

ABORIGINAL – CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS AND THE POLYPHONY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Frank Fletcher msc

My brother Barry looked after that Magnolia shrub for years, he watered it, dug around the soil. Nothing came to flower. After his funeral at Coonabarabran we drove home. And there it was, the Magnolia was in full bloom. We knew Barry was safely on the journey.

Barbara Asplet, director of the Aboriginal Women's Healing House, Picton NSW, member of the National Indigenous Arts Council.

The splendour of the world is a cipher, a revelation, an unveiling, the presence of one who is not seen, touched, grasped, yet is present.

Bernard Lonergan, theologian, writing on symbols.

We Aborigines are people of ceremony.

Maisie Cavanagh, author and lecturer.

A FEW YEARS after World War II, I came across a book written by an English woman during that war. It was entitled *This War is the Passion*. Living through the bombing the author, Caryl Houselander, was a sensitive witness not only to the bodily suffering inflicted but also to the hatred that was aroused. Yet, without denying any of its evil reality, that war and all the people within it were taken up inside the living passion of Christ. The war was symbolically transformed.

How does such a transforming symbol arise in a person's consciousness? That is not the core question of this chapter, but it is a question that needs to be answered

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right at the beginning. It gives us an understanding which we will draw upon throughout the discussion.

The question highlights the symbol as *transforming*, that is, as the person finding his/her world understood anew *within* the symbol. This overturns whatever outlook had been taken for granted.

We tend to believe that what everyone *thinks* to be the case must be so. Our thinking is a great gift, but we cannot live our lives only at the level of intellectual consciousness. The intellect is not up to the task. We are not pure spirits or pure reason. On the contrary, we live (and we need to live) within a polyphony of consciousness. Polyphony is choral music in which there are a number of quite independent waves of melody but all harmonising. Theologian Bernard Lonergan characterises human consciousness as a polyphony because of its variety of distinct levels and 'voices'. Yet in the concreteness of our living all are inter-related. He speaks of our consciousness as moving in an elemental flow: our senses and feeling, our understanding and loving, choosing, acting responsibly or irresponsibly. All have their moments, flowing into one another, a polyphony of differing functions.

Yet there comes a moment when the elemental flow slows and stops: the stillness of contemplation. In this stillness what has been happening in the flow of the polyphony begins to be revealed: patterns become manifest, the confinements of our thinking are shaken, images take shape. We find ourselves anew within symbolic images.

How does the *religious* symbol originate? Contemplation shakes the confinements of our everyday thinking—sometimes it does more than shake, sometimes the walls of the confinement in the everyday world are broken. A weakness has been found in the ego's defence of the everyday world. This break allows the Mystery (which we have always experienced without giving it the attention it requires) to transform our way of putting the world together. A new transforming melody is heard in the polyphony: we are within a symbol of Mystery.

St John of the Cross, an acknowledged leader in mystical theology, speaks of this transforming breakthrough as an experience of dissolution. It causes anxiety that is accompanied by a move away from ego-centredness. A symbol of Mystery brings us inside community and attracts us towards self-transcendence.

Such, in outline, is the origin and the transforming function of authentic religious symbols. As I noted earlier, we need to bear this in mind for our core

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question which will relate to those religious symbols which are Aboriginal in origin, whilst Christian in context. This Aboriginal-Christian question will unfold for us as we proceed.

For us westerners any question regarding Aboriginal-Christian symbols raises the issue of the present state of religious symbols in the west. The west is stony ground for symbols. We will keep bouncing from the stony ground for Christian symbols in the west to the indigenous traditions with their mystical and aesthetic attraction to spirit symbols.

On the superficiality of religious symbols in the west, I am thinking particularly of some contemporary paintings of Jesus Christ: in them, little mystical depth breaks through. One painting comes to mind: it portrays a blonde Jesus, glowing and fresh-faced. He looks as if he is about to play baseball. The health and humanness are appealing. But the face is complacent, very first world. No hint of the divine Mystery that longs to overcome evil and suffering.

From the north of Western Australia, the Kimberley region, comes a quite opposite Christ image. The Aboriginal artist has drawn a set of frames on the passion and death of Christ that is in accord with the symbolic consciousness of the people. In each frame Christ is depicted as a brolga bird: the brolga is beset by the boomerangs of hunters, wounded and killed.

Years ago, when copies of this set of drawings were printed, there was an outcry from fundamentalist inclined Christians. Jesus, they said, must be portrayed as a man, naturalistically, as he literally was. (In fact, western devotional art has commonly depicted Christ as a tall, white European which is unlikely to be as he actually was.)

It is not hard to see why the Aboriginal artist has blended an Aboriginal symbol within a Christian symbol. Going back to the origin of religious symbols, we saw that a people find *their* world, their community understood in a transformed way inside the symbol. The brolga is a notable creature within the strongly symbolic spiritual world of the Aborigines. With its long crane legs the brolga is well-known for its dance which resembles a ritual. It is hardly surprising that this Aboriginal symbol, which occurs in a number of their mythic stories, offered itself to the artist's contemplation of the suffering and death of Christ. The brolga would connect the spiritual world within which the community dwelt with the great ritual story of Christ Jesus.

However, there is an objection which needs to be considered. It runs: there is a difference between Christian and traditional Aboriginal symbols. The latter

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arise from inside nature, hence the brolga. The Christian symbols arise from the divine redeeming act which took place, speaking broadly, inside history. The two kinds of symbols, being distinct, should not be mixed together as the brolga drawings do. This objection brings us to formulate the core question of this chapter: *are Aboriginal symbols able, authentically, to become part of Christian symbolism? This issue is important for the continuation of the bridge between primal religion and the Christian Mystery.* The rest of the chapter will build towards making the answer to this question more understandable. There are a number of related issues which need to be untangled.

One such tangle is literalism: that brolga is not Jesus and therefore cannot be Jesus! That literalism is a rejection of the possibility of symbolism. It would have told Caryl Houselander: the war is not Jesus' suffering. We are not suffering as the body of Christ.

What lurks behind this emphatic literalism is the story of the western suspicion regarding symbolism.

Cognitive and symbolic in western culture

In the primal and immediately post-primal eras, myth was the main means of explaining the origin of world processes. Then, in the west, came the Greek discovery of mind. Of course this did not mean that there had been no human intelligence before that. The discovery was the realisation that myth was not the same as reason. By distinguishing reason from myth the dynamism of reason was unleashed. From this appreciation of the rational, the philosopher Aristotle (364-322BC) went on to advocate a discourse that would be, as far as possible, free from images and symbols for they were not national and precise enough for the scientific discourse he desired. Such discourse would seek to state in a systematic manner how things actually are. This discourse became the basis for theory.

