

Christianity Full Circle

Aboriginal Christianity on Yarrabah Reserve¹

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Yarrabah is an Aboriginal reserve on coastal North Queensland, originally developed by the Reverend J.B. Gribble, an Anglican priest. He died shortly after starting the mission and the work continued under the direction of his son, Ernest Gribble. It remained a mission until 1960, when the government took over the management and made it into a Reserve. Yarrabah has always been exclusively Anglican. When the church handed over control to the government one of the stipulations was that it would remain Anglican.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Aboriginal people have, by their own efforts, transformed an imposed religious belief system and world view into one which is Aboriginally-oriented and acceptable to themselves. As well, they have incorporated this belief system in pragmatic terms, into a moral code for everyday living. The "new" Christianity promises not only "personal salvation" but an avenue for Aboriginal-instigated social change, thereby placing Aboriginal people in a position of control over the direction of their own lives. In the 1980s many people on Yarrabah began experiencing "visions". These visions are an integral part of the upsurge of interest in the church. They are seen as confirmation that God has a special purpose for Yarrabah: the Aboriginalisation of Christianity. The intent behind this purpose is for Yarrabah to become the centre for Aboriginal missionaries who will be sent out to missionise not only their own people, but also Europeans who, because of their materialism, have lost their link with God. Thus, Yarrabah has come full circle: from a white mission station to an Aboriginal mission centre. The new Christianity has had an accompanying social impact on the community which will also be discussed.

Seeing Things: The Visions

"You know that scripture that's in the Bible: 'without a vision the people would perish', that's the right thing, I think, for all those

visions that people seen. We all seem to have a vision that keeps us going with God. And it's just like that verse says: 'without a vision the people would perish'."

— a Yarrabah resident

The term "vision" as described by the people of Yarrabah is used in a generic sense for a range of phenomena which Yarrabah people claim to have experienced. Many of the visions are interpreted by the seer, or those to whom they are recounted, as prophetic and/or a message from God which has special meaning and intent for the Yarrabah people. The "conviction" experience talked about by "born-again" Christians on Yarrabah is explained as "when you get a feeling that God is speaking to you". Yarrabah Christians say that while Europeans tend to question the existence of God, asking who or what is God, they believe by faith, and their simple faith enables them to develop spiritually. The seer of a vision develops his/her own symbolic analysis of the meaning conveyed by the vision. Sometimes s/he does not understand parts of the vision and only later are additional meanings "revealed" by others. A vision thus comes to have a composite meaning. Flashes of intuitive thought or imagination (for example a specific design of an illustrative nature) are also interpreted as emanating not from the person, but from an outside power.

Visions have been noted as occurring among Aboriginal people long before the "new" Christianity, though not in such clustered and numerous proportions as have been declared in the past several years. Elkin writes that visionary experiences formed a part of the making of medicine men, or men of "high degree" (Elkin 1977:95). Gribble wrote that the oldest Aborigine on the reserve in the early days of the mission, the mother of "King" John Menmuny, a Gungandji, was "frequently seeing visions and dreaming dreams, and frequently held converse with the dead, from whom she from time to time received new songs for the use of the tribe" (Gribble 1930:90). A story which the Reverend James Noble (Gribble's Aboriginal assistant) passed on to his progeny, tells of his meeting one evening with an "old man" whom he did not know, while he was out cutting wood. The stranger came up to him and asked him if he would help Gribble open the Mitchell River mission. James thought the "old man" was God, and from that time on he gave up smoking, swearing, and "bad ways". The place where James is said to have met the stranger was not far from Reeves Creek, where some Yarrabah children saw a vision in June 1983.

