

Mission Not Accomplished

Christianity in the Kimberleys

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As the proselytising bonanza of missionary Christianity in the Kimberley region is now gradually abating, the initial fervour is giving way to the sobering realisation that the mission has remained largely unaccomplished. It is irrefutably evident that the Aborigines, despite much loving coaxing, have refused to become devout Christians in the missionary mould. Sharply contrasting with the presence of numerous mission stations spread throughout the region for many years,² and disproportionate to the time, effort and funds invested, the influence of Christian dogma remains slight. Quite obviously, Christianity has not succeeded in dislodging Aboriginal religion, not even in those places where a concerted, all-out effort had been made. In the places which were under missionary jurisdiction, all that has been achieved in the long run is that after a period in which Aboriginal religion was driven underground, it has resurfaced and there is now a resurgence of traditional and quasi-traditional forms of belief and ritual practices. All this bespeaks the unbroken vigour of the indigenous religious life, even though it has undergone some metamorphosis. And outside the direct ambit of mission influence, Christianity has always remained peripheral to the lives of the Aborigines. This is in keeping with the situation elsewhere, as some anthropologists have not failed to record (see e.g. Tonkinson 1974; Rose 1965:38). The sweeping generalisation to be made, simply is that missionary Christianity has succeeded neither in instilling in Aboriginal people a distinctly Christian view of human existence and morality, nor in gaining admittance to their social life to a noticeable degree.

Aborigines in this region typically have an arbitrary, almost whimsical understanding of some parts of Christian tenet, having absorbed some elements without inner coherence or profound conviction. Equivalences between Christian beliefs and traditional Aboriginal ones are established almost randomly, without eliciting much moral or philosophical commitment; that is to say, the point of the comparison is more to express awareness of Christian teaching than to relate to a religious system which is considered relevant. Basically, Christianity is seen as just another "Law", i.e. a complex system of beliefs, myth, ritual and moral conduct, like

any other of the numerous Aboriginal "Laws". The only difference is that Christianity has infinitely less appeal to the Aborigines than the autochthonous Law or Laws.

Among the equivalences established most often by Aborigines, is the one that equates the concept of the Dreaming as the creative period with the Christian idea of divine creation. In southern parts of the Kimberleys the term Djumanggani establishes that connection while in the northern Kimberleys it is the concept of Wandjina and Unggud.³

It is not unusual to encounter the notion among Aborigines that Christ, like any other indigenous mythical figure, has brought a Law from heaven which is now expounded by the missionaries. Christ's act, of such redemptive impact to the devout Christian, has to most Aborigines the same meaning as mythic beings of the Aboriginal theriomorphic pantheon, who have appeared coming from somewhere, introduced a more or less complex code of behaviour, customs and ritual, bestowed it on people, and then disappeared, retreating either to a distant place or to a location above or below the world's surface. In all cases the fundamental pattern is the same: appearance from either a chthonian or ethereal abode, or from a distant region, then a brief sojourn in the ethnocentre followed by withdrawal. As far as this fundamental pattern is concerned, there is nothing new or exceptional about Christ's existence. In fact, since his activities have occurred in distant Biblical lands, they are taken to have little relevance to the lives of Aborigines in Australia. For a Law in the Aboriginal sense is not necessarily valid universally or equally applicable everywhere. It has a primary relevance only to the place where it has been exemplified by its divine protagonist.

Of unclear provenance is the motif of a mythical deluge. Quite possibly it had existed in traditional Aboriginal mythology before the introduction of the corresponding Biblical one. In the southern Kimberleys, the Dreaming deluge is a prominent feature in the myth of the Blue-tongue Lizard Woman, Luma, who swam a considerable distance through rising flood waters before drowning near the settlement of Looma (see Kolig 1973/4). The same motif occurs in the myth of Noah's Ark which Aborigines say really landed in this region and not in Biblical lands (see Kolig 1980). In this case the flood motif is undoubtedly of Christian origin.

A striking high water mark which runs as a horizontal band of discolouration along the vertical cliff face on both sides of Geikie Gorge, was explained to me as the mark left behind by the mythical deluge which ushered in the end of the Dreaming and the beginning of the human sojourn on earth. This is consistent with the belief from the central Kimberleys that the Wandjina beings had entered the rock, thus leaving their images behind on the surface, when a flood occurred which ended the Dreaming. Others maintained it was a sign left by the Biblical flood. In the same vein a hillock was shown to me, not far from the little town of Fitzroy Crossing, where bulldozers apparently had laid open a layer of marine sediment. The place was strewn with fossilised coral and sea shells which some Aborigines took as evidence for the Biblical deluge and others as proof for the Dreaming flood. Apparently, it was left to individual discretion to interpret the evidence one way or the other and in fact, in the minds of some Aborigines, both had merged inseparably, one supporting and giving credibility to the other.

