

Prolegomena to the History of Indigenous Australian Prophetic Consciousness

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Introduction

There is not a single book, chapter or even article devoted to the subject of indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness. This lacuna must be considered in the light of the indisputable presence of indigenous Australian Christianity.¹ Simply stated, if there is such a Christianity and if Christianity in general is a prophetic religion *par excellence*, then it is reasonable to explore the possibility of identifying a prophetic consciousness in postcolonial indigenous Australian religions. If the hypothesis that there is an indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness proves sustainable, the next step is to assess how tightly or loosely this prophetic consciousness is connected to Christianity. Any study of indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness needs preliminarily to address three questions: firstly, is such a prophetic consciousness a plausible subject of study? Secondly, are there objections to such a study? Thirdly, if such a study were to be undertaken, how would it be circumscribed?

For and Against Indigenous Australian Prophetic Consciousness

With regard to the first question, as to the plausibility of this study, it is possible to answer affirmatively for a number of reasons. The term

¹ I have pursued this idea on a number of occasions: briefly, in ‘Australia, a Land of New Prophets’, *God & Religion* 6, 1999, 162 (in Greek); in the more substantial ‘Terra Nullius? Indigenous Australians Reply: This Land is Sacred!’, *God & Religion* 8, 2000, 70-75 (in Greek); in ‘Introduction to the Study of Aboriginal Prophetic Consciousness’ delivered at the Postgraduate Research Seminars of the Department of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney, 2002; again, in ‘Indigenous Australian Literature and the Question of Prophecy’ at the 2003 series of the abovementioned seminars; and finally, in my *Prophecy Dreamings: Hermeneutic Approaches to Some Instances of Indigenous Syncretism in Post/Colonial Australia* (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2006).

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'prophecy' has been insightfully applied to a wide range of cross-cultural religious phenomena and in this respect has been broadened conceptually to account for various aspects of indigenous religions worldwide. The vital role of prophecy has been well-documented in the wider context of the religions of Oceania, where prophecy has been specifically associated with phenomena such as revivalism/revitalisation, nativism and millenar(ian)ism.² These phenomena are hardly unknown in postcolonial indigenous Australia. The encounter between indigeneity and Christianity in postcolonial Australia can be regarded as a likely matrix for the emergence of indigenous Australian prophecy. Indeed, intriguing instances of apocalypticism and prediction have been recorded by ethnographers and anthropologists. The impact of charismatic Christianity on certain indigenous Australian peoples is likely to have generated prophetic phenomena, and terms related to prophecy have indeed been used in the literature on indigenous Australian religions. Finally, the very function of prophecy from a social sciences perspective suggests the possibility of its emergence in postcolonial indigenous Australian religiosity.

An affirmative answer with regard to the second question, concerning the objections to such a study, is however also possible, again for a number of reasons. The literature has explicitly or implicitly denied indigenous Australian religions any sort of prophetic manifestations, the very fundamentals of indigenous Australian religiosity being held to exclude both the possibility of prophecy and the possibility of its appropriation. It could be maintained, moreover, that Christianity has itself ceased being actively prophetic and so there is no reason to assume that it could generate such a consciousness in indigenous Australian religions. Lastly, if it is true that radical innovations in indigenous Australian religious life-forms have proven to be short-lived, it would seem that, even if an indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness could be sustained, it would be of little social or historical significance.

² See G W Trompf, *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, (Berlin, 1990).

A Further Qualitative Perspective

Before turning to the third question concerning the nature of the study – which constitutes the core of the present investigation – it should be noted that, in quantitative terms, the indications to support the thesis of an indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness are far greater than those which oppose it. It is necessary to consider these indications further, to assess the matter from a qualitative perspective. Only thus will it be evident whether indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness can be upheld as a scientific topic of study.

To begin with, prophecy is no longer regarded as an exclusively Israelite religious phenomenon; is it not confined to Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions. On the contrary, it has been used to define and describe a number of religious phenomena in the Mediterranean (for example, ancient Greek oracles) and the Middle East (such as the Mari oracle-givers in Mesopotamia and the Zoroastrian prophetic tradition). The term ‘prophecy’ has been applied to a wide variety of indigenous cultures with different degrees of explanatory efficacy.³ Prophecy is also not restricted to ‘monotheistic’⁴ religiosity; its descriptive-explanatory potential can be tested in cases of indigenous religions.⁵ It is therefore legitimate to hypothesise its presence in postcolonial indigenous Australian religions.

³ G T Sheppard and W E Herbrechtsmeier, ‘Prophecy’ in L Jones (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 2005) 7423-7429.