Gribble writes of yet another visionary experience in the early days of the mission:

For several years after the formation of the mission, the young men used to ship for the season on the bêche-de-mer schooners. But it ceased in a remarkable way. One night when they were on a trip they were awakened by one of their number, a native named Sam Jagur, who said that he had seen a big light at the masthead, and had heard a voice which said they must not ship again, but remain with the mission. (Gribble 1933:41)

Three of the young men later became lay readers and one was a member of the Synod of North Queensland for several years. Seeing a light appears to be a not uncommon

occurrence. Several Aboriginal people, both on and off the Reserve, have commented on seeing a light on a hill, particularly above graveyards, or where people are known to be buried; several people have said that they see spirits of deceased people. Roth wrote that generally among North Queensland "tribes" it was believed that many of the nature spirits originally derived from the bodies of dead people — "from spirits that have taken to the solitudes of the mountain or forest" (Roth 1903:17).

The visions of the 1980s are numerous and varied. The most dramatic, and one which is now used as a logo for Yarrabah, is that which was manifested from a "butterfly" painting done by a young boy in kindergarten on June 14, 1983. The boy had used red, yellow and blue paint on a piece of orange cardboard, which he had folded in half, pressed, and opened after the colours had merged together. The result of this exercise had a profound impact on the community. The "painting" looks remarkably like the head of Christ (as popularly depicted), with eyes open, wearing a crown of thorns, hands folded in prayer-like gesture, and encompassing a bishop-like figure wearing priestly vestments and mitre. The bishop figure was not noticed until three years later, when it was "revealed" to someone at the ordination of the Aboriginal Bishop, a Yarrabah man. More hidden meanings in this painting are "revealed" as time goes on (such revelations usually occur after prayer). Recently "revealed" is a sword over the mouth area, interpreted by Yarrabah Christians as the word of God which they must continue to uphold and spread to others.

Two days before this painting appeared, several girls, aged between ten and thirteen years, saw visions of "Jesus, a large cross, and steps leading to heaven with two angels", in cloud formations in the sky. The girls were questioned separately by two of the Aboriginal priests who were convinced that what they saw was a vision of Christ. Christ-like cloud formations were seen by an Aboriginal priest and his wife on Yarrabah in June 1980 (three years before those seen by the young girls), after the couple had attended a weekly fellowship meeting.

It is believed by many in the community that visions such as these have been seen for years, but that people experiencing them had been afraid to mention them for fear of ridicule. With the "new" Christianity and open declarations of being "born-again in the spirit", people have lost inhibitions about speaking out. James Noble's granddaughter saw a vision of Christ years ago when she was a child, and others have "seen" over the years, but they kept it to themselves. She says:

I think a lot of people, they keep that — like — it's theirs. They keep it to themselves. It's personal. It's between them and the Lord. They seem to think, that's mine, he gave that to me. Whenever we sit and share, and talk about the Lord, someone'll say, Oh, I saw this a long time ago when I was a young person, and then somebody else will remember and they'll share what they seen.

Other visions seen in the 1980s — the era of new Christian awareness at Yarrabah — were manifested in various ways. In June 1984, a scorch mark on an iron was "revealed" as having three faces of Jesus, one representing the face of the risen Christ, another the face on the shroud, and the third, the face of Jesus ascending into Heaven. Collectively they depict "Christ has died, is risen, and shall come again". This iron is now housed in a glass case in the rectory at Yarrabah. A vision of Christ was seen on the torso of a man in a photograph in someone's house; the face of Jesus

was seen on a star after a midnight church service at Christmas; a large hand reaching out over St. Alban's church was observed the same night; a Christ-like figure was seen in a tree at night after a Bible study session; another (a full figure of Christ) in the window curtains of someone's house, by people returning home after an evening Bible study. Many of the visions occurred at night after the seer had been studying the Bible, or been concentrating on the scriptures. These visions were witnessed by several people, as the seer called others to view their apparitions.

