached to particular cultural or subcultural traditions.

Once these basic features of Christianity have been appreciated, thoughts about adapting or inculturating Christianity in any given culture, while by no means vain, must be seen in the light of necessary change at both religious and secular levels of culture. As Vatican II has shown, even the most conservative of denominations must reinculturate from time to time. One may also discern in Paul and those first Christians what I have elsewhere (1979) called *individuality*: a compulsion to tell others the good news or preach the gospel, to stand aside from given moralities and communicate, in the light of Jesus' teaching on love, the vision of new and more satisfying moralities which reach out beyond given socio-cultural boundaries. On both hands changes are implied and envisaged: a critique of given moralities, the offer of new moralities, extending love to those beyond the bounds of the in-group. This is the basis of missionary work. While the stabilities may be desirable, changes are inevitable. As Gogarten has pointed out, being a Christian and doing Christian work imply continually tearing down and rebuilding (1970:4).

For Paul and his immediate successors, once the faith or metaculture had been properly communicated and digested a culture could be left to look after itself. The idea that Christianity was unsuited to this or that culture was inconceivable. Later in history, however, as the metaculture or experience of the faith was developed and refined in overt cultural terms to become inculturated in differing ways, competing theologies with their varying overt cultural expressions began to indicate nuances or even seemingly vital differences in faith and belief. Heresies, schisms, and

millenarisms, which may be read as reinterpretations of the metaculture in relation to particular socio-cultural conditions, multiplied. Many kinds of men and women, appalled at the worldly corruptions of the Church and seeking a renewal of the faith by returning to apostolic simplicities, eventually cohered to become the Protestant reformation. Just this process continues today. As Christianity changes a given culture and becomes inculturated, so changing socio-cultural conditions demand further reinterpretations of the metaculture, new modes of inculturation. And these are always regarded with suspicion and hostility by the conservative.

Today's world offers some affinities with the Roman. It is of course a much larger world with a greater variety of cultural differentiation. But the hegemony, although divided in political and military terms, exists in economic, commercial and industrial terms as well as in an allegiance to science. It is, as was the Roman, a materialist and secular world where different philosophies, political creeds, and religious or quasi-religious and secular cults compete for adherents from among a vast majority given over to concerns of power and status, the accumulation of wealth and enjoyment of material goods. Except in some Islamic States, governments and national polities are specifically secular and not religious. Although the scale is much larger, Christians are organized as they were in Roman times into relatively small and usually dispersed local communities with wider allegiances to their constituted authorities in sect or denomination. Integral parts of the overreaching secular socio-cultural order but in their own peculiar ways rather different from their neighbours, most Christians participate (as they must and should) in secular organizations and the generally materialist ambience: the leaven in the dough.

Australian Aborigines are today in much the same situation as the gentiles of Roman times. Caught up in the same hegemony as are others, both Christian and secular, distanced or detached from their traditions but also attempting to revive or rework them in conditions (such as a cash economy, wage labour, and dependence on the material resources of the exterior social environment) which, for the most part, cannot truly sustain them, Aborigines, whether as groups or as individuals have been presented with a variety of options. The missionaries brought to Aborigines differing versions of the faith, and in attempting conversions hoped for those decisive changes of heart and mind or metanoias or enlightenments which would reveal a new consciousness in the Godhead. They tried to teach what they meant by love of neighbour and reconciliation; they brought medical aid and literacy; gave instruction in some of the skills and trades necessary to survive in the commercial-industrial hegemony. Indeed, if some Aborigines, no doubt, appreciated and embraced the Christianity offered, this should be balanced against the fact that a majority began to depend significantly on the missions for subsistence, jobs, education and training in crafts. Today, most if not all of the missions have been secularized. And although the missions may be thought, rightly or wrongly, to have stressed religion rather than training in secular skills, secularization has decisively reversed the balance. The relationship of dependence may have shifted from missionary to secular civil servants, but in most cases of secularization a relationship of dependence persists.

Ideally, the more enlightened missionaries may be supposed to have sought to make themselves superfluous, attempting to change the relation of economic dependence into one in which Aborigines, becoming wholly aware that much of the past had slipped away, might realize themselves as integral parts of an over-arching

socio-cultural order and, aware of the options and their consequences, make their own decisions. And one may suppose that the secular civil servants who have displaced the missionaries have had much the same objectives in mind. Indeed, some Aboriginal groups have recently begun to move out of the dependent relationship. Becoming more or less their own masters, no longer relying on the tutelage or patronage of either missionary or secular civil servants, but more or less forced to conform to the requirements of the hegemony, they have been persuaded to organize themselves as independent corporations. Attempting to adapt or inculturate Christian beliefs to Aboriginal ways and traditions from the outside, a corollary of dependence, is now an unstable flux in a situation of rapid socio-cultural change: a problem for Christian Aborigines and their denominational authorities (Aboriginal and/or Euro-Australian) to work through together.