⁴ For a critical approach to the conceptualisation of the term ‘monotheism’ in studies in religion, see my ‘Monotheism and Ideological Deadlocks’, *God & Religion* 2 (1999) 148-153.

⁵ This is the result of anthropological approaches to a variety of prophetic figures: ‘prophet’, ‘shaman’, ‘witch’, ‘medium’, ‘sorcerer’, ‘diviner’, ‘priest’ and ‘mystic’: D E Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Michigan, 1983) 20. Referring to the sociological and anthropological studies of contemporary oracle-givers, R R Wilson notes the following: ‘these specialists form a highly diverse group that includes various types of mediums, diviners, priests, and shamans, but *like the biblical prophets* they all see themselves as intermediaries between the human and the divine worlds. In spite of obvious differences, these figures often exhibit similar behavioral characteristics and interact with their societies in much the same way’. R R Wilson, ‘Biblical Prophecy’ in Jones, *op cit*, 7430; my emphasis.

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The descriptive-typological use of ‘prophecy’ has a conceptual parallel. As a *religionswissenschaftliche* category, ‘prophecy’ is capable of covering diverse situations. For instance, there is no need to conceptualise the ‘prophet’ as an agent who conforms to a specific set of characteristics. On the contrary, prophetic agency can be seen in different activities, related by the experiences they produce in individuals, communities or movements. This of course constitutes a broader understanding of ‘prophecy’, far beyond the image with which we are familiar in the prophetic figures of the Old Testament. The element of authority must be retained, even if without its Weberian nuances; so too, the stabilising and the innovative activity of the religious intermediary.⁶ Such activity can be found in many aspects of postcolonial indigenous Australian religiosity.

A remarkable variety of prophetic phenomena from the highly differentiated region of Oceania has been observed, described and interpreted by scholars.⁷ While one must bear in mind that ‘the traditions of the Pacific islands and Australia are quite distinct’,⁸ in modern times an interrelation between these two geographical blocks results from the Western construction of Oceania’s integrity.⁹ It seems entirely warranted to explore the possibility that the Pacific prophetic phenomena, from Melanesia for example, may have counterparts in postcolonial indigenous Australia.¹⁰

⁶ These two types of activity correspond to what I M Lewis has called ‘central intermediary’ and ‘peripheral intermediary’, respectively. I M Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, 1971); see also Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, *op cit*, 7425.

⁷ T Swain and G Trompf, *The Religions of Oceania* (London and New York, 1995) 146, 170, 175-177, 179 and 186.

⁸ *Ibid*, 1.

⁹ ‘Oceania does emerge as a socio-political reality in recent centuries. This in turn has reshaped the identity of the original inhabitants of this region, so that today there is indeed much substance to the notion of religions of Oceania as a whole, for example in the form of Pacific Black liberation theologies’: *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁰ Something similar can be shown with regard to ‘cargoism’ in Melanesia, South-Eastern and Northern Australia – even though the meaning of ‘cargo cults’ needs to be recast. See T Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards A History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge, 1993) 142 and 165.

A number of cross-cultural approaches to indigenous prophecy have been articulated in relation to phenomena characterised by the social sciences as revivalism/revitalisation, nativism and millenar(ian)ism.¹¹ These terms have been applied again and again by scholars of indigenous Australian religions.¹² The encounter between indigenous cultures and Christianity is known to have generated various degrees and forms of syncretism,¹³ extending from passive acceptance and selective adaptation to resistance and opposition. In either case, syncretism has the potential to infuse or cause prophetic consciousness in indigenous religions. The study of syncretism in relation to indigenous Australian religiosity has increasingly come to the fore¹⁴ in the last two decades. This reinforces the hypothesis that a prophetic consciousness within postcolonial indigenous Australian religions is not out of the question.

The typology of apocalypticism constitutes one of the most typical examples of prophetic consciousness.¹⁵ Apocalypticism was the natural successor to Israelite prophecy,¹⁶ greatly affecting the eschatology of early Christianity.¹⁷ This term has proved extremely helpful in the histor(iograph)ical reconstruction of postcolonial

¹¹ See for example Y Talmon, 'Millenarism' in D L Sills (ed) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968) 10, 349-362; and A F C Wallace, 'Nativism and Revivalism' in Sills, *op cit*, 11, 75-80.

¹² See for example H Petri and G Petri-Odermann, 'Nativismus und Millenarismus im gegenwärtigen Australien' in *Festschrift für Ad E Jensen* (München, 1964) 461-466; M Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Ithaca, 1973) 179-185; Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 134-136 and 247-252.