Europeans, and some Aboriginal people on the Reserve, remain sceptical about the stories of visions. Only one European, himself a Christian, stated that he saw one of the apparitions (a Christ-like figure in a tree, at night) but explained it as being caused by lights shining on the tree in a way which cast light and shadows into a certain form which seemed anthropomorphic. There have been mixed reactions within the Anglican Church to the phenomenon of the Yarrabah visions. No mention of any of the visions can be found in secular newspapers outside Yarrabah, and some Anglican priests are frankly sceptical. However others, including the Rt. Reverend John Lewis, Bishop of the North Queensland Diocese, regard them as being "extremely significant and in keeping with a very ancient tradition in the Church, which is seen primarily in the icons of the Orthodox Church" (pers. comm. Bishop Lewis, 27/11/1985) many of which were reportedly inspired by the same sort of visions that people have experienced at Yarrabah. Certainly, the Yarrabah visions have not been discouraged by the Church, and Bishop Lewis, who has always encouraged and promoted the Aboriginal ministry, has referred to the visions on several occasions.

In fact, Bishop Lewis figures prominently in an experience which has not been termed visionary, but still figures most significantly as a "sign" to some Christians. After a church service one Sunday, when everyone else had left the church, one man stayed behind to pray. He looked up and saw a mynah bird with its foot caught in a crack in the ceiling of the church. Other mynah birds were attacking it until its head began to bleed and drip down on to the floor of the church. Some time later this story was recounted to other Christians who gave the story special significance. They saw the troubled mynah bird as symbolic of Bishop Lewis being attacked by other white clergy for his support and promotion of the Aboriginal priests, and his insistence that an Aboriginal bishopric should be formed, in spite of white opposition to this idea.

Many Christians in the community believe that Yarrabah is the mother church to Aboriginal people around Australia, particularly in the north. They believe it will be the training ground for Aboriginal priests who will then go out to missionise not only their own people, but Europeans who have become too materialistic in their outlook and way of life and so have lost their link with God. The first Aboriginal deacon, James Noble, went out from Yarrabah as a missionary, and more recently (1985), a Yarrabah man, Arthur Malcolm, has become the first Aboriginal Bishop in Australia. Shortly thereafter, three Yarrabah priests were sent to different parts of Australia as missionaries — one to Palm Island, one to Oenpelli, in the Northern Territory, and one to Oombulgurrie, in Western Australia. Since then, more men have become deacons, and are training to become priests. All these events are seen as confirmation that Yarrabah is to be the mother church.

The social impact of the new Christianity

"The seeds that the missionaries sowed many years ago have now been watered by our own priests and deacons."

— a Yarrabah resident

Yarrabah is now seen as "the jewel in Church Army's crown" (Church Army Minister, A.B.C. Radio, 24/11/1985). One future possibility for missionary work is an itinerant evangelical ministry working up and down the eastern coast from Brisbane to Cairns, similar to the old Church Army vans. Lay people are encouraged (by the Aboriginal bishop) to train to become lay readers and deacons, in the hope that new people will become priests and perpetuate the apostolic image of Yarrabah as a new Jerusalem.

Prior to the visions of the 1980s the problems of alcohol abuse and violence seemed insurmountable. They continue to present enormous difficulties. However, there has been some improvement in the 1980s with many people becoming born-again Christians, and very strict about upholding their rule of abstaining from alcohol.

A white Anglican priest in a nearby town commented that Yarrabah used to be a "wicked place" before the visions began appearing. One Aboriginal woman who had grown up in a white community and moved to Yarrabah on marriage, in 1974, was horrified at the amount of fighting and drinking on the Reserve:

When I first came there were 60 fights in the one street. Sixty fights in the one street in one night! No matter where you moved there was fights. That's how bad it was. You wouldn't believe it, looking at the place now. But that night, I came up here in '74, you couldn't even drive up the street. My brother-in-law tried to drive past them, but when he finished driving past one he was right in the next one. There was fights all over. I saw it happening all the time. That's how bad it was.

