

THE SPIRIT OF GOD: THE CENTRE FOR
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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God is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere. (Hermes Trismegistus)

The centre is the goal, and everything is directed toward that centre. (Carl Jung)

Introduction

The statement by Trismegistus reflects how I see the Australian Indigenous Christian women I have studied understanding God in their lives. These women are at-one with the spiritual Being of God such that they know of no other existence outside of that Being. God is their essence and their breath. This is a Living, Spiritual, theistic relationship where expression of doubt does not exist. God is.

In reference to the statement made by Jung, the women find it necessary to seek the centre only if they have moved off-centre; in other words are out of balance/harmony with God. For these Aboriginal women, the Spirit of Jesus Christ provides the help and support to re-establish that balance and harmony. They have found that white Western Christian doctrine has moved them off-centre in their relationship with God and they have had to deconstruct/contextualise those doctrines in order to become centred, to feel balanced and in harmony again with God. It is a relationship with God that can be seen as 'mono-theistic pantheism'; a oneness with the Spirit of God who moves through all Creation.

This paper is a product of my PhD research into Australian Indigenous Christian women's theology and spirituality. It reveals how and to what depth God is central to their lives; emphasising their Indigenous perspective of Christianity, its uniqueness in comparison to white Western Christianity.

Background and Profiles of the Aboriginal Christian Women Interviewees

The first group of women interviewed were the East Arrernte (the proper spelling, not the one used by anthropologists) who live at Santa Teresa Community, which is approximately eighty kilometres south-east of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. It is a Catholic Mission establishment with some attending priest and nuns, a large church, presbytery and accommodation for the nuns; as well as a school and community facilities for approximately five hundred people. Immediately next to the church, and quite symbolically, is Santa Teresa Healing Spirituality Centre. The centre was created because *Lyaakiyi* (pronounced 'Yargi') was so very concerned for her people and others being so spiritually out of balance, she sees such balance of the mental, physical and spiritual as fundamental to complete healing and wholeness for Human beings. Central to her healing practice is the deep spirituality and spiritual ontology¹ of her Aboriginal culture. *Lyaakiyi* also deeply relates, spiritually, to Catholic Christianity and brings the two spiritualities together in her healing centre.

The next tribal group consulted was the women from the Tiwi Islands. These women lectured in, and studied theology at Nungalinga Theology College in Darwin. This college is Indigenous and interdenominational, and the body of Indigenous students are the ones who are the most

¹ I define the term 'ontology' as meaning 'way of being in the world'.

articulate of their tribal groups in expressing in English their cultural theology and spirituality. The Tiwi theological and spiritual understanding of the melding of two spirits, the *Yiminga* (spirit) of the Tiwi with the *Yiminga* (spirit) of Christianity in Christ, which I came to know during my MA thesis research and which was the initial inspiration for this current research. I interviewed four Tiwi women elders with a Catholic background.

At the college I took the opportunity to interview three other women elders, two were lecturers and one a student. The two women lecturers are Yolgnu, one a greatly respected elder from Gupapuyngu tribe at Milingimbi, in northern Arnhem Land, who has a Uniting Church background; and the other is the wife of an Indigenous Anglican minister from the Kunbarlanjnja tribe at Oenpelli, in west Arnhem Land. The student was important because she came from a different tribal group, the Warlpiri, from Central Australia, Ali-Kurung (her spelling) or 'Dog-Dreaming' Community, near Tennant Creek; she has a Uniting Church background and could add to a variety of perspectives.

The Ngarrindjeri women were the last group of Indigenous women consulted. Their tribal nation is located in the south-east of South Australia; most of these women were elders from the Coorong area, and one was from Mt Gambier, which is further south. I interviewed four women altogether concerning their Indigenous/Christian spirituality, and six women elders in total (the two others in Adelaide), concerning the Kumarangk² Controversy. Most of the interviews took place at Camp Coorong, which is an Indigenous cultural education centre.

