

THIS number is the last of the millennium! I was asked what special features I had planned for it. Nothing special. We just hope to move into the new millennium with No.74 in due time next year.

We welcome another contribution from *Tyson Doneley* in India. It is a challenging paper. Tyson has transferred his fast, zipping leg-break skills into his journalistic endeavours.

Dan O'Donovan, from his hermitage at The Rice Bowl near Beagle Bay, continues his exploration of elements of Aboriginal culture that have rich potential within a culturally adapted christianity. Also, in a Letter to the Editor he notes some recent developments in Aboriginal christian theology.

The AIATSIS library director, *Barbara Lewincamp*, whom I met at an AIATSIS membership workshop in Canberra 24 September, told me she had been archiving Fr Kevin McKelson's collection of papers which he had gathered or wrote over the years and which he had handed over to the Institute. She agreed to write a short paper about it as some of the *Nelen Yubu* readership would have similar collections of their own which could become a valuable public resource if made available in a similar way. It could also help some of us know what we actually have...

I present some reflections on a workshop in the East Kimberley which I attended in July - August.

Hilary Martin OP presents a report on work being done at Wadeye (Port Keats) towards the preservation of threatened Aboriginal languages.

Finally, before our normal feature from *The Secretary*, we have a bit of nostalgia from the pen of *John Leary* about earlier happy days at Garden Point, Melville Island.

— Martin Wilson msc

Editor

TO SEE OURSELVES

Tyson Doneley ¹

ROBBIE BURNS has the deservedly famous couplet:
'Ae wad some god the gift wad gie us
To see ourselves as others see us.'

It was written after his experience at the kirk one Sunday when a finely dressed lady, full of airs and graces, sat down near farmer Burns and as the ceremony went on, a bed bug crawled dispassionately out on her hat to show that all humans are equally fair game to bloodsuckers. There are much worse comedowns than this. One such came to the Catholic Bishops Conference of India meeting at Pune in 1994, which invited the Hindu journalist-scholar Arun Shourie (former editor of the *Times of India* and later *The Indian Express*) to address them on his perception of the work of christian missionaries in India. While expressing measured appreciation of the social and educational work of the christian Church, the sum of his words could be expressed as: 'The best thing you christians can do is to pack up and get out of India — go back to the places you came from and convert them, for they need converting much more than Hindu India does, with its spiritual values and religious practice that far outstrip yours. You may be Indian but you come with a European religion, European ways, European money, European names² and European control from Rome; you would be wise to leave India to the Indians and their rich Hindu culture.'

¹ Fr Tyson Doneley msc is stationed at the Sacred Heart Novitiate, Kanjoor, Kerala, India.

² Many Indian Catholics have Goan origins and in early Goa, Indian converts were forced to take Portuguese names at baptism.

Anyone who has ever been winded, never forgets the experience, the sudden blow in rugby or some other fashion — a fall from a tree — that takes away all one's wind for breathing. The bishops were winded, stunned mentally, as Shourie's well-informed words hit home. — India has some 25 million christians, 60% of them Catholic, but some of the proselytising sects are here too.

Hinduism is as much a culture as a religion and for most Indians, the two are inextricably intertwined in daily life. The temples, the great feasts like Diwali, the freedom to choose one's favourite guiding god or goddess, the daily home Pujas and rituals, the example of ascetic religious leaders for the common folk, all combine to effect a more profound and lasting grip on Hindu minds than secularised Westerners can imagine. (This is rather similar to what Shinto does in Japan but the effect is deeper in India.)

Hinduism can search for religious experience with a more rigorous asceticism and deeper renunciation than the ordinary Western christian would dream of. These qualities were seen and valued in Mother Teresa, but are not seen in the Church at large. And since Hinduism has been here for thousands of years, and has roots deep in the Indian mind through great epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayame as well as the books of the Nedas Upanishads Puranas, since Indians cannot see why any of their people should abandon such a wonderful heritage for some recent foreign-introduced religion. Hence Shourie's recommendation: 'Take Christianity back to where it came from and convert that faithless, amoral group before you seek converts from our peoples with their rich spiritual heritage — we have something better than you are bringing, anyway! So you are wasting your time here.'

Part of the animosity between India and Pakistan comes from the Hindu belief that these Pakistanis were Indians led into Islam by the might of the Mogul conquerors, Akbar and his successors; and this led to the political division of India that should never have taken place, creating India, Pakistan and Bangladesh instead of a united sub-continent. Even within India there can be strong communal

feeling — Hindu versus Muslim as after the destruction of the Ayodya mosque by fundamentalist Hindus in 1992, who claimed that it was built on the site of a former temple commemorating the birth place of a Vishnu incarnation, Ram. The Muslim presence amounts to over 100 million, a lot of people. Some 3,000 died in communal rioting in Mumbai alone at that time. To join Islam was to escape caste but unhappily this is not the case with christianity which has condemned caste divisions officially, only quite recently, and then too late. Before that, it was handled gingerly as a culture question and even admired by such a great missionary sociologist as the Abbé Dubois who wrote after 30 years of missionary experience in South India that ran to about 1820.

To return to Shourie, here are his charges:

- 1) The Church played a key role in perpetuating British Imperial rule, abetting the British rulers and acting as the unofficial branch of government to keep down the Indians.
- 2) All missionary activity in India was to convert the 'heathen' to the true religion, with bureaucrats, statesmen and governors all colluding.
- 3) The aim of conversion led to contempt, ridicule and sarcasm being directed at Hinduism so that it might be rejected and abhorred.
- 4) Often this conversion was 'rice christian' approach to gain numbers but not change hearts; and it was done among the weak and vulnerable (dalits, i.e. untouchables, tribals) not with the mentally and culturally vigorous.
- 5) Yet the Hindu religion that missionaries tried to supersede had equal or more depth of insights and a remarkable spiritual thirst whereas many christian institutions appeared to Hindus to be based on money, power and prestige.
- 6) After generations of attacking Hinduism, now there is admission (post Vat. II) that there is salvation in it and missionaries now seek dialogue. But if there is salvation in it, why try to convert at all — just leave Hindus to the practices they have followed and enjoyed for thousands of years and long before christianity began.
- 7) The Church in India is over-dependent on Rome — financially, ideologically, organizationally the Indian Church is tied to Rome and

churches elsewhere. At Vat. II the Indian church made virtually no contribution to Council thinking or decisions: the Council was largely a European affair with some American input; India counted for little.

