TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY

Niel Gunson


Christianity and Aboriginal Australia. By John Harris. Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society, Dickson, ACT, 1987-88. 5 parts. Pp.12 ea. $2.00 ea. plus postage.


DIANE BARWICK stood out among anthropologists - and historians for that matter - for her understanding and ready acceptance of the Christian dimension of modern Aboriginality. After all, considered per head of population, more Aboriginal people claim to be Christian than the large mass of other Australians. That this is so should not be surprising. Nor is it simply because Christianity can be seen as a 'religion of the oppressed' or even as 'the opiate of the people'. Contrary to early missionary belief Aborigines were an essentially religious people almost perfectly adapted to the natural environment in which they found themselves, but primal religion needed to be synthesised with or replaced by one of the

Niel Gunson is Senior Fellow in the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, The Australian National University, and was Foundation Chairman of Aboriginal History Incorporated. He edited Australian reminiscences and papers of L.E. Threlkeld (1974).
universal or teaching faiths in order for them to adapt and cope with the modern world which burst in upon them so dramatically two hundred years ago.

That such an intrusion by European or Asian powers was inevitable cannot be denied. It is popular in the wake of 1988 to decry the 'invasion' and to deny that Aborigines have anything to celebrate. Indeed the so-called Australian Bicentenary provided a wonderful opportunity for Aborigines to draw attention to the multitudinous grievances they have suffered since contact. Yet there is one important thing to celebrate. Under almost any other European or Asian combination the original people of the Australian continent are likely to have been entirely eradicated. One only has to think of the fate of the Californian Indians under Spanish colonisation.\textsuperscript{1} The tradition of British Evangelical and philanthropic paternalism combined with the dedicated thoroughness of German, Spanish and Italian missionary traditions ensured the survival and continuance of a people otherwise doomed to die. That the First Fleet brought the seed of salvation as well as the means of destruction was almost entirely due to one man. It was an accident of history or, as he himself would have chosen to express it, the workings of a benign Providence.

One may look in vain for the name of the great British philanthropist John Thornton (1720-1790) in the general histories and even the church histories of Australia, yet it was this influential but self-effacing man who was responsible for the appointment of the first chaplains to New South Wales and the formulation of the first missionary policy. As leader of the largest and largely amorphous Evangelical connexion in England, Thornton boasted that he had more chaplains than George III.\textsuperscript{2} Through the institutions which he founded and his personal chaplains, such as John Newton, he was responsible for the selection and training of the first chaplains to the colony particularly Richard Johnson and Samuel Marsden.\textsuperscript{3} Perhaps more importantly he was responsible for the missionary policy which they introduced and fostered.

For perhaps the first fifty years of contact the most successful form of missionary endeavour was the 'domestic experiment', the practice of raising orphaned Aboriginal children in the homes of pious citizens.\textsuperscript{4} Thornton had great faith in the ability of Christianity to transform and enlarge the powers of the 'savage intellect', and in the innate capacities of the culturally deprived.\textsuperscript{5} He corresponded with the Negro poet Phillis Wheatley and the American Indian minister, Samson Occom. Indeed, he continued to support and sympathise with Occom when deserted by his New England committee for drunkenness, admiring all that had been positive in the good Indian's life.\textsuperscript{6} It was Phillis Wheatley, however, who inspired the domestic experiment. Taken as an untutored slave girl, fresh

---

\textsuperscript{1} The dedicated work of the missionaries was largely negated by the soldiers who rounded up the 'wild' Indians for labour gangs.

\textsuperscript{2} Thornton's role will be discussed at length in my book-in-progress \textit{Whitefield and the connexions}. After 1790 the Evangelical connexion was developed and expanded into the Evangelical party of the Church of England and Thornton's immediate associates became known as the 'Clapham Sect'.

\textsuperscript{3} Many acts attributed to Wilberforce before 1790 should properly be attributed to his 'uncle' Thornton. Church historians have blurred the truth, though Marsden gave full credit to his benefactor.

\textsuperscript{4} A contrary view is taken by many historians who cite the much publicised 'moral' failures and premature deaths.

\textsuperscript{5} The object of the Marine Society, of which he was treasurer, was to give street boys and orphans the opportunity to have a successful career in the navy.