In this sense Aboriginal Christians stand on the same ground as other Christians: How may they sustain their faith within a secular and materialist world? Secularized Aborigines or those who are not Christians now have much the same options in relation to Christianity as do non-Christians anywhere: embrace it as a guide for realising to the full the possibilities inherent in being human; ignore it as outdated or irrelevant to modern life; reject it as misguided; or oppose it as cruelly deceptive and detrimental to mastering the technologies derived from science, which of themselves seem to make possible a full life in the hegemony obtaining.

If the last seems the most viable option, the forms of corporate activity are not sacrosanct. They may change as rapidly as anything else, are vulnerable to mergers and take-overs, survive or go under in relation to the environment the hegemony provides. Survival and a measure of prosperity depend on a command of the techniques and technologies demanded by the hegemony as well as knowing all or most of its implicit rules. On the other hand, organizing and attending church services, and supporting clergy, facilities and programmes become a drain on scarce resources. Belief in the efficacy of prayer in a technological world seems childish and impractical. Extending love to one who may be a rival or competitor seems silly, even perhaps suicidal. Monogamy may be lived with, but arrangements for swift or easy divorce become essential. State schools and welfare services will look after children, dependants, and oneself should it be necessary. As for theological or doctrinal niceties, why lumber the mind with the complexities developed by an intellectual elite whose wisdoms, knowledge and predications of heaven and earth have been displaced by science?

Not an issue of faith *versus* technology, for these are not necessarily opposed, the point is this: while life in any environment has its risks, far from providing that matrix whereby the moral and other problems encountered by individuals and the community might be resolved, characteristic of religions in traditional societies, Christianity, like other religions in a context of general secularization (that process whereby religion ceases to be the organizing principle of community life), seems everywhere to have become more burden than advantage. Secular bureaucracies together with their specialists now secrete the moralities, and deal with most of the problems most people have with the aid of psychiatric or psychological techniques. Natural and social scientists seem to know much more about the world and its inhabitants than clergy or theologians ever did. Government agencies now furnish the safety net that Christian organizations with their meagre resources tried, not always successfully, to provide. The cultural experience, in short, leads not into

organized religion (as the shortage of vocations testifies) but into secularity and, perhaps, into privatized versions of some sort of religious life. Still, a secularized world is not simply a non-religious world: it breeds its own problems which secular agencies seek to alleviate.

That they were Christians who pioneered all or most of the social services now in secular hands is not wholly irrelevant. Christian missionaries were, and to some extent remain, the progenitors of all aid and development programmes anywhere. Yet although Christians in whatever sect or denomination have to suffer passing or more persistent scepticisms which develop into secularization or even secularism, Christianity itself has a resilience and, indeed, an attraction which, if not wholly immune to socio-cultural analysis, ultimately escapes secular rationalization. From its earliest days Christianity has been familiar with the half-hearted, the secret reservations, losses of faith, and secularization: movements between conviction and scepticism. Still, it has always succeeded in renewing itself. If there are as many or more secularized or apostate once-Christian Aborigines today as there are active and believing Christians, the long dependence on missions and missionaries carries with it a heritage of mixed blessings.

From Fundamentalists to Catholics missionaries brought to Aborigines not just a foreign faith which might have been as acceptable to them as to anyone else but a faith in foreign cultural wrappings. Nor is it twisting the truth to say that by and large most missionaries communicated not so much the faith as the varied inculturations in which differing interpretations of the faith were contained. A point for critique perhaps — unless or until a viable alternative is proposed. For not only is the communication of culture rather than the metaculture inevitable despite efforts to the contrary but, as the missionary experience generally has shown, peoples addressed are apt to prefer what goes with the faith — medicines, literacy, technology, goods — which they think they can understand, to the faith, which at first seems to fly in the face of all traditional cultural values, assumptions and proclivities.

Nevertheless, the missionary effort was not wholly in vain. If relatively few Aborigines actually became convinced Christians, while anthropologists and others might write about the conditions of Aborigines, the missionaries went there, lived in those conditions, and tried with their very meagre resources to do something which, with the notable exception of Daisy Bates, no one else over a period of more than a century has been prepared to do. The missionaries remain the only body of men and women who not only tried to alleviate the conditions of Aborigines, but attempted to prepare them for a future that has just about arrived.