In the middle ages St Thomas Aquinas followed this turn to theory, adapting Aristotle's cognitive discourse in his systematic treatment of philosophy and theology. The cognitive went on to become a methodological tool for modern science.

The benefits brought by the cognitive developments, especially in modern times, must be acknowledged. Their achievements, however, are not decried if we also admit the limits of the rational. As we live in the flow of existence within our polyphonic consciousness, we are (and we need to be) more than rational beings.

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Those who sent the First Fleet of soldiers, settlers and convicts to Australia and those who led this motley community were people who believed in rationality as the core of civilisation. Their minds were formed by the Enlightenment period in Europe. Thus it came about that the rational servants of the British Crown met a culture that was profoundly mythic-symbolic. The two have still not understood each other.

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In the present time there is a re-discovery of the symbolic. So let us look again at the western turn away from symbolism.

Aristotle's rationally purified discourse, with its pursuit of how things actually are, focussed upon the everyday material world. It derided the mythic 'explanations' of material processes. Thus it not only diminished the mythic symbols but also the contemplation from which they arose. Aristotle, it was said, took away the people's gods.

Regarding the medieval part of the story, we should notice also that Aquinas, whilst he adapted the cognitive discourse of Aristotle in order to treat systematically the world of natural beings, he also appreciated that St Augustine had opened the heart to contemplation of the divine Mystery in Christ. As stressed in the previous chapter, Augustine's key contemplative word was participation. In the stillness of contemplation the human mind and heart participates in the light and love of the Divine. From this mystical participation the Christian symbols are illuminated. It is said that there is not a page of Aquinas that does not contain the word participation, at least once.

Modern scientists, with their stress on the adequate collection of data, have presumed a literal form of objectivity for all levels of meaning. In that dominant outlook, the symbols of the scriptures and of ritual, along with the mystical-mythic stories and rituals of the indigenous, have appeared irrational and superstitious. It is striking, in this climate, that the indigenous have persisted in retaining what they have of their symbolic heritage. Striking, too, that their confidence regarding the symbolic is based upon something distinctive in their subjectivity as Aboriginal. They believe that there is a mystical disposition within them which enables them to perceive symbolic realities—which few westerners seem able to do. We must recognise this mystical disposition if we are to understand their mentality. Even many urban people retain a sense of living within a communion of beings, visible and invisible. Thus totems, birds, dreams, when they make unexpected entry into

their lives, are not merely events in the everyday world but may be mystical indicators of encouragement or of warning.

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From these two versions of the story, I believe we can draw a conclusion relevant to our investigation, namely, that in the polyphony of consciousness there are two ways of attaining meaning which are quite distinct. They are: the cognitive, which arises from a profound desire in the human mind to understand; and the symbolic which arises spontaneously from contemplation.

I would assert also that these two ways of attaining meaning are complementary to each other, each is a necessary corrective to the other. These later assertions will be considered further at the conclusion of the chapter. Meantime let us examine the distinct but inter-related roles of the cognitive and the mystical symbolic in Christian Mystery.

Cognitive and symbolic in christian mystery

Cognitive: There is a cognitive backbone to Christian faith. Jesus was an historical person who preached, healed and exorcised evil spirits mainly around Galilee and its environs and also in Jerusalem. He was crucified by the Roman authorities as a subversive. Soon after his death his followers proclaimed that he had appeared to them. They honoured and worshipped him as the Christ of Jewish prophecy and as Son of God. In succeeding centuries his followers became a community of communities living mainly in the Greco-Roman culture and so open to cognitive questioning. The main question that the communities had to struggle with was the relationship of Christ Jesus to the One God. This question was not able to be resolved by recourse to the symbolic discourse of the scriptures. A series of Church councils (from 4th–6th century AD) found it necessary to use cognitive non-scriptural terms to attain the precise formulae needed. Resort to the cognitive for resolving similar doctrinal disputes has continued in the Church.

Symbolic: In spite of the cognitive dominance in western thought, symbols are needed if we are to respond to the depths and mysteries of existence. I will back up this position by quotations, firstly from two leading theologians, one Protestant (Paul Ricoeur) and one Catholic (Bernard Lonergan); secondly by two quotations from Christian Scriptures.

Paul Ricoeur: symbols 'are the manifestation in the sensible—in imagination, gestures and feeling—of a further reality, the expression of a

depth which both shows and hides itself.¹ Ricoeur is speaking both of the depth of the human and of the deepest depth, the Mystery in which we live and move and have our being.

The cognitive does not directly experience these depths, we are not purely intellectual spirits. The cognitive, as pointed out, only reaches to raising and answering questions *about* the depths. The deepest or sacred depth resonates in our being as a whole, that is, in our bodily-spirit as woven intricately within the material cosmos. Therefore it stirs our senses, gestures and ritual, imagination and feeling. Through the conjunction of this stirring with intelligence, symbols arise.

Paul Ricoeur: 'The symbol opens up and discloses a dimension of experience that without it would remain closed and hidden.'²

Only contemplation evokes perception of the depth dimension and only the symbol can make it visible. Only mystical contemplation evokes perception of the sacred depth in all things and only religious symbolism can make that visible. Thus Caryll Houselander's mystical contemplation allowed World War II to be transformed into a symbol which disclosed the sacred dimension, the suffering of the crucified as a living event.

Bernard Lonergan indicates another aspect of symbol. 'Symbols...are inner and outer events, or a combination of both, that intimate to us at once the kind of being we are to be and the kind of world in which we become our true selves.'³

Ricoeur linked human depths to the sacred depth. Lonergan illuminates this further by heading us off from considering the symbol as a kind of *thing*. On the contrary the occurrence of a symbol is a transforming event in the life of a person or of a community, an event in which we are caught up within the event. Lonergan's distinguishing between the inner and outer event helps us grasp how the symbol 'happens' for us.

In Caryll Houselander's case the outer event would initially have been her effort to cope with the bombing, the threat of invasion etc. The inner event would have begun with her prayerful contemplation of these horrors. This contemplation would have proceeded to the mystical moment when the war

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, New Haven, Yale, 1970, 7.

² P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, 165.