There is no rule without exception. In this case, the rule is that despite the phenomena just described, on the whole we find little interpenetration between Christianity and Aboriginal belief. The exception is the Aboriginal community of



1. *Geikie Gorge, 1972, showing the discolouration along the cliff, interpreted as left by Dreamtime deluge*



2. *Construction of Looma settlement, 1975/6. The boulders on the ridge above represent Luma's children*

Looma (formerly of Myroodah) where we find a larger degree of intermeshing between Christian and traditional Aboriginal ideas. In fact some elements of undubitably Christian provenance have become ideologically quite prominent in the lives of this highly traditionally oriented group. On first glance, this is rather surprising as the people have not been directly linked with a mission station. In fact, the community enjoys a high reputation as a centre of traditional lore, a stronghold of traditional religiosity and as one of the most important links in the religious exchange route which connects the West Australian coast with the interior of the continent (see Kolig 1981:120ff.). Notwithstanding their resounding success in keeping intact the traditional religion — and in so doing they have achieved prominence despite acute adversity that had impeded their efforts — the community also assimilated Christian elements to their world view and lore.

The historical reason is that some members of this community had contacts with wandering Protestant preachers many years ago. This seems to have left a lasting impression. A more recent stimulus has been the close kinship bond between some prominent community members and church elders of the United Aborigines Mission station at Fitzroy Crossing, some 200 km east of Looma. On the basis of this dual experience some leading elders of Looma developed a lively interest in fundamentalist Protestant tenet, or as they call it: the English Law, which they pedantically distinguished from Catholic Law. Catholicism, which they professed to detest, is relatively well known to them through intensive contacts with Aborigines of LaGrange, a Pallotine mission station about 200 km to the west on the so-called Eighty Mile Beach of Western Australia. It is for reasons basically as enigmatic as those for their enchantment with Protestantism, that Catholicism is loathed by the Looma people.

Certainly by far the most spectacular upshot of the community's bilateral ideological involvement, is the promulgation of an Aboriginal version of the mytheme of Noah's Ark which by now is well known throughout most of the southern part of the Kimberleys and beyond (see Kolig 1980; Petri and Petri-Odermann 1964, 1968, and this volume). Basically, the Aboriginal version claims that the Ark has landed in Australia, in a specific location at the edge of the Great Sandy Desert where it came to rest after the flood waters had subsided. The missionaries who taught the Aborigines that this event had taken place somewhere in the Old World, are suspected of fraud and deception. Theirs is not an honest mistake, but a deliberate attempt to conceal the truth from the Aborigines, for the presence of the Ark is thought to be of benefit to the knowledgeable. As the Ark obviously has found its way to Australia, divine providence has clearly singled Aborigines out as the true beneficiaries. The claims of the Whites to have a monopoly, as it were, on this divine vehicle have thus been unmasked as spurious. This has incited some theological speculation about the meaning of the Ark, the reason of the benevolent divine intent by which it had come to Australia, and the missionaries' attempt to conceal the truth.

Through the confluence over many years of several diverse pieces of information and speculation, the Ark is now believed to be laden with treasures of precious stone and metal. However, it is not crude avarice which makes the Ark important in the eyes of the Aborigines. Of much more significance than the real or imaginary wealth heaped up in the Ark is its redemptive potential, its numinous quality. Several chiliastic beliefs have become associated with it. They vary greatly and it is difficult

to say with certainty how many Aborigines believe in them and how deep their belief is. When Petri and Petri-Odermann wrote about quite distinct beliefs in the black Jesus-Jinimin, an apocalyptic deluge and a subsequent rescue through the Ark, they presented what was probably a rather extreme version. In the 1960s, according to their description, the Aborigines of LaGrange expected that they were going to survive the future deluge on board the Ark, while all Whites would be drowned. The skin of the surviving Aborigines would be washed white by magic rain and henceforth they would enjoy a millenium of bliss and affluence. Most probably such extravagant hopes were entertained only by a tiny minority and most others held rather more diffuse ideas about the Ark. Above all, neither in LaGrange nor anywhere else did these redemptive hopes coalesce into a social movement. Although one man was regarded as the "boss" and enjoyed some charismatic appeal as a consequence (customarily all sacred sites have a special custodian, a senior man who through descent or otherwise is linked with the place and holds the ritual expertise in trust for a group), he did not become a cult leader, nor did he ascend to the exalted position of an acclaimed prophet.