The 'success' or 'failure' of missionary endeavours can only be measured subjectively. For missionaries being a missionary is self-justifying, and their 'success' or 'failure' may not be measured in numbers or rates of conversions. This, the experience of the faith, is for the Spirit for whom missionaries are but the flawed agents. Nor, in their eyes, are missionaries to be judged on the purely social work they do. Rather is their work to be measured by the manner in which they attempt an imitation of Christ. Secular observers, on the other hand, tend to measure missionaries by precisely those criteria by which they do not measure themselves. Further, no matter what a missionary does, whatever his or her personal qualities, mode of address or denominational allegiance, he or she usually becomes a target for the criticism and often derision of outsiders, both Christian and secular. That is a



missionary's fate, written into the task. A missionary is always the 'other', to the people addressed, to those of his or her own culture. Positioned aside from the normative cultural modes, and thus interstitial, critical of the moralities both in their own and other cultures, missionaries attempt to do what few others would even dream of doing: reconcile people and cultures to each other.

The changes that missionaries necessarily bring about in trying to teach people how to 'put on the new man' can always be regarded as instances of kinds of ethnocide or 'culture-wrecking'. Indeed, some missionaries must stand guilty as accused. For in teaching Christianity and attempting as so often they have done to do away with the myths and traditions of Aborigines they seem to have been unaware that they themselves are not exactly the cultural replicas of the Apostles, and that European Christians have been able to treasure, preserve, and find instruction in, say, Greek, Roman, Norse, and Celtic mythologies and traditions without loss to their Christianity. If some Christians, iconoclasts, will doubtless disagree, so long as missionaries (like anthropologists) regard Christianity as a culture derived from the European environment instead of, as they should, treating it as a faith or metaculture, so long will one or other sort of 'culture-wrecking' continue.

As Edwin Smith, great missionary and anthropologist, past President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, has remarked, "There are missionaries *and* (*sic*) missionaries" (1950:8). Yet few observers would agree on which side of the *and* to put a given missionary. As a supposed role model for the beneficiaries or victims of Western expansion, every missionary was and remains a contrast to the other models available. They can never be as wealthy, influential and powerful as station owners or civil servants or businessmen. Not great spenders or drinkers or masters of profanity, strong in the faith though they may be, those who belong to the poorer missionary societies can seem pretty wretched to the secular affluent whose preferred role models are much like themselves. Not always welcome in the homes of other white folk who think of themselves as Christians, missionaries are usually regarded as the social inferiors of those whose supposedly central values they attempt to communicate. Generous as they are with their time and attentions, missionaries remain for the most part effectively outcast in relation to their own native cultures. Like Socrates to the Athenians or Jesus to the Jews, they are seen as subversive rather than as creative.

What did or could Aborigines make of the missionaries? A white Australian putting the question into Aboriginal mouths might ask why they were being so saddled with rejects. While missionaries have had to resign themselves to the situation, taking some comfort from the fact that although Christ himself was rejected his Spirit prevailed, Aborigines have for the most part shrugged their shoulders and tried to make the best of it. Besides bringing goods, medicines, literacy and jobs, missionaries were conduits to other kinds of employment and welfare cheques. They were brokers representing Aboriginal interests to those with power, and they could very readily be made into scapegoats, easily blamed on all hands for the generally unwholesome conditions of Aboriginal life. Yet missionaries are at best dedicated men and women who persevere in their faith, in hope, and in love. Some missionaries have been 'successful' in both their own and outsiders' terms. And here and there some Aborigines, not very many in relation to the whole it is true, have come to appreciate the supposed rejects as people who nonetheless possess something of value their compatriots do not.



One albeit equivocal measure of the 'success' or 'failure' of missionary endeavours is the incidence of millenarisms. While missionaries regard such activities as more or less disastrous, retreats into local exclusivisms which deny the universality of the faith or metaculture, on another view they reveal Christianity at work. From Paul's anxieties with the Corinthians through the Montanists, medieval millenarian movements, Anabaptists, Enthusiasms, and the proliferation of denominations and sects to modern Pentecostals and charismatic movements, millenarisms are as they have been an integral part of Christianity: a dionysiac verso to the usually sober, intellectualized and appollonian presentation of the faith. While, as was noted at the outset, some Christians regard the former as crucial and essential for true renewal of Christian faith, other hold them to be improper. Nevertheless, millenarisms must be considered part of the package, and Christianity continually generates them. Yet among Aborigines millenarisms have been relatively few: only two or three where there might or perhaps should have been dozens.

