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EDITORIAL

THIS ISSUE CARRIES an article on Aboriginal revival by Fr Eugene Stockton, a theological lecturer at Manly seminary and a pre-historian of some note. He has been involved with Aborigines in the Sydney area, mainly, for quite a few years. His article is a reflection on his own experience and the observed experience of many others. Its actual 'point de départ' is a recent book by Hans Mol, which he also reviews in this issue (though the review was originally commissioned and published by the *Australasian Catholic Record*, vol. LXI/2, April 1984 pp.208-210).

The article does not pay much attention to Mol's erudite discussion of various scholarly positions and theories — a discussion that I don't find very convincing at times. In fact I'm prepared to suggest that, though the article will almost certainly receive less academic attention than the book, the article is much more important. This, for two reasons. Firstly, detaching the positive elements from Mol's wide-ranging, condensed and maybe not wholly satisfactory discussions, the article states them more clearly. Secondly, as the article draws on a wider lived experience than Mol's as far as the Aboriginal scene is concerned and is more up-to-date in regard to recent significant happenings which are still in progress, the article makes its point more cogently than the book.

The other two papers in this issue have a similar positive content in common: each is searching for a way to enhance the self-esteem of Aboriginal people. Neil Bell is concerned about creating a social milieu in which Aboriginal self-esteem can be given room to develop. Chester Street looks to a more genuine christian discipleship. In a later issue I hope to take up this theme rather more in the line of Eugene Stockton's article: the discipleship that needs to be made the object of christian endeavour is the full sort that overflows into ministry to others, Aboriginal self-ministry. This is surely the *nelen yubu*, the good way 'par excellence'!

Martin J Wilson

Editor

ABORIGINAL REVIVAL

Eugene D. Stockton

SOCIOLOGIST HANS MOL (author of the wellknown *Religion in Australia*), collaborating with a group of Canberra economists in research into economic motivation of Aborigines, recently published his *The Firm and the Formless: Religion and Identity in Aboriginal Australia*.¹ Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, he concludes that for Aboriginal revitalisation economic self-sufficiency is subordinate to a new viable and firm view of existence, in a word, religious renewal. He sees economic goals, to which 'we could have added political power and scientific objectivity' (p.93), as not providing adequate answers to the problem. Especially self-defeating is the whole apparatus of social welfare, since it only touches the surface and leads to greater impotence and dependence. Likewise economic independence in the form of newfound wealth of some communities will not solve the basic malaise, either for those communities or for Aborigines in general. On the other hand, a return to the Dreaming is not a viable solution either.

The malaise of Aboriginal communities is admittedly a complex matter comprising many facets (e.g. lack of purpose and motivation, alienation, anomie) and symptoms (e.g. alcoholism, poverty, unemployment, lack of education, inability to cope, family breakdown), and operating simultaneously on various levels (e.g. spiritual, political, economic, societal). We each have our own hobby horse, leading to emphasis on one or other aspect of the problem, in the fond illusion that it suggests the key to opening the door to all the rest. Beware of single, simple solutions. However, I believe Mol is on the right track in identifying the root of the Aboriginal problem (or the 'white man's problem' if you like) as the loss of identity, both communal and personal, in the face of European aggression. The breakdown of identity does not directly result from the clash of two very different and unequal cultures, grievous though it may have been, but from the inadequacy of the old religion to continue to give meaning in a new, harsher world of existence. Religious breakdown was both an early casualty (through destruction of sacred sites, dis-possession and relocation of communities) and a continuing instrument of aggression.

The sociologist sees religion as a way of bolstering a precarious identity by affirming order in an existence which would otherwise fragment into formlessness; but European contact brought about changes vastly greater than those which traditional religion was accustomed to accommodate within its delineations of order, and this in turn occasioned the collapse of Aboriginal identity.

Just as the breakdown, though precipitated by a set of powerful external forces, was radically an inner collapse, so too Aboriginal revitalisation, no matter how much it is supported by wise and friendly elements of the majority culture, must ultimately be from within. Already there are hopeful signs of this on a secular level in the out-station movement, in the struggle for land rights and in the moves towards a pan-Aboriginal identity. These can only be partially effective. Comprehensive inner revitalisation, which can also provide impetus for revival on other levels as well, can only come through a religious renewal. A return to the Dreaming is no longer viable since it can only turn its back on change. Change, for better or for worse, has happened and cannot be undone. The only real option in Mol's opinion is a successful absorption of change through a new system of transcendental thinking which gives meaning to all elements of the new order and locates the person meaningfully in the new universe. For Aboriginality to come of age Mol appears to offer the prospect of an amalgam of the Dreaming and Christianity, which already have much in common:

'... numerous elements of dramatization, some of which come to the heart of things; wholeness/breakdown, salvation/sin, order/disorder, resurrection/crucifixion, life/death, and so on. There is in both a basic commitment and loyalty, not to what man can control but to what transcends man. There is in both a comprehensive intent that is abysmally missing in the segmented idolatries of the twentieth century' (p.93).

Mol also insists on the need of emotional energy, currently in short supply, for embracing this option.

There are already historical precedents for syncretist transcendental systems to absorb change. Overseas Mol instances:

'The various, well-documented revitalization movements of other countries in which Western/native elements merged smoothly in which strong loyalties were purified by ascetic techniques' (p.91).

More noteworthy examples closer to home, though limited in extent, are two indigenous movements of syncretist pentecostal character, that of the NSW Bandalang since 1952², and the Jinimin myth in

central and northwest Australia since 1963³. As a comparable model Mol cites Alcoholics Anonymous, interesting because it takes its point of departure from individual destitution. Though it is professedly secular, AA stresses a transcendental order at the heart of its 'creed' and is recognisably an application of Gospel principles of salvation to a secular need. In AA ex-alcoholics constantly witness to a conversion resulting in a changed identity, renewed motivation and a conviction of personal responsibility over their own lives, with the indefatigable support and guidance of a group of peers. (Later I will suggest that AA might be viewed not only as a means of personal reformation for the individual, but as a paradigm for the renewal of Aboriginal communities which find themselves at 'rock bottom' largely as a result of unrestricted drinking).