The cases of Looma and of LaGrange in the 1960s, and their colourful involvement with Christianity are as spectacular as they are unique in the Kimberleys. By and large, and despite some inroads Christianity has made into Aboriginal consciousness, the question remains: why has it failed to entrench itself thoroughly in the Aboriginal world view, ethics and way of life? And, one might add, why has it not incited, to a much greater extent, chiliastic activity in previous years, as it did elsewhere, notably in the Pacific and in particular in New Zealand?⁴ Christianity, despite the dedication and stamina which its proponents showed in the face of often enormous adversities, has not made the hoped for impact.

The Kimberleys do not stand alone in this respect. They seem rather to be representative of what has happened in much of the rest of Australia. The absence of absorption of the Christian tenet into the lives and consciousness of the majority of Aborigines, becomes particularly striking when the Kimberleys, or Australia in general,⁵ are compared with the effects of missionary activity elsewhere. The Pacific and Latin America especially come to mind, where, under conditions quite similar to those in Australia, Christian missions could operate unimpeded under the protective umbrella of colonialism and subsequently come to enjoy enormous success. In these countries Christianity has become not only the all-dominant creed, but also the officially accepted, all-pervading way of life, and a national rallying point. It is more than just a coincidence that both the very first Pacific nation to gain independence from colonial rule, Western Samoa, and the latest one, Vanuatu, make reference to Christianity in their state mottos.⁶

In the history of the ethnic encounter in the Kimberley region, organised missionary Christianity entered the scene fairly early, namely in the eighties and nineties of the last century. Protestantism and Catholicism arrived at approximately the same time, gaining an initial foothold at various spots.⁷ Some of these establishments attracted Aborigines who did not have any previous experience with Whites. In particular the Port George IV, Kalumburu and Balgo missions seem to have provided scenarios for the first encounter with Whites for sizeable numbers of Aborigines.

The contacts with missionaries were not altogether unpleasant, particularly when compared with the treatment Aborigines often suffered at the hands of

pastoralists and police. In the Fitzroy River area, for instance, in the 1970s many of the older Aborigines of desert extraction spoke with respect and a degree of nonchalant affection of the "bearded fathers" they had known on the Balgo mission station. The blankets and food rations doled out by the Pallotines to the new arrivals from the Western Desert were well remembered, as was the strictness and uncompromising suppression of Aboriginal lore and law. But the manifestations of benevolent despotism were then apparently taken by Aborigines as the inevitable state of affairs and those who did not like it were free to leave — which is more than could be said about the bond that tied Aborigines to many pastoral stations. The missionaries did have some initial success in converting Aborigines, in particular among those who had hitherto not had any experience with Whites. Many of those with such experience had grown cynical and distrustful of Whites in general and had as a consequence become impervious to any deliberate efforts by Whites to indoctrinate them.

To be sure, the missions protected their wards against the kind of atrocities and exploitation of a more blatant sort perpetrated on the Aborigines elsewhere. But the protective mantle of the missions was not spread around Aborigines so that they could go on living their traditional way of life undisturbed. Of course, they were shielded against physical brutalities, but there was a price to pay. Within the mission sanctuaries Aborigines became the stuff to which the Christian conversion zeal could apply itself with fervour and diligence. And in their own persistent way, the missionaries pursued their objectives no less relentlessly than the secular branches of western civilisation. As Burridge quite correctly points out (1973:6ff.), the missions must be given credit for having been more or less the only institution in Western society to see in Aborigines human beings worthy of spiritual uplifting. In this they certainly differed markedly from the prevalent attitude among settlers and politicians alike. But the missionary crusade had little aesthetic or intellectual appreciation of cultural distinctiveness. Being human made a creature the raw material for spiritual transformation, and not the object of cultural curiosity. The missionaries' conviction that they were the bearers of a vital message left little room for even the most superficial inquisitiveness about what appeared to them to be the fallacious ways of the heathens. That which made them different, their creed, their ways of life, were not to be studied and recorded, but were to be eliminated as epitomes of ignorance or, worse, abomination. The heathen ways had to be rooted out, their destruction being penance and salvation in one.