¹³ A Kuper and J Kuper (eds) *The Social Sciences Encyclopedia* (London and New York, 1999) 862.

¹⁴ T Swain, *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: A Bibliographical Survey* (New York, 1991) 41-43; F Magowan, 'Syncretism or Synchronicity? Remapping the Yolngu Feel of Place', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12:3, 2001, 275-290.

¹⁵ R Meyer, 'Prophecy and Prophets in the Judaism of the Hellenistic-Roman Period' in G Friedrich (ed) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Michigan, 1968) VI, 827-828.

¹⁶ Aune, *op cit*, 103-121.

¹⁷ For a critical appraisal of the relationship between apocalypticism and early Christian eschatology, see my *The 'Kingdom of God' As Utopia: The Genesis, Development and Typology of Political Eschatology in Early Christianity* (PhD Thesis, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, 2005 [in Greek]).

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indigenous Australian religious life.¹⁸ Indigenous Australian apocalypticism has been documented along with instances of unmistakable prophetic phenomena.

Cases of indigenous Australian prophesying have been recorded in ethnographic accounts dating back to the eighteenth century,¹⁹ which provide the most explicit references to support a general theoretical exploration of prophetic consciousness in postcolonial indigenous Australian religions. The accounts seem to belong to the prediction type of prophecy, though do not exclude a more comprehensive view of indigenous Australian prophecy. On the contrary, the fact that they are related to the traditionally multi-faceted function of the 'clever-man' suggests that, as a prophet, this figure is more than merely a foreteller.

Another set of references for the study of indigenous Australian prophecy is to be found in the literature concerning the impact of certain Christian denominations on indigenous religiosity. Pentecostalism, a profoundly prophetic interpretation/performance of Christianity,²⁰ is known to have generated a number of prophecy-oriented indigenous phenomena throughout the world. It would be reasonable to expect something analogous in the case of indigenous Australian Pentecostalism. In fact this has been verified,²¹ though studies of indigenous Australian Pentecostalism remain extremely limited.

Of particular interest here is the fact that the term 'prophecy' and its derivatives have been employed in the indigenous Australian

¹⁸ Most notably in Swain, *A Place for Strangers*.

¹⁹ For example, *ibid*, 134-139.

²⁰ H Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, 1996) 81-138; *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1983) 1253-1254.

²¹ For example M J C Calley, *Aboriginal Pentecostalism: A Study of Changes in Religion* (North Coast, 1955), and 'Pentecostalism among the Bandjalang' in M Reay (ed) *Aborigines Now: New Perspectives in the Study of Aboriginal Communities* (Sydney, 1964).

religions literature, in the writing of H Petri and G Petri-Odermann,²² V Lanternari,²³ M Eliade,²⁴ E Stockton,²⁵ S Muecke,²⁶ and F Magowan.²⁷ While these references do not offer analysis of what is meant by ‘prophecy’, they show an awareness of the implications of its use. Even more interesting is the application of ‘prophecy’ by certain indigenous Australian authors themselves, such as D Unaipon.²⁸

Lastly, the apt remarks of Turner should be taken into consideration:

Weber’s distinction between priest and prophet has its main relevance in an analytical frame of reference constructed to consider the relationship between religion as ‘a force for dynamic social change’ and religion as ‘a reinforcement of the stability of societies’ ... It has been found effective by such anthropologists as Evans-Pritchard ... and Worsley ... who are dealing directly with social transitions and ‘the prophetic break’ or what Parsons calls ‘the primary decision point [between] a direction which makes for a source of evolutionary

²² H Petri and G Petri-Odermann, ‘Stability and Change: Present-Day Historic Aspects among Australian Aborigines’ in R M Berndt (ed) *Australian Aboriginal Studies: Modern Studies in the Social Anthropology of the Australian Aborigines* (Nedlands, 1970) 248-276, where the authors mention four Western Desert prophets by name: Dooley Bin-Bin, Tommy Djilamanga, Lulidj and Jimmy Bango.

²³ V Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York, 1965) 182-183. Lanternari discusses the case of the ‘Kurrangara cult’ in a way that is implicitly related to prophecy. For Lanternari, postcolonial indigenous Australia developed prophetic movements, but not prophetic figures.

²⁴ Eliade, *op cit*, 180-181. Eliade uses ‘prophetic’ twice and ‘prophet’ once.

²⁵ E Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria, 1995) 168. Stockton uses the term ‘prophetic’ with a strong sociopolitical connotation.

²⁶ K Benterrak, S Muecke and P Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Fremantle, 1984) 70. Muecke employs the term ‘prophet’ in the sense of *maban*.