From these examples Mol concludes that success in revitalization depends on four characteristics:

1. Leadership by charismatic figures who could strip away an old identity and weld a new one, because they were acquainted with, or could visualize both;
2. a strong anti-white, religiously motivated, and strongly reinforced stance;
3. a strongly held combination of traditional and Christian beliefs;
4. a system of ascetic rules which would clarify all priorities and would give to beliefs position of place over the now-disciplined comforts of life' (p.91).

The Jewish-Christian continuum can draw from its own tradition a telling example of revitalisation of a people. In the 6th century BC, Israel suffered a catastrophe which could well have spelled the end of a people and its religion: 'invincible' Jerusalem was captured and destroyed, the cream of the nation was taken into exile and dispersed, they were cut off from the temple cult and from all that was held essential to their religious life (Dan. 3:11-18 in LXX), the people was utterly demoralised and threatened with absorption in a larger cosmopolitan world (as other small nations at that time had suffered deportation and extinction). But the people rallied, in God's providence, displaying the same four characteristics:

1. Charismatic leadership emerged in the priests-turned teachers and in the great prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah II and Ezekiel;
2. A strong national identity was affirmed and strengthened by a religiously motivated anti-gentile feeling;
3. Yahwism became Judaism with paramount stress on the Mosaic Law, a portable form of religion which could serve Jews in any place or situation — but also incorporating

tenets of their neighbours' beliefs such as creation, angels, future life;

4. Jews set out determinedly to regulate their lives according to the minutest prescriptions of the Mosaic Law.

This rallying of the People of God could be seen as a radical retheologising of their religious tradition, by a whole people at different levels, from which emerged a nation with a new identity (though continuous with the old) and almost a new religion. Perhaps the Exile is the most telling example, but the history of the Jewish-Christian continuum abounds in other instances of the cycle of crisis-theologising-renewal, e.g. Exodus, settlement, monarchy, centralisation of cult, Hellenism, Roman domination, destruction of Jerusalem, the breaking out of the Christian Church to the gentile world, barbarian invasions, Renaissance, Reformation etc. Practical, popular theologising (i.e. as distinct from academic study pursued in esoteric literature, hushed libraries and lonely studies) has always been in greatest foment at times of crisis, as the People of God struggled to rethink, modify and widen their religious tradition to meet new situations undreamed-of in the former state. Each time has emerged a people with an identity and religion which was in one sense new and in another continuous with the past.

This is the kind of hopeful struggle facing Aboriginal people today. Martin Wilson of Nelen Yubu and Don Carrington of Nungalinya College are, I believe, prophetic in their call for an Aboriginal theology, i.e. theologising by Aborigines themselves as they blend the new and old traditions into a new religious framework, providing a new identity and meaning in a new world, yet still rooted in the old traditions. I am not imagining a body of theological writings, replete with scientific method and technical jargon — at least not for a couple of hundred years. But theology does occur in keen discussion around the campfire, in the planning of ceremonies, in the composing of new songs, and in the exchange of songs, ritual and ideas which is now taking place away from the notice of white folk. In particular, since Aboriginal thinking tends to be more visual than verbal, true theologising is taking place in new forms of religious painting, of which I have observed many exciting examples in various localities over the last year.

In the midst of very real problems facing Aboriginal communities today, there are also very hopeful signs of religious renewal initiated by Aborigines themselves. Over the last five years a remarkable, but poorly understood, renewal has spread to communities right across Northern Australia and beyond⁴. Significantly it began in a community which could be said to have reached 'rock bottom' through unrestricted drinking. The Aboriginal pastor of Elcho Island, Terry

Djinyini, and some friends had been praying desperately for three years for the bondage to be broken. Then something happened, which as he described it to me sounded like a group pentecostal experience (of a type now familiar in the charismatic renewal). Radical changes took place in that community and, and through visits and direct evangelism, many other communities were caught up in the movement.

As the revival came to the notice of whites, negative elements were stressed such as extreme fundamentalism and puritanism, sectarian hostility, repudiation of traditional religion (e.g. sacred sites, ceremonies, myths). However I suspect that these aberrations are not characteristic of the movement in general but of its localised manifestations (e.g. in East Kimberley). At Elcho Island the revival resulted in a re-discovery of, and a re-identification with, the traditional heritage leading to a sensitive amalgamation of the new and the old. Except for the anti-white stance item, the movement bears out Mol's prognosis for Aboriginal revitalisation. It is worth repeating that it is highly significant that this renewal rose out of a curse bedevilling most Aboriginal communities, the alcohol problem — I am convinced that real renewal only begins at the point of personal and communal poverty ⁵ — as if alcohol may yet prove to be the providential means to Aboriginal conversion.