The number of conversions is not great when compared to the total population. It was estimated that, of a total population of approximately 1350-1500, there is a core group today of 300 born-again Christians, though most of the population are also Christians. What does have a powerful impact on the community is that most of the core group, especially the priests and deacons were, by their own definition, previously alcoholics and/or drug addicts. They were also leaders of small cliques, as well as entrepreneurs with small businesses. Their conversion was total and has been lasting. Each of these leaders brought their followers with them into the church. As these leaders depart the community for missionary work with only their nuclear family, new leaders convert and bring in their followers. The process results in exponential conversions.

The first of these leaders, who became a deacon in 1983, and was ordained a priest in 1983, had a successful shop business. Another, whose brother and sister were already living on Yarrabah and married to Yarrabah people, and come over from Western Australia with the intention of growing marijuana on a commercial basis. He claimed to be involved in drugs in Western Australia, but since his

conversion has taken a three month diploma course in alcohol and drug abuse counseling, has counseled in the Rehabilitation Centre on Yarrabah (opened by the Church), and is one of Yarrabah's most promising priests. His conversion was sudden. He says that he has been seeking "worldly riches" but God gave him "spiritual riches". Now he has both, as priesthood confers certain privileges.

The visionary Yarrabah Christians lay great emphasis on the importance of being born-again. It is not seen as devotion enough to be simply Christian without having undergone expurgation of the old way of life and publicly announcing how the new Christianity has changed one's life. Being an alcohol abuser, a drug addict or a gambler prior to becoming born-again is seen as evidence of the transformation from a passive to an active role. There is an acceptance of alcohol abuse in the community, and while not condoned by the born-again, there is an understanding of what it is to be an alcoholic. In fact, the converted, recovered alcohol abusers feel that God allowed them to have that experience so that they would be better able to administer to their own people. To be able to stand up and publicly declare one's change from chronic alcohol abuse to a life of abstention, is to declare one's break from a past life.

When people are converted to the new Christianity, their life-style is quite radically changed. Alcohol, smoking and swearing are completely vetoed; their physical appearance changes (especially if they are former alcoholics), and they describe themselves as having an "inner glow". This notion was corroborated by a statement of the Bishop of the North Queensland Diocese, at a Yarrabah church service, when he said that he could now see the visions of Yarrabah in the faces of the newly ordained priests. Their lives become more ordered, they participate in both sacred and secular activities, and their social network is widened into the outside world. Newsletters, meetings, and study groups inform and educate, and groups of Christians from Yarrabah travel to conferences, seminars, retreats, and workshops off the Reserve.

Alcohol abuse, and its concomitant effects of early deaths, violence, family disruption, community upheavals, and lowering of individual self-esteem, is common among many Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. As early as 1893, E.R. Gribble's diary records incidents of camp Aborigines in Cairns drunk on beer, brandy and whisky, which Gribble prophetically saw as a "terrible evil which is only just beginning to grow on these natives" (Diaries, 9/9/1893, ABM Archives, Sydney). Considering the devastating effects of alcohol on Aboriginal communities, the role that the Church plays in actively attempting to eradicate alcohol and drug abuse is Christianity in social praxis. Some members of the Christian core group are constantly working at the alcohol rehabilitation centre situated in the main village. One or two Yarrabah people have taken diploma courses in alcohol and drug rehabilitation and are qualified to counsel and take care of patients in the Centre. In 1985, the couple staffing the Centre were a Yarrabah priest (a recovered drug addict) and his wife. Aboriginal people are thus instigating and continuing to maintain their own alcohol rehabilitation in their own way. There are no Europeans working at this Centre.

In the Foreword to its Interim Report, the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs stated that alcohol was "the greatest present threat to Aborigines of the Northern Territory" and unless strong immediate action was taken, Aborigines could destroy themselves (1977:iii). Members of the Committee visited other States

and saw that alcohol abuse was just as devastating elsewhere in Australia. The Committee's final report stated that unless there was a reduction in the effects of alcohol abuse, any future aid program offered to Aborigines would be severely jeopardised. Yarrabah was one of 66 communities throughout Australia visited by members of the Standing Committee, and was cited as a community with serious alcohol problems.