²⁷ F Magowan, ‘Faith and Fear in Aboriginal Christianity’ in M Charlesworth, F Dussart and H Morphy (ed) *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: An Anthology of Recent Writings* (Aldershot, 2005) 293. Magowan refers to a Yolngu Christian ‘prophecy’.

²⁸ See the short story, ‘Narrondarie’s Wives’ in D Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (Carlton South, 2001).

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change in the ... established or traditional order, and a direction which tends not to change it drastically'.²⁹

If this is the function of prophecy from a social sciences point of view, then the various studies of change in indigenous Australian life-orders³⁰ are significant for a prophecy-oriented approach.

The indications to support the hypothesis of an indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness are not exclusive. There are also indications that oppose such a hypothesis. The typology of 'prophecy' has been explicitly denied in the indigenous Australian religions literature. In his book on modern messianic movements, in a chapter titled 'Australia and its lack of local prophets', Lanternari notes that 'Australia is ... a sterile soil for prophets'.³¹ The lack of prophetic consciousness in indigenous Australia is not total, however;³² it is counterbalanced by the ubiquity of a prophetic orientation towards the imminent end of the world.³³ Yengoyan similarly denies a prophetic tradition on the part of the Pitjantjatjara, on the basis of the prophetic valorisation of individuality and futurity.³⁴ Yengoyan restricts himself to what he takes to be a Christian understanding of prophecy and downplays the role of individuality and futurity in indigenous Australian life-forms. He has a limited appreciation of the

²⁹ V Turner, 'Religious Specialists: Anthropological Study' in Sills, *op cit*, 438.

³⁰ For example E Kolig, *The Silent Revolution: The Effects of Modernization on Australian Aboriginal Religion* (Philadelphia, 1981) and R Boss, *Jesus and the Dreaming: Religion and Social Change in Arnhem Land* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Queensland, 1988).

³¹ Lanternari, *op cit*, 180. This, he believes, can be adequately explained by 'the seminomadic way of life of many Australian communities': *ibid*, 184. But this can not be sustained, since it is known that a major prophetic tradition in ancient Israel, namely, that of the Rechabites, was opposed to the agrarian way of life. Prophecy and agriculture are by no means concomitant.

³² In this respect, Lanternari's treatment of the phenomenology of prophetic consciousness as both simplistic and self-contradictory.

³³ *Ibid*, 181-183.

³⁴ Yengoyan, 'Religion, Morality, and Prophetic Traditions: Conversion among the Pitjantjatjara of Central Australia' in R W Hefner (ed) *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993).

phenomenology of prophecy and downplays both the community awareness and the present orientation of the prophet.³⁵

There seems to be an almost total absence of academic work on indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness. This is due to the fact that the study of indigenous Australian religiosity was until very recently focused on the ‘alleged nature of “traditional” in Aboriginal societies’.³⁶ Now that change, innovation and creativity in indigenous Australian religions has gradually become the focal point of research, we have both the theoretical framework and the conceptual tools to ascertain the presence and function of prophetic phenomena in postcolonial indigenous Australian religiosity.

The most compelling negative indication regarding indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness lies in the objection that the very fundamentals of indigenous Australian religiosity exclude both prophecy and the possibility of appropriating it. It is argued that indigenous Australian and Christian ontology³⁷ – the latter being representative of prophetic consciousness – are mutually exclusive: the former emphasises place, while the latter emphasises history; the former reflects an enduring/abiding world in the context of a rhythmic experience of time, while the latter postulates an otherworldly/transcendental final resolution in view of a future time.³⁸ This argument presupposes a specific conceptualisation of

³⁵ For a substantial critique of Yengoyan’s view, see T Ranger, ‘Christianity and the First Peoples: Some Second Thoughts’ in P Brock (ed) *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change* (Leiden and Boston, 2005) and B Edwards, ‘*Tjukurpa Palya* – the Good Word: Pitjantjatjara Responses to Christianity’ in Brock, *ibid*.

³⁶ See Swain *Aboriginal Religions in Australia*, 41.

³⁷ I use the term ‘ontology’ because it has been applied insightfully in the study of indigenous Australian religions. For example: W E H Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion* (Sydney, 1966); A P Elkin, ‘Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy’, *Oceania* 40:2, 1969, 85-98; L R Hiatt, ‘Introduction’ in L R Hiatt (ed) *Australian Aboriginal Mythology* (Canberra, 1975) 1-23; A Yeatman, ‘The Procreative Model: The Social Ontological Bases of the Gender-Kinship System’, *Social Analysis* 14, 1983, 3-30. However, I understand it as equivalent to the German ‘*Weltanschauung*’ rather than to the Greek ‘*ontologia*’.