² This is the Ngarrindjeri name for Hindmarsh Island in South Australia. A controversy arose over the building of a bridge over a Sacred Site belonging to Ngarrindjeri Women's Business.

I stayed for several days at the major communities mentioned in this study. I am a Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal) and we are keeping our culture alive in spirit, but I live in a different State, and it was healing to be absorbed into the spiritual ontology and culture of my People on the mainland. And to be made aware of how much in solidarity I am with them in ontology, in the spiritual nature of their *Weltanschauung* and Indigenous Christian theologies and spiritualities that develop from that ontology. I express this phenomenon as data relevant to this research.

The Contribution Australian Aboriginal Christian Women Make to Inculturation Theology

The women of the Tiwi Islands are the clearest example of a faith rather than doctrinal inculturation of the Indigenous women interviewed. They met the Christian message in the powerful depths of their spirituality. The most interesting fact is that they inculturated the message. They met the Christian message on their own terms out of the situation of their own culture, theology and spirituality. Out of the powerful depths of their spiritual ontology, and their natural theistic orientation, they met the Christian message in the being of Christ. Sister Ann Gardiner in the title of her article: 'The melding of two spirits: From the *Yiminga* of the Tiwi to the *Yiminga* of Christianity', states exactly the process of faith inculturation among the Tiwi.³ It involves a meeting and melding of two spirits, the spirit of the Tiwi and the spirit of Christianity in the spirit of Christ. Encounter with the Tiwi women reveals initially this powerful spiritual relationship between Christ and culture. There is, however, a gradual breaking down of this spiritual relationship by the effects of doctrine, mostly brought

³ See Bibliography, L. Miena Skye, *Kerygmatics* (Messengers) of the New Millennium: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Women's Christology, MA thesis, University of South Australia, 1999.

about by pressure from clergy and lay members of the Church (predominantly Catholic) who are usually not traditional Aboriginal People, to live out that doctrine (usually Catechismic).

The Tiwi women are trying desperately to hold onto their spiritual hermeneutics, and hence, culture, but are victims of White Western Christian pedagogy. These women really do love their natural spiritual relationship with Christ and doctrine (a doctrine which is definitely not literal); I have seen them become overwhelmed in joyful salutation and witness only to have this severely quashed, because of its invalid representation of hegemonic doctrine.

The women of the Tiwi Islands inculturated Christ, but they understand that Christ had 'preincarnated' before Christian colonialism came to Australia. This belief is shared unanimously throughout all the tribal groups interviewed. The belief that Christ was with God (however God is perceived), and the Ancestors (the depth of this belief varies from group to group, but is ever present), and our People from the beginning of Creation, is also unanimous.

The remarkable phenomenon that occurs with the Tiwi women is their ability, because of their spiritual ontology, to pierce through the pre-inculturated layers of Christian doctrine and discover its true essence: a living relationship with the living God. It is through this relationship that they interpret Christianity, if permitted. The East Arrernte women, in my experience, seem to have been allowed to develop this relationship less than the Tiwi women. They have been more heavily indoctrinated by Catholic teaching, and suffered physical maltreatment by nuns in earlier years of the established mission, hence, there is a stronger presence of fear, more than reverence, for God among these women. This community of women is struggling to hold onto its Indigenous spirituality, theology and culture, but

they say clerical respect for this aspect of their life is far better than it was in the past.

The Ngarrindjeri women were the victims of white Western colonialist Protestantism. The effect on their culture, theology and spirituality was more devastating than on the other two main tribal groups because Protestantism has placed less emphasis on inculturation in its missiology. There was a cultural war right from the beginning of white contact, and Ngarrindjeri culture, theology and spirituality was forced underground. It has only been in recent years, and mainly due to the actions of the Ngarrindjeri People themselves, that culture has been able to surface and be lived.

The Ngarrindjeri found it easier to inculturate the Old Testament because their Laws are so similar, but their Laws are sacred and they keep them in secrecy, especially in the light of past and present abuse and exploitation. Their relationship with Christ also is based on faith rather than doctrine, and they yearn to indigenize their Church life.