Less of a movement, there appear nevertheless signs of renewal on Catholic missions as well. At Balgo and its outstations I observed preparations for baptism and confirmation; these were not children but adults, some elderly, receiving instruction in their own language from their friends. Whatever one may have judged about internalisation of christian beliefs in the past, the earnestness of those giving and receiving instruction would leave no room for doubt. At Balgo too has just begun a style of large scale religious painting, executed by groups of painters in the abstract style of the desert, with arresting and original juxtaposition of Old and New Testament motifs — certainly a form of visual theologising. Last year at Hall's Creek three hundred people from six far-flung communities gathered to celebrate Pentecost⁶. Though some missionaries had been invited, the initiative was entirely Aboriginal: the organisation, the corroborees composed for the occasion, the liturgy, the camp logistics, the feasting. They want to repeat it on a large scale. There too I heard of the influence of former lepers, out of their closer contact with the Church in leprosaria, now providing deeper instruction back in their own communities. At Red Hill nearby I attended a campfire prayer meeting of elderly people, quiet, simple and full of faith. From other missions in the Top End comes news of Aborigines forming their own AA groups. Such events may be isolated flotsam on the sea, or flecks on swelling waters, or a wave passing only to be drawn up in a

following surge. Time alone will tell, but the wisdom is to be ready for the incoming tide.

What part can be found for missionaries and their associates in a scenario of renewal where Aborigines are no longer choristers echoing an action but principal players. The following points come immediately to mind and are not proposed as comprehensive.

1. Men of religion can find in their own Gospel the self-effacing ideal of the friend of the bridegroom (Jn.3:25-30), the voice in the wilderness (Matt.3:1-3), the servant-apostle (1 Cor.1-4).

It is not easy to climb down from the pulpit, to be supportive and non-directive from the side as the players play out their action centre-stage before God and the world. Not that the pastor is redundant, by any means. By contrast to a time when one sought to feed bellies and minds before feeding the spirit, the missionary now finds there are others ready and equipped to serve the lower, more immediate needs and himself facing a demand for a greater, not less, ministerial role, though a role now so subtle as to tax his spirituality, theology and anthropology as never before.

2. Mol listed an anti-white stance among his four characteristics of revitalisation. A teenager trying to define his identity may need 'pass through a difficult stage' of anti-parent hostility. With wisdom one can bear it as a phase in coming of age. With the same kind of wisdom one might expect and bear manifestations of anti-white feeling among Aborigines, understanding that it may only last for a time while helping to define the new identity. Not that spiritual considerations will render it less hurtful in the concrete circumstance, a special missionary asceticism.

3. If we are prepared to baptise a person, we owe him a practical belief in the indwelling Spirit: his instinct of faith is to be trusted as he finds new meaning in christian revelation and in the old tradition 'drawing out of his treasure new things and old'. It is the spirit and tradition of Catholicism to embrace a multiplicity of rites and spiritualities, the many expressions of humanity incarnating the Word of God. It is the Aboriginal, not the white minister, who is to theologise the Aboriginal expression of the Incarnate Word. However, the minister may render valuable service in helping the other to articulate what rises wordless from within his spirit. His too it is to encourage the celebration of faith in art and music, the means by which the Aboriginal is first likely to theologise his new identity and to catechise his children into a new world. The Vatican Council taught us to see the Holy Spirit active in non-christian religions preparatory to the Gospel, and so we are entitled to apply this to the Dreaming and not to disparage old ways as 'pagan' (whatever that means, if not rustic). Just as the Old Testament was

the Judaism's preparation for the New, so for the Aboriginal the Dreaming can be seen fulfilled in Jesus — it is little wonder that Old Testament history, with its striking parallels to his own, holds special interest as an example and model of another people who progressed from Law to Grace (Don Carrington, pers.comm.).

4. Catechetics for Aborigines is too large a subject to be treated adequately here, but some general observations on the expressions of faith are pertinent of the present considerations. It is surely obvious that imitation of catechetics devised for one culture can be misleading, even to the point of misrepresentation, in another. The language of catechetics, even more than for theology, is analogy and analogy must always be only an approximation to truth. One seeks an image as close as possible to a revealed truth (itself originally revealed in analogous approximations), complementing it with others to make up for the inherent deficiency of imagery. A successful image is judged not only on its intellectual content but also on its impact on imagination and emotions within a given culture (e.g. I have found the campfire a powerful image with Aborigines). Many of our technical religious terms are at root vivid images of an older culture — few of us hearing words like redemption and sacrifice, realise that Paul (for one) used them not as definitions of revealed realities but as images of his time partially approximating to truth and needing to be complemented by other images. As they stand they may not be especially helpful as analogies in our own culture, less so in a still more different one. Few formulas need to be regarded as canonical, at least in teaching the faith. Again many biblical terms (e.g. grace, glory), which in chains of translation now appear abstract, were in their native Hebrew starkly concrete and would be best translated directly into equivalent concrete expressions for a people similarly minded. Again the Hebrew penchant for telling stories to inculcate religious truth would obviously make catechetical sense in Australia. In devising a new theology and language of faith for and by Aborigines, it would be truer to the spirit of our sources (and to the Holy Spirit who inspired them) to imitate their method of teaching than to reproduce slavishly their culturally conditioned expressions, or worse the western translations of them.

5. The charismatic renewal, now accepted with highest ecclesiastical approval, has enriched the Church with rediscovered insights into revelation and its own tradition and with practical strategies in ministry and spirituality. Since the history of spontaneous renewal movements among Aborigines has shown their affinity for the pentecostal style (though in a gentle, less exuberant mode), there seems to be no reason why such insights and strategies should be ignored. The recurrent fear among pastors of emotional

display is baseless, since religion, like sport and politics, needs healthy emotional expression. Mol observed that emotional energy is one of the requisites for Aboriginal revitalisation and one that is currently in short supply.

6. It is well to recognise that the Catholic tradition has certain advantages over other churches in the Aboriginal apostolate and there is no reason why they should not be exploited. It is often remarked that Aboriginal thinking is more visual than verbal. Bible-based traditions are very dependent on the form of words in conveying revelation to men and in expressing their response to God, whereas sacramental traditions like our own make greater use of symbols, a non-verbal expression, presumably more suited to a visual mentality. Aborigines also appear to be more at home with the sacramental, spirit-conveying character of things, places and persons. The Catholic, like the Aboriginal (and our Semitic forbears), feels at ease with the value of myth in expressing truth, whereas our Protestant brothers, true to western thought, prefer to recognise factual historicity in our common sources. Likewise devotion to Mary is favourably received by Aborigines.