What to make of this relative absence? If, as many anthropologists argue, millenarisms are due to the stresses and strains of culture-contact and are attempts to adjust to changing socio-cultural conditions, does this relative absence indicate that there have been no stresses and strains, no attempts to adjust, or that everything has gone smoothly? If Christianity may be said to generate millenarisms, does the relative absence of such activities indicate that Christian missions to Aborigines, mainly apollonian, have been peculiarly effective, or that they have been inept? Answers that will satisfy both social scientists and missionaries are elusive. Have Aborigines been so resigned to a relation of more or less helpless dependence that they developed a culture of relative poverty and dependence, using alcohol to dampen sparks of aspiration or muffle hopes deferred? After all, in the face of a flinty hegemony only the missionaries translated their voiced concerns into action, and they, like the Aborigines, were themselves among the rejected. Or might it be that Aborigines were so attached to their traditions that they remained, if not unaffected by, at least unwilling to admit or surrender to the new conditions?

Again, what might be persuasive answers escape into doubt. If some of the missionaries preached a hard-nosed God of punishment mixed with stony justice, easy to understand, most went to the subtle complexities of a God of love, very difficult to grasp especially when, as is most usual, that love is translated not into reconciliation but into an expectation of material assets freely come by. Although some missions were havens of reasonably contented communities and others were not, in neither case do the rituals and disciplines of worship of either kind of God seem to have allayed anxieties or doubts in relation to the over-arching hegemony on the one hand or tradition on the other. The fact that charismatic groups are presently enjoying the kinds of 'success' that have for so long eluded the mainline denominations is surely not fortuitous. For in scientific or behavioural terms charismatic modes, irrational though they are in relation to given reason, include the release and resolution of emotional tensions as they seem to deal with conflicts between conscience and authority born of tradition on the one hand and the 'new man' predicted by Christianity on the other.

Perhaps 'new person' might be better and more correct than 'new man'. For women too are emphatically included in the Christian dispensation. Fiorenza, for example (1983), makes a strong case when she argues that the Roman persecutions of Christians were due less to objections to Christianity in itself than to the way in

which it contradicted the patriarchal principle by giving the same kinds of freedoms to women and slaves as it gave to free men. The general experience of missionaries is that women are more susceptible than men. Women comprise the majority of those who attend church services, women are the backbone of other church programmes, more females attend school than do men, more women become more literate sooner. In the missionary situation, in short, women tend to have a greater command over knowledge of the outer world than do the men. Which the men resent deeply, particularly in the Aboriginal context where men bear responsibility and are the authoritative culture bearers. If this education and perhaps liberation of women may be called 'culture-wrecking', in a pejorative sense, it then becomes the kind of change that Westerners may deem desirable for themselves but not for others.

Accepting that many Aborigines, moving from a relationship of dependence, where Christianity was doubtless seen as part of a total package for survival and, for a few, even relative prosperity in the hegemony, to one in which it might be separated out, will reject Christianity for one or other reason — What does Christianity have to offer Aborigines apart from the faith itself to those who might embrace it? The mainline denominations — Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Lutheran — can normally offer only membership of bodies that are politically, socially and economically relatively liberal and undemanding. But the price is a lack of attention to and responsibility for the worldly needs and aspirations of their co-members: no assurance of either social status or economic security, little mobility in the sense of being given a certain welcome and assistance by the members of a similar community elsewhere in the hegemony. Support perhaps for the more gifted wishing to enter commerce, industry or the political arena. On the other hand, the wealthier of the smaller but dissident denominations or sects, such as Mormons, Adventists, Pentecostals, or Jehovah's Witnesses, offer membership in closely integrated fellowships which, while demanding in tithes, subscriptions, and religious observance, are also mutual aid and assistance associations providing a more certain economic security, an in-group status, mobility between dispersed groups of members, and certainly no less political opportunity.

For Aborigines wishing to become Christians and also go out into the world, leaving the reservation, settlement, or mission behind them, the smaller denominations would seem the more viable choice. Within the local enclave, however, whether on the outskirts of town or city or in the rural outback, the choice is much more open. For the mainline denominations little of what is thought to be tradition need actually be abandoned: it simply has to be seen in the light of Christian faith. If there must be differences between Christians and those who are not Christians, they need not be quite as injurious to general social life for mainliners as they tend to be for members of the smaller or dissident denominations, whose demands are much more strict and very much less forgiving. As for the faith itself, Christians of all denominations and sects would claim that it provides not simply utilitarian spiritual strengths and peace of mind which might or might not reap material advantage, but is the proper mode of acknowledging and coming to an at-oneness with the Creator-God.