³⁸ For an excellent presentation and critical appraisal of this juxtaposition, see Swain, *A Place for Strangers*. D B Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an*

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prophecy – a Christian one – and an undifferentiated approach to Christianity itself.³⁹ This negative indication nevertheless deserves close attention, since it has implications for concepts of transcendence, history and individuality – concepts that play a vital role in any type of prophetic consciousness.

Another objection is that the loss of prophecy in Christianity itself means that it cannot generate indigenous prophetic phenomena. This objection relies heavily on Protestant assumptions,⁴⁰ neglecting the fact that the generation in question may have already taken place. It by no means applied to early indigenous Australian and Pentecostal relations, given the prophetic fervour of the first Australian Pentecostal missionaries.⁴¹ It may even be conjectured that indigenous responses to Christianity – and for that matter indigenous Australian ones – could revitalise prophetic dispositions that have become dormant, resulting in *sui generis* charismatic Christian formations.⁴²

Lastly, one can discredit manifestations of indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness by claiming that they are provisional in character, as has been shown of a substantial number of radical innovations in indigenous Australian religious life-forms.⁴³ This perspective is simplistic, neglecting the fundamental and persisting

Australian Aboriginal Culture (Cambridge, 1992) 229-235 is also noteworthy for its penetrating observation.

³⁹ I have argued for a fundamental differentiation within Christianity in my 'The Political Dimension of Eschatology', *Church and Eschatology*, 2003, 251-262 (in Greek) and my *The 'Kingdom of God' As Utopia*.

⁴⁰ An example of this can be seen in G Friedrich, 'Prophets and Prophecies in the New Testament' in G Friedrich, *op cit*, 856 and 861.

⁴¹ See D and G Smith, *A River is Flowing, A History of the Assemblies of God in Australia* (Assemblies of God in Australia, 1987).

⁴² This is most likely in indigenous Australian and Roman Catholic relations. One can see such a prophetic resurgence in some interpretations of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's art. See P R Derrington, *The Serpent of Good and Evil: A Reconciliation in the Life and Work of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann* (Flemington, 2000) 48-49, 53, 59, 63 and 67.

⁴³ Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 131-132.

indigenous accommodations that enabled the emergence of such innovations.⁴⁴

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In light of these considerations, I regard indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness as a justified scientific topic. The objections nevertheless call our attention to the possibility of a simplistic application of ‘prophecy’ on indigenous Australian religions. The fact that one can describe, explain and understand indigenous Australian religious data on the basis of the typology of ‘prophecy’ does not entail that one may simply proceed to a preferred version⁴⁵ of this typology. The choice of a social sciences, history of religions or phenomenological perspective greatly affects the outcome of a study, and can distort the peculiarity of the indigenous Australian data itself.

This challenge brings to the third question posed: if a study of indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness is to be undertaken, how is it to be circumscribed? An answer to this question is contingent on the definition, or redefinition, of ‘prophecy’. Only by proposing a tentative redefinition of ‘prophecy’ can an appropriate assessment of the data be secured. This definition must account for all aspects of religion – social, historical and phenomenological – in light of the distinctiveness of indigenous Australian ontology.

First of all, it should be noted that the ‘formal character of *prophetes* makes it a good translation word well adapted to pick up the most

⁴⁴ Swain’s ‘appropriation of fundamental cosmological principles’ can be interpreted – at the anthropological level – as the realisation of prophetic consciousness in the context of postcolonial Aboriginal religions. On the other hand, his ‘certain mythic elements’ or ‘Christian narrative segments’ would be the various renderings of prophetic consciousness, namely, apocalypticism, millenar(ian)ism, utopia and so on: Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, 132.

⁴⁵ For a history of religions typology, see Friedrich, *op cit*, 781-861; for a phenomenological one, see Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, *op cit*, 7425; for a sociological one, see M Weber, ‘The Prophet’ in D L Petersen (ed) *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity* (London and Philadelphia, 1987) 99-111.

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diverse contents'.⁴⁶ This is one way to state the difficulty involved in the definition of 'prophecy'. As in most cases of religious phenomena, however, what is required is a starting point from which the necessary modifications can be made. The phenomenological perspective seems the most appropriate. Here, the term 'prophecy' is understood as the receiving (or seeking out) and communicating of a message from a god; a 'prophet' is the spokesperson or the messenger of a god.⁴⁷ But what sort of message and what are the various ways of obtaining it? Is the relationship between human and god a *conditio sine qua non* in the case of prophecy?