The foregoing is very much a personal manifesto of confidence in Aborigines, in their future and in the part religion may play in forging that future; it also proposed (while humbly aware of grandmother and her eggs) how missionary efforts might respond as developments appear.

FOOTNOTES

1. HANS MOL *The Firm and the Formless: Religion and Identity in Aboriginal Australia* 1982, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Ontario.
2. MALCOLM CALLEY, 'Pentecostalism among the Bandjalang', in Marie Reay (ed.) *Aborigines Now*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1964, pp.48-52. Greater detail can be found in Calley's MA & Ph.D Theses, University of Sydney.

3. PETRI, H and G 'Stability and Change: Present-Day Historic Aspects among Australian Aborigines', in Ronald Berndt (ed.) *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1970, pp.248-76.
4. E STOCKTON 'Renewal Sweeps the North', *Praise*, April 1984, pp.7-8.
5. E STOCKTON 'Renewal', *Out of our Treasure New Things and Old*, Chevalier Press, Kensington, 1982, pp.13-17. Briefly the author sees the steps to renewal as sense of need, thirst, prayer, (expectant) faith, repentance; he further observes that renewal is located in tension between the person and the community, between the past and the future.
6. E STOCKTON 'Pentecost at Rock Hole', *Praise*, (forthcoming).

TOPICAL CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Chester S. Street

AS I READ THROUGH my latest copy of *Nelen Yubu* (No. 17), several things caught my eye. Firstly, there was the favourable report on the 1983 Orientation Course at Nungalinya College including some helpful comments and reactions by the participants. Also of interest was a report on the NTCMC held in October 1983 and the interest expressed by the delegates in alcohol, language and liturgy, formation etc. In Frank Fletcher's essay he noted, among other things, the decline in church-going among adults. Because of the lack of interest in church a considerable number are now turning to sects and drugs. And finally, there was an appeal by Dan O'Donovan to help *Nelen Yubu* survive by contributing articles, no matter what style or type.

So, to take up Dan's challenge and help *Nelen Yubu* survive I want to jot down some thoughts along with Scripture quotations on some of the foremost topics mentioned in the latest *Nelen Yubu*, hoping that all readers do have a mutual interest in these topics, and it may perhaps encourage others to put forther their points of view.

Alcohol

This is always a popular topic and it was the most popular topic at the 1983 NTCMC. Much has already been written on it, including an article of mine (see *Nelen Yubu* No. 6, Nov. 1980). But to talk on this subject in terms of the role of the church today, I strongly believe the church needs to form a solid Bible-based policy with regard to alcohol. The following passages would be a good place to start:

Proverbs 20:1, 23:19-20, 29-34, 31:4-5

Isaiah 5:11

Hosea 4:11

Romans 14:15-21

1 Corinthians 10:31

Ephesians 5:18

1 Thessalonians 5:6

1 Timothy 3:2-3, 8

Titus 1:7, 2:2-3, 6, 3:2

We cannot compare the use of wine in New Testament times to the situation in which we live today, the two are vastly different. I know that many Aboriginal and European people would agree with me that alcohol in an Aboriginal Christian context is totally unacceptable.

Many Aboriginal people here at Port Keats have expressed to me their concern about what alcohol is doing to their community and they know full well the evils of it; and their very genuine concerns have been based upon their own conclusions, not on any Scriptural evidence. If these then are their conclusions, my first belief is that any type of spiritual ministry where alcohol is accepted or compromised with will be fruitless. We have much reference in the Old Testament where the Hebrew people compromised in the worship of God together with pagan idols and the consequences thereof. Today also, we have God's Spirit to help us discern good from evil, as St Paul says, *Whoever has the Spirit, however, is able to judge the value of everything ...* (1 Corinthians 2:15).

The Aboriginal people today are seeking good strong guidance. We cannot compromise, nor can we be fence sitters. Jesus' words to the Laodicean Church as recorded in Revelation 3:15-16 were, *I know what you have done; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth!* No, we can't be fence sitters, we have to take a stand one way or the other. And if we don't take a stand against alcohol then we are implicitly endorsing it. When Herodias' daughter danced at Herod's birthday party and asked for the head of John the Baptist, Herod was not the only man guilty of murder that day. The many official guests there also shared Herod's guilt because no one spoke out against that brutal act. (Mark 6:16-29).

For too long there has been no strong stand against alcohol, and many Aboriginal people have been led astray into drinking only to finish up with some alcohol related disease, or sometimes even death. Often the A.A., Al. Anon. or some such group are then called in to help these sick people. I'm not for one moment criticising the good work these organisations do, but how much better it would have been if these people had never been encouraged to drink in the first place.

'Alcohol is not the problem, but only the symptom of a much greater problem', is an expression we often hear, and basically I agree with that. However, I think it goes a little deeper than that. In talking with older Aboriginal men over the years, I have learnt that even many years ago, when white society was barely making a ripple among their traditional way of life, Aboriginal men found alcohol a temptation and would frequently go in search of it. I believe it is a weak spot they have and one that Satan continually uses to get at them and try to pull them back to himself. I see alcohol as basically

a spiritual issue, and only Christ can provide that extra dimension needed to cope with life and all its problems and temptations. After all, St Paul says, *Do not get drunk with wine which will only ruin you instead be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18)

Church Relevance

Frank Fletcher's comment on the decline in church attendance was referring to the white Australian population, but there has also been a noted decline over recent years in Aboriginal church attendance in some areas. He points out that people have no interest in the church. For one to have interest in church there needs to be a sense of relevance.