I remember well the charmingly naive and disarmingly direct manner in which Aboriginal children being educated in the dormitory of the United Aborigines Mission at Fitzroy Crossing, asked me whether I was a Christian or a sinner. When I, somewhat facetiously, replied that I fancied myself as neither, they were left in giggling bewilderment unable to accommodate my strangeness. They had been taught to view the world in the white and black contrast between true believers, i.e. those shaped in the mould of extreme Protestant fundamentalism, and those who were consigned to eternal damnation. This lack of any subtler nuances in assessing the world was symptomatic of the missionary approach up to that time, in which the crude racism of white settlers was replaced by an equally uncompromising division of humanity in terms of gnostic criteria. The hand of brotherhood extended to Aborigines had obviously exacted a price: the acceptance of the missionary world view with its rather limiting confines. Aborigines had the choice of either total

conformity with missionary teaching, and with whatever this involved and demanded, or being branded worthless sinners.

By not too subtle means Aborigines were to be liberated from the burden of their sinful and wrongful traditional culture. From the beginning it was brought home to them by the missionaries of both basic persuasions that there was an unbridgeable chasm between their traditional heathen beliefs and Christianity. In fact, the concept of heathenism and sinfulness was extended by most missionaries not only to forms of religious beliefs and practice, but to social domains as well. Traditional social patterns were equally wrong and contemptible and, if Christianity were truly to be embraced, had to be abandoned. This view was not inconsistent with the manner in which Aborigines themselves traditionally viewed the matter: all social patterns were permeated by religious meaning and religious aspects could hardly be divorced from social life.

Some missionaries, however, held with the view (and some still did in the 1970s) that Aborigines traditionally have no religion — or to put it in the form of a paradox: Aboriginal religion in their view did not qualify to be truly called a religion. The failing of Aboriginal society was that it had not developed a true religion, and Aborigines therefore were in urgent need of proper instruction. For those missionaries, Christianity's failure to convert the Aborigines *en masse* must be all the more galling, as it apparently did not even manage to fill a void.

Attempts to stamp out heathen practices — traditional ritual as much as connubial arrangements which were seen by missionaries as scarcely better than fornication — ranged from frowning upon them to more active measures of suppression. As a consequence, Aboriginal traditions regulating social and ritual life and beliefs were forced underground on the mission stations and in many cases carried on clandestinely in the form of a "counter-culture". Most Aborigines living on mission stations sooner or later compromised by outwardly conforming to the standards set down by the missionaries, while privately holding on to their traditions. Only a minority made an all-out effort to discard the old ways in order to wholeheartedly accept the new way of life as prescribed by mission teaching.

In theory at least the missionaries had erected an insurmountable barrier between Christian and traditional Aboriginal forms of existence. A strict compartmentalisation made impossible a diffusion of ideas, ritual modes, concepts and social patterns from one side to the other. Aborigines either remained entrapped in their heathen ways or they had to become, as missionaries insisted they do, unreservedly Christian. Needless to say, few Aborigines had the inclination to do so. Those who did, placed themselves immediately outside the traditional way of life and in opposition to their fellows, an act which by and large entailed the severance of old and comforting social ties.

If it had not been for the missionaries' intransigence and their insistence that Aboriginal belief and lore were totally incompatible with Christianity, a harmony between both sides could have been established relatively easily. Aborigines could have found in Christianity much which intuitively had appeared familiar. The Aboriginal concept of the Law, for instance, is extensible almost ad infinitum. That is to say, Christianity, as any other religion, is to Aborigines just another body of ritual, moral and social prescriptions handed down by divine and mythic exemplars. Of course, in detail and substance Christian and Aboriginal ethical imperatives, taboos, ritual modes and social obligations differ; but in principle Christianity

constitutes a Law by the same right as does the Law of the Wadi Gudjara or that of Ngamandjimandji. And as in the remote mythical Dreaming superhuman heroes had roamed the land performing miraculous deeds and instituting beliefs and social patterns, so had Abraham, Jacob, Jesus and other figures of the missionary Law. Like the Dreaming characters, the Biblical heroes eventually had died and either had gone up to their celestial abode or retreated underground, as the devil is believed to have done. When couched in the appropriate language, these ideas have a familiar ring to Aborigines and those of them who have some rudimentary insight into Christianity have remarked time and again how similar to their beliefs it appears to them in many respects. But why should it insist that its esoteric secrets, rituals and imperatives are superior and must be obeyed to the exclusion of everything else? No Aboriginal Law is totally incompatible with other Laws and several can be gainfully adhered to by the believer.

