

THE CIVILISATION/CHRISTIANISATION DEBATE AND THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

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The work of Christian missionaries during the nineteenth century generally had a twofold aim: to convert the heathen to Christianity and to introduce them to European civilisation. The 'civilising' process consisted partly of teaching the sorts of skills which would enable indigenous peoples to fit into European society, but it also involved weaning them from their own customs and cultures. The two aims were usually mentioned simultaneously as though they were inseparable, and in the minds of most missionaries they were inseparable, for it was believed that a rejection of pagan ways was as vital as the replacing of pagan religions before Christianity could take a permanent hold. The words Christianity and civilisation were sometimes used interchangeably.¹

As the newly formed Protestant missionary societies gained experience in the field, there was some questioning of these precepts and a debate developed about the relationship of the two aims. Should one be attempted before the other for greater efficiency, and if so, which? Was it possible for the two to be pursued together? The purpose of this paper is to examine the debate particularly in the context of New South Wales in the 1830s and 1840s. It is not intended to discuss in any detail what happened, but to examine the intellectual constraints of the debate.

There was, of course, considerable missionary experience in preceding centuries, when the matter of civilisation was deemed important. In missions conducted in the Americas from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries the simplest form of the civilising process consisted of 'curing' native peoples of their nomadic habits. Settlement was considered vital for the acceptance of Christianity. Just as the Spanish in southern California encouraged the formerly nomadic population to settle in villages close to the missions,² so did the Puritans of New England try to impress upon the Indians the need for them to discard their hunter-warrior culture and accept some measure of 'civility' so that they would be receptive to Christianity.³ In due course the missionaries of New South Wales followed the same pattern and endeavoured to persuade the Aborigines to give up their wanderings in favour of a settled life.

Most missions to 'primitive' peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were conducted by various Roman Catholic orders, the main exceptions being in North America,

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1. Walls 1975:296.

2. Latourette 1947:III,103.

3. Love 1899:6.

where Puritans, Quakers and Huguenots sought to convert the heathen. Generally speaking, the early Catholic missionaries were content to introduce the most basic ingredients of civilisation and to adapt their Christian message to fit the local culture and society. Indeed, the Catholic missionary body, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, decided in 1659 that no pressure should be put upon native peoples to make them change their manners and customs, but that missionaries should content themselves with introducing the faith.⁴ Many of the present-day religious processions, fiestas and dances of South America were developed from pagan customs under the direction of Spanish priests. This emphasis on Christianity can be explained by the Church's belief in the urgent need to convert the heathen. The mass baptisms of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were part of this 'rapid saving of souls'.⁵ Missionaries were also urged to train an indigenous priesthood as quickly as possible.⁶

At the other end of the civilising scale were countries such as Japan and China, where the missionaries found it necessary to settle for a cultural compromise, for these highly advanced civilisations were not receptive to cultural imposition. The Jesuits in China adapted their Christianity to fit in with Chinese culture and society.⁷ They also adopted Chinese dress and manners to make themselves more acceptable. In Japan they used Buddhist terminology so that Christianity appeared to be a new form of Buddhism rather than a different religion.⁸

With the opening up of Australasia and the Pacific to European traders and settlers, evangelical Christians saw great possibilities for the furtherance of the Gospel. Writing to tell his daughter of the appointment of the Reverend Richard Johnson as Chaplain to the First Fleet, Henry Venn predicted a great future for the Australian Aborigines who would thus be introduced to Christianity and who would 'call upon his name' in vast numbers, 'and all the savageness of the Heathen shall be put off'.⁹ For Venn and others like him the equation was simple: by being introduced to Christianity the Aborigines would become civilized, the two things went together.

The experience of English protestant missionaries in the Pacific would have appeared to confirm the belief that Christianity and civilisation went hand in hand, for in New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji and the Society Islands they had been able to persuade their converts to adopt European dress and manners and to put aside many of their own customs as well as their gods.¹⁰

But no missionaries actually accompanied the First Fleet and by the time missions to the Aborigines were eventually established in eastern Australia in the 1820s and 1830s the debate as to which should come first, Christianity or civilisation, was already well under

4 'Do not draw invidious contrasts between the customs of the peoples and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them'. Quoted in Neill 1973:179.

5 Gibson 1966:73.

6 Neill 1973:179-80.

7 Fairbank, Reischauer and Craig 1967:37.

8 *ibid.*:31.