'Prophecy' refers primarily to speech and more precisely to special forms of speech or discourse.⁴⁸ This in turn presupposes a *Sitz im Leben*, which must be seriously considered in each case if one is to assess the bearing of the prophetic 'message'. The speech/discourse-based nature of 'prophecy' alludes to something more profound, to a certain type of consciousness. It betrays a certain type of experiencing.⁴⁹ The authority of this consciousness – its assumed assignment by the 'sacred' – renders it a hierophany.⁵⁰ The latter, however, is too general a term; one has to specify what kind of hierophany is realised in the case of prophetic consciousness. 'Prophecy' should be understood as a commissioning hierophany, a mode of praxis that, in the light of a calling, establishes the essential

⁴⁶ See W Krämer: 'The word group [of 'prophet'] in profane Greek' in Friedrich, *op cit*, 796. This formal character is summarized as 'declaring, proclaiming, making known' and 'explains' the 'early transfer and use' of *prophetes* 'over a broad area': *ibid*, 795. It has also been suggested that 'the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible used this word ['prophecy'] to render several Hebrew titles and apparently understood it to be a general term capable of being applied to various types of religious specialists': Wilson, *op cit*, 7432: my emphasis.

⁴⁷ Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, *op cit*, 7423.

⁴⁸ For ancient Greek forms of prophetic speech, see Aune, *op cit*, 49-79; for Israelite forms of prophetic speech, see C Westermann: *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia, 1967).

⁴⁹ Throughout this investigation, 'consciousness' refers to a person's experiential referentiality to the world, which in turn forms his or her identity. This meaning is derived from Husserlian phenomenology: E Husserl: *Ideen zu einer Reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (The Hague, 1982).

⁵⁰ See my 'Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le Profane*: 'Hierophany' as a Basis for a Theory of Religion', *Studies in Religion – Sacred/Profane* 2, 2001, 7-19 (in Greek).

coherence between identity and transformation within the context of a given religious system or, alternatively, leads to the creation of a much-needed new religious system. This delineation points to three basic features of prophetic consciousness: transcendence, individuality and dialectics.

Since ‘prophecy’ has a mediating function,⁵¹ it must be discussed in terms of transcendence and immanence. These terms are not contradictory, as is usually assumed; there are different types of immanence, as well as different functions of transcendence. The data of the history of religions indicates two general types of immanence: cosmic and historical immanence,⁵² or ‘here’-immanence and ‘now’-immanence, respectively. The first type, represented by ancient Greek *propheteia*, assumes a profound ontological and, by extension, normative level; it entails a more or less extended mediating process and emphasises the spatial dimension. The second type, represented by Israelite *hitnabe*, expresses a self-contained divine revelation, constitutes a more or less direct mediation, and stresses the temporal dimension. The meaning of transcendence in the context of ‘here’ – immanence would be endurance, while its meaning in the context of ‘now’ – immanence would be absence. Prophetic consciousness may therefore be approached through these hierophanies of endurance and absence.

It should be emphasised, however, that it is individuals who realise prophetic consciousness; prophetic consciousness is located in the subjectivity of a given individuality. This does not imply that prophecy is not socially oriented, but simply that the agent of prophecy is always the individual. Society remains the context and final recipient of prophecy. What exactly is the function of individuality as the *locus* of prophetic consciousness? It seems that the ‘message’ of a ‘prophet’ represents a specific interpretation. The fundamental elements that a ‘prophet’ must tackle are the ‘same’ and ‘other’. In the case of the prophetic consciousness of endurance, the prophetic ‘message’ accounts for the presence of the ‘other’ within

⁵¹ Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, *op cit*.

⁵² M Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, 1954).

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the ‘same’; in the case of the prophetic consciousness of absence, it produces the ‘same’ out of the ‘other’. In both instances, the god-like figure that discloses the prophetic ‘message’ sums up symbolically – and thus establishes transcendentally – the endeavour of the prophetic individual. Prophetic individuality thus represents the authentication⁵³ of the dialectic between the old and the new⁵⁴ in the context of a given religious system.

This dialectic is performed as a negotiation between historical continuity and historical discontinuity, since the prophetic ‘message’ inevitably causes a rupture in a given religious tradition or, better, enables the envisioning of a new history. Prophetic consciousness constitutes a reinterpretation of a religious tradition – both at a personal and a public level – which aims at resolving social crises and rendering collective life meaningful.⁵⁵ Even when it results in a new religious tradition, this is perceived only against a previous tradition. Prophetic consciousness cannot be conceived but through the experienced body or capital of those temporal markers that either make up life as tradition or transform tradition into history. Ultimately, prophecy presents itself as the driving force of tradition or history.