Even the preoccupation of fundamentalist Protestantism with the theme of human sinfulness, could have been accommodated without too much difficulty in the traditional Aboriginal philosophy. Lommel says that traditionally Aborigines had no concept of good and evil (1969:53) and certainly this moral polarity was not as pronounced as in Christianity. But the imperative to act in accordance with certain precepts and sacred norms was certainly a strong one, while contravening them was considered both ethically wrong and punishable. Basically, the concept of sin draws on the arbitrary classification of behaviour as right or wrong and on the notion of a contravention of a strong taboo. As in Aboriginal lore breach of a rule, or taboo, will attract punishment or sanction by either physical force or supernatural intervention, so too will sinful behaviour. The modes of behaviour to which missionaries apply the concept of sin differ to some degree from traditional Aboriginal forms of wrongdoing, but the basic idea could have been appreciated by Aborigines without the need for major adaptation. While on first sight it may appear absurd that little children in the United Aborigines Mission dormitory should have been taught that climbing a tree on Sunday or running around naked is sinful, on second thought such prescriptions are no more arbitrary than the Aboriginal social rule that a man may not address his wife's mother.

So it seems that while there would have been ample opportunity for Aborigines to assimilate Christianity in their cognitive, moral and pragmatic horizon and vice versa, Christianity unrelentingly insisted on complete purity. The missionaries' tolerance *vis-à-vis* traditional Aboriginal law and lore was taken over by Aboriginal converts who in their fervour to do away with any vestige of heathenism and thus to vindicate themselves, carried their conversion to the extreme. Christianised Aborigines not only forswore drinking, gambling, swearing, chewing tobacco (at least where Protestant fundamentalism was the dominant brand of influence), but also tried to eradicate all traces of traditional lore and belief: marital laws were changed to ensure monogamy; selection of marriage partners according to traditional rules was outlawed; traditional rules of sharing and reciprocity were branded communist; and the whole religious structure was dismantled. Sacred objects, the most treasured possession of old, were either abandoned, left to rot, burnt, or where Aborigines had a commercial sense, were flogged off to White collectors for a pittance. However, where this occurred in the Fitzroy River region, some forty or more years ago, the trend was soon reversed and most of these erstwhile Christians have either returned to the fold of a more traditional form of life, or embraced an agnostic philosophy.

Ideologically there was no effort to achieve a compromise between Aboriginal law and lore and Christianity. On a personal level tensions often ran high. It was made impossible for Aborigines to be both Christians and traditionalists. The newly converted despised the heathens, and these in turn, probably in reaction to Christian intolerance, then barred the converts from participating in their religious law. In some places the division was so strict that participation in church services entailed automatic exclusion from traditional ritual and *vice versa*. Consequently, Christian adolescents, not having been inducted into the traditional initiation system, faced the debilitating disadvantage of being outcasts in their own society. Mutual dislike and distrust were souring relationships even among close relatives. Occasionally, Christians were subjected to harassments such as death magic, occurrences to which hospital and Native Welfare files attest. Only in recent years is there a noticeable detente and, as a consequence, the compartmentalisation has mellowed considerably. This is probably so because the traditionalists have recognised that Christianity is considerably less of a danger to the perpetuation of their beliefs and religious practices than they had previously assumed. The inroads made by western secular culture are much more severe. And likewise, the Christians' purism has markedly declined, and they are rediscovering their interest in Aboriginality, taking more pride in what they see as their cultural heritage, including myth and ritual. A rapprochement seems possible now on the basis of a shared identity as Aborigines.

But to go back to the beginnings again. Through lack of fusion and penetration of ideas across religious boundaries, Aborigines initially were faced with the alternative of either completely rejecting Christianity, or embracing it unreservedly and in so doing having to renounce their indigenous cultural traditions. To do the latter was neither practically possible nor desirable. And above all — and this is probably the crux of the whole matter — there was no real incentive for such a radical move.

Before I turn to this point, there is yet another side to the problem. One might argue that Aborigines were too conservative, too much steeped in their traditional world view, to have the slightest interest in alternative beliefs and ways of life. Even though this view appears to be fairly widespread, it really begs the question. Cultural conservatism is not an explanation; it is only an excuse. After all, many Aborigines were not too conservative to seek new luxuries on pastoral and mission stations. They came in droves, spurred by curiosity and the desire for the commodities the Whites had to offer. Why had Christianity less attraction for them than material goods? I think this is explicable through an examination of fundamental differences between missionary teachings and Aboriginal religion. By insisting on purity of the Christian dogma, missionaries thwarted any possibility for Aborigines to creatively modify and assimilate Christianity to their spiritual, intellectual and pragmatic needs, and so bring it in line with the expectations they had of religious exercise.