Jesus preached very few sermons, but his ministry here on earth was very relevant to those with whom he came in contact. He met their needs both spiritual and physical. I wonder if we are meeting Aboriginal needs today? I don't think we always are, and that is why many turn to drink. And within our own society, as Frank Fletcher says, many are turning to the sects and drugs.

The Aboriginal people urgently need to know that Christ can meet their every need. They need to know that he can give them power over the temptation of alcohol, he can take the burden of their daily living pressures and he is stronger than the evil around that engulfs them in fear. One way to make the Gospel relevant to them is to meet their needs with relevant Scripture passages and pray over these matters with them. So often Jesus quoted Scripture in his dealings with people. And if we can help them with Scripture in their own language, so much the better. The quote from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* No. 63 in the last *Nelen Yubu* is well worth quoting again:

'Evangelism loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete lives.'

Teaching/Discipling . . . as a Church Role

In following on from above, I believe the church needs to be actively involved in a teaching/discipling role. Jesus' disciples were with him constantly for three years and near the end of that time he could say to them, *You are clean through the word . . .* (St John 15:3) Through their personal instruction from Jesus, through their hearing of others being taught, and sometimes through rebuke, these disciples were made clean by his Word. God's Word can have a powerful

cleansing effect on each of our lives. And then to move on further, what were some of Jesus' last words to his disciples before his ascension? *Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples ... and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you* (St Matthew 28:19-20)

I firmly believe the Aboriginal people need much teaching with regards to discipleship and what it means to be a christian. St John (6:66) records how many followers of Jesus left him when they knew what was involved in being a disciple. And truly, many Aboriginal people know very little of what is involved in being a true christian. Only recently an Aboriginal friend of mine told me, 'We understand some of the ten commandments, but not all of them, we don't really understand what God expects of us regarding those laws, nor do we fully know what God expects from us regarding the teachings of Jesus.' Here then, is one felt need that we should meet.

Yes, it is true it is not easy to be a modern day disciple, but Jesus didn't say it would be either. But it certainly involves more than going to church every Sunday. And that is the message that has to get through to the Aboriginal people. The Gospel can't be watered down, nor can we hide some of its teachings, but we must convey the whole message, the full truth, and in so doing expect to see Aboriginal people finding out that christianity is relevant for them and we can then expect to see them maturing in Christ.

RACE RELATIONS IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Some Thoughts on the Frontier¹

Neil Bell

THIS PAPER HAD ITS GENESIS when the writer was approached to discuss the issue of race relations and a possible process of conscientising non-Aboriginal residents to a more positive attitude towards race relations. The paper in a somewhat different form was delivered at the Lake Bennett conference organised by Northern Territory representatives of the National Aboriginal Conference. The paper had been prepared in a very short time and this revision contains some changes and additional thoughts.

Why Discuss Race Relations? Is it a Problem?

One frequently hears criticism of those who would raise the question of race relations that they are creating the very problem that they are seeking to ameliorate.² The more one discusses the problems of race relations, the more a problem develops.

The writer does not share their view. Inevitably the proponents of such views are never the butt of acts of racial discrimination. What is being asked is the perpetuation of unequal, exploitative social and economic relations.

In the situation of Northern Australia where Aborigines by and large form an underclass, a refusal to address the issue of race relations will affect them more seriously and unfairly than the dominant non-Aboriginal group.³

In case there is any doubt that Aborigines are affected more seriously and unfairly, consider these figures from the Office of Community Relations:

In his annual report for the year 1980-81, the Commissioner for Community Relations says:

'The Aboriginal community is the butt of the worst prejudice and consequently suffers greater denial of human rights than any other community.'

Neil Bell, a linguist and teacher by profession, is the present member for Macdonnell in the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory.

He went on to say that the number of complaints of racial discrimination directed against Aboriginal people was 388 out of a total of 904.

By way of corroboration it should be pointed out that the situation reported in 1980-81 was not a particularly singular one: in 1978 the Commissioner had reported:

'As in the previous two years the greatest number of complaints was lodged by Aboriginals comprising 39% of the total as against 27% last year. Such statistics confirm that Australia wide it is the Aboriginal community that suffers the greatest discrimination. Complaints have come from all states and the Northern Territory. Discrimination has been suffered by Aboriginals in practically all areas of public life.'

The writer, and I am sure readers as well, can recount from his own experience. For example, the non-Aboriginal friend who is told in an electrical goods shop to ignore a particular stereo set because the article and its price is aimed at Aboriginals. The non-Aboriginals overheard using aggressive and offensively racist language that does not need to be dignified by repetition. The Aboriginals who are genuinely hurt by these utterances. (To be strictly accurate it should be pointed out that Aboriginals can be intolerant, in the writer's experience, of other social and cultural groups, including those of European descent; however, rarely is the intolerance expressed with the same vehemence as is directed against them, never are the social and economic effects as scarifying.)

To sum up then, it is safe to assume that race relations in Northern Australia is a problem and that as a society we have a responsibility to address it and seek solutions.

What is the Problem?

Given the evidence that race relations is a problem, how do we define the problem? How do we define the situation in which race relations ceases to be a problem?

Let us assume that race relations can be defined in terms of individuals, institutions, social and economic class. We are interested in the reactions of individuals and groups and the ideas that people have about themselves and the groups in which they belong.

Let us commence by considering aspects of a situation in which race relations can be said to be positive and to this end consider three themes: communication, self-esteem and economic well-being.

Firstly, if two people have vastly different views of what is important to them as human beings, and different ways of expressing this, there is very little chance that they will be friends. There is

very little chance that there will be communication of the sort that will enable them to find what they have in common. (The very word 'communication' means etymologically the thing or things that are found to be common. The commonality may be verbal or otherwise.)