Craig noted there was a thriving market in sly grog in spite of the beer canteen on Yarrabah (1979:160). The canteen still sells only beer, and at prices much higher than in nearby towns. Four taxis operate full-time between Yarrabah, Gordonvale and Cairns, and they do a thriving business, principally in transporting people from Yarrabah to Gordonvale or Edmonton, usually to load the car with cartons of beer and wine after a couple of hours' drinking in an off-Reserve hotel. Most of the drinking population do not own cars and so use taxis rather than private vehicles when driving over the mountain range to nearby towns; a fact which keeps deaths from drink-driving to a minimum. Sly grog is still sold at inflated prices to those who are desperate for a drink and/or have exhausted their own supplies. *Goom*, a mixture of methylated spirits and cordial or water, is often drunk as it is much cheaper and has the desired effect. Marijuana is also used, and petrol-sniffing occurs, especially among young people. Detoxification programs in Cairns are effective only while the affected person is drying out. Once back in the same environment the social pressures and fear of ridicule from peers result in ineffectual attempts to change, unless there is an overriding incentive or opposing social pressure for them to do so. This is where the new Christianity comes into effect.

The Standing Committee's report noted that some Protestant churches have influenced the decisions of a number of Aboriginal communities to prohibit the importation of alcohol, and also, that the Catholic Church generally prefers rationing alcohol. Neither prohibition nor rationing would be effective on Yarrabah. Because of its proximity to nearby towns, access to alcohol is a simple matter and prohibition would only increase the sly grog trade. If the Anglican Church *per se* had attempted to enforce a rule of sobriety, it is doubtful whether it would have met with success. However, the prohibition on drinking is being observed by Aboriginal representatives of the Church. Herein lies the difference. The very people who are observing the prohibition of alcohol today used to be alcohol abusers themselves. As part of the process of internalising their new Christian ideology, they constantly reiterate their renunciation of substance abuse. With these personal stories of salvation, they emphasize the marked contrast in their lives since their conversions. One man said that before he was a Christian he felt he was "a nothing". He felt that because he was a "half-caste" whites looked down on him, expecting him to be a "no-good drunken Aborigine", and so he acted the part. This self-fulfilling prophecy has had the same effect on others. A teenager who had previously been a heavy drinker, a marijuana smoker, and a petrol-sniffer until she converted, advised others:

If you want to get drunk, get drunk on the Holy Spirit, and get high on Jesus, in his love. No matter how bad we are, Jesus loves us very much.

One man who has recently been ordained, talked about his conversion three years earlier. His wife was already a committed Christian, but he was always drunk and

getting into fights, and scorned Christians. One night he picked up his wife's Bible and tore it apart, then he looked in the mirror and saw how ugly he'd become and went into his bedroom, got down on his knees and tried to pray. He saw a vision of Christ with his arms out and the wound in his side and felt ashamed of the life he was leading. At that point he thought of two avenues of change: one was to commit suicide, the other was to walk over to the church. He decided on the latter — "the longest mile he'd ever walked", but almost did not go in because he felt he was "too evil to go into church". Once inside, the other Christians welcomed him and he felt "a heavy load lifting from his shoulders".

Feelings of utter despair and lack of personal worth have resulted in extreme actions for many Yarrabah people. Drinking excessively is probably the most common result, suicide is another alternative (there have been several suicides or attempted suicides in recent years). For the man in the previous example, and many like him, religious conversion was another alternative. People who choose religious conversion as an alternative say that heavy drinking is a result of despair:

You feel bad about yourself as a person, so you drink. Only way out is to turn to Christ. All us men (Church people) were alcoholics or gamblers before we asked Christ to come into our lives.