\textsuperscript{6} Love 1899.
from Africa at the age of ten, Phillis was raised by Mrs Wheatley of Boston, and when only nineteen was acclaimed as a remarkable prodigy. Well read in the classics and modern learning she published a book of elegant verse in which she lamented the sufferings of her people, urged the desirability of liberty under the Crown, and extolled the saving virtue of Whitefield's theology. Thornton entertained both Phillis and Occom in London, and was convinced that Phillis was a genuine case of nurtured talent by Christian foster parents.

It would be difficult to assess the success or otherwise of the 'domestic experiment' in New South Wales as no public records were kept and Marsden denounced the practice. One rather supposes that the public were never told the real reason why bringing up an Aboriginal boy in a family predominantly of girls was not a success. But numerous successes there were. As so often happens in similar circumstances the young Aboriginal women tended to marry European rather than Aboriginal men and at least one Aboriginal youth married a European woman and acquired a farming property. Such families ultimately merged with the European community. Genealogists may well discover that our old colonial stock has a relatively high proportion of 'black' genes. Aboriginal ancestry is not easy to detect. At least one British peer and one former premier of New South Wales are of Aboriginal descent.

Thornton's policy was not consciously geared to racial assimilation, nor did the raising of black children in white households necessarily have the ugly features of some twentieth-century social experiments when children were forcibly removed from parents. There were no prodigies, however, and no Samson Occoms emerged until after almost a century of missionary contact. Perhaps the 'domestic experiment' is best typified by the portrait in oils by J.M. Crossland of 'An Aboriginal boy in European dress playing cricket' held by the National Library.

As yet there is no comprehensive history of missionary activity amongst the Aborigines nor of the Aboriginal response to Christianity. Early attempts to tell the story of the missions were written within the perimeters of sectional or denominational interests, and more recent and detailed accounts have concentrated on particular missions or missionaries. In publishing thirty-three papers given at two symposia in Adelaide in 1986 Swain and Rose have provided much raw material and many themes which could be developed in such a history. Their compilation *Aboriginal Australians and Christian missions* will prove a valuable 'source book' for courses in tertiary institutions providing many cases for analysis and debate, but more general readers will probably come away confused by the complexity of the issues and the diversity of approach. Sheer narrative history to the point of tedium alternates with more analytical but abstruse studies and the more experiential accounts of participants. It will only be possible here to look at those individual authors whose contributions touch on the general themes under review.

---

7 Wheatley 1773.
8 Gunson 1974:1, 27; II, 300.
9 In South Africa the white colonial population had 5 per cent 'coloured' blood.
10 It was expected, however, that young Aboriginal women would go into service. Mrs Crook, a missionary's wife in Tahiti, had an Aboriginal companion for her daughters.
12 Some recent studies include Bishop Salvado and New Norcia, John Smithies and the Swan River, Daniel Matthews and Maloga, and several Arnhem Land missions.
Missionary history in Australia before 1860 has frequently received a bad press. The importance of the domestic experiment policy initiated by Thornton and followed not only by the chaplains but also by senior government servants has been underestimated. All too often the missionaries' own self-assessments of failure at a theological or socio-religious level, particularly in the period between the 1820s and the 1840s, have been taken as an admission of failure at social transformation or ideological assimilation.

Denominational bias and missionary polemics have all too often assisted this image of failure accepted by church and secular historians alike. Yet in this period many Aborigines made their own syncretic assessments of their expanded world relating their new knowledge of a white-dominated world to their ancient knowledge of the land without necessarily rejecting all their own beliefs and without necessarily accepting all the dogma and new mythology of the invading culture. Missionaries may not have made the kind of converts they wanted but they provided the symbols and motifs of social transformation.

Jean Woolmington is one of the more experienced historians of Aboriginal missions relying on sound documentation. In her essay in Swain and Rose she provides a useful chronology of the major events in the pre-1848 era in eastern Australia, but judges the mission experience against the background and attitudes of the missionaries themselves. John Harris, in his Zadok working papers, provides a much more detailed account of the early missions, though he accepts the notion of failure highlighted by Woolmington in her major work, and downplays the domestic experiment policy. Until historians look at the missions in terms of overall cultural impact they will accept this conclusion of failure. But in non-religious terms the missions provided linguistic and ethnographic studies, gave some protection in the courts, made some impact on public opinion, and provided a base for genuine religious growth.