To this extent relationships between racial groups mirror interpersonal relationships. If it were easier to find what is common between the institutions of a western culture and the Aboriginal cultures of Australia, race relations would be less of a problem.

There is no doubt that in terms of world-view, religion, attitudes to the law and morality, language and so on, Aborigines and non-Aboriginals hold widely divergent attitudes and values. One cannot escape from a suspicion in Northern Australia that nowhere else in the world is there living side by side such widely different cultures. The miracle is perhaps that there is any communication at all.

On one hand then we have a positive image of race relations where there is plenty of communication between the groups that make up a community. On the other, we have the situation that is essentially a feature of Northern Australia where two very different cultures confront each other in an atmosphere of mutual ignorance and hostility. The situation was described to me by an Aboriginal man who expressed the view that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal law were 'pata nguwanpa', rather a long way apart. One objective then is to increase the communication between individuals and groups and to increase it in both quantity and quality.

Turning to our second theme, it is obviously important for all people to have self-esteem, to have the feeling that they are good people, making a contribution to the world around them in all sorts of ways, to family, friends, the community, wider society and so on.

Self-esteem is a variable on both sides of the race relations equation. Clearly and obviously, the disorientation that many Aboriginal people feel in the situation of culture contact on the frontiers of Northern Australia brings about in many people, particularly males, a poor sense of self-esteem. (Ironically, it seems that in post-contact culture the role of women has been less dislocated than that of men, resulting in a poorer sense of self-esteem on their part).

On the other side of the equation it is often ignored that non-Aboriginal people with a propensity for racial discrimination are so inclined because they are seeking to hide from themselves and others what they dislike about themselves. A poor sense of self-esteem is much more likely to result in acts of racial discrimination.

Obviously such a sense of well-being, of self-esteem, is closely related to our third theme, economic well-being which we will discuss below. It is also related to a sense of spiritual well-being, one suspects. The present writer does not feel competent to explore the

relationship between self-esteem and spiritual well-being but it is difficult to imagine a person with a sense of self-esteem and spiritual well-being having anything but a positive attitude to race relations. Further we could essay that a sense of spiritual well-being is tantamount to a self-esteem and that a social group with such a sense of spiritual well-being would *ipso facto* evince positive attitudes. Amongst non-Aboriginal christians this is by no means assured. It is a moot point whether other social groups who might be thought to have a sense of spiritual well-being evince such attitudes but it is important to note in this context the large number of Aboriginal people who are practising christians and to wonder about, and at, the resultant sense of spiritual well-being. (Juxtaposed with this source of spiritual well-being is, of course, the right spiritual elements of traditional culture associated as they are strongly with the land from which such spiritual well-being derives).

When we turn to the third theme of economic well-being, we note again that it is a factor on both sides of the race relations equation. It is much harder for racial discrimination to be practised against Aborigines when they have the economic power that would tend to block contempt.

By any objective criterion Aboriginal people do not enjoy anything like a level of income that would engender a sense of economic well-being and there is a clear need to redistribute society's goods and services in a more equitable fashion. The issue of chronic poverty in Aboriginal communities is still a fact. Such poverty is not simply a problem of money but the difficulty for the majority society in comprehending Aboriginal aspirations is no excuse for permitting a race of people to be condemned to poverty.

On the other side of the equation the non-Aboriginal who is concerned about his economic well-being, afraid that he may lose a job next week, afraid that he will not be able to maintain the mortgage payments is more likely to succumb to racial discrimination. It is much easier to be positive about race relations when one is economically secure. (There is of course a subjective aspect to economic well-being: two people in similar economic circumstances may not necessarily feel the same degree of security. One could argue that Northern Australia attracts more than its share of non-Aboriginal people whose feelings of economic security are excited only by a rather high level of income).

Aboriginal Land Rights

One of the most potent sources of tension in the area of race relations is the process, legal and administrative, of the recognition of Aboriginal land rights. Before we analyse the dimension of race

relations in this process, it is worth pointing out that Aboriginal rights in land are not based solely on prior occupancy. It is not just that Aborigines were here first but that their very understanding of themselves, their self-esteem, and their understanding of others and their relationship to them, and traditionally, their economic well-being are both materially and symbolically connected to the land. Add to this the dire material poverty referred to above, and one has an incontrovertible case for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights.

Returning to our theme of communication it should be pointed out that it is difficult for non-Aboriginal people to learn why land is important to Aborigines in a religious sense. From the point of view of the present writer, who regards himself as one of relatively few non-Aboriginals to have been privileged to have learned something of the Aboriginal world view, it seems that if it were easier for non-Aboriginals to obtain some understanding of this world view and see why land is sacred to Aborigines, it would make a positive contribution to race relations in the region. In this context it is worth noting that in the writer's experience there have been very few people who have spent time in Aboriginal communities and not developed positive attitudes to Aborigines chiefly because they have internalised something of the Aboriginal world view.

To take a current example where there is very little communication between non-Aboriginal protagonists and traditionally-oriented Aborigines, let us consider the debate over the proposal to construct a recreation lake in Alice Springs which would result in the flooding of a sacred site in the vicinity. Aborigines refer to the site as 'welatje therre' while non-Aboriginals refer to it as the 'telegraph station lake'. The only significance that particular area can have for non-Aboriginal people is that it was the site of the original overland telegraph station and, apart from the physical beauty of the surrounding landscape, it has no other associations. On the other hand, for Aborigines there is a complex association of stories of which the present writer has a dim understanding.

Before that dim understanding is outlined, it is important to note that many non-Aboriginals, because they can have no understanding of it, suspect that the attachment is not genuine and are therefore prime targets for public figures who allege that sacred sites are created. (Some readers may need to be reassured that none of these public figures are on the same side of the political fence as the present writer!)