³ B. Lonergan, 'Reality, Myth, Symbol' in *Myth, Symbol and Reality*, ed. A M Olsen, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1980, 31-37.

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was transformed into a symbol of the higher event hidden within it. At that moment the symbolic event would have intimated to her that she was to proclaim this mystical dimension and that she collaborate with Christ in his embracing and overcoming of evil with love.

Following up these reflections, which I have derived from the writings of Lonergan and Ricoeur, I offer two short quotations from the New Testament Letters. These make clear the mystically symbolic character of Christian faith:

'There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything.' *The Letter to the Church at Colossae*, chapter 3 vs.11.

To the merely cognitive mind this statement is an affront to reason. However, primal symbols, as in the Dreaming, disclose that everything in the environment is bound together in a hidden drama. Christian contemplation builds on this disclosure. It states: the hidden drama is Christ's overcoming of evil through the cross; evil is what seeks to pull everything apart; his loving embrace of the cross is what attracts everything into harmony. So we can rightly say that Christ is everything in its harmony and that he is *in* the mysterious depth of every thing.

The second quotation is from *The Letter of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, chapter 2 vs 20. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me.

Paul's apostleship among varied regions of the Greco-Roman world had brought him much suffering and betrayal. As with Caryll Houselander, Paul found that his sufferings were a sharing in the hidden but living passion of Christ. As we noted from the Lonergan quotation, Christ's passion is not merely an historical event, an 'it', but also a mystical we-event. It follows that 'it is no longer just I who live, but the crucified lives in me.'

In the sentence, 'I have been crucified *with* Christ', the 'with' emphasises also that the we-event is happening now. So Paul's sufferings were mystically contemporaneous with Christ's. Here there is a similarity with the Dreaming. The events of the Dreaming as celebrated by traditional people, were regarded as contemporaneous. Professor Stanner spoke of the Dreaming events as happening at *every-when*.

The Christian Churches, in a similar way, celebrate the mysteries of Christ's life, death and resurrection as living events in a pattern of year-round celebrations called the liturgy. Liturgy means the communal work of the people. *The people* refers to the community of Christian communities

throughout the world, the dead as well as the living. The *work* of the people is their sharing in the crucified's healing and forgiving transformation of the dysfunctional world. Yet we must admit that in the western church the liturgy is not participated in deeply enough as the we-event of Christ's healing and forgiving. For the renewal of liturgy that is necessary I am attracted to the approach of an English theologian and monk, Sebastian Moore.⁴ His specialty is the theology of the spiritual life. Wrestling with the issue of the externalism and 'deadness' in much western liturgy, Moore suggests that entering into the we-event of liturgy must mean people reaching beyond a merely external saying of set prayers. He recalls that St John of the Cross insisted that, when a person is no longer satisfied by the mere saying of prayers, it is a call to cross the threshold to contemplation.

I see this opening to contemplation as fitting in with what we have been considering about religious symbols which come alive through contemplation. The weakness in western liturgy is surely linked with the diminished feeling for symbolic ritual. Life is not felt to be rooted in hidden spiritual realities. To put it another way, western culture has become more and more alienated from religion in its symbolic form. For younger adult and youth generations religion appears to be of the past, not touching the present cultural mood. Moore's direction turns us toward mystical contemplation with its contemporaneity, its primal every-when.

Against those who insist that contemplation is reserved only for spiritual high-flyers, Moore quotes a number of authorities including a prince among 20th century theologians, Karl Rahner. Rahner, writing around mid-century, declared that a merely cultural Christianity was at an end. The Christian of the future (a future that has arrived) will have to be something of a mystic in order to stay a Christian.⁵ Rahner could see the alienation between western culture and religious symbolism growing. Religion was being understood from a materialist viewpoint.

Here again we can note a comparison between the indigenous and the west. It is interesting that for decades the materialist opinion of sociologist Emil Durkheim (1858-1917) held sway which said that religion was invented by primal people as a support for their social structures. The indigenous people themselves disputed this. It called the authenticity of their spirituality

⁴ S Moore, *In Water and in Blood*, Lonergan Workshop, vol 11, ed. Fred Lawrence, 91-103.

⁵ S Moore, *In Water and in Blood*, 101.

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into doubt. Lately anthropologists have come to realise that the indigenous are right: Durkheim had things back to front. The shape of primal society was directed by their culture which was rooted in their mystical symbolic experience.

Pope John Paul II confirmed to the Aboriginal people the mystical contemplative foundations of their culture when speaking to them at Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia in 1986:

You have lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land...through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God...The silence of the bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God's spirit.⁶

This mystical disposition applies not only to the traditional people but in some measure to the de-tribalised urban people also. I quoted Maisie Cavanagh's statement at the beginning that hers are a ceremonial people—in spite of grave cultural loss. Ceremony is built on religious symbols come alive.

Symbolic and cognitive as complementary

The western Church liturgy in need of a renewal of its symbols through contemplation provides perhaps the best context for considering the relationship between the symbolic and the cognitive. The secularist culture does not offer a suitable context because it brackets out from life the dimension of sacred Mystery. Church liturgy, on the other hand, provides a ritual symbolic context which is emphatically that of believers, but, at the same time, human understanding with its doubts and questions is given its place. Indeed, liturgy should offer the polyphony of human response to sacred Mystery. Believing and understanding (cognitive) carry distinctly different melodies but they have a unity in their response to the Mystery. At the same time they are different yet they need one another. Thus, human understanding (cognitive) raises questions *about* our believing in the Mystery event, and it can indicate answers. However, human understanding does not experience itself as caught up in the we-event.

Likewise believing cannot answer precisely, through its symbols, questions about the Mystery, yet through its symbols people are caught up in the we-event. And the symbolic does need to be questioned: has its believing helped individuals and the community toward genuine self-transcendence, especially

⁶ *The Pope in Australia, Collected Homilies and Talks*. St Paul's Publications, Hornebush, NSW, 1986, 167.

at a time when fundamentalism and fanaticism are rampant? Also the cognitive has to depend upon the believing which, through symbols, brings to understanding an awareness of the Mystery.

Aboriginal-christian symbols

At last we come to the core question: 'Are Aboriginal symbols (such as the brolga) able, authentically, to become part of Christian symbolism?' The objection, you recall, was that they are distinctly different forms of symbolising, the Aboriginal symbols coming from inside nature, the Christian from the divine redeeming grace inside history: they should not be mixed. Is this argument correct?