It is sometimes overlooked that a number of relatively successful missions commenced before the demise of the first east coast missions. These missions were fairly similar in aim and scope to the earlier ones but had the advantage of being accessible to larger population groupings, were favoured by continuing government patronage, and were mostly staffed by dedicated continental European staff who had no other commitments in the colonies. German Lutheran missionaries began work in Queensland and South Australia in 1838 and Spanish Benedictines commenced the prestigious New Norcia mission in 1846.

Edwin Schurmann's study of his great-grandfather's work is a fascinating and informative account of mid-century mission life. The book is beautifully presented and deserves to be widely known. Like earlier missionaries Schurmann did not regard himself as successful (see pp.173-4). He was, however, a good ethnographic observer. While his dogmatic approach had no room for Aboriginal 'superstition' he consciously assisted the syncretic process essential to the transformation of primal religion:

*Munaintyerlo*, who of old lived on earth, but who sits now above, has made the sun, moon and stars, the earth and the visible world in general. As soon as I got this name, I substituted it for the hitherto used Jehova, which they could scarcely pronounce... If further discoveries do not show that they combine too pagan and absurd ideas with the name *Munaintyerlo*, I mean to retain it for the name of God.
He was later to discover that the word simply referred to a 'very ancient being' (p.91), but he listened and engaged in dialogue and no doubt assisted in helping many Aborigines to come to terms with the changes impinging upon their traditional beliefs. He recognised their 'clear perception of the immateriality and immortality of the soul' (p.239) though he confessed he could not deal with it.

Like most of the early missionaries Schurmann was continually involved in attempting to smooth relations between Aborigines and settlers in his capacity as Protector. Thus, when John Hamp, a shepherd, was mutilated and had his head cut off with a saw in 1848 (p.185) Schurmann recalled that a similar mutilation had been carried out previously by white soldiers, and that the 'reign of terror' mentioned by Inspector Tolmer was a two-sided affair.

By far the most controversial Protector was George Augustus Robinson, sometime Commandant at Flinders Island Aboriginal settlement. Vivienne Rae-Ellis's biography is authoritative and well researched. Those whose only knowledge of Robinson is derived from Plomley's two monumental volumes on the Protector and the Flinders Island mission may be surprised to learn that the Protector was not all that he seemed, that the records show him to have been dishonest, and generally unpleasant. But while the Rae-Ellis biography is a much needed corrective Robinson is one of those larger than life Australian figures, like Samuel Marsden, who will have detractors and supporters as long as the records survive. At least Robinson knew the cardinal rule of reporting to associations, that in order to succeed you must tell your patrons what they want to hear or they will cut you off. He was more likely to gain the respect of Aborigines than some of those who complained about his methods.

Plomley in Swain and Rose gives a gloomy picture of the Tasmanian mission, a view partly coloured by Robinson's own views of those sent to assist him. His dismissal of the domestic experiment in Tasmania is based on the abuses of that system - kidnapping children to raise as domestic servants - rather than on its successes. It is all too easy to read back into our early history the abuses of the unrelated adoption schemes of the twentieth century.

Miller's study of Thomas Dove may seem slight in comparison with the detailed work of Plomley and Rae-Ellis, but it gives a sounder view of the Presbyterian cleric appointed to the Flinders Island mission than comes direct from the biased pen of Robinson. The egotistic Robinson felt the Doves were ill-bred because Mrs Dove would not take his hand nor would Dove mention him by name in the mission prayers. But there is always Bonwick's glimpse of Dove at the deathbed of King George alias Old Tom (p.100): 'the last effort of the dying man was affectionately to smile at the pastor and squeeze his hand'. That counted for something.

Things were grim on the Tasmanian mission frontier because of the 'wars' or genocide of the 1820s. Later in the century frontier conditions were worse in Western Australia than in the eastern colonies because of the nature of settlement and the official policy towards 'wild Blacks'. Labour was forcibly recruited and settlers frequently took a proprietary attitude to their 'blacks'. Indeed, the frontier situation differed very little from the repressive military regime in colonial California.