No matter when the missionaries appeared on the scene, their teaching and way of life always appeared to be totally different from other manifestations of western civilisation as exemplified by settlers, graziers, police and others. In political, social and ideological respects, the behaviour and life patterns of White settlers and of missionaries differed so markedly even on superficial observation that Aborigines saw little in terms of a common cultural denominator. Consequently, Aborigines came to distinguish terminologically and conceptually between so-called Whitefeller Law, which pertains to western civilisation generally, and the Law of the missionaries

as it is called.⁸ While the former Law became unanimously recognised by Aborigines as being of great importance to their lives — no matter whether this was grudgingly, resentfully conceded or not — the latter is seen as being of minimal relevance other than on mission stations where missionary jurisdiction officially prevails, though this does not necessarily always penetrate into camp life.

Missionaries appeared to form a minority who — and this underscored their peculiar difference — were often antagonistic to, and derided by, other Whites. Aborigines could observe that although they were the law on mission stations, missionaries had little authority and respect outside these areas. It was not too difficult for them to discern a certain perverse oddity about the missionaries: although White, they did not partake in the usual activities of White society, but rather seemed to constitute a curious offshoot, of little power and consequence among their fellows.

The specialisation that accrues in a society which separates religious from secular enterprises, was not understood by Aborigines who traditionally perceive a full interpenetration and inseparability of both realms. For this reason, Aborigines were bound to misconstrue the missionaries' presence in their midst. That some people could make religion their sole function in life, and what is more, that others then could deride this specialisation, and deride with it their own religious beliefs, must have been utterly incomprehensible to Aborigines. By failing to understand the essentially specialised nature of the missionary presence, Aborigines compared settlers and missionaries on equal terms as two separate forms of Whites, of which one was seen as "normal" for white society, while the other, the missionaries, appeared strangely deviant.

Above all, the crux of Christianity's failure was that missionarydom could not be identified with the might of the Whites *per se*. Not only did missionaries seem different from other Whites but, even worse, they appeared to have a deficient status among their fellows. Their power obviously was rather limited. Unlike in Melanesia and some other parts of the Pacific where missionaries often represented the political authority and performed administrative functions, those in the Kimberleys could not conceal the fact that government and powerful western institutions were of quite a different order. Thus, although missions often operated with governmental blessing and subsisted on governmental subsidies, a clear and easily discernible difference existed between them and the source of power in White society generally. In contrast to Melanesia and Polynesia where converts could identify to some degree with the dominant White power and hope to internalise it for their own benefit, conversion in the Kimberleys meant accepting commitment to a small ideological and social enclave of little importance in the rest of White society. Missionarydom in the Kimberleys did not appear to offer a viable avenue to power, or the possibility to assimilate oneself to the status of the Whites in general. The fact that Christian missions in some parts of the world were able, by design or accident, to project this image and establish an association between themselves and the secular might of the colonialising state, was probably the most salient factor for their success.⁹

It seems abundantly clear that Aborigines primarily had material expectations. This was their foremost reason for seeking the proximity of Whites: settlers or missionaries, both were basically seen as sources for certain desirable goods. A few thorough studies speak an unambiguous language as to what Aborigines expected from the missionaries. While the missionaries' stern dictum to the Aborigines may

often have been “no work — no food” (McKenzie 1969:26), the Aborigines seem to have reversed this to: “no tobacco — no halleluja” (Durack 1969:52). Aborigines were obviously more interested in the food and goods which could be had on the mission stations, than in the gospel. Acceptance of the gospel, superficial as it was, was the means of obtaining food. And taking up the jargon of the missionaries, Aborigines may have voiced their true concern when they were wondering aloud: “how much food will there be in heaven?” (J. and L. Haviland 1980:132). The only thing which might have convinced them of the advantages of embracing the new creed sincerely would have been an obvious demonstration that it could secure material success; but it was precisely here that it was sorely lacking. The missionaries themselves and their understaffed and underfunded establishments were living proof that this “Law” did not lead to visible success. Within their own society, the missionaries were a breed poor in power and personal wealth. To Aborigines they constituted a momentarily convenient avenue for satisfying a few needs, but not a model to emulate in the long run. They failed to convince Aborigines that they had the means and methods to control access to power and the flow of goods. Their power base seemed too obviously deficient. To the Aborigines, meaning and purpose of religion have always been bound up with practical considerations. Now, however, a religion was being proffered that seemed almost anathema to practical success.