Berger describes this phenomenon as the meaninglessness of anomy, in which the individual is "submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness" (Berger 1973:32). In the anomic state, life is unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it.

Once a new convert makes the first step s/he undergoes a private counseling session with one or more of the priests. This in itself has a cathartic effect. Pent-up emotion and repressed thoughts are brought to the surface of consciousness and purged. The negative emotions are believed to be demons which are exorcised during counseling. About one of these counseling sessions, a resident says:

They sat down and prayed for me. I felt three demons coming out of my head and heading for the window. The demons were hostility, anger, and hate.

Exorcism rites have recently (April 1987) been performed on the Yarrabah watchhouse which was believed to hold a demon responsible for several suicides. Both the watchhouse and the police offices were spiritually cleansed. Demons are sometimes exorcised from family homes. Evil spirits are also believed to linger about the place where a murder has been committed.

Repeated avowals of the change in people's lives since they gave up alcohol also have a cathartic effect. Written testimonies of people's conversions and faith appear in the local Christian newsletters, and are given orally at meetings or services. Sermons become homilies on the vices of alcohol, swearing, gambling or homosexuality (of which there is a fairly large component on Yarrabah). In the words of a Yarrabah priest at a Sunday church service:

We Christians have to get in amongst the people and open their hearts to the Lord. The yearning for grog has to be replaced by the

yearning for Jesus. God will work on them and replace this yearning. We have to go out and talk to them. Grog is a *gamon* (false) god. For one hour of evil pleasure you give up an eternity with Jesus.

Active church involvement is structured, organized, and occupies a major proportion of the individual's time. The new Christianity has put meaning back into the lives of those who have chosen this alternative. As well, it has provided a moral framework, helped solve social problems of substance abuse, and created a socially cohesive core group of Christians. Homilies from the pulpit advise people to forget about the past and think about the future, providing direction for future action.

The New Christianity and Social Mobility

Meetings with other Christians at off-Reserve townships, both near and far, widen networks for Yarrabah people and enable them to participate in many activities that otherwise would not be available. Church services for ordinations of new priests in other towns such as those on the Atherton Tablelands, and fellowships at places like Mossman, north of Cairns, have both Aborigines and whites attending. By travelling to places off the Reserve and meeting both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within the realm of the church, the Yarrabah Christians widen their experiential horizons. There is future-oriented planning, especially in rehabilitative and social needs. There already exists an alcohol rehabilitation centre, and there is talk amongst some of the women of a possible women's shelter, similar to the one on Palm Island.

Priests and deacons go on retreats, and attend services in other congregations. Many church conferences, seminars and workshops are open to them. All these different occasions open up avenues of experience which are closed to the non-active Christian at Yarrabah. Individuals gain self-esteem as they become more confident about speaking in public and in front of large numbers of people, both black, and white. The rectory on the Reserve acts as a busy meeting place both as a formal learning centre and an informal gathering place — further enforcing the solidarity among members.

In addition to extensive kinship networks already in existence at Yarrabah, the Christian community has classificatory kin in the "family of God". When the new Aboriginal missionary priests were leaving Yarrabah to begin their missions in other areas of Australia, Bishop John Lewis told them that, although they would miss their families and friends they would still be with the family — "Jesus' family". Other born-again Christians are referred to as brothers and sisters in God. There are also godparents, godchildren, and godsiblings (the latter are the children of ego's godparent) and some children have several godparents. Kinship connections between the original Aboriginal persons at Yarrabah who were key figures in the church in early mission times and today's descendants, are sometimes discussed and these ancestors are thought of as "looking down at their grandchildren furthering God's ministry". The James Noble Fellowship unites all Yarrabah Aboriginal priests and deacons under the early pioneer Aboriginal priest, James Noble, who preached to both Aboriginal and white congregations in various parts of Australia, and has many descendants on Yarrabah today.