Although as I have suggested some missionaries and missions may rightly be considered success stories — at Hermannsburg, for example, or Kalumburu, Port Keats, Beagle Bay, La Grange or Lombadina to mention a few — the general and

overall presentation of Christianity to Aborigines cannot be said to have been either happy or successfully done. Too much was arrayed against them. Not so much in relation to the Aborigines, for few peoples take kindly to Christianity at first, and Aborigines were in this regard no different from others. Rather was the task made more difficult in part by missionary misconceptions as to the nature of culture and metaculture or faith and, much more significantly, by a Euro-Australian populace which not only held missionaries in low regard but, whether or not they were themselves Christians or simply disdained organized religion, in so many ways preferred that the Aborigines *not* be Christians, *not* have a status equivalent to other Australians.

Based mostly in racial prejudice, such preferences had economic advantages and seemed to enjoy scientific support. As Cribbin has remarked (1984), for many years and for most Euro-Australians Aborigines were simply part of the native Australian fauna, not wholly human, not worthy of the responsibilities of full citizenship because patently wholly unable to assume them. In any case, they were dying out, a Neanderthal remnant on the road to an evolutionary extinction. But even as science revised its older views persisted in the popular mind: they provided a ready excuse not to do so many of the things which might have been done much earlier. Moreover, many if not all the accounts by anthropologists, which might have bridged the moral and cultural gap between Aborigines and Euro-Australians, even when pleading Aboriginal causes unhappily confirmed the general prejudice by making them seem in so many ways entirely peculiar to themselves, distant and different from others anywhere: a stone age people who were supposedly ignorant of the biological facts of life and almost hopelessly fixed in a primitive and eternal dreamtime.

Today as in the past, different people perceive and extract a variety of meanings and relevances from Christianity. Aborigines neither were, are, nor will be exceptional in this. No longer economically dependent on the missions, the situation today is, as has been pointed out, an open one. Aboriginal men and women may, as they certainly will, choose for themselves without being led into thinking that becoming a Christian might reap an immediate or future material advantage. There is little doubt that in the remoter enclaves and settlements parts of the Old and New Testaments and Christian belief will be, as they have been, inculturated in a variety of ways — in myths or some life-styles for example — without actually adopting the faith itself. Little doubt too that where a version of the faith is embraced it will be inculturated in ways that are acceptable to some Christians but not to others. Whether or not the central cultural values of Christianity — love of neighbour, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, work as prayer, morality independent of merely cultural convenience — will find a home in an explicitly Christian religious context in the lives of Aborigines as, in a variety of ways, they become parts of the overall cultural hegemony is for prophets to divine. The historical experience of Christianity suggests that while in a few they will and in most they will not, the cultural values will probably inform their religious and secular lives in significant ways.

Grudgingly or otherwise, one can say this of the missionaries: they tried. And one measure of their endeavours is that so much of what they have tried to do in social or cultural work has been appropriated by those who regarded (and still regard) missionary work with no small contempt. For more than a century before it

was recognized by State or Commonwealth governments or the general populace, missionaries were affirming that the first Australians were human and should have the same rights and dignities, the same opportunities and respect as were normally accorded to other Australians. These aspirations have not yet been achieved, for Aborigines still lack the explicit political opportunities and positions which would enable them to speak for themselves to their own particular interests. Yet if there is any credit for what has in fact and at long last been achieved over the last decade or so, much of it must go to those missionaries whose faith, values, and cultural aspirations laid the basis for an improved present and, perhaps, a better future.

As with any other faith, from a cultural point of view Christianity seems to offer poisons with its nectar. An assertion which convinced Christians will of course deny. Nevertheless if there will always be those who maintain with some bitterness that Christianity and its missionaries have much to answer for, missionaries themselves would warmly and at once respond that indeed they have!

## Notes

- 1 Although I am using metaculture here as a heuristic device, the whole problem of metacultures, how the seemingly irrational in culture may be made to submit to given reason without vulgarity or denying or damaging the experience itself — posed by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) when he relates that he actually 'saw witchcraft' — has only just begun to be seriously addressed by anthropologists.
- 2 For example, in 1659 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith issued an instruction to missionaries — "Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the people, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy, or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people, always supposing that they are not evil, but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed." (From Neill 1973:179)

## Bibliography

- Abbott, Walter M. (1966), *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York: Guild Press.
- Burridge, Kenelm (1979), *Someone, No One*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cribbin, John (1984), *The Killing Times*, Sydney: Fontana Books.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1937), *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schussler (1983), *In Memory of Her*, New York: Crossroads Publishing Co.
- Gogarten, Friedrich (1970), *Despair and Hope for Our Time*, Boston: Pilgrim Press.
- Neill, Stephen (1973), *A History of Christian Missions*, London: Pelican Books.
- Smith, Edwin William (1950), *The Blessed Missionaries*, Capetown: Oxford University Press.