My argument, on the surface, seems to conform to the view that religion is informed by practical concern and that it pursues the power to solve real problems in real life: food, security, control over nature, resources and empirical events (see e.g. Weber 1963:1ff.). As Hans Mol (1976:181) has pointed out with some justification, however, this materialist interpretation arises out of the common western bias of pragmatism and achievement orientation; it is no more than a reflection of our modern preoccupation. Religion in actual fact, he argues, is concerned solely with such non-pragmatic matters as delivering identity, systems of meaning and interpretations of human existence. I think this view too, if applied too rigidly, springs from a common western bias insofar as it seems based on the western specialisation of cognitive fields, in which the search for meaning has remained a religious concern while concerns of a more pragmatic nature have been surrendered to another type of cognitive enterprise. To put it in other words, Christianity, being unable to sustain credibly its previous pragmatic claims in the face of the dominance of the scientific world view gave up some of its traditional concerns to rival cognitive enterprises. Any religion that claims in western society to be able to solve practical problems in the real world will soon find itself the target of mockery and derision as magical mumbo-jumbo; and in order to retain some credibility, will have to renounce pragmatic claims. However, comparative studies of religion show that both sides usually form integral parts of the religious experience. Theories of religion that respectively emphasise either “identity function” or “action programme” at the expense of the other, derive from a superimposition of our present cognitive specialisation into metaphysical thought and technology. Less compartmentalised world views and religions are characterised by the fact that, even though empirically based wisdom and practical experience are the dominant factors in trying to solve practical problems, symbolic or metaphysically oriented thought is not divorced from practical concerns.

As Eliade (1968:23, 117) maintains, religion is meant to give a superior view of reality, to prove a revelatory truth of the "pre-eminently real". This view emphasises the tight connection that exists between practical reality, the everyday life world, and meaning, the construction placed on it by religion. There is no separation between the religious exercise and thought, and the sphere of real life. One interpenetrates and supports the other. This, I think, is very clearly revealed in Aboriginal religion. The sole thrust of it lies in the tight combination of metaphysical meaning and practical real life concerns. The practical solutions sought by religious means are answers to the perceived meaning mediated by the religious system. The meaning of (Aboriginal) human existence is perceived to be inextricably bound up with the fulfilment of pragmatic functions such as on the most basic level, procreation and meeting basic needs, creature fertility and, on a higher plane, the continuation of social and cosmic order. Cosmological, speculative meaning developed in the absence of avenues for implementing it in real life, would at least be extremely frustrating and at worst appear totally nonsensical.

Christianity offers practical avenues only in rather rudimentary form. Reducing dogmatic intricacies and denominational differences to bare essentials, it may be said that the Christian message is centred on the irreconcilable difference between what is and what ought to be: the real and the ideal. Through moral imperfection humanity suffers. Since the fall from grace humankind is condemned eternally to try to extricate itself from the quagmire of imperfection, to combat evil and to strive to religiously follow divine imperatives. But even by behaving in accord with God's command, we are, by inbuilt default of the human condition, unable to redeem ourselves in this world. So while Christianity holds out a form of improvement through redemption, it will not come in this life.

The Christian message of suffering, imperfection and possible improvement as such, would perhaps not have been entirely lost on Aborigines; at least in the contact situation. Traditionally, Aborigines might not have conceived of a Kantian-type discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be". Real life was seen by them as normally in accord with mythically mediated precepts, through which reality comes as close as possible to the sacred example of the Dreaming. (When this was not the case in detail, remedial sorcery was applied to rectify the situation.) But in the aftermath of the impact of western civilisation they learnt the meaning of a different kind of suffering. The need for change was brought well within the ambit of their imagination. But while the desirability of narrowing, or obviating, the gap between "what is" and "what ought to be" was clearly perceived by Aborigines, they failed to see that this discrepancy, as Christianity claimed, should be an intrinsic, inescapable quality of human existence, which could not be remedied in this life. If life is imperfect and humanity suffers as a consequence, then religion ought to show the way of remedy here and now. If humanity is in need of redemption, then why delay? A religion and the way of life it preaches, which abrogate the desire and ability to improve and perfect human existence in this world, are acutely lacking in power, knowledge, ritual means and good will. Christianity's "pie in the sky", its openly preached discrepancy and delay between promise and fulfilment, must have seemed to Aborigines to be fairly pointless. Had they been exposed to Marxist indoctrination, they might easily have come to see this kind of Christianity as no more than the proverbial "opium for the masses", held out to them to make them acquiesce in their miserable lot in this world.

Even to the extent that the prospect of a spiritually blissful afterlife was occasionally understood by some Aborigines to mean material affluence in heaven, it did not seem attractive to most. Characteristically, I found some Aboriginal lay preachers in the early seventies, conducting church services much like a ritual session: the exhibition of the Bible and of colourful pictures with Biblical scenes that replaced traditional sacred objects, where hymns were sung instead of traditional chants. In their sermons they often stressed the joys and good things that would be waiting for the faithful in heaven while the heathens and sinners would remain empty, joyless, poor and hungry. But even by painting the afterlife as a dreamworld of opulence and luxury, this message of delayed gratification still seemed to hold little attraction. Not even such a distinctly materialist twist to the redemptive philosophy could entice a majority of Aborigines.