9 Rev. H. Venn to his daughter, 28 October 1786, Bonwick Transcripts, Box 49.

10 See for example Beaglehole 1957, and Morrell 1967. For more specific discussions see Watters 1959, and the chapter entitled 'The Gospel of Civilization' in Gunson 1978.

way. The surge of missionary activity which grew out of the late-eighteenth-century evangelical impetus led eventually to a more careful consideration of the emphasis and priorities of missionary work, especially where 'very primitive' races were concerned. The establishment of several Protestant missionary training colleges in England early in the nineteenth century meant that undirected enthusiasm gave way to the development of missionary theory and technique and these were modified by experience in the field. One such practice which was changed as a result of experience was the sending of Christian tradesmen with little formal education to primitive tribes, in the belief that primitive people would respond more readily to 'lowly' men, tradesmen who would teach their crafts and so introduce civilisation along with Christianity.¹¹

What did the missionaries mean by civilisation? The word was generally used by them simply to denote the opposite of barbarism, the European way of life as opposed to the 'savage' way. The missionaries expected the civilising process not only to change the way of life but to bring progress to the way of life, for as one missionary writer expressed it, civilisation was 'an improving, elevating process'.¹² The naked would be clothed, the wanderer housed and the 'lazy native' would learn the value of work.

A difficulty placed in the way of our present comprehension is that most missionaries, especially Protestants, basing their understanding on a literal interpretation of the Bible, believed that barbarism was not man's original state.

All barbarism is deterioration, a state which men have degenerated from some higher and anterior state. His primaeval state was a condition of knowledge; he was made competent to live in a society, to aid its improvement and to profit, in turn, by all its advantages.¹³

This writer's explanation of the way in which nations sank into barbarity need not concern us here. The important part of his argument for missionary activity is that Christianity was seen as the vital ingredient for civilisation, for it led nations to banish such customs as slavery, infanticide and polygamy and to live under the rule of law. 'Christianity contains the germ of the world's civilization'.¹⁴

Another writer conceded that nations like Greece and Rome had been able to attain 'a very considerable eminence in civilization' without the Gospel, but that without the Gospel such civilisations could only be partial, they did not reach the masses, and eventually degenerated.¹⁵

Just before William Watson and his wife left England in 1831 to take up their work at Wellington Valley in New South Wales, they received a long letter of instruction from the Church Missionary Society which included a statement of that Society's view of the introduction of Christianity and civilisation:

In connection with the preaching of the Gospel, you will not overlook its intimate bearing on the moral habits of a people. One effect arising from its intro-

¹¹ For a fuller discussion on this point see Woolmington 1985.

¹² Freeman 1848:4.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Freeman 1848:11.

¹⁵ Miller 1850:25.

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duction into a country, is the "beating of the sword into a ploughshare, and the spear into a pruning hook". Seek then to apply it to the common occupations of life; instruct the natives in husbandry, in the erections of houses, and in the useful arts of life, and instead of waiting to civilize them before you instruct them in the truths of the Gospel, or to convert them before you aim at the improvement of their temporal condition, let the two objects be pursued simultaneously.¹⁶

But this belief in the simultaneous introduction of Christianity and civilisation was no longer held by everybody concerned with missions, as the evidence before the 1836 House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) showed. Some missionaries and colonisers believed it was essential to convert heathens to Christianity first, in order to fit them for civilisation, while others held the opposite view and claimed that civilisation was the first logical step to take. Indeed, those in the latter group held that conversion to Christianity was quite impossible unless preceded by the introduction of civilisation.

There had been occasional consideration of the problem before the Select Committee began to raise the question. For example, in 1796 Dr George Hamilton had told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland:

To spread abroad the knowledge of the gospel among barbarians and heathen nations, seems to me highly preposterous, in so far as it anticipates, nay, as it even reverses, the order of nature. Men must be polished and refined in their manners before they can be properly enlightened in religious truths. Philosophy and learning must, in the nature of things, take precedence. Indeed, it should seem hardly less absurd to make revelations precede civilization in the order of time, than to pretend to unfold to a child the *Principia* of Newton, ere he is made at all acquainted with the letters of the alphabet. These ideas seem to me alike founded in error, and, therefore, I must consider them equally romantic and visionary.¹⁷