To return to Welatje Therre, there are three reasons that the interest in it displayed by local Aranda people is genuine that the present writer finds compelling. Firstly, it is difficult to imagine that the people involved known personally to the writer could possibly have any motivation for not being genuine. This is a negative reason but,

secondly and more positively, the importance of these places has been recorded and is available in non-Aboriginal libraries around Australia, Thirdly, neighbouring but distinct tribes attach importance to the same place. In Pitjantjatjara country the Kungka Kutjara or Two Women story travels from Docker River north of Ayers Rock passing close to Kings Canyon and into Aranda country where it becomes restricted. Other places on this story include a hill behind the drive-in theatre to the south of Alice Springs which is the head pad of one of the women and the place Weltaje itself. (Weltaje Therre incidentally means two breasts).

Clearly if people were aware of the association people have with that country and were aware of the purpose that motivates Aboriginal people it would certainly increase the understanding between the two racial groups.

Australians by and large have a good record of religious tolerance; it is lack of communication that prevents this tolerance from holding sway.

Alcohol Abuse

This is a potent source of racial tension and again sums must be done on both sides of the racial equation. For many non-Aboriginal people in Northern Australia, alcohol has presented itself as a salve against isolation from the social circles which they have forsaken⁴ but unreasonably the majority of non-Aboriginal people in Northern Australia declare moral turpitude on the part of a whole race to be the cause of such widespread alcohol abuse. The present writer maintains that the lack of communication, poor self-esteem and economic distress explain the phenomenon of alcohol abuse in Aboriginal Australia.

As we have said there is little communication between the racial groups, Aborigines feel there is no understanding of what is important to them and the reaction on their part is so frequently to resort to the bottle, reflecting as they do the reaction of other citizens of the fourth world in North America and elsewhere. Poor self-esteem and deeper poverty certainly follow and in some cases precede this reaction.

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Before a consideration of some positive steps that are being taken and that may be taken, it is worth pointing out that the variables of lack of communication, poor self-esteem and concern about economic well-being combine to trigger fear and repulsion in black and white alike, emotions which, in many people, blot out any sympathies

towards which they may have been inclined. Similarly it is possible to analyse suspicions on the part of non-Aboriginal people in Northern Australia that a distant, indulgent Federal Government advantages Aborigines in an unjustified way.⁵

Positive Steps

It is far easier to describe the problem than to prescribe solutions; we can see what the problem is but knowing what to do is rather more difficult.

At the outset it is important to point out that much valuable work is being done at present and there have been improvements. A variety of organisations including schools, churches and government bodies have developed valuable programs that have made great contributions to race relations. This is evident in Alice Springs where Aboriginal organisations, funded largely by the Federal Government, have made considerable headway in encouraging cross-cultural communication, bolstering self-esteem and economic well-being, through a recognition of Aboriginal land rights and a variety of social programs that address some of the problems described above.

Essentially however, these programs are directed towards improving economic well-being and self-esteem through processes of cultural identity for Aborigines. There is very little done to lift non-Aboriginal people out of their ignorance of Aboriginal concerns.

School programs are generally deficient in this respect. Some active thoughtful attempt must be made to design curriculum in schools with a view to children in Northern Australia having some appreciation of the parameters of race relations as they experience them. There is room for Northern Australian content in many of the school subjects that are taught. For example, it is absurd that Northern Territory history starts with the Overland Telegraph: there is little teaching of the joys and satisfactions, as well as the frustrations and murders of contact history. Equally, the general lack of interest in the Aboriginal languages of the north borders on the philistine: here is a unique oral culture, a precious cultural resource, that is almost universally ignored if not despised.

Beyond the schools, I believe greater use could be made of the cultural awareness programs that are conducted to the best of the present writer's knowledge by the police in the Northern Territory and by the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs. Access to these programs should be encouraged throughout the private and public sectors amongst the organisations that deal with Aboriginal people.

They should actively and publicly be supported by all political parties. In the same way as awareness programs are conducted in relation to alcohol abuse, similar programs ought to be run by

governments encouraging positive attitudes to race relations.

Finally, it must be said that positive race relations relies on the will of individuals. Institutions can organise PR campaigns and run courses but unless individuals are of a mind to stop and think of the world around them, the efforts are wasted. It is of great importance that our children and their children grow up in an Australia where Aboriginality is alive and a vital part of the lives, not only of black Australians but of the whole society. It is only in this way that Australia can come to full maturity as a nation.

REFERENCES

1. It may be more appropriate to title this paper 'Race Relations in Central Australia' because that is the area within which the writer has obtained the experiences upon which this paper is based. I will let the title stand because I suspect that there is enough in common between the various areas in Northern Australia for the comments to be valid generally.
2. We can safely assume that people who discuss race relations seek to ameliorate a set of social conditions that they believe to be undesirable and immoral. People who exploit racial inequality and racial differences for their own ends rarely discuss race relations.
3. I would like to use the terms 'white feller' and 'black feller' because they are less stuffy and more honest and give no offence to anyone. Unfortunately, they do not read well and may be misconstrued by some. Because they are the two groups with whom we are chiefly concerned here, I will persist with the terms 'Aborigine' or 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal'.
4. Three months after this paper was originally presented the NT Government called a snap election because of a Federal Government decision to vest title in the Ayers Rock/Mt Olga National Park (Uluru and Kata Tjuta for the local Pitjantjatjara) in the traditional owners. A theme of the subsequent election campaign was that the self-esteem and economic well-being of Territorians was threatened by this decision.
5. This of course has been the case since the frontier was at Botany Bay in 1788. It was not by chance that alcohol was the important element in the rum rebellion.