Thus, to sum up Shourie's address to the stunned group of bishops, you are just an insignificant branch of a foreign church, introducing where you are not wanted. Go home and allow the bulk of Indians to serve God in their age-old way, a way that appeals to and satisfies the masses with its popular traditions and practices.

Much of what Shourie said may be superficially correct though with wrong conclusions e.g. missionary work among the 120 million dalits or 70 million tribals has been the option for the poor, not to win over the weakest. Yet this is not the point: from his words, we can see ourselves as *others* see us. Our answer ought to be in the quality of love shown in our christian lives and work, as was the case with Mother Teresa. Currently in India we are having inter-rite battles or intra-rite quarrels over ritual symbols or language use. Did our Founder *really* mean it when he said: 'By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another'? This lack of unity is not a pleasant sight for our own selves, let alone how others are seeing it

Yet despite Shourie, we do have a mission here where the immense poverty of India cries out for help of every kind; and the 2.5% of the population that is christian gives this help: they cater for 20% of all the primary education of the whole country, 10% of all the literacy and community health care, 25% of all existing care of the orphans and widows, 30% of all existing care of the handicapped, lepers and AIDS patients. About 4,500 high schools and 230 colleges under christian auspices cater to the urban middle class of India while the help and food given to the destitute and starving are unquantifiable.

Mother Teresa caught the attention of the world in what she was doing. Thousands if not tens of thousands are doing like work. Yet she probably has meant more for the image of the church in India

than all the 140 bishops en masse who represented the institutional church that we all have to grapple with, a necessary evil that can stifle as well as sustain. It is a strength and a weakness, supporting the lone individual, submerging individuality very often, but not always, because it is impossible to submerge God. And it is His help and guidance we need as we move onward: 'I planted', wrote Paul, 'Apollo watered but God gave the increase.' (1 Cor.3.6) And He will give the increase *in His time*.

As a footnote illustrative of the rigorous asceticism and deep renunciation found in Hinduism, let me quote the example of a village sadher or holy man from central Andhra Pradesh, a bit below the centre of India: he took a vow to honour a particular deity by standing for a whole year. He fulfilled the vow, then took another one to roll from his village to a special shrine in Kashmir, 3,000kms distant. This too he fulfilled in six months of time and accompanied by a back-up team. He did mention that it was hard on knees and elbows!

REFERENCES:

1. *The Church in India in search of a New Identity. The 19th Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association 1996*. Especially the address: 'Image of the Christian Presented in India Today', by T K John SJ.
2. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, by Abbé J A Dubois (Oxford, Clarendon Press. 3rd ed.1906). [Dubois worked in South India 1792-1823 and recorded his observations with meticulous care and exactness. He came as a representative of Missions Étrangères of France. His work is a classic because he adopted Hindu dress and customs, saw life from the inside and was highly regarded by both British and Indians of every variety because of his truth and impartiality.]

Wunan — A Law of Sharing, Exchange, Hospitality

Dan O'Donovan¹

AS sky, land and sea are in the world of Nature, so holism, kinship and *wunan* are in Aboriginal religious Law.

1) The Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra of Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, maintains that:

Evangelism means caring for the whole person. We want to be free to engage in a holistic ministry to our own people. Yes, we want them to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And yes, we are concerned about housing, employment, training, community development, alcohol rehabilitation, land rights, health and youth work.

But for us to do this ministry we must have control of our own organisation. We must do things in ways that Aboriginal and Islander people are comfortable with. . . (From *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, by Djiniyini Gondarra.

So, the whole person in his/her whole real life situation, as part of a universe that is whole. This means a universe in which everything is seen as inter-related and interdependent — a remarkably modern understanding of reality, and a view now widespread in society at large. Indeed, it derives to a great extent, in this widespread acceptance, from the natural sciences.

For Djiniyini it would derive rather from his inherited personality, as Aboriginal Law-man and Christian.

2) Kinship I have touched on in a previous article (*Nelen Yubu* 71 [1999] 25-29.) An inner, more mysterious *sense* of kinship, we saw, led during a time when this was needed, to a kinship *system*, strictly regulated and open to everything that might fit.

¹ Fr Dan O'Donovan is living these days as a hermit at The Rice Bore, Beagle Bay, WA.

3) What then, is *wunan* (winan, wingan)?

As a term, it belongs to the north and east Kimberley region, and in its more general meaning is not secret. One of the public services in Kununurra, for instance, is the *Wunan Regional Council*. As an activity, it extends much further. Around Daly River it is called *merbok*. An anthropologist friend, however — author of many books of Aboriginal oral history in the East Kimberley and sensitive to the issues — has kindly advised me that ‘the *wunan* definitely has sacred (and therefore secret) associations.’ I will say no more therefore on what is simply stated in this article’s title. Besides, that will suffice for our present purposes.

I am interested primarily in the interior life, and am trying to hand-sketch here, in broadest outline, a structure of spirituality for the Aboriginal Christian which, while remaining perfectly continuous with the past, would carry him or her *healthily* into the uncertain future.

I emphasise ‘healthily’ because health is the overall subject of this series of articles, which started with *Nelen Yubu* no. 66: meditation as a way to general good health, to wholeness:

Let me draw attention first to a letter which appeared in *The Weekend Australian*, July 5-6, '97. It goes into detail in the matter of Aboriginal health, and names some practical goals to be aimed at. I will quote simply the opening paragraph:

All Australians must view Aboriginal health as a national crisis, both because of the preventable deaths occurring at an excessive rate every day of the week and because our failure to deal with this issue is a stain on our national character at home and abroad.