Turning now to indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness, this outline of prophetic consciousness provides a helpful set of searching criteria. The ethnographical and histor(iograph)ical accounts we have of indigenous Australian religions, and the phenomena observed in contemporary indigenous Australian religiosity, can be approached in the light of three questions: has a re-interpretation of indigenous Australian religious ‘traditions’ taken place? Do indigenous Australians profess their conferred authority to undertake such a re-

⁵³ This expresses Weber’s thesis that a prophet is ‘a purely individual bearer of charisma’: Weber, *op cit*, 99.

⁵⁴ Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, *op cit*, 7425.

⁵⁵ In the sociology of religion, such theories are usually called ‘conflict theories’, wherein the social function of religion in general lies in the changes that it promotes. See for example W E Mühlmann, *Chiliasmus und Nativismus: Studien zur Psychologie, Sociologie und historischen Kasuistik der Umsturbewegungen* (Berlin, 1961) and J M Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London, 1970).

interpretation? Has such authentication been realised as an endurance – or an absence-oriented understanding of indigenous Australian life-forms? Each of these questions must be addressed before venturing further. The first question is inextricably related to the problem of ‘tradition’-talk in indigenous Australian life-orders. This is a huge problem.⁵⁶ During the precolonial period, indigenous Australian life-orders were hierophanically experienced in terms of ‘emanation’ and ‘mediation’. It was only under the impact of postcoloniality that this state of affairs gave way to a hierophanic experience of ‘foundation’ and ‘perpetuation’ at first, and ‘tradition’ and ‘identity’ thereafter.⁵⁷ Indigenous Australian religions can only be studied at present on the basis that a gradual but definitive shift towards tradition – and for that matter history – has taken place.

The second question brings to the fore the problem of the authority that is specifically conferred on an individual, reshaping all other *foci* of authority in a given indigenous Australian life-order. For indigenous Australians, authority is acknowledged in relation to the multiplicity of Dreamings and is thus diffused throughout the place–people continuum. How then can one conceptualise a certain person as of pre-eminent status, the sole *locus* of authority? Here the definition of ‘prophecy’ needs to be modified in light of the indigenous Australian data. Prophecy is a mode of *praxis* that, in the context of a calling, establishes the much-needed coherence between identity and transformation within a given religious system or, alternatively, leads to the creation of a promising new religious system. In the postcolonial situation, indigenous Australian prophecy must be conceptualised as *any individual identification with a given Dreaming that becomes the focal point for the negotiation of collective or community identity*.⁵⁸

The third question draws attention to a theoretical distinction that can yield misleading methodological juxtapositions. The theoretical

⁵⁶ On this problem, see a number of excellent studies in L Taylor *et al* (eds) *The Power of Knowledge, The Resonance of Tradition* (Canberra, 2005).

⁵⁷ For details on these distinctions, see my *Prophecy Dreamings*, 20-26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 39.

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distinction between endurance – and absence-oriented hierophanic experiences should not lead us to identify only one of them in the case of indigenous Australian religions; we may discern a spectrum of syncreti(sti)c formations made up of both. This results from the post/colonial challenge posed to the indigenous Australian ontology of place. One may discern indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness within the variety of accommodations realized between place and history, *topos* and *utopia*, by indigenous Australian movements, communities and individuals.

Indigenous Australian syncretism is a fundamental aspect of religious change; one must consider the presence and function of prophecy in its every manifestation. One can, of course, outline more specific methodological trajectories through the research materials. For instance, although it is difficult to assess the Melanesian or Indonesian impact on indigenous Australian life-orders (for example, in its ‘Fertility/Earth Mothers’ and ‘Hero Cults’),⁵⁹ it is necessary to consider their impact, to assess the overall disposition of indigenous Australian religions towards transformation. Such an assessment may disclose the rationale behind the syncreti(sti)c formations in postcolonial indigenous Australian religious life (in its ‘All-Father/High God’ beliefs,⁶⁰ ‘bora’ ceremonies,⁶¹ retributive, apocalyptic, or millenarian trends, revitalization and adjustment movements). At a second level, these syncreti(sti)c formations should be approached by considering their individual advocates and the discernible modifications that they realise.

On the other hand, one needs to focus on the position and function of a wide range of specialists in indigenous Australian religions:

⁵⁹ For a critical appraisal of this impact, see for example Swain, *op cit*, 69-113, 159-211.