A key theological dictum of the Christian tradition is that grace is distinct but not separate from nature. The objection has overlooked this. It suggests that there is the grace of Christ's redeeming act in history but no grace in the Aboriginal perception of the spiritual in creation. Nonsense. This is an old bias against primal people and their religion. Creation is a primordial revelation. It reflects the beauty and wonder of the divine. As the Pope said, through their contemplative closeness to the land the Aborigines have touched the sacredness of the human relationship to God. Creation, therefore, is a grace. Creation and Christ's redeeming act are not separate but interrelated. The redeeming is a healing and fulfilling of creation; creation looks to its fulfilment through the cross. Aboriginal art emphasises the mystical depth of creation. Its symbolism is abstract and non-naturalistic. This is because the spiritual vision behind it is mystically entranced by the Otherness of the sacred. Aboriginal Christians, like the Brolga artist, are able to interpret their own symbols as entering into the mystical depth of the redeeming symbols of Christian faith. Indeed, their coming together symbolically can justly be interpreted as part of the 'new heaven and the new earth,' (*Book of Revelation*, Chapter 21, vs 1-2). Quoting from the Pope's Alice Springs address once more, 'It is wonderful to see how people, as they accept the Gospel of Jesus, find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people.'⁷

The brolga tradition and the passion of Christ have a point of agreement and they have come together for the artist. Letting the two symbolisms play together makes a polyphony of primal and redeeming voices.

⁷ *The Pope in Australia*, 168.

The bridge between the indigenous and the Christian religion emerges more clearly. □

Question to a Small Aboriginal Girl

Little Damascene,
With your small round head
Balanced on the brink of a slender neck
Ever so nicely:

With your small girl's arms
Stuck out of a square frock,
Thin and restless,
Promising roundness:

With your bounce, your poises,
You're tumbling through girlhood
Carelessly as water
Up at Pendella:

Are there moments you wonder
What it will be like
When you've grown out of being
A young darling?

Martin Wilson
Peppimenarti 1976

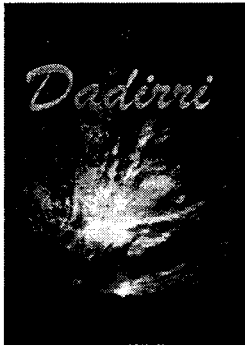
(Written while living at Peppimenarti outstation in the first part of 1976. The Ms. carries the gloss: 'Pendella is the name of the country our river comes from: more precisely, the name of a waterfall'.)

Review: Dan O'Donovan, *Dadirri*

(Kensington: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2001) 68 pp.

John D'Arcy May

We do not think in terms of Desert Fathers any more, but Dan O'Donovan is one. This little book brings together short reflections that have appeared in *Nelen Yubu*, and they gain by being rearranged so that each one sheds light on the others. The overall effect is still a little disjointed, but these are just fragments, hints thrown out by a 'bush theologian' which conceal as much as they reveal about the depth of contemplation from which they spring.



In the tradition of the Desert Fathers, the book is a commentary, not on Scripture—though interesting use is made of it—but on Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's by now well-known talk on *dadirri*, the Aboriginal way of contemplation. This is significant in itself, for O'Donovan wants to be an 'honest broker' introducing the Christian mysticism of the 'prayer of the heart' and Aboriginal spirituality to one another. His hope is that the Aboriginal 'holistic vision, the sense of kinship and the *wunan* sense [a Law of sharing, exchange, hospitality] form a solid foundation for a total way of being which is at once cohesive and splendidly in tune with today's demands' (15).

Equally fascinating is O'Donovan's suggestion that the ancient Syrian spirituality of Afrahat, Makarios, Ephrem and Isaac, whose closest Western counterpart would be that of Francis of Assisi, could form a bridge between the Greek and Latin traditions and those now emerging in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. He sees Aboriginal people as naturally endowed with the contemplative gift he has discovered in India, and he finds Syriac Christianity, with its practice of the Jesus prayer and its universal compassion for all creatures, most closely akin to this. That he is serious about offering this spiritual way to both Aboriginal and European Christians is shown by his practical tips (where to get Bibles in the Top End!) and his suggestion that the

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newly-emerging 'Gospel-inspired spirituality and Christian theology' of Aboriginal Australia 'stands only to gain by taking time to look around for user-friendly source-models close to its own way of thinking' (p.52).

Is this merely a visionary's dream or does it deserve to be taken seriously? O'Donovan is in no doubt that *dadirri*, quite apart from being a demanding practice for which he gives detailed instructions, has practical implications in the 'horizontal' or 'outward' dimension as well. He sees it as 'waking up' to injustice and its causes and as a source of inner peace from which the resolution of conflicts and the non-violent struggle for justice flow. His closeness to Aboriginal people allows him to suggest that, now that they are dispensed from the necessity of hunting and warfare, 'this feeling of pity for all of creation will be a useful area of self-purification for all Aborigines' (p.51).

O'Donovan raises many questions for further reflection and study, e.g. the mode of God's 'sacramental' presence in the land as perceived in Aboriginal myth and ritual, the nature of the 'Spirit-christology' that would be needed in order to elucidate it, the link between peace and justice, and the complementarity between Yoga and Zen meditation and *dadirri*. But his aim is not so much academic research as *contemplata aliis tradere* [to share the fruits of contemplation with others]. By following his lonely path O'Donovan has sown a seed; one day both 'land people' and 'boat people', old and new Australians, will gather its fruit □

Dan O'Donovan 2001, *Dadirri*. Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, Kensington, NSW. Soft cover, 68 pp., ISBN 0 9587869 3 3.

The bulk of the printing (total, 200 copies) are being distributed by the author himself (contactable at The Rice Bore, Beagle Bay Mission, PO Box 90, Broome WA 6725). A limited number are available from NYMU here at Kensington for \$20 plus postage. If sufficient interest were shown, we would consider a re-print.

— Editor

My Reflections on Twenty Years as a Missionary In Japan

Don Smith msc

SINCE THE END of the Second World War, hundreds of foreign missionaries, Priests, Brothers and Sisters, have laboured incessantly to spread Christianity in Japan. There are probably as many impressions and reflections about missionary work in Japan as there are missionaries who have worked there. So, as I write of my experience and impressions over twenty years, it will come as no surprise to me that others might think differently.