We do not believe that this problem can be dealt with by governments alone. . .

And so on, with a final appeal that Aboriginal health-care reach better standards by the year 2000.

The letter has four signatories; 1) Dr K Woollard, Federal President, Australian Medical Association; 2) Professor S Leeder, President, Public Health Association; 3) Sir (Prof.) G Nossal,

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President, Australian Academy of Science; 4) Dr B Hertzell, Chancellor, University of South Australia.

General good health, I am convinced, is mainly a matter of heart. Apart from the case of infant mortality — as one's heart is, so is one's general health. (By 'heart' I mean here the complex reality at the centre of a person's spiritual, psychological and moral self, of which the bodily organ we call 'the heart' is a handy symbol.)

Winnie Budbaria, a Kitja woman, who suffered once from Hansen's Disease and spent years in the *Pangaran*, (Derby leprosarium, now closed), belongs to the Warmun community in East Kimberley. Eventually, she had to have a leg amputated. I have watched her a number of times, well into her 60s then, get up at a corroboree, with her artificial leg and walking-stick, and laughing, join in the dance. Not much wrong with Winnie's health, I thought.

I was supplying for a few months in Halls Creek around the time of the Darwin cyclone in late '74. Turkey Creek — as Warmun was then called — was part of my pastoral round. The day of my first visit, I did not know anyone in the community there; but over to meet me as I got out of the car, with gentle words of welcome, came Queenie McKenzie, Hector Jandany (Winnie's brother), and Winnie. Each wore a set of rosary beads around their neck. 'We are not ashamed of the Gospel' they were saying to me with St. Paul (Roman 1,16).

Heart and faith — together they make a powerful mixture. Whoever owns a faith-moved heart is necessarily healthy. Humanly, is a realised person, growing. Such a one has joy in herself and to spare for giving to others — even from a bed of bodily sickness.

Now, the *wunan* way of behaving and relating — as we saw the case with the kinship system — arises out of a prior and deeper *sense* of sharing and giving in exchange, which lie buried in every traditional Aboriginal heart. It shows itself all the time and, by Aboriginal people themselves is taken for granted. It is like an oil which spreads out, or the light fragrance of eucalypt in the bush after a downpour of rain. There is a certain *ease*, a naturalness in

giving uncommon in a selfish world. Treasure indeed, which must be guarded.

Of course, it must be added that the sharing and gift-giving tradition in Aboriginal culture is not yet the kind of giving Jesus was teaching:

...He said also to the man who had invited him, 'When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But...invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, *because they cannot repay you*. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.' (Luke 14, 12-14).

Rather, the *wunan* comes very close to the older, more calculating Hebrew *hesed* law, which I have described in some detail in an article, 'A Family Church' (*Nelen Yubu* 25:3--10 [1986]). Both Aboriginal *wunan* and Hebrew *hesed* are systems of two-way obligation. Highly practical: for community, serving as a binding mortar; for the individual, as a reliable security in face of want.

Now, in grace, meditation (*dadirri*) advances the *wunan*, as it did the *hesed*, to the Jesus stage, toward which it was already moving anyway.

On the other hand it needs to be said that any lifestyle arising out of hard living conditions, and bound by rules — and instincts — of strict two-way obligation, has to have its defences in place. So we find that the *hesed*, as also the *wunan*, could change quickly into their reverse. The law of payback.

This again, Jesus came to rid us of, deeply ingrained as it is in all our natural selves:

You have heard that it was said, (in Exodus 21,24):
'eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand,
foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound,
stripe for stripe'; (also Leviticus 24,20; Deuteronomy
1921); but I say to you...If anyone strikes
you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;
and if anyone would sue you and take your coat,

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let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. . .

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5, 38-45.

Cut free altogether from Law by 'the perfect law of freedom' (James 1,25), we now call that forgiveness or reconciliation. In a way, you lose; but more importantly by far, you are the winner.

To sum up: holistic vision, the sense of kinship and the *wunan* sense form a solid foundation for a whole way of being which is at once cohesive and splendidly in tune with today's demands. Together they can bear the weight of a well-adjusted plan of action for the future, corporate and personal. Sky, land and sea combined can bear a heavy weight.

On line access to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies catalogue <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au>

Barbara Lewincamp

OVER the past two years, staff at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies have worked on a project to make the catalogue available on the World Wide Web. The Institute contains one of the most extensive collections of materials on Australian Indigenous studies anywhere in the world. The catalogue comprises the details of pictorial collections, films and videos, recorded sound collections, manuscripts, rare books, books, journals, serial analytics, and many pamphlets.

The catalogue was given the name **Mura**, a Ngunnawal word meaning pathway. Its proprietary name is Unicorn, a library management system produced by Sirsi Pty Ltd. This state of the art software has enabled the catalogue to be made available on the Internet and to provide electronic access to documents on other sites. Through the Information Gateway, you can go to other library catalogues, pictorial collections and other relevant web sites.

Library staff have updated information about Library services on the Institute web site. There are details of opening hours, copying charges, contacts and an information request form and a document delivery form. Library staff welcome your comments and hope that you find the catalogue a useful resource.

Some recent acquisitions of note include the following. The Bible Society in Australia Inc. donated a number of items including Mamamili Wangka in the Martu Wangka language. It is the Shorter New Testament and a Genesis paraphrase.

Father Kevin McKelson has donated his personal papers. This collection is a valuable addition to the Library's manuscript

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collection, because of its wealth of information on Nyangumarta, Karajarri, Yulparija, Juwaliny, Mangala languages and the kinship structure of those five Aboriginal tribes located near La Grange Mission, Western Australia.