---

19 Plomley mentions at least one case of Christian marriage between Aborigines (Swain and Rose 1988:94).
The Rev. John Brown Gribble was undoubtedly the greatest public champion of the Aborigines in the late nineteenth century, a stance which even brought him into conflict with church authorities eager to avoid confrontation and political involvement. From being a Congregational minister who took an interest in the Aborigines of his rural charge in the vicinity of the river Murray, he founded his own mission under Anglican patronage. In 1884 he was invited to work in Western Australia, opening the Gascoyne River mission in 1885. Though the mission only lasted two years his confrontation with the opponents of the mission had lasting repercussions.

Gribble's *tour de force, Dark deeds in a sunny land*, published first in a Perth newspaper in 1886 and republished as a booklet in 1905, was a damning indictment of the local labour system and a major document in the crusade for social justice. While the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies and the University of Western Australia Press are to be congratulated for republishing Gribble's tract it is a pity that they could not persuade Professor Tonkinson to write a more lengthy biographical introduction. As it is, Su-Jane Hunt's essay on 'The Gribble Affair' given as an appendix had already been published and is inaccurate in regard to Gribble's early life.

But Gribble was not just important in Western Australian history. As founder of the Yarrabah Mission near Cairns in 1892 his work was carried on by his son Ernest from 1894 to 1910. Ernest's missionary labours also extended to Western Australia where he was head of the Forrest River Mission in 1914-28. Several essays in Swain and Rose and Harris's fourth Zadok paper touch on the work of the Gribbles. The Yarrabah Mission is also the subject of Judy Thomson's monograph *Reaching back*. This collection of Aboriginal reminiscences is a pleasant non-judgemental record of Aboriginal spirituality, the Aboriginal participants showing respect for the Gribbles, respect for the old ways, and searching for meaning in other byways including new sects.

The enduring Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran missions established from the mid-1880s figure prominently in Swain and Rose. These missions produced some great missionaries, including Duncan McNab, Bishop Gsell, Nicholas Emo, Ernest Worms, the Strehlows and others, some of them with anthropological insights or training. In his essay the ex-missioner Michael Alroe concentrates on what he calls the 'Pygmalion complex' among missionaries in the Kimberleys. Even those missionaries acclaimed as enlightened, such as Emo and Worms, are seen by Alroe as being the enemies of Aboriginal culture, parasites living on a host which it is in their interest to keep alive. Noel Loos, looking at Lutherans, Moravians and Anglicans in North Queensland, sees both concern and contempt, and concludes that 'it is hard to imagine Christianity being taken in worse circumstances to a people than has been the case with Aborigines throughout much of Australia'. In all these studies there is still a tendency to judge the missionaries by the missionaries' own standards rather than look at the values and beliefs of the people arising from their mission experience.

The papers in Swain and Rose which deal with the history of missions in the twentieth century cover more diverse topics ranging from the repressive regimes of sectaries to studies

---

22 Swain and Rose 1988:30-44.
which highlight the reciprocal interaction of missioners and mobs. One of the most disturbing developments in twentieth-century missionary experience was the Church's acquiescence in adoption and educational schemes which separated Aboriginal children from their parents. Unlike the domestic experiment of early colonial days, which was theoretically voluntary and egalitarian, the twentieth-century schemes were partly based on the acceptance of the precepts of social Darwinism, that Aborigines were stone-age people who would die out if left to themselves. In several states Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents. The story of the Colebrook Home for Aboriginal Children, administered by the United Aborigines' Mission, was one of the more successful ventures in this sphere. Today these schemes are seen as racist but in their day they were opposed by another type of racist who resented Aborigines or part-Europeans being given opportunities to assimilate into the white community.

One of the themes of the Swain and Rose collection is that the Aboriginal people themselves have responded to Christian missions in a 'coherent, reasoned and intelligent manner'. This should be obvious to anyone who has studied the missionisation process but it has not always seemed obvious to fundamentalist missionaries on the one hand or doctrinaire anthropologists on the other. It has been all too easy to castigate the non-converting Aboriginal as an 'ignorant savage' or the Aboriginal convert as an 'Uncle Tom' or a cultural drop-out.

During the two hundred years of contact Aboriginal spirituality appears to have ranged widely through various syncretist forms. Ever since Andrew Lang suggested that Baiame and the other sky gods owed their existence to the absorption of missionary ideas there has been debate concerning the origin of 'syncretist' beliefs. The missionary Schurmann also thought some such beliefs were borrowed.