Christian theology is used to rationalise possible adverse future events over which Aborigines have little or no control. One deacon said he thought the

government would eventually take over all but a small portion of Reserve land, but evaluated this depressing outcome as "it's only sod — what does it matter when we have all eternity to think about". Reinterpreting the past in the light of the present enables Yarrabah Christians to forgive though not to forget, past atrocities perpetrated on their ancestors, and to look forward to a future which will make them "equal in Christ". Acknowledging that "the white man brought them Christianity" gives them a rationale for the maltreatment of their forefathers. One man believes that people were brought to the mission in the early days so that Yarrabah could become a "real Christian community like it is now", sending people out to spread "the Word". He said that he used to ask himself why God would allow Aboriginal people to be so badly treated, but now sees it as God's plan to equip Aboriginal people to go out and minister to their own.

The assembling of off-Reserve bishops, priests and lay people at frequent services on Yarrabah is an affirmation of Christian solidarity and authority. The special services which attract visiting European Christians visually express the idea that black and white can interact freely through the medium of the Church, which ostensibly accepts black and white equally. This is not to say that such an ideal black and white relationship does exist, but Aborigines who are known to belong to the church, especially ordained priests and deacons, are looked upon by Europeans in a more favourable light than others, because of the fact that Yarrabah Christians do not imbibe alcohol.

It is only since 1975, for the first time in over 80 years, that people on Yarrabah have had the legal right to spend their money as they wished. It was not until 1978 that they were able to establish private enterprises. That year, two people opened a fish shop and a dry goods store (Craig 1979:82). Since then, several people have made attempts, some successfully, at entrepreneurial activities. At present, there is a bakery, fish shop, dry goods store, two video outlets (one managed by the Council, the other by a private businessman), a pie van, the beer canteen (owned by the Council), a concession stand, and a store. With the present policy in the North Queensland Diocese of encouraging Aborigines to join the ministry, theological and/or college training is waived and personal training from Bishop Arthur Malcolm and his wife, is acceptable. Training of people for ministry in the congregations of the Anglican Church has now become a practice in some dioceses (pers. comm. Bishop Lewis, 27/11/1985). Persons involved in entrepreneurial activities and faction leaders in the secular domain have become people of influence in the sacred (Church) domain. Several of the ordained priests and deacons either were, or still are, engaged in business activities on the Reserve.

Becoming a deacon does not bring in any direct economic benefits, but parish priests are on a stipend. The Home Ministry fund of the Church paid some money to Yarrabah up until 1985, when they became self-supporting. Then money for the parish had to come from donations from the parish congregation. Collection plates began to be passed around at Sunday services and some people gave very generously — \$20 and \$50 notes were collected. The economic sufficiency of the parish is in direct relation to the generosity of the members of the congregation. There are indirect benefits which accrue to persons who become involved in the church hierarchy. At least two priests moved into newer accommodation when they gave up alcohol and entered a program of rehabilitation and church training. Money is available for trips and seminars, travel costs are either subsidised or paid for, and,

as ordained priests are sent out to their own mission stations they receive the stipend paid to resident priests and, usually, accommodation. The church also offers status and prestige in a career which is more accessible to Aborigines than other positions in a white-dominated society.

The non-secular domain, that of the church, is the only way that an individual can attain any sort of hierarchical position in the community. Informal social control at Yarrabah is accomplished through gossip, ridicule, shame and, as a last resort, violence. These secular sanctions are imposed by members of the community on anyone showing superiority, or seen to be trying to be "above" the others. Priesthood however, demands respect because of its sacred dimension. It is above reproach, a necessary part of life, even for those who spurn it and jeer at its members. Thus, membership in the church hierarchy bestows a separateness from the egalitarianism which is enforced upon other, non-sacred, members of the community. "Signs" from God, principally in the form of visions, give sacred legitimacy to this hierarchy, and help maintain the faith of the born-again in the face of the derisive "pulling-down" ethos pervasive at Yarrabah. This interchange between the author (LH) and a born-again (BA) provides an example:

BA: When Aboriginal people want to get somewhere in the world, even their own people will pull them down.