For those of you who don't have access to the Internet, you can contact the Reference Desk by more traditional methods, details as follows.

Telephone 02 62461182

FAX 02 6246 1113

Address GPO Box 553, Canberra ACT 2601.

Barbara Lewincamp

Library Director

Kimberley Workshop

Martin Wilson msc

OVER the weekend between July and August this year I attended a pastoral workshop in the Kimberley organised by Fr Noel McMaster CSsR, parish priest of the extensive Halls Creek parish. The overall theme was due to be inculturation, and I had been invited to provide some input.

Some 20 people attended the workshop. I had failed to notice beforehand that it was being organised for the *non*-indigenous pastoral workers of the parish, hence I should not have been surprised to find no Aboriginal persons present. The theme being inculturation and the history of the East Kimberley church being so full of incarnating endeavours, one could have expected a very mixed gathering. However, that was not the way it was organised. I imagine most indigenous workers would have been bored stiff by all the talk we went on with — talk that tended to become more abstract the further we went — I am thinking particularly of my own input!

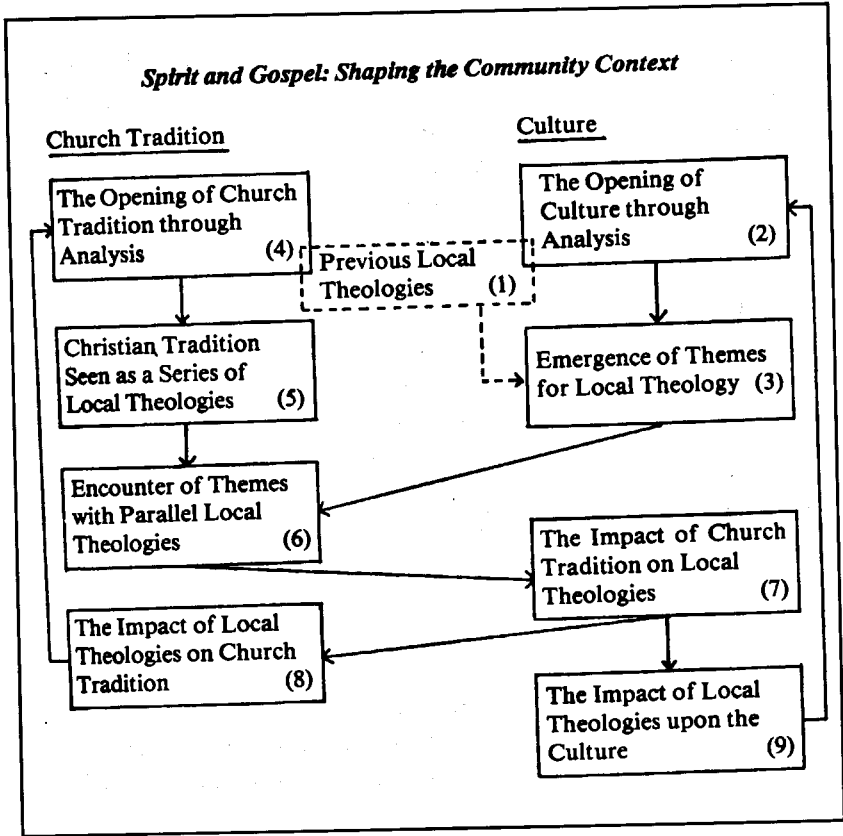
Robert J Schreiter CPpS has been the flavour of recent months. He has been Dean of Theology and Associate Professor of Theology at CTU, Chicago, and Director of the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center for Theological Ministry. Articles by Gerard Goldman in *Nelen Yubu* have been peppered with his name. He was brought to Australia to deliver the Dom Camara Lecture Series, which he did between the end of July to the middle of August in five of the Australian capitals. His recent publications and the topic of his lecture series have had to do with reconciliation. However, it was his 1985 production, *Constructing Local Theologies*, that seemed to offer me guidance while I was preparing my workshop presentation.

Constructing Local Theologies was first published in paperback by SCM Press, London, in 1985. I was using the sixth printing as issued by Orbis Books, Maryknoll in 1996 (178 pp., ISBN 0-88344-108-X).

Schreiter's overall contention is that local churches should develop their own local theology. Such a theology would be specially related to, impregnated with the respective local culture. At the same time it would be so related to other local theologies in its own country and indeed throughout the world as to form what one might call the covering quilt of the theology of the universal church, which itself is made up of all the local churches with Christ as their Head. He defines *local theology* as 'the dynamic interaction among gospel, church, and culture' (p.22). The book explores the manner of that interaction.

In Ch.2 he provides a map that would 'allow anyone engaged in the development of local theologies to locate where his or her work stands relative to the entire enterprise' (p.23). The map itself occurs on p.25 and is reproduced here on the following page.

Any of us actively involved in evangelisation work in a local area would have to consider where we are located in regard to Previous Local Theologies (1). Some of the possibilities were outlined in the previous chapter. It depends on the model we, and others, had been following. It could have been a *Translation Model*, where we thought we could get back to the kernel of the gospel by stripping off the cultural layers covering it up — and it would be *that* kernel that we would hand over to the locals for them to cover appropriately in their own cultural coverings. In this model we would replace elements, for example, of liturgy with what looked to us like cultural equivalents. I remember years ago at Doromoku (PNG) I had suggested to the local community that we would replace the clappers, which we were still using then during Holy Week, with drum beating. It seemed an obvious substitute to me. Fortunately I managed to muster up enough sense at the time to scrap my idea when I saw how horrified they were. The drums are 'closed', they explained, because of a recent death and cannot be re-opened until



the end of the official mourning process. For me, a drum was just a percussion instrument; for them it was a richly endowed item of culture. — One of the main troubles with the kernel model is that layers of culture are rather like an onion: when you strip them all away, there is nothing left.