⁶⁰ For the heated debate on the ‘High Gods’ issue, see E Kolig, ‘Religious Power and the All-Father in the Sky: Monotheism in Australian Aboriginal Culture Reconsidered’, *Anthropos* 87, 1992, 9-31.

⁶¹ For a recent discussion of ‘bora’, see D Thompson, ‘Bora is like Church’: *Aboriginal Initiation and the Christian Church at Lockhart River, Queensland* (Sydney, 1985).

‘medicine men’, ‘men of high degree’,⁶² ‘shamans’,⁶³ ‘sorcerers’, ‘healers’, ‘clever men’, ‘mabans’ and other indigenous leaders. These may be considered in terms of how they correspond to the prophetic individuality criterion. In the cases of god-like figures, these criteria may be used to determine whether these specialists are of the ‘High God’, ‘Ancestor’ or even the ‘Cultural Hero’ type. Their symbolic function in conferring individual authority may be explored by this means. However, one needs to be cautious where one ascribes authority. A useful indication of prophetic individuality seems to be offered by the notion of responsibility,⁶⁴ such as is evidenced in the call to ‘care for the land’. Although clearly rooted in precolonial indigenous Australian religiosity, this notion emerges in postcolonial contexts in forceful claims as to the distinctiveness of Australian indigeneity.

Returning to previous remarks concerning the dialectics of place and history, that is, to the problem of what type of hierophanic experience prevails in postcolonial indigenous Australian religions, several final points may be ventured. The notion of immanence that is characteristic of indigenous Australian religious life-forms lies between ‘endurance’ and ‘absence’ forms. Although indigenous Australian religions are performed through experiences based on place, they also seem to allow for the presence of time.⁶⁵ They do not make an absolute out of place, but rather understand it – that is, a specific land – as a complex reality rendered most commonly as ‘Law’ or ‘Dreaming’. The ‘Law’ or ‘Dreaming’ is what Swain has termed the ‘Abiding Event’⁶⁶ or what W E H Stanner describes as the

⁶² A P Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (St Lucia, 1977).

⁶³ D Pecotic, ‘Contesting the Invisible: Towards a History of Indigenous Australian Shamanic Practice and the Secularization of Western Esotericism in the Postcolonial Situation’, *Studies in Religion – Sacred/Profane* 6, 2005, 225-251.

⁶⁴ See for example D B Rose, ‘Consciousness and Responsibility in Australian Aboriginal Religion’, *Nelen Yubu* 23, 1985, 3-15.

⁶⁵ As to the literature that deals with the distinctiveness of the indigenous Australian experience of time, see for example F R Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Washington, 1986) 47-70; Rose, *op cit*, 203-208; Stockton, *op cit*, 93-9; Mudrooroo, *Us Mob. History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Sydney, 1995) 175-192.

⁶⁶ Swain, *op cit*, ‘Introduction’.

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‘ever-present’ in this life-order.⁶⁷ Such clues about temporality and eventfulness show that the pre-eminent indigenous Australian hierophanic experience of life is linked to both types of immanence. Wherever these two types can be detected, one may historicize the shift from precolonial indigenous Australian *topos* to postcolonial indigenous Australian *utopia*. This involves a historiographical elaboration on the (partial) succession and (partial) overlapping of indigenous Australian resistance activity, cultic innovation, sociopolitical movements and Christianity. One might hope thereby, not only to uncover both ‘here’/endurance and ‘now’/absence forms of prophetic consciousness but, more importantly, to articulate a typology of eschatological ontology that is peculiar to indigenous Australian life-orders.⁶⁸

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the following objection, which I take to be a reasonable one: the discussion above could also be regarded as reflecting a precolonial indigenous Australian religiosity. One might, in other words, be justified in making out a case for precolonial indigenous Australian prophetic consciousness. The levels of analysis provided here may reflect indigenous Australian religions before European/Christian contact. However, if one wants to stand firmly on scientific grounds, that is, on the grounds of critical reflection on the available accounts and the observation of contemporary religious life, then one must treat colonization as a *terminus post quem*. No-one disputes the fact that major changes in indigenous Australian religious life have occurred, nor that these can be understood within the categories of non-indigenous religions. ‘Prophecy’ is one such term. Whether prophets or prophecy existed in the traditional cultures of precolonial Indigenous Australia is something we will never be able to answer in a definitive way.

⁶⁷ W E H Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming* (Canberra, 1979) where this notion is the guiding idea throughout the whole collection of papers.

⁶⁸ For the presence of eschatology in indigenous Australian Christianity, see Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards An Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn, 1997) and my ‘Perceptions of Land in Indigenous Australian Christian Texts’, *Studies in World Christianity* 11:2, 2005, 200-214.