By their insistence on the purity of Christian tenet whose message was not to be adulterated by adaptive alterations, the missionaries prevented its adjustment to the Aboriginal horizon of expectations. Had alterations been allowed, Aborigines may well have come to interpret Christianity in a sense which was congenial to their intellectual needs, and fulfilled their expectations of a religion. Defeatist dogma may have been turned into materialist optimism. For Aborigines did not so much reject Christianity because of a logical incompatibility of Christian belief elements with their traditional world view, but because of what might be called — paraphrasing Max Weber — a “negative elective affinity”: a perceived lack of relevance of the offered belief to the needs and conditions of real life.



3. Mowanjum Church, 1972 (near Derby). Walls adorned with Wandjina style paintings (see Note 3)

Notes

- 1 This paper is based on 13 years of research (intermittently from 1970 to 1982) in the southern Kimberley region. Parts of the research were carried out with the financial help of the AIAS. I was able to visit most mission establishments in the Kimberleys while I was with the AAPA. I should like to state here that even though my assessment of missionary activity may appear critical, it is not my intention to denigrate the individual efforts of missionaries whose stamina and courage I have come to admire. In particular, my work has benefited from the assistance of the United Aborigines Mission and the Australian Inland Mission at Fitzroy Crossing. Equally, during short visits to the relevant mission stations I have enjoyed the unstinting hospitality of the Pallotine order. I have also met with ready cooperation by Mowanjum authorities. To all of them my thanks.
- 2 There was the Sunday Island Mission, Port George V Mission (later Kunmunya and the Mowanjum), Lombadina, Beagle Bay, Kalumburu (formerly Drysdale River), Forrest River Mission, LaGrange, mission stations at Balgo Hills and Fitzroy Crossing; several churches, convents and dormitories in the townships of Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Kununurra. Some have been founded late last century, others somewhat after — and some have meanwhile disappeared.
- 3 Visual expression was given to this linkage, for instance, by adorning the walls of the church building on Mowanjum mission, near Derby, with Wandjina style paintings.
- 4 Several of the chiliastic movements among the Maori in the 19th century and early 20th century were distinctly modelled on Christian belief elements. See, for instance, Elsmore 1985.
- 5 If the existing ethnographic literature is any indicator, only parts of Arnhem Land seem to be an exception, as in recent years a fundamentalist revivalism is spreading. (Cf. various papers by R. Bos 1981, 1982 and 1983.)
In the past, Christianity seems to have taken hold among the Bandjalang resulting in some faintly chiliastic belief forms (see Calley 1964), and to some extent it seems to have played a role in the "Adjustment Movement" on Elcho Island (see R. Berndt 1962). Arguably also, the well-known All-Father figure among south-eastern Aborigines may be of Christian provenance (see Kolig 1987:256). Not to forget of course the phenomena described by the Petris.
- 6 The motto of state for Western Samoa, the first Pacific island nation to gain independence in 1962, is: "Western Samoa is founded on God". The most recent one to become independent, Vanuatu, whose Prime Minister Walter Lini is himself an ordained Anglican minister, is also an emphatically Christian nation whose motto is: "Long God yumi stanap" (With God we stand).
- 7 Beagle Bay mission was founded in 1889, Lombadina in 1892, Sunday Island mission in 1899, Forrest River in 1897, Port George V mission in 1912, Balgo (formerly Rockhole Station) in 1939, the United Aboriginal Mission at Fitzroy Crossing in 1952 and, finally, LaGrange in 1955.
- 8 This conforms to the custom Tonkinson (1974:118f.) records for Jigalong.
- 9 Latin America is perhaps the best example of a total identification between the power of the colonialist state and the church. In Melanesia, too, missions succeeded in presenting an image of being closely linked with the colonial power (see e.g. Guiart 1962). In Polynesia such impressive examples as Tonga come to mind, where a Methodist missionary drew up the state's constitution.

A somewhat special case obtained in some parts of Polynesia including Maori New Zealand. As Parsonson (1984) has argued, the colonial encounter with Polynesians was characterised by their early wish to acquire literacy as a means of obtaining equal power

with Europeans. The only vehicle by which literacy could be had was missionary teaching. The two sides, literacy and Christianity, being inseparable, Polynesians thus readily absorbed both.

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