Or we could be more enlightened and be following an *Adaptation Model*. For instance, we could have been trying to develop a new philosophical underpinning to the faith by spinning out the local cultural conceptions into a philosophy that would replace Thomism, as some scholars did in Africa; or developing a theory of adaptation like Paul VI's as outlined in *Evangelii*

Nuntiandi, which is fine for general motivation but empty of detail. — Such models appeal to academia. Their value is that they offer validation for what is happening on the ground, but don't actually make anything in particular happen.

Thirdly, there are the *Contextual Models*. In these the message is fitted into the socio-cultural environment. Examples might be the Self-Study of the Church in Papua New Guinea during the early 1970s, or the Small Christian Community movements in Africa and South America. Or the Liberation Theology movements.

Each model has its strengths and weaknesses. Whichever one is being followed, that delivers the context within which gospel and culture are interacting towards the evolution of the local theology within a local church. Schreiter invites us to identify where we find ourselves within the map. It is not easy to do so.

In Ch.3 Schreiter lists various approaches that might open up a local culture to fruitful interaction with the gospel: *functionalist* approaches, *structuralist*, or one that Schreiter favours as 'a good wager' (p.53), *semiotics*, even though not much of the detail has been worked out as yet (p.52). — I cannot imagine that anyone involved in practical evangelisation will wait for a semiotic analysis of the culture to be worked out before attempting to develop a culturally significant form, for example, of baptism — during our workshop Sr Theresa Moralini presented some ideas on baptism that she has been working out with the Warrmarn elders, cf. later.

A couple of positive themes in Schreiter's book that I thought were enlightening and important were (1) the role of the 'local theologians', (2) the supplementary role of evangelisers from outside the local culture, (3) the constant need to correlate local developments with the wider church.

I tried to develop the first point in a fairly critical way. 'Theologians' are people who explicitate the religious elements of a culture. In the West they tend to be people who lecture in centres of theological learning and write books. Local communities in the East Kimberley, and most other places, don't have that sort of people

around. The people who explicitate their religious culture are the songmen, the dancers, the painters, the poets... Words are only one way to spin out a theology, and a rather dry one at that. Dramatic dancing corroboree-style or paintings demanding quiet contemplation are also valid and much more exciting.

Schreiter p.85 ff. puts his finger on what I believe to be a crucial element in the development of a local church.

One of the predominant forms of theology in Christianity, as well as in other great literate traditions, has been theology as wisdom, or *sapientia*.

Quite rightly, I believe, Schreiter develops *wisdom* as a *way* of seeing life and the world, of attaining significance, of living and behaving. And that is what Christianity was at its very beginning: it was a *way*. It is presented as such, especially by Paul, throughout the Acts of the Apostles (*Acts* 9:2,27; 19:9,23; 22:4,14,22).

When we go to a people to 'evangelise' them, we are giving them Good News about the Way. We are not aiming to baptise them into being theologians, but to join us in the Way — and we hope with good reason to find that their own local way and ours have a lot in common. And we can hope for mutual enrichment. Here in Australia it is exciting to think that the way of the Dreaming might deeply enrich our Australian way...

In short, I propose that Schreiter has been caught in the theologians' treadmill. Constructing local *theologies* is an esoteric pursuit that academics can work at. In the mission of the world the evangelisers are working at developing *wisdom*, ways of seeing, believing, hoping, living, along with others, in the following of Christ. Thus, I would expect that the wisdom people in Gija country, for example, would be developing a Gija way. They would be developing properly Gija ways of eucharistic worship, sacramental performance, celebratory ritual — all the time being guided by people who represent the wider church, like bishop, priests, pastoral workers and teachers.

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A theologian might like to analyse the process and write it up as a Gija theology, but the primary task is development of the Gija wisdom way of being Christian. Theology is a useful by-product, not a goal to be aimed at.

As it happens, at our workshop we were presented with a good example of ongoing work being conducted by Sr Theresa Moralini with the Warrmarn elders in the matter of baptism. Some interesting elements are the people's perception of the smoking ceremony as the real baptism: it is this ceremony that inducts the child into the family and group. Water is seen as a symbol of saving, 'so it is good to use water and pour it on the baby's head as a symbol of the baby being saved'. Likewise anointing with holy oil fits in with the local conception that anointing makes a baby strong and healthy. However, the Warrmarn elders don't want baptism to be called 'initiation': that's something else...

NOTICE

As mentioned elsewhere in this issue, the Nelen Yubu Secretariate (and Secretary) has moved from Leura.

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Nelen Yubu Secretariate
1 Roma Ave
KENSINGTON NSW 2033

The telephone and fax numbers are as indicated on the inside back cover, viz. Tel. (02) 9315 2231, Fax (02) 9697 9350.
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At this stage we do not know what GST will mean for us. Hopefully we will not have to increase our prices. We shall keep you informed.



Nelen Yubu Staff
Wish Everbody
A Blessed and Happy Christmastide
and
A Fine New Millennium!

Preserving Rarely Spoken Languages

John Hilary Martin OP¹

IN JUNE 1999 I returned once again to Wadeye/Port Keats (an Aboriginal community near Darwin) to be met and warmly welcomed by the Aboriginal community members, some I had brought to Berkeley in 1994, and some I knew for a good number of years. It was *Bush Holiday* time which is the month of the year when the people leave for their own particular country and to visit their Dreaming places. Some years before on a previous visit I happened to stumble into a project being run by Mr Mark Crocombe, the Curator of the *Kanamkek-Yila Ngala* Museum there. He had a small grant from the Australian National Library Heritage Fund to record Aboriginal languages on tape before they disappeared. In the environs of Wadeye many languages were spoken at one time. We do not really know how many, but at least seven have been identified. Today *Murrinh-patha* is the major language of these parts. It is in a strong and healthy state, spoken and sung by hundreds of people in the district. Since there is a good deal of *Murrinh-patha* literature coming from the local Wadeye Press, it will be even more widely available so there is no immediate danger that it will die out. But many other languages originally spoken in the area were not so lucky. They are still spoken occasionally by the few that remember them, but they are now definitely at risk. The mission of *Kanamkek-Yila Ngala* Museum is to preserve and make available the traditional culture of the area, and languages are a major part of their concern. *Kanatnkek* refers to the Dreaming Rainbow Serpent who is a creative spirit, the source of human and other animal life. *Yila Ngala*, meaning 'Great Father',