First tasks

The first task that was given to me in Japan was to teach English at our now defunct MSC Nagoya English Academy. One might ask what does teaching English have to do with missionary work and I think it is a legitimate question. After all one might expect to find a missionary involved in evangelisation by teaching scripture, catechism and such like. But I think that the teaching of English as a missionary in Japan says a great deal about the nature of missionary work there. It seems to me, that missionary work in Japan is not so much a matter of evangelisation as one of *pre-evangelisation*. Pre-evangelisation is a matter of being a presence and making contact. After that one can evangelise those who choose to be committed. In my early years in Japan I used to go for advice to a priest, not an MSC, who had worked there for forty years. On one occasion he said to me 'Father, go out and scatter seed. Leave the results to God, but scatter as much seed as you can, and then go out and play golf. Otherwise you will go mad.' I learned gradually what sound advice that was. Pre-evangelisation missionary work in Japan is about scattering seed without expecting results, or rather, leaving the results to God.

Work of pre-evangelisation

A fellow MSC once said to me, you MSCs in Japan must not be very good missionaries seeing you have made so few converts. I am sure it was a statement made in jest, but the fact is we do not make many Japanese

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converts. What we are doing is scattering the seeds of Christianity, a work of pre-evangelisation, and a great deal of effort has been put into that by a large number of missionaries. It seems to me that teaching English is one method of pre-evangelisation, of making contact, of being present.

Education ministry

Another way in which Christianity is a presence in Japan is through education. The Catholic and Protestant Churches run some very prestigious universities, schools and kindergartens there. You will not find many baptised Christians among the alumni of these institutions, but the seed of Christianity is being scattered in the minds of many young people. To what extent it flowers is something only God can deal with. Many years ago I attended a lecture on the occasion of some celebration of a Nichiren sect of Buddhism. A professor from a Buddhist University gave the lecture. Part of the lecture was a tirade against Christian mission schools that have made such inroads into Japanese society! I do not think he was wrong. As I have stated, many of these institutions are very prestigious and many young people study long hours to be able to pass the entrance exams for these universities and schools. Surely the years they spend in these institutions must implant Christian values in their hearts even if they do not receive Baptism. I think it is true to say that Christian education in Japan is a work of pre-evangelisation, of being present and making contact. Of course, I would not deny that some evangelisation is occurring here too.

Blessing of non-Christian marriages

A further way in which Christianity is a presence in Japan is through the blessing of non-Christian marriages. The vast majority of Japanese will describe themselves as Buddhist. But they are Buddhist in name only, and it is my experience that younger Japanese know nothing about Buddhism. It is the religion of their family. In the Edo Era prior to the Meiji Restoration that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century all Japanese households had to be registered with a Buddhist temple. It was the Edo Era Bakufu Administration's way of keeping control of the population. It seems to me that the notion that most Japanese families are Buddhist is a remnant of the Edo Era, because although most Japanese people will describe themselves as Buddhist, seventy percent will now also say they have no religion personally. However in spite of that, when a child is born it is taken to a Shinto Shrine to be dedicated. That same child will probably have a Christian wedding and a

Buddhist funeral. Until more recent times Japanese people had a Shinto wedding ceremony, and many wedding reception centres have a Shinto Shrine so that a package deal can be worked out for a wedding. In more recent times Christian style weddings have become popular, and the percentage of Christian type ceremonies has become greater than that of Shinto weddings. The result is that some magnificent wedding chapels have been built and the cross on top of a building does not necessarily mean it is a real Catholic or Protestant parish church. Wedding reception centres are now also including Christian style chapels, so as to be able to continue to present the package deal. How did all this happen?

I have no way of verifying whether it is a fact or not, but I have heard it said that a Catholic priest once stated that if the Church can bless animals, why not non-Christian couples on the occasion of their marriage. And so with the permission of Pope Paul VI, the custom of giving such a blessing on the occasion of marriage began in Japan. This is a work of pre-evangelisation that I was involved with over many years, and one that I enjoyed very much, because it is so closely related to evangelisation and is a contact with young people at such a special time in their lives. Of course, the Japanese Bishops have surrounded with conditions the reception of such a blessing in the church. All the couples have to take several pre-marriage talks before they could have the church ceremony. As I have said, it is an attempt to introduce Christian ideas to young couples at this important time in their lives.

In the last few years I was in Japan, so many wedding churches and chapels had been built, that I began to ask couples why they wanted to be married in a Catholic parish church when they can have a Christian style marriage at these wedding churches and chapels. I often got the answer that they wanted to be sure they received the real thing. Because I spent sixteen years working in parishes a long distance from the centre of the diocese, I myself had to give the required instructions in preparation for a Christian ceremony. As one who was educated entirely in Catholic schools and thoroughly taught the teachings of the Catholic Church from my earliest years, I was constantly surprised that these non-Christian Japanese young people who came to the church to be married, knew next to nothing about religion, about God, about the purpose of human life, about the meaning of love, and had not given a lot of thought to the deeper implications of the step they were about to take in life. I personally have not heard that any of these couples received baptism in later years, but I do know couples who still have contact with the Church, who

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come to Mass at Christmas, and I have maintained contact with some couples whose marriages I have blessed over the years. I think this is a very special pre-evangelical work and I hope it continues in the Japanese church for many years to come.

Conversion?

I have often asked myself why there are so few Japanese converts to Christianity. Actually, I do not like the word 'converts'. It strikes me as patronising, and as implying that these people had no faith till we Christians turned up. Years ago I was teaching English to a young man and took an opportunity that presented itself to speak about Christianity. He was most annoyed and stated that we have our own religion. Buddhism was introduced into Japan from China by Prince Shotoku in the seventh century AD. But since that time it has been intertwined with the native religion of Shinto, and is a Buddhism that is uniquely Japanese, different from Continental Buddhism. The Japanese have taken on a lot of the trappings of Western culture, but deep down they are proud of their own culture and heritage and Christianity has yet to become a part of that uniquely Japanese culture. Christianity is a foreign religion in Japan. It is interesting that Christianity in Korea was introduced by Koreans, but Christianity in Japan was introduced by foreign western missionaries whether you think in terms of St Francis Xavier four hundred and fifty years ago or of missionaries who entered Japan after the Second World War. Christianity in South Korea is growing, but not so in Japan, unless you choose to include Christians from South America who have Japanese ancestry and Filipinos who have come to Japan in recent years.