LH: They don't do that with people going into the church?

BA: No, the church is different. But in the secular world, Aboriginal people pull their own people down. Aboriginal people, they community people. And they share their money and everything. Supposedly. And some people who want to advance, they get rubbished by their own community. But not in the church area. They can't do it because they're fighting against God, and not man. And who can fight against God? No one. So they don't do it.

The visions also serve to confirm the born-again's claim that Jesus has a personal interest in Yarrabah and a special purpose in mind for its people. The visions give credence to the entrance of Aborigines into what was previously a white domain: the church hierarchy. They also support the claim that, because of the Aboriginal people's simple faith in Jesus, they have been chosen to take the Word back to whites who have lost their link with God.

Summary

In summary, the visions, prophecies and revelations, the Aboriginal bishopry, and events leading up to them, have created a "new" Christianity at Yarrabah, which has resulted principally in:

- a focus on Yarrabah as a centre and training ground for Aboriginal missionaries
- a lessening of the social problems surrounding alcohol abuse
- an identity as Aboriginal Christians
- an increase in individual self-worth

- an avenue for future careers
- a change in life-style
- a medium for black and white equalization.

The church, with its definitive rules of behaviour and ideals, offers a stable base on which to rebuild the rehabilitated individual's life-style. With changing ideals of behaviour and no real guidelines from general community mores, and with the European society condemning (whether spoken or unspoken) the Aborigine as a hopeless alcoholic, the church's rules and mores offer something tangible to grasp on to and follow. Now that the Aborigines themselves are becoming church officials, these rules and mores are laid down by Aboriginal church leaders themselves. They no longer see a white person standing in front of them telling them about the Bible, but one of their own kind who has the undeniable authority and backing of a large institution; one whose language and socialization is their own, and yet who has the outward manifestations of a large and powerful institution.

The "new" Christianity has become a recipe for everyday living, as it advises, offers norms of behaviour, and regulates the day's and week's activities. It has been very successful in extricating heavy drinkers from despair and apathy. It is goal-oriented, re-unites families, and reduces wife-beating and child neglect. Christian ritual can incorporate all members of the community as participants, regardless of gender, age, kinship, or even "place". Being a Christian, one can form new networks of classificatory kin through the church, thus cutting across actual kinship groupings and extending to off-Reserve areas, as Yarrabah Christians meet other Aborigines at fellowships, conferences and meetings. It thus becomes a means of uniting Christian Aborigines nationally.

However, while the new Christianity has potential as a point of unification for Aborigines nationally, it can be a divisive factor within a community. The unconvinced and unconverted souls who make up the rest of the population at Yarrabah frequently mock the born-again. Some say they don't want to be Christians because "Jesus was a white man, and nothing to do with us"; to become born-again is to become too much like Europeans. This causes a moiety-like rift between two diametrically opposed views on how life should be lived: the born-again Christians on one hand, the unconverted on the other.

As more priests go out from Yarrabah to Aboriginal communities in other parts of Australia they will be extending a network of Aboriginal Christians — Aborigines preaching to other Aborigines who see the spiritual realm as being potentially open to them in spite of what happens to them in the secular realm. Christianity is a refuge from the social and political problems confronting them, a point of view summed up in one Yarrabah man's feelings:

They take more and more of our land, but if they squeeze us into a corner, I don't care, I still have my Lord.

This leads to an interesting question on a wider scale. Are Aborigines who enter the church hierarchy promoting the maintenance of white hegemony and thus becoming apolitical with regard to the broader Aboriginal issues (for example, land rights)? Or will they, in the future, become a powerful voice in their own right, wielding more political power for their own people, in the style of South Africa's Bishop Tutu, or the Melanesian "pastors in politics" in Vanuatu?

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