Not all were quite as adamant as this. While agreeing that Christianity was better understood by 'a Grotius, a Locke and a Fenelon than by any ignorant savage' and that its virtues could only be developed and exercised in civilised society, another missionary believed that the very limited good effected by Christianity among barbarous peoples was sufficient to encourage further efforts among such peoples.¹⁸ But many took the view that the introduction of civilisation was a necessary preparation for Christianity. The Reverend Samuel Marsden, Chaplain to the penal colony of New South Wales, was advised by the Secretaries of the London Missionary Society that he should

at the same time contribute to the Civilization of the Heathen and thus prepare them for the reception of moral and religious instruction.¹⁹

Marsden certainly subscribed to the view that civilisation was a necessary precursor to the acceptance of Christianity and it was chiefly for this reason that he considered the Australian

¹⁶ C.M.S. to Rev. William and Mrs Watson, 7 October 1831, Aborigines: Australian Colonies, BPP/34/627/1844/152.

¹⁷ Quoted in Elliott-Binns 1964:378.

¹⁸ Bradford 1830:6-7.

¹⁹ London Missionary Society Secretaries to Marsden, 19 March 1810, Marsden Papers ML MSS A 1955 4/9.

mission field would be a barren one. The Australian Aborigines were not attracted to the trappings of European civilisation. 'They have no wants', he explained to Archdeacon Scott, 'nor is it in our power to create any which will benefit them.'²⁰ This was an opinion he held to the end of his days²¹ and which was the cause of some friction between him and other missionaries. His view appears not to have been based on the same strong objections as Dr Hamilton's (quoted above), but rather on the belief that the advantages of civilisation would attach native peoples to missionaries and so lay the groundwork for the introduction of Christianity.

Missionaries going amongst Savage nations are very differently situated from those who go to preach the Gospel to civilized Heathens – It is necessary to introduce the simple Arts amongst the Savages in order to arrest their idle vagrant Habits . . . I think it will be very difficult for missionaries to maintain their Ground in any Savage Country without the Introduction of Arts and Commerce.²²

Marsden's missionary energies were therefore spent on the Maoris of New Zealand who, unlike the Australian Aborigines, were attracted to European goods. Others agreed with this view that it was impossible to attract the Aborigines to European ways. They had nothing to trade with Europeans and 'where there is no incitement exertion cannot be expected'.²³

Similarly, it was observed by several commentators that Aborigines appeared to be quite impervious to what Europeans saw as the comforts of civilisation. While some missionaries were able to persuade them to build simple huts, for example, most Aborigines showed a dislike for staying in such confined areas.²⁴ Nor did they always see clothes as any particular advantage, especially when engaged in the hunt, and would cast missionary-endowed garments aside if they became inconvenient.²⁵ Other 'advantages' of civilisation like growing crops to be assured of a food supply were also dismissed, and while they would occasionally assist the missionaries in the fields in return for food or fish-hooks, they refused offers of a piece of land to grow their own crops, on the grounds that they would have to do all the work and then be obliged to share the crop.²⁶ William Watson saw their sharing obligations as being 'one of the impediments that lie in the way of their becoming possessed of property'.²⁷

Nevertheless, most missionaries, while acknowledging these drawbacks, did not agree with Marsden that they were sufficient reason for not trying to convert Aborigines. Many,

²⁰ Marsden to Scott, 2 December 1826, Threlkeld Correspondence, LMS Archives.

²¹ Marsden to Coates, 23 February 1836, Bonwick Transcripts, Box 54. He again claimed 'They have no wants'.

²² Marsden to Taylor and Watson, 15 August 1822, Bonwick Transcripts, Box 52.

²³ 'Agricola', *Sydney Gazette*, 14 August 1819.

²⁴ Evidence of Threlkeld, Report of the Committee on the Aborigines Question, NSWLCVP/1838.

²⁵ Moreton Bay Annual Report for 1838, CMS Archives. Evidence of Schmidt, Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, 1845/17.

²⁶ Watson's Journal, 7 July 1836, CMS Archives. Evidence of Threlkeld, Report of the Committee on the Aborigines Question, NSWLCVP/1838/21.