Christianity is a foreign religion in Japan, foreign to Japanese culture. Japanese society is vastly different from our western society. Western society is strongly individualistic, whereas Japanese society is strongly collectivist, group orientated. It is possible to live in western society without knowing one's next door neighbours or without any particular relationship with them. Japanese society is organised into neighbourhood groups that belong to a district group that reports to and receives information from the city. Within a district, there is a women's group, a men's group, a children's group and a variety of other groups that make for an orderly district. I am not interested in whether Japanese society is better or worse than western society. It is just different, and regimented in such a way that it makes it difficult for Catholics to be at Mass on Sunday because of obligations to neighbourhood and district. And although religion is free in Japan, the nature of Japanese society does make it

difficult for people to become Christian. Every district has its own small Shinto Shrine. The Catholic Church covers many districts and cities and in a sense belongs to none. A Japanese Catholic priest suggested that I should try to be involved in the district where the church is. That may well be a good idea, but as a Catholic priest in Japan where Catholic churches are a long way apart, our work constantly takes us into widely different areas especially in the country. It is not very practical to be deeply involved in one small district. Japanese society does make it difficult for people to become Christians, especially in the country, where I mostly worked.

Basic diversity of cultural patterns

There is another reason for the lack of people joining the Church. A couple of years ago, I read the intervention made by the Archbishop of Osaka at the Asian Synod of Bishops held in Rome. I read a summary in English, and was so surprised at what he said, that I got a copy of the original Japanese just to make sure there was no mistake. He said that western missionaries from the time of St Francis Xavier, four hundred and fifty years ago, have tried to spread Christianity in Japan with little success, because they have introduced western catechetical thinking that does not gel with Japanese thinking. He noted that what is needed is the teaching of the scriptures and its stories. This was a surprise to me, because I have always had a strong leaning towards catechetical sermons. After reading the Archbishop's words, I tried to lean more to the scriptures and have thought a lot about the Catholic Catechism, a product of our western thinking. Without doubt the Church must protect orthodox doctrine and theology, the teachings of scripture and tradition, the creed we profess each Sunday at Mass. The document which Rome issued as a response to the recent Asian Bishops' Synod, namely *Ecclesia in Asia* ('The Church in Asia') stated that the people of Asia are waiting to receive Christ, and we have what they need. Maybe there is a minority in Asia who are in a waiting mode to receive Christ. I would question whether the majority is. Do we have what Asia needs? Is the expression of Church teaching all together in a way that Asian people can receive it? There is no doubt in my mind that eastern and western thinking, eastern and western logic is different. If the expression of the eternal truths as found in the western Catholic Catechism does not gel with the eastern mind, then maybe Rome needs to allow the leeway necessary to find an eastern expression of the eternal truths. Perhaps there is need for greater trust in the indigenous Bishops Conferences in the different Asian cultures. In the document *The Church in Asia* Rome opts for the

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notion that there is only one Asia, one Asian culture. I have read that that is not the common view among anthropologists. So, I wonder if it is not true to say that there is a need for greater trust in the indigenous Bishops of each country to allow indigenous theologians to produce an eastern expression of the eternal truths. After all it has taken two thousand years of development of doctrine to get where the western church is today and there have been a lot of hiccups along the way. □

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Martin Wilson msc
Editor

Review:

Veronica Ryan 2001, *From digging sticks to writing sticks—Stories of Kija Women—as told to Veronica Ryan, rsj.* Published by Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 328 pp, rrp \$50.

SISTER OF ST JOSEPH, Veronica Ryan, has collaborated with a number of East Kimberley Warmun women and other community members to produce this collector-type book which is generous in almost every dimension.



From digging sticks to writing sticks presents the recorded stories (with accompanying commentary by Ryan) of a number of Kija women (with input from some men), all of whom have been involved in their particular ways in the evolution of the Warmun (Turkey Creek) community.

In general the stories draw on aspects of pre-contact indigenous cultural life in the East Kimberley and specifically the gradual movement of some Kija people from the pastoral leases of Violet Valley and Texas to eventual settlement at Turkey Creek where founding members of the present Warmun Aboriginal community established their Ngalangangpum school in 1979.

When Veronica Ryan concluded her teaching commitment to the Ngalangangpum school in the late eighties, some of the women with whom she had established close ties through her teaching presence soon sent her their written request that she help them record their story of the preceding couple of decades.

Now another decade later, *From digging sticks to writing sticks* is the most attractive result. The book is a mosaic of Kija history and culture from the first dislocating colonial intrusions to the present day. Despite sadly remembered

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cruel and oppressive times there is a remarkable story of survival. A constant inner glow of achievement accompanies the unfolding personal records and the culminating account of the establishment of a Catholic school at Warmun.

Naturally there is a rich vein of evangelising purpose apparent, personified in the story of Winnie Budbaria who in the ten commandments and seven sacraments (her constant mantra) had brought her new Catholic convictions from the Leprosarium near Derby to her East Kimberley Kija relations.

Through five parts the book builds the mosaic from recorded narrative pieces and commentary which are in turn anthropological, personal (feminine), historical, spiritual, and educational.

From the text the reader easily absorbs the spirit of the storytellers and notes the ready attendance of the caring listener and recorder, a former principal of Ngalangangpum school. Together they seem to have enjoyed the almost extravagant patronage of the Western Australia Catholic Education Office, publisher of the book.

Much of the text is vitalised by rendering the stories in their original Kriol. At the same time each chapter's solid concluding remarks evoke an image of commentator Ryan familiar to many, while a passage or two reveal a more poetic attachment to her interlocutors. Thus in reference to Dinah the doyen of the storytellers at page 118: '[r]eflection on Dinah's life conjures up an image of a gentle stream created to flow along the feint furrows sketched out by the ancestors so long ago. Unexpected disaster in its many forms divert [sic] that original path, but after aimless meanderings across strange and hostile terrain she finds new direction in totally unfamiliar circumstances.'

Cost does not seem to have been an inhibiting consideration, judging from the quality of the paper which both allows a clarity of print and enhances a Kimberley pellucidity in many of the excellently reproduced photographs. Multiple portraits in colour of some individuals, I suspect, are explained by the ever-gathering momentum of the work's intent; perhaps they are justified in that many of their older subjects do not read.

Veronica Ryan has fanned the spark of memory and a willingness to talk in these valiant women of Warmun. Their ensuing partnership suggests a common hermeneutical simplicity leading into a marriage of gospel energies and the culture of (the) Dreaming. The overall movement is towards a contemporary socio-religious scene which mostly escapes, in the religious dimension especially, probing and realistic critical analysis.