¹Hilary Martin is an American Dominican priest who lectures at Berkeley Cal. in the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Graduate Theological Union, and also at the YTU, Melbourne. He has been doing research work in primal religion at Wadeye for a number of years. He wrote 'Healing at Port Keats', *Nelen Yubu* No.37 pp.20- 24, 1988.

referred to Fr. Docherty, as I was told, the MSC priest who founded the Catholic Mission at Port Keats in 1935 and who brought a new religion to these people. In its way the title of the Museum, which was carefully chosen by the Elders in conference, represents their version of the Old and of the New Law. The memory of Father is highly revered and what he said still goes for many in the district.

But to return to the project of Mark Crocombe. When I arrived at my earlier visit Mr Crocombe was about to go into the bush to tape the voices of the Elders and other older people who were speakers of some of the less spoken tongues, and I went along. A good deal of urgency was felt about getting the project started because in some cases only one or two speakers are still alive who are fluent. Mr Crocome had the enthusiastic support of the local community and a helpful grant from the Northern Territory Educational Department's, *Aboriginal Education Program: Initiative II*. We travelled into the bush to interview a number of significant individuals who were anxious to transmit the stories and happenings of their clans so that they would not be lost. In a circle about a fire (if it was evening) in an Elder's country Mr Crocombe would sit down and in casual, or sometimes in more formal ways, encourage a conversation in one of the less spoken languages. An audio tape of the ensuing conversation by local speakers would be made which would be conducted entirely in that particular language. At the same time a video tape was being made of the conversation. The Elders were happy to be surrounded by younger men and women of their group who knew a little of the language, and by many younger children who were being exposed to their language for the first time. To give a sense of local customs an event was sometimes staged. During the 1996 trip a video was made of a demonstration given by an Elder on how to butcher and cook a wallaby. Using his own language he singed the animal, cut it open, put it on the fire and divided the cooked pieces among appropriate relatives and friends. This is a homey event, done often, but he was careful to restrict all expressions to *Marti-ke*, his own language. At another place a demonstration was given about preparing the wax glue to hold a

spear and woomera together — a simple action but a good way of gaining local vocabulary. These were done entirely in the fading language of the narrators. The results of these sessions, now edited and deposited in the Language Centre, are already being used as a resource to build upon.

There are a number of advantages to combining the oral and visual which linguists would recognise. Words on a printed page miss much of the life of a language, and while grammars outline the formal structures of a language and lay out relationships with other tongues, at the end of the day there is a certain dead quality about the result. Speech, after all, is an audio experience. As the Elders pointed out themselves, pronunciations can be *thick* or *thin*, *light* or *heavy*. The lilt of a voice, the cadence of a statement, the rapidity of words flowing one after another is at the heart of speech. But language needs to be *seen*. Speaking is always wrapt up with the use of hand gestures, the sparkle of a speaker's eye, the turning aside of the head, the glancing down or looking up into the audience or toward an individual listener. By making high quality audio tapes and pairing them with videos the communities hoped to preserve and to make available for posterity something of the inner spirit of these rarely spoken languages so their echo might still be heard by future generations. In 1996 four weeks were spent listening to a succession of stories about the Old Days (1940s–60s) with broad references back to still earlier times.

The project initiated by Mr Crocombe continues to make progress. In 1998 I again found the speakers gathered, but a different format was being used. Instead of going into the bush, this time native speakers from *several* of the less spoken languages gathered in a room which had been set up as a sound stage at the *Kanamkek-Yile Ngala* Museum. Five languages were represented with two or three speakers from each. The participants arranged themselves in a semi-circle about Mark Crocombe and the linguist, Dr. Lysbeth Ford. Their aim was to make comparisons in lexicology and structures of these local languages. To insure that comparisons were

parallel a routine procedure had been developed. Every speaker was to choose a word in their language which corresponded to a word on a prepared list. (A standardised list of words was settled on to assure that there would be a consistent approach if other groups were to join the project later.) After making their choice the speakers held a preliminary consultation among themselves to decide which word in their languages best matched the word on the English list. Each speaker then repeated the word in his or her own language three times with everyone else listening carefully to check for clarity and precision. The fifteen or so men and women, well known to each other, clearly enjoyed the sessions supporting each other in finding and listening to the appropriate meaning and pronunciation of words from each other's languages. Mr Crocombe recorded and video taped the sessions while the linguist Lysbeth Ford worked frantically each evening, organising the day's results and rationalising the spelling in order to prepare the material for the computer and to produce a print out. The languages were *Magati-ke*, *Marrisjebin*, *Marringarr* and *Marri-Ammu* [*Muri-amor*]. The sessions, which went on for two weeks, included Patrick Nadjulu and Gabriel Kunggul (for *Magati-ke*), Les Kundjil and Frank Dumoo (for *Marrisjebin*), Benedict Tchinburur and Jonny Nama (for *Marringarr*), with Mary Jongmin and Moira Benida (with another dialect of *Marringarr*), and Mary Long and Ruth Panbuk (for *Marri-Ammu*). In the course of an early session one of the Elders pointed out that while it was good to list words, it was more important to see how words were put together. Word comparisons made a good start but that had to be followed up by comparing real conversations. Conversation in fact developed almost immediately. The men and women, many of them Elders, had known each other for years and there was banter and private jokes between them as they talked about individual words, about some overlapping meanings, or the strange corners of pronunciation. By the second or third day the languages were alive in the room. The men and women speakers began to fashion longer stories — events from the past at the mission, stories of local trips — all of which were

preserved on audio and video tape as convenient conversation segments for future study.