²⁷ Watson's Journal, 7 July 1836, CMS Archives.

indeed, recognised that when European civilisation did provide incitement it also led 'semi-barbarous' man into temptation, immorality and wretchedness because he had not the 'correct view of his duty' nor sufficient firmness of mind to resist its temptation.²⁸ Polding suggested that the material benefits of civilisation should be used to attend the Aborigines' physical wants:

thus you conciliate confidence, induce moral habits, give expansion to the mental powers, thus you prepare them for religious truths.²⁹

But he firmly believed that no man could 'remain permanently civilized except through the means of religion', nor could civilisation be introduced in any other way than through Christianity,³⁰ so that Polding would appear to have agreed with the Church Missionary Society's policy of simultaneous introduction of both Christianity and civilisation.

William Westgarth maintained that the missionaries could succeed in introducing civilisation to the Aborigine even when they failed to convert him to Christianity. They could tame and subdue his spirit, and by removing all 'inducements to his barbarous customs and wandering habits, maintain him at least in quietness, without injury to himself or the colonists'. He admitted that the Aborigines would thus be deprived of their former enjoyments but pointed out that colonisation had made them unobtainable anyway.³¹ Such an aim was not shared by any of the missionaries or their societies, although it may well have been shared by other Europeans. La Trobe, for example, acknowledged that 'the real advantages of the extension of civilization in any degree to the Aboriginal Natives, are mainly on the side of the Europeans'.³² He also believed that any attachment to civilisation displayed to date among the Australian Aborigines could not be considered the fruits of Christianity.³³

On the other hand the 'Christianity first' school received considerable support. Several missionaries from various mission fields told the House of Commons Select Committee that the Gospel should come first. The Reverend William Yate was one of these, and he brought his New Zealand experience to bear when he gave evidence:

Fifteen years we attempted to civilize without effect, and the very moment that Christianity established itself in only one instance in the island, from that moment civilization commenced, and has been going on, hand in hand with Christianity, but never preceded it.³⁴

Yate asserted that Christianity was the only way of raising the moral character 'and proving the means of their civilization', and added that he found this to be true not only in New Zealand, but also 'in the Friendly Islands, the Navigators – the Feejee and the Hapai Islands in the South Seas'.³⁵ Another South Seas missionary agreed with Yate and said he had not

²⁸ Rev. William Cowper, examined before the Executive Council 17 April 1838, HRA 1/xx/616.

²⁹ Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, NSWLCVP, 1845/10.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 1845/8, 10.

³¹ Westgarth 1846:37.

³² Evidence of C.J. La Trobe, Superintendent of Port Phillip, Appendix to the Report from the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate, NSWLCVP 1849/7.

³³ NSWLCVP 1849/5.

³⁴ House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), BPP/7/425/1837/200.

³⁵ BPP/7/425/1837/203.

the slightest doubt that Christianity must come first: 'I think the most effectual and the most speedy way to civilize a people is to commence with teaching them the principles of Christianity'. He said of his own experience in the Pacific:

We could not get them to do anything, or evince any attention to industrious habits, till they made a profession of Christianity. There must be an impetus given to the mind before they will aspire to these improvements.³⁶

Another missionary to claim success in the Pacific by converting to Christianity first was the Reverend S. Leigh, who said the natives in Tahiti were leading civilised lives 'since they received the gospel of peace'.³⁷ Dandeson Coates of the Church Missionary Society told the Select Committee that Christianity must come first because it made men peaceable and honest, and thus prepared the way for civilisation.³⁸ This view seems to have been a modification of the instructions to William Watson quoted above.

Experience on the Australian missionary field largely supported the 'Christianity first' theory. Broughton told the House of Commons Select Committee that he had come to the conclusion that the process of first trying to settle the Aborigines and then to teach them to abandon their former habits, should be reversed. They should be given a knowledge of Christianity 'and make that the groundwork of better habits of life'. He said he based this opinion on the failure of preceding attempts.³⁹

James Günther expressed the belief that the Aborigines of Wellington Valley would never be fully civilised until they became Christians and the Christian principle was 'implanted in their minds'. This was the only way to prevent them from reverting to their former habits, the only way to overcome their innate dispositions.⁴⁰

Threlkeld also supported the principle of 'Christianity first' from the time he was a missionary candidate and expressed the belief that if he were allowed to preach the Gospel 'in any part of the World', civilisation would follow.⁴¹ In Australia a little over a decade later, he found that this view was diametrically opposed to Marsden's and thus the source of some friction.⁴²

The experience of the Wesleyan missionary, Francis Tuckfield, with Aborigines in the Port Phillip district led him to declare:

All merely civilizing schemes have hitherto failed and if ever we [are to] benefit the Aborigines of Australia I am quite convinced it must be done by bringing the Gospel to exert its full and glorious influence upon them.⁴³

The Lutheran missionary Christopher Eipper, working in the Moreton Bay district, asserted that civilisation could never precede Christianity:

36 Evidence of John Williams, BPP/7/425/1837/668.

37 Leigh to WMS Secretaries, WMS Records NL MS 156.

38 House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlement) BPP 7/425/1837/517.

39 BPP 7/125/1837/19.

40 Gunther to Colonial Secretary, 9 January 1843, HRA/1/xxii/646.

41 Threlkeld to Burder, 21 July 1815, Archives of the Council for World Mission, Candidates' Papers Box 16.

42 Threlkeld to Burder, 27 March 1826, Bonwick Transcripts Box 53.

43 Tuckfield to Tiechelman, 17 March 1842, Tuckfield's Journal, SLV MS 655/323.

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The Gospel it was, that changed the lazy Hottentot into an industrious subject; the Gospel it will be that works a change in the habits of the indolent Australian.⁴⁴

His colleague William Schmidt said that they worked on the principle that 'civilization will never prosper, without Christianisation having broken the way before it'.⁴⁵

The Reverend William Cowper said that he believed that the government and the colonists should not be satisfied with anything less than making the Aborigines Christians, which would eventually lead them to civilisation.⁴⁶ Tyerman and Bennett, the visiting London Missionary Society agents, urged all influential people in the colony to attempt to civilise the Aborigines by Christian teaching and Christian living.⁴⁷

Others, besides missionaries, gave a similar viewpoint. James Dredge, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, considered that whenever Christianity was introduced it became the parent of civilisation.⁴⁸ One of his colleagues, Edward Parker, agreed, asserting that Christianity alone provided the motive for civilisation.⁴⁹ Neither men gave evidence of having seen proof of this among the Australian Aborigines; like the missionaries, they seem to have been predicting a possible approach.

In making their Report based upon the evidence taken from many witnesses from British Settlements and trading posts throughout the world, the House of Commons Select Commissioners concluded that mere acquaintance with civilised men was not enough to prepare savages for Christianity, but that civilisation invariably followed the adoption of Christianity. All attempts to instruct savages in the civilised arts as a preparation for Christianity had been signally unsuccessful. They stated their conviction

that there is but one effectual means of staying the evils we have occasioned, and of imparting the blessings of civilization, and that is, the propagation of Christianity, together with the preservation, for the time to come of the civil rights of the natives.⁵⁰

The newly founded Aborigines' Protection Society claimed that the 'civilization first' doctrine was 'well nigh universally exploded'. This view, they said, was at total variance with all the evidence; all evidence suggested that the 'invariable result of Christianity is the advancement of civilization'.⁵¹

While the Australian missionaries contributed to the debate, they could do so on theoretical grounds only, for whether like Threlkeld and the Lutherans they recommended conversion before civilisation, or like the Church Missionary Society's agents at Wellington Valley they attempted to introduce both simultaneously, or whether, following Marsden's

44 Eipper to Lang, [n.d.] Lang J.D., Papers re Moreton Bay, ML A2249.

45 Evidence of Rev. William Schmidt, Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, NSWLCVP/1845/20.

46 Cowper to Broughton, Report from the Committee on the Aborigines Question, NSWLCVP/1838/60.

47 Tyerman and Bennett 1840:190.

48 Dredge 1845:32.

49 Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines, NSWLCVP/1845/54.

50 Report from House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) BPP 7/425/1837/45.

51 Aborigines' Protection Society 1838:25-6.

recommendation, civilisation was made the first priority, none of them could claim to have fulfilled their aims. Theories which seemed capable of practical realisation among other 'uncivilised' races appeared to break down when applied to the Australian Aborigines. By 1848 all the early missions in New South Wales had closed, only a handful of infants had been baptised and one adult confirmed, no indigenous clergy had been trained, and the few adults who had learned European skills were generally exploited by the white settlers.

The explanation of this failure lay not in the civilisation/Christianity debate which occupied so much of missionary thinking and anguishing. Nor would the explanation have been comprehended by those missionaries, for they had not yet discerned the nature of Aboriginal spirituality and society.

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