The Yolgnu and Warlpiri women interviewed also inculturate their faith. They meet the Christian message out of their strong spiritual ontology. All the women have met the Christian message through Protestantism. The woman with the Anglican background says traditional language is used in church, but outside of this, culture and church are kept separate. The women who have Uniting Church backgrounds experience a flourishing of culture and church life combined, more so than any of the other women interviewees.

For these Aboriginal women, inculturation theology is liberation theology. They ache to be freed from the effects of racism, classism, sexism and naturism inherent in Christian colonialist inculturation theology and its legacy.

They want to be free to find their God out of the context of their culture, theology and spirituality, and for most of them this means rediscovering culture all over again. Doing this will deepen identity, thus equipping them with the tools to deconstruct White Western Church pedagogical hermeneutics, and develop Indigenous/Christian hermeneutics instead. There is the phenomenon that even though there has been conscious genocidal activity to destroy these cultures, their spiritual ontology could not be destroyed. And because these Indigenous women inculcate faith, they will be a source of revelation becoming spiritual directors able to reformulate white Western theological language.

Christ Transformed

The Aboriginal women interviewed for my MA thesis, and the women consulted for this research have met Christ and the Christian message in spirit, out of the depths of their spiritual ontology. They perceive doctrine through faith, believing in Christ's power to make it relevant to them in our Indigenous and feminine context. The MA thesis data analysis produced two paradigms after discerning the Christologies of the Aboriginal women. The Indigenous women consulted for this research unanimously share the Christology of the first paradigm.

The first and most generally shared by the Aboriginal women of the paradigms, and one into which I personally fit, presents a Christology that understands Christ to be the very essence of the 'spiritual' existence of Australian Aboriginal Christian women. The issue of gender is unimportant to them, just His holistic spiritual 'saving' power that uplifts them in all dimensions of their being, spiritually, mentally and physically, in the depths of their great suffering. His central expression is holy 'love', by holy I mean love that treats Human Life and Land as sacred. Their Christ is one that allows them to identify with

and draw the good from their native cultural/spiritual heritage and celebrate the ‘wholeness’ that this brings. He is seen as being of equal value to the community of Australian Aboriginal Peoples as He is to the individual.⁴

The phenomenon is that even though a paradoxical, phantom Christology was presented to the women through Christian colonialism and its legacy,⁵ they were able to perceive a Christ who is one with us in our depths of suffering, identifying with the oppressed and broken-hearted, uplifting and empowering us to experience the fullness of joy, freedom and life. These women are experiencing the wonder and witness of the ‘true’ Christ revealed to the least, in order to save the least. It is in this particular perception of Christ that most valuable contributions are being made to Christian soteriology.

Christ is being transformed, is inculturated in faith and revealed through that Indigenous faith, and thus, white Western Christology is being transformed. Christ’s spirit becomes melded to the Yiminga (spirit) of the Tiwi, the Pilirra (spirit) of the Warlpiri, the Tiggana Marrabona (spirit) of the Palawas. Christ’s spirit melds with the spirit of the Yolgnu, the East Arrernte, and the Ngarrindjeri. Christ, thus, becomes one with the full spiritual dimension of each tribal group, this dimension being the very essence of Indigenous life.

Christ’s presence is felt at the Totem ceremonies, and other important ceremonies. As the Yolgnu lady from Milingimbi stated: ‘Jesus is there with you in the ceremony. I feel it in my spirit’. Christ is believed to be present with Australian Aboriginal People in Spirit and the Law (this is so for all of these tribal groups) since the beginning of Creation. Christianity merely brought us the

⁴ Skye, *Kerygmatics* (Messengers) of the New Millennium, p. 33; also Skye & A. Pattel-Gray (forthcoming).

⁵ Skye, *Kerygmatics* (Messengers) of the New Millennium, loc. cit.