From Digging Sticks

There are here, of course, outstanding issues of cultural and religious significance to be explored with further funding, it may be hoped, from the Catholic Education Office in Perth. One such issue will be the unravelling over (a long) time into the future of a presently consolidated religious syncretism at Ngalangangpum school and in the Warmun Catholic mob generally.

Perhaps even more fundamental as an issue is the accommodating cross-cultural anthropological interpretation which undergirds this presentation of the leading phenomena that have shaped today's Catholic community at Warmun. It is worth noting that in another work of practically contemporary interest, *Aborigines and Diamond Mining* (Dillon and Dixon, eds.), some of the actors in *From digging sticks to writing sticks* together with relatives manifested their beliefs to a couple of consulting anthropologists as warrant for their stake in the Argyle diamond mine. These beliefs, as recorded by Palmer and Williams, were devoid of any Christian content or resonance.

The future, therefore, of the Kija at Warman will be no less challenging than the events of those recent decades covered by *From digging sticks to writing sticks*. Specifically, from an immediate educational perspective the stories are now available, not just to young growing Indigenous girls rightly proud of their forebears, but to all those who value the past and who desire to build an ever more humanised future by critically attending both to that past with its glories and to any continuing ambiguities. □

Noel McMaster,
Halls Creek.
April 25, 2001

INCULTURATION: A MISLEADING TERM

Dennis J Murphy msc

Inculturation is a well established tool for understanding, promoting and evaluating the Church in its mission to the world. Pierre Charles sj seems to have been the first to use the term in an article in 1953. Since then it has gained a respected place in theology and also in official Church documents.

It may come as a surprise to learn that a biblical scholar of international repute, Lucien Legrand, has recently questioned the use of the term.¹ He is a member of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, professor emeritus (Scripture) at St Peter's Institute of Theology, Bangalore, India. He has lived close to the reality of 'inculturation' in that country during practically all of his life as a priest. He knows at first hand what it is about and has no intention of soft-peddalling it, but he does query the usefulness of the term and claims it is ambiguous and misleading.

One of the points he makes is that 'inculturation' is often applied in a one-sided way as though it was a matter primarily for places like Africa, Asia, Oceania, etc. On the contrary, the problem of culture has to be viewed in a *deeper* and *wider* perspective. It is a challenge that has faced and continues to face the Word of God *everywhere*.

His objection to the word is not theoretical. Nor is it based on the Bible's teaching about cultures. It is rather a study of the cultures in which and from which the people of the Bible emerged. During his research on these cultures, he became more and more convinced that 'inculturation' was an inadequate term for describing the cultural processes he had discovered there.

Legrand limits himself to certain cultural areas, but they are key ones. First, in the Old Testament: 1) Israel in Canaan—though Israel in many ways confronted Canaan, its cultural background was clearly Canaanite; 2) the political 'acculturation' that took place in the acceptance of Kingship and the

¹ Lucien Legrand, *The Bible on Culture*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001. Also published by Orbis.

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counteraction of the prophets; 3) the search for a 'wisdom' that crossed the boundaries of cultures, and its eventual acculturation in the book of the Wisdom of Solomon. He shows also how the cultural background of Abraham and Moses reveals the same complexity.

With regard to the New Testament, he draws on the extensive modern studies of the Jewishness of Jesus, and highlights this in the context of the culturally complex nature of Galilee. Finally, he studies Paul's background and after that the developments in Colossians and the strong anti-Roman attitude of the Apocalypse. A lot of this is highly disputed area, but Legrand moves through it in a balanced and fair way. While it is possible to dispute various details and emphases, the overall picture he presents seems inescapable. Throughout the history and pre-history of Israel there is no *one* model for the relationship of faith and culture.

Legrand gives the reasons why he finds the term 'inculturation' inadequate. First of all the study of 'culture' belongs to anthropology, but anthropology does not have 'inculturation' in its vocabulary. 'In an area where faith investigates its borders with anthropological realities, it does not bode well for theology if it cannot share a common idiom with anthropology. It is a poorly "inculturated theology" that cannot use the language of its partner in dialogue!' (p.169).

He finds each component of the word ambiguous. *in-* seems to imply a 'disincarnated faith that would have to enter the concrete world of various cultures' (p.xii). But faith is always incarnated in a culture before and when it approaches another culture. It is always a case of one culture contacting another culture either positively or negatively. The complexity and multiplicity of models found in this process has already been studied in depth and detail by anthropologists; consequently theologians are short-sighted if they bypass the findings and terminology of that discipline.

Legrand makes another point that is commonly overlooked. Christians at times measure their progress in 'inculturation' according to the number of religious customs they have taken over. Greater sensitivity is required in this. Representatives of the great religions 'have actually objected to Christian attempts at "inculturation" and have denounced them as other forms of missionary aggressiveness. As guardians of their traditions, they are not happy to witness what they consider to be an encroachment by uninvited outsiders' (p. xii-xiii). This observation is not untimely.

The second component in-*cultur*-ation raises a double problem: that of definition and use. 'Though culture is common to all; the particular pattern of culture differs among all.² And also 'inculturation' seems to take culture in the singular, whereas a culture very often has a great variety of subcultures and is far more complex. Often enough the majority belong to subcultures and not to the dominant culture. Moreover there is conflict within cultures. And 'culture and "inculturation" may not always be as noble as they seem.' (p. xv).

The third component *-ation* implies action, whereas 'in most cases and at the deepest level, cultural influence will be more imbibed than deliberately induced. Cultural forms are rarely produced artificially. They more commonly emerge from the soil, from society, and from history and come to existence without deliberate human intent' (p. xv). Legrand claims that apart from the Jewish apologetics which tried to present Yahwistic faith to the Hellenistic world in Egypt (Alexandria) in the last centuries B.C.E, 'the relationship with surrounding cultures is rather to be expressed in terms of emergence, immersion, acculturation, intercultural exchange, subcultures, counter-cultures, cross-fertilization, *métissage*, and so on' (p.169).

At the conclusion of his book, Legrand sums up his conclusions. The way the term 'inculturation' is used seems to imply that cultures necessarily have positive values. His study, however, revealed another attitude to cultures particularly in the prophets and in Jesus who 'revolt against oppressive dominating cultures' (p. 170). The figures of Abraham and Moses also indicate a certain 'estrangement' from the culture of their origins.