This year in addition to Lysbeth Ford the linguist, a musicologist, Mr Allan Marret was present in the room. The task of the linguist was to flesh out full verb paradigms by asking local speakers how verbal expressions were formed in their language. This work is vital to understanding these languages since much of the meaning is communicated through highly complex verbal forms. Verbs are often irregular, contain infixes as well as suffixes and prefixes, all of which requires a well trained ear in order to *hear* what is being said. Although accurate *hearing* is painstaking and difficult work, it is worth doing well if anyone wants to grasp these languages in their mature form, and so be able to understand the maturity of the minds of the ancient speakers who devised and used them.

The task of the musicologist was slightly different. Music both ceremonial and corroboree is an integral part of aboriginal cultures. This is not the place to discuss the importance of the non-verbal part of communication in aboriginal languages, but it bulks large as the late Catherine Ellis has shown so well in her, *Aboriginal Music* (1985). Before the advent of phonograph records and music tapes this aspect of language could never be preserved. Fortunately for us a body of tapes does exist from this region dating back to the 1950's which contains material representing some of these language groups. It was the role of the musicologist to recover the lyrics recorded on the extant tapes in the presence of local speakers and appropriate Elders. The lyrics of songs are often poetry and like all poetry require first of all a sensitivity to hear the lines accurately, and, after the words have been transcribed, sensitivity to ask about their frame of reference and to find local help in filling in the gaps in meaning which are always there. Over several weeks with the local speakers we listened to the old tapes playing them over and over again trying to recoup their verbal and non-verbal messages. The people also reminded us that aboriginal languages were spoken in a place, in a particular locale with its plants, animals and Dreamings. We

followed this up by going to local countries in order to be in the places, among the range of places where these ancient languages were once spoken.

The *Kanamkek-Yile Ngala* Museum does not plan to be a Museum that simply collects fossils from the past. A culture is to be preserved, not to be put *on ice*. Aboriginal culture has long roots, but they are designed to support a living tree. Will preserving these ancient languages, we might ask, have much value or influence on future events? That is not for us to say. It is worth noting, however, that the community of Wadeye is and has been a *composite* community. The population is composed of the descendants of several tribes who have lived together for approximately 65 years, but hosted, as it were, in *Murrinh-patha* country. To some now seems to be the moment for devolution, to move back to local lands. Outstations have been built (since the 1980s) to enable families to move and local housing sub-divisions are now being planned that will be established in locations where these local languages once were spoken. The project of preserving less spoken languages will be an ongoing at Wadeye. The Museum has new plans in the offing for coming years.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thanks to Gideon Goosen's article *Theological Studies* 60 (1999), reviewed in your last issue, I have been catching up on some dramatic events which have occurred during this one short present decade.

I had, of course, been aware of 'the first National Conference on Aboriginal Spirituality and Perceptions of Christianity', held at Victor Harbour, South Australia, from 2-6 August 1990. 'A landmark' indeed! (Anne Pattel-Gray).

The papers read by Aboriginal speakers at that conference are collated in Anne Pattel-Gray (ed.), *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future*, Harper Collins, 1996 (reprinted 1997, 1998). Not only the conference papers in fact, but a small collection of important 'Post-conference works'.

After that has appeared (Harper-Collins, 1997; reprinted 1997), the first attempt at a synthetic Aboriginal Christian Theology by a group of eminent Aboriginal Christian thinkers who have adopted the name, 'Rainbow Spirit Elders.' Their book presented by Adelaide scholar, Norman Habel, is called *Rainbow Spirit Theology: towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*. It is a highly significant piece of work, for which all Australians should be grateful.

What *Nelen Yubu* has been working toward and hoping for, has now become reality. We enter on a completely new stage of Aboriginal Christian theology, full of life, imagination, youthful vigour.

Dan O'Donovan
at, The Rice Bore,
Beagle Bay

OUT BUSH IN THE NT

Donkey Race, Potters' Clay, Seagull Island

John Leary msc⁵

ON St Patrick's Day, 17 March 1953, we had the usual sports. I don't think I have ever enjoyed sports so much. The boys and girls are natural athletes: there's no preparation of course, in the way of practice. They are very keen on the pole vault, but what amused me most was the donkey race.

First the donkeys had to be rounded up. I can still see a very black little six-year-old going for his life through the low scrub to head off an unwilling donkey. Eventually the animals were more or less lined up under the goal posts at the far end of the football field — about ten in all. The riders looked very important as a wild mob of youngsters gathered behind them. The enthusiastic assembly in the background puzzled me until the word 'Go' was given, and then I knew. The shouts increased, hands and sticks waved, and the donkeys, under this wild impetus, made off. Some kicked their hind legs in the air and took a direct course; others veered off to right or left, almost taking several of the urgers as they went. The riders, saddleless and bridleless were helpless to do anything except kick and generally try to steer the donkey on the straight course.

Towards the end it looked as if one big black donkey had the race 'sewn up,' and evidently the rider thought so too, because he began to cease struggling with his charger and started casting backward, contemptuous grins on his pursuers. But within ten yards of the post his donkey balked and looked as if it meant to stay put. However, under the influence of the wild kick of its rider and the

⁵ Fr John Leary continues his reports of adventure and quests for materials for the Tiwi people.

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Indian whoops of his supporters, the black terror moved off but, donkeywise, not towards the post, and despite everything would not change course but went directly on as though the winning post was something to be avoided. I don't think there was a winner to that race. They all finished in a confused mass — donkeys and camp followers — all except Blackie who was bent on carrying his rider to the other side of the field.