BOOK REVIEW

Hans Mol, *The Firm and the Formless Religion and Identity in Aboriginal Australia*, Humanities Press Inc. New Jersey USA 1982, viii + 103 pp., \$7.50.

To anyone wishing to embark on a study of Aboriginal religions there is precious little offering. The would-be student may consult several major studies written from drastically opposite viewpoints, which preclude hope of consensus, or he may plough through field studies and be bewildered by a mass of details on practice and belief which defy rational systematisation. *The Firm and the Formless* providentially appeared on my desk at a time when I could no longer avoid Aboriginal religions, and gratefully I can recommend it to others looking for an introduction to this difficult study.

The book has a curious background. Hans Mol is a sociologist (remember his *Religion in Australia* about a decade ago?) and the study was commissioned by a group of Canberra economists concerned about economic motivation of Aborigines. One wonders how happy they were at Mol's conclusion that 'revitalisation will occur only when (Aborigines) manage to make economic self-sufficiency subordinate to a viable and firm view of existence'.

The master idea in this and other books in the series (including New Zealand and Canada) is that wholeness and fragmentation alternate in human societies and that religion can be seen as a way to bolster a precarious identity and to affirm order in an existence which would otherwise appear formless. This theme has been successfully applied to the past and present condition of Aborigines. In the absence of personal fieldwork, there is of course danger in imposing such an ordering perspective on data culled from the researches of other scholars. Mol is disarmingly aware of this (p.87). The advantage to the reader is that he enters the field with a systematic tool, a filing system, with which to organise the highly disparate material — if the filing system shows flaws no great harm ensues so long as one is ready to modify it under pressure of unfileable new data.

The body of this work reviews Aboriginal religion under the following aspects:

1. *Objectification*, i.e. the projection of order into the transcendental beyond — discussing totemism (seen as an embryonic form of transcendence) and the problem of high-gods in southeast Australia.
2. *Commitment*, i.e. the affirmation of order by emotional anchorage in various foci of identity, such as taboos, sacred persons, things and places.
3. *Ritual*, i.e. the delineation, perpetuation and corroboration of order by repeated acts (e.g. totemic ceremonies, rites of passage such as birth, death, marriage and initiation).
4. *Myth*, i.e. the delineation, perpetuation and corroboration of order by recurrent narration (e.g. stories respecting territory, order, morality, rebirth).

The final chapters may be of interest to a wider readership as Mol passes from a largely theoretical construct to a factual discussion of the breakdown and revitalisation of Aboriginal Society (though the historical process also confirms the theoretical). The breakdown is briefly described in terms of the master theme, i.e. European contact brought about changes vastly greater than those which traditional religion was accustomed to accommodate within its delineations of order, and this in turn occasioned the collapse of Aboriginal identity. Much of this may sound trite but some of Mol's supporting observations, as far as I know, are quite original. More satisfying, however, is the treatment of revitalisation which is the most painstakingly documented part of the study. Revitalisation from within is instanced in the Kurangara cult early this century, in the egalitarianism enjoyed by Aborigines in Army settlements during the war, in the outstation movement, in the forging of new tribal identities out of fragments of the old (Wolmadgerization) possibly tending to a pan-Aboriginal identity, and in the same tendency but more marked in urban part-Aboriginal communities. The reconstitution of Aboriginal identity inevitably incorporated elements of the aggressor culture, under which are considered

1. *Missionary effect* — treated sympathetically but considered to have had shallow impact (through lack of anthropological knowledge on the part of missionaries!)
2. *Sectarian effect* — syncretist pentecostal movements (among the NSW Bandjalang since 1952, and the Jinimin movement in central and northwest Australia since 1963), to which might be added the latest revival emanating from Elcho Island across much of northern Australia:
3. *Secular effect* — identities forged from secular causes (e.g. the Pindan Mob associated with Don McLeod since 1946, the Land

Rights movement beginning with the Gurindji strike in 1966), to which might be added the Tent Embassy in Canberra and the numerous urban initiatives in legal, medical and educational areas.

The way ahead? Certainly not the current apparatus of welfare assistance, which does nothing to remake group identity, but only touches the surface and leads to impotence on a larger scale. Likewise a return to the pre-contact situation is futile. The only option, as Mol sees it, is the successful absorption of change. For this is required both emotional energy (currently at a minimum) and a new identity configuration, which is described as 'a transcendental framework of order which meaningfully spans all experiences'.

An interesting comparison is made with Alcoholics Anonymous, wherein ex-alcoholics witness to a changed identity and a renewed motivation, a conversion resulting from (a) the cohesion of the re-orientating group and (b) the inexhaustible energy expended on guiding the potential convert out of his destitution into a new status. (One reflects that the beginnings of AA in some Aboriginal communities may offer not only a new wholeness to certain individuals but also a paradigm for the reforming of the communities themselves). As comparable models, Mol also adverts to the instances of charismatic movements among Aborigines, as well as examples of revitalisation movements in other countries, which combine (a) charismatic leadership able to strip away an old identity and weld a new one, (b) a strong anti-white, religiously motivated stance, (c) a strongly held combination of traditional and christian beliefs, (d) a system of ascetic rules clarifying priorities.

Mol concludes that neither the new-found wealth (of certain communities) nor a return to the Dreaming has the answer, but rather an alliance of the Dreaming and christianity which have in common (a) the dramatisation of the radical paradoxes of life, (b) a basic commitment and loyalty, not to what man can control but to what transcends man, (c) 'a comprehensive intent that is abysmally missing in the segmented idolatries of the twentieth century'.

Obviously there is plenty of meat in this work, not only for students of religion and of human behaviour but also for social workers and missionaries.

Eugene D Stockton