Jesus story. The Anglican Yolgnu lady expressed that: 'God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus were here before white man came'.

In the light of these views, white Western Christology is being challenged. A spiritual ontology is challenging white Western intellectual (cerebral) ontology. Hence, Christ's 'eternalness' also lifts the human being into 'eternalness', Christ has always and will be eternal. All of these tribal groups had difficulty comprehending an 'end-time'. As a Yolgnu lady stated: 'There is nothing in our culture about heaven and hell, that came from the white man. When we die our spirit goes back to our Homeland, which is my promised land, my heaven'. With these views they make some interesting challenges and contributions to Christian eschatology.

Christ as Spirit is 'living energy', the 'pulse and breathe of life' (a Tiwi understanding that is shared by all the tribal groups of this study), who moves through all Creation. In the words of the Yolgnu lady with the Uniting Church background: 'God [meaning also Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Ancestors] is in the Creation part of it [meaning the beginning and ongoing acts of Creation, and the witness of the scripture], and the Land, everything I see'. To the women this means that all animate and inanimate Creation is lifted up in sacredness. It is unfortunate that Human beings are so often unaware of their own sacredness, the sacredness of others, and the sacredness of the natural environment.⁶ In the light of this, Christian views on Creation are being challenged.

All the women interviewed for this research believe in Christ being one with God (however God is perceived) and the Holy Spirit, and that this country is the 'Land of the

⁶ The point has been made that some of the views of the Aboriginal women sound like New Age spiritual concepts, it needs to be understood that many such concepts have been co-opted from Indigenous cultures.

Holy Spirit' with which Christ is one; hence, through such understandings contributions are able to be made to the study of the 'doctrine of the Trinity', and to pneumatology. There is the phenomenon that we all sense in Spirit and know that our country is the 'Land of the Holy Spirit', and this is a message to us that we have a mission for our people to share the healing value gained from our spiritual ontology with Western peoples, who are out of balance and need to be mentally, physically and spiritually whole. In this I see Australian Aboriginal Christian women become saviours of their oppressors.

It is undeniable that Christ has been transformed after being inculturated, in Spirit and faith, into the Indigenous theologies and spiritualities of the East Arrernte, Tiwi, Yolgnu, Warlpiri, Ngarrindjeri, and Palawa women mentioned in this research. Our spiritual theistic ontology will always determine how we meet White Western Christian theology and society.

Conclusion

For the purpose of this paper the main concern has been to reveal, using sections from the data analysis of my research, the nature and depth to which God is the centre in the lives of a select group of Australian Aboriginal women. As this paper has argued God as Spirit, He/She (however perceived) is the absolute centre of their lives. There is no life outside of God. This is the relationship all Indigenous Peoples had with God before colonialism. With the coming of colonial Christianity, the spirit of Christianity in Christ was united to the spirit of the Indigenous cultures. Hence, theirs was and is until this present-day a spiritual relationship with Christianity. Unfortunately pre-inculturated Christian doctrine came with an imperialistic Christianity and stifled the deep spiritual relationship these Aboriginal People had with God. They understood God out of their spiritual ontology and they were being pressured to

accept a God understood through white Western intellectual ontology. In order to find God as they had known Him/Her through their spiritual ontology, to find their centre, these Indigenous cultures have had to deconstruct and contextualise Christian doctrine. In order to bring back balance and harmony to their existence they have had to, and must still in neo-colonialist times, reclaim their right to their different ontology. And Christ in Spirit is seen as central to helping them to reclaim, and to recentre.

These activities have resulted in the forming of Indigenous Christian theology and spirituality, unique and different to white, Western Christian theology. The stark difference being the witness of the 'absoluteness' of God in the Aboriginal women's lives – an intimacy, I believe, which has become lost to Western Christians due to their ontology. The practise of spirituality being the only means to 'know' God in essence, and to begin to live with God in the understanding of absoluteness as these Australian Indigenous women do.