On 19 March all the boys and myself went up to Woolwunga Beach, ten miles away, in the *Quail*. The beach is about ten miles from Cape Van Diemen, the northern-most point of Melville Island. My chief purpose, apart from giving the boys a day out, was to get some samples of the clay that makes up almost entirely the hard land in those parts. Perhaps the clay would be worked on the potters' wheel or made into bricks for houses. Some of the boys were very expert with their hands, so there may be an opening here. The chief purpose the boys had in view was to go hunting, for Woolwunga has a reputation for fish and turtle and dugong, and an unbelievable supply of large oysters.

The oysters grow thickly on the reef which runs along the coast about half a mile out, and continues to stretch further into the sea. Of course, you have to judge the tide as the reef is entirely submerged when the tide is in. Unfortunately on this day, when we eventually got to the reef, the tide was well on its way in and as a result we collected only a billycan of on-shell oysters. At other times they have got as much as two kerosene tins of on-shell oysters, enormous ones too. They shell them as they get them.

Today I stayed on board the *Quail* and fished, taking nothing. I found out later that I was in the wrong place. Not long after landing, one of the boys raced along the beach in the tracks of a turtle, discovered where the tracks ended, prodded with his stick and unearthed 150 eggs from the nest. They are the shape of a ping-pong ball, though a little bigger. The shell of the egg is thin and looks like tissue paper.

The boys looked with longing eyes towards Seagull Island, about fifteen miles away, six miles off Cape Van Diemen. The seagulls are there in their thousands. They simply darken the sky and the combined cries of the birds is tremendous. There seems to be an inexhaustible supply of eggs there, which are about the size of a hen egg. But we will hear of this island again, for May is the month we go out there.

I went again to Woolwunga, this time with the Sisters and girls. I brought back about one ton of clay to try out on bricks. It was rather choppy on the way and a few got seasick. I just managed to survive — arriving at Woolwunga with a very thick head which worked off during the afternoon.

I also went croc shooting once again, this time taking Tom Hacket, a brother of Br John Baptist of Darwin. He had come up from his home at Port Pirie to do some electrical work at the new mission in the Centre, Santa Teresa, then came on to see his sister, then across to the Tiwi Islands in the *Tiki*. It was a bad night for the tide was too far up on the mud flats, so we returned with only one small croc.

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From the Secretary's Desk...

THERE is an address change on the inside back cover of this issue, indicating that I have levered myself out of the Blue Mountains after nearly forty years, to nestle into a tranquil spot close to the Georges River at Sylvania. Actually, your mail for the Secretary can now be sent direct to NYMU at 1 Roma Ave, Kensington 2033 (instead of to Leura), which will be a great time-saver for us all.

I feel rather like the Mountains Aborigines when they gravitated from the biting winds, snow flurries, bleak days of approaching winter, to wander down to the plains for shelter under the brow of the escarpment. How they must have loved relaxing along the Nepean, avoiding the rigours of high ranges, to watch their children frolicking in that great freshwater river. They came down at the end of summer, whereas I came at the beginning of spring, full of hope and joyous expectation of no more bitter nights and icy days — just peaceful waterways winding

through tall gums on the way to the ocean only a short birdflight from my new home.

Of course I brought copious pots of my much loved plants not only from the mountains but from faraway places I've lived in, the NT, Red Centre, Top End, all of which to my surprise are flourishing in the gentle Sylvania clime. This is the life for me, and it makes my voluntary work in NYMU so much easier to handle. I am even tackling the fierce traffic of Princes Highway without much objection from my small car.

Meantime I face stacks of books to be sorted and suitably allocated to shelves. My trouble is rediscovering old friends: leatherbound tomes sporting book plates and family crests; some rare, rather tattered treasures; stories being studied at school (sometimes not just for study either, like Alan Sullivan's *Under The Northern Lights* which I revelled in reading over and over in bed at boarding-school because I could nestle in a bit early and browse away till lights-out); other dear old possessions live on with their particular memories.

Especially precious are some works inscribed by their author Miles Franklin, near whom we lived as children, and whom we loved and mightily respected. She was a strict old lady with an amazingly beautiful smile, and we accepted quite naturally, as kids do, her instruction one day to call her 'Aunty Miles'. I'm meeting again *All That Swagger*, *Bring The Monkey* (she told me her own story of writing it), *Old Blastus of Bandicoot* and of course *My Brilliant Career*. And she gave us children such beautiful books as *The Constant Nymph*, oh, and many others to foster our love of reading.

Whenever I see reference to Miles Franklin in the news, nostalgia floods back to her little house in Grey Street. By invitation we appeared, and under my mother's usual admonition: 'Be punctual, and good, now, and don't outstay your welcome!...' as if such were possible at that grand old Australian's home. She always smartly ushered us out when she was ready for us to go home. But how valuable were those visits.

Something I won't forget was her cherished Rose Cup from which only the very favoured may drink Tea. The first time she set me down to it, I quacked: 'But I don't like tea, Aunty Miles! Mummy always makes me coffee.' A stern eye fell upon me. 'Only Tea is served in my Rose Cup, Keren!' Tea it was. But she was gentle with us too. When, a teenager, I was sent to spend three months out west near Nyngan to see if the dry air would cure my bronchitis, I wrote her a rather lonely letter. Back came a lively description of how once a tramp offered to share a mug of billy tea with her under a bridge at Nyngan. Never too busy to answer the call of a young friend in distress! I still have that letter.

So that's how I'm enjoying my new abode, resurrecting wonderful memories of times when we never dreamt of the Millennium Bug, or TV, or saw reports of nightly murders in our city splashed across the press every morning. I hope my grandchildren, Robert and Anna Wolff, will luxuriate in the inheritance of all these magnificent books and their

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history, when I go on to fresher fields.

We are looking forward to some more good articles from our subscribers as we enter the new millennium. There are thrilling stories out there in the

Outback and we want to read about them.

May the year 2000 and onwards bring lasting peace and encouragement to all countries in the world. Especially peace.

Secretary Keren