When a good man dies, his soul flies, as they express it, upwards or to heaven, where there are plenty of kangaroos and other food. Bad men, one person told me, go down into a great fire, but I am not sure if he had not heard that from an European.

Since most primal religions (including the universal religions which derived from them) ultimately derive from the shamanic practices or beliefs that were common to the human species for many thousands of years it should not be surprising that Aboriginal religions and Christianity have some features in common. Concepts such as the three-tier universe, the world tree, the avian nature of the soul, genesis from the earth, the power of crystals and the ritual use of water are found on all the continents. In this regard Barry Alpher's commentary on Jack Bruno's elegy in Swain and Rose is pertinent. One is therefore a little sceptical concerning Swain and Rose's statement about the myth of the forbidden fruit in the mythology of the Otati of eastern Cape York Peninsula being of Judaeo-Christian origin, for the shamanic myth of the forbidden berry can be found in

---

24 See particularly Peter Willis on conversion at Kununurra in Swain and Rose 1988:308-20.
25 When I was at school (1936-48) it was actually taught that Aborigines could be totally assimilated genetically within four generations and the only physical characteristics to survive would be thin ankles! Diane Barwick first drew my attention to the inappropriateness of the intelligence tests applied by the anthropologist Porteus, which were used to support the racial arguments for assimilation.
26 See Swain and Rose 1988:140-55; and Harris 1987-88:Pt 5, 2-5.
27 Schurmann 1987:46.
28 Swain and Rose 1988:16.
ancient Finland and the Marquesas as well as in Mesopotamia!\textsuperscript{29} From the point of view of social history some of the most interesting and useful essays in Swain and Rose are those in the fourth section which discuss issues of syncretism, rejection, cultism and indigenisation. They illustrate clearly the survival of the Aboriginal religious overview irrespective of the changes in the cultural or mythological \textit{dramatis personae}.

For many Aboriginal Christians there is some satisfaction in being able to relate their own traditions to the religion of the Bible. Thus Lorna Schrieber, ‘Queen of the Gungganyji’, relates Bible stories to traditional beliefs and sees it as her mission to teach the old cultural ways to the young.\textsuperscript{30} For many Christian Aborigines, however, the attraction is now to simple dogma. The nineteenth century saw many cases of genuine conversions to a dogmatic faith, but never enough to astound the missionaries. Yet, in more recent generations, it has been the dogmatic beliefs, expressed in simple faith, which have been the most fervent expressions of Aboriginal Christianity. Most of the ordained Aboriginal priests and ministers have come from Evangelical and fundamentalist traditions. Those who search outside the missions tend to gravitate to revivalist churches such as the Assembly of God or the Full Gospel Church.\textsuperscript{31} The Aboriginal Christian revival movement which commenced at Elcho Island in 1979 is a form of dogmatic spirituality which was both the result of missionisation and a need of the people themselves to cope with the social predicaments of their era.\textsuperscript{32}

Many of the essays in Swain and Rose, particularly those by Burridge, the Berndts, Tonkinson, Bell and others provide valuable anthropological insights and analysis. It is a pity, however, that there is so little input by Christian Aborigines. Aboriginal theology is still in its infancy in Australia and there is nothing comparable to the Black Theology so manifest in the United States and South Africa.\textsuperscript{33} Yet even so, the Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra of Elcho Island is both a modern Christian leader and theologian.\textsuperscript{34} His views are representative of a new Christian Aboriginality. Other Aboriginal church leaders such as Pastor Denzil Humphries and Pastor Ossie Cruse of the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship and Bishop Arthur Malcolm represent the most recent flowering of Aboriginal religion. Bishop Malcolm, a great nephew of the Reverend James Noble ordained in 1925, continues as it were the Gribble tradition of Yarrabah. For these leaders two hundred years of Christianity provide a gateway to the future of their people.

\textsuperscript{29} Swain and Rose 1988:1.
\textsuperscript{30} Thomson 1989:116.
\textsuperscript{31} See Thomson 1989:115, 120.
\textsuperscript{32} See Swain and Rose 1988:67, 245; and Harris 1987-88:Pt 5, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{33} See, for instance, Kretzschmar 1986.
\textsuperscript{34} See Gondarra 1986a and 1986b.


Murtagh, James G. *Australian missions.* Australian Catholic Truth Society, Melbourne, 1941.


Diane Barwick at an official University function c.1985.