He stresses that 'attention must be paid to the subcultures of the lowly. They are often the present-day equivalent of the ancient biblical situations of the subcultures of the Israelites in the Canaanite context, and of Jesus the Galilean peasant in the Jewish world.' All this has a close connection with 'option for the poor'. He quotes the call made at the end of the Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences in 1995:

Like Jesus, we have to 'pitch our tents' in the midst of humanity, building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound solidarity with suffering humanity and led by the Spirit of life, we need to *immerse ourselves in Asia's cultures of poverty and deprivation*, from whose depths the aspirations

² J Bennet and M Rumin, *Social Life* New York: Knopf, 1948.

for love and life are more poignant and compelling.³

Legrand makes another point from the examples of Abraham the migrant, of Israel forging its identity in exodus and exile, of Paul the traveller—that of openness to other cultures. ‘Never was it God’s purpose to isolate his people from external influences. Another name of *agapé*, charity, is *koinonia*, fellowship, openness to others... The local church will not be Christian if it is not open to other churches and to the world.’ (p. 172). This openness is not as simple as it might appear at first sight. ‘The cultural identity of the local church in Tokyo and Hong Kong, for example, has to face the fact that more Filipinos attend church services than local Christians. In French suburbs church attendance is largely made up of a multiracial blend of Portuguese, Africans, Vietnamese, Tamilians with a sparse sprinkling of autochthons’ (p.172f).

Legrand rightly stresses that there is no going back on the centrality of the local church with regard to interaction with cultures, but he stresses also that the local church cannot be closed in itself. ‘A church finds its identity as church of *God* only if it remains open to God’s call and to the world... It will also reach out to other churches in *koinonia* and to the world at large in *agapé* ... A church’s efforts at cultural identity must be responsive to the alterity of other people and to the otherness of the Most Holy’ (p.174).

The author’s final word is that cultures are ‘the most precious treasure of humanity... In this world there is no disincarnated word or Word and culture is the incarnation of the word’ (p.175). If the Christian movement has been overly westernized, the remedy will not be found in a return to some idealized past, be it ‘a return to the early Church, to the purity of biblical origins, to the simplicity of the Gospel and the pristine authenticity of the Jesus movement ... The clock cannot be set back. Christ did not leave his disciples with a promise to lead them back to the Garden of Eden’ (p. 175). The only way lies ‘in a greater fidelity to the power of the Spirit. The Spirit opens the Christian faith more and more to the widening world of the five continents and to their old and newly emerging cultures, subcultures and counter-cultures. (p. 175). Though thoroughly erudite, Legrand’s book is easy to read. It throws light on large areas of the biblical text. More importantly, it brings that text to life and makes it very relevant to the Church in the cultural changes of our own time. □

³ Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, Manila, Philippines, January 10-19, 1995, Papers no. 74, p.88. Italics not in the original.

Interview with God⁴

I dreamed I had an interview with God.

'So you would like to interview me?'

God asked

'If you have the time' I said.

God smiled

'My time is eternity

'What questions do you have in mind for me?'

'What surprises you most about humankind?...'

God answered...

'That they get bored with childhood.

They rush to grow up and then long to be children again.

That they lose their health to make money

and then lose their money to restore their health.

That by thinking anxiously about the future,

they forget the present,

such that they live in neither the present nor the future.

That they live as if they will never die, and die as if they had never lived.'

God's hand took mine

and we were silent for a while

And then I asked...

'As a parent, what are some of life's lessons you want your children to learn?'

God replied with a smile...

'To learn they cannot make anyone love them.

What they can do is let themselves be loved.

To learn that it is not good to compare themselves to others.

To learn that a rich person is not one who has the most, but is one who needs the least.

To learn that it only takes a few seconds to open profound wounds in persons we love,

and it takes many years to heal them.

To learn to forgive by practising forgiveness.

To learn that there are persons who love them dearly, but simply do not know how to express or show their feelings.

To learn that two people can look at the same thing and see it differently.

To learn that it is not always enough that they be forgiven by others. But that they must forgive themselves.

And to learn that I am here always.'

⁴ Downloaded from web site, www.InterviewWithGod.net, a movie display with a backdrop of beautiful nature scenes and rather tinkling music. Viewers are invited to share the experience with friends.

SYRIAN CHRISTIANS

Tyson Doneley msc

IN 1931 a cargo boat, the *Malabar*, ran aground on the rocky coast south of Maroubra and gave its name to a Sydney suburb. Malabar was the southwest coastal corner of India and its name was also associated with a sometimes bitter controversy over Jesuit efforts (de Nobili, Britto and others) to inculturate the gospel in South India. The controversy over the Malabar rites ran for centuries with papal pronouncements to settle disputes; and post Vatican II one can only wonder at the fuss, and regret lost opportunities as with the Chennai of Ricci, similarly disputed by men sometimes more intent on Europeanising than evangelising.

Christians in India go back into the remote past, possibly back to St Thomas the Apostle whom many claim to have started churches on the west coast near Cochin before journeying to the east coast and being martyred and buried at Mylapore in the south of modern Chinese (Madras). Concrete historical proof is difficult to produce as evidence of this. Three centuries later, in 345AD, a merchant, Thomas of Kinai, did come with 72 christian families from Edessa in Syria to settle in the southwest corner, and their descendants are with us distinct and clear today and are known as Suddhists. (The diocese of Kottayam has personal jurisdiction over all Suddhists by a brief of Pius X in 1911.) The question arises: have the two Thomas's been confused?

The Christians of India kept in touch with Persia and the Chaldean rite, and from here they regularly obtained bishops until difficulties in the course of centuries led them to turn from East Syria and Babylon to West Syria and Antioch. Christians became a strong and flourishing caste group but do not seem to have evangelised. Nestorian Christian missionaries made their way to both India and China and may have influenced the doctrinal orthodoxy of Indian believers.

Before the Portuguese found the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope (Vasco da Gama 1498), intrepid missionaries did find their way to the subcontinent overland just as the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, did

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in 327BC. The remarkable Franciscan, John of Monte Corvino came to Mylapore in 1291 for over a year before going on to modern Indonesia (to Sumatra) and China where he was made Archbishop of Peking in a mission that failed. A man longer in India of the 14th century was Jordan of Severnac OP, a careful observer (his booklet 'Wonders of the East' is highly praiseworthy for its graphic detail and keen objectivity) a great missionary who converted thousands along India's west coast from Bombay to Aulon, south of Cochin, a martyr to Muslims. Like Francis Xavier two centuries later he appealed for labourers to come to this mission field ripe for the harvest, but very few came—Europe was too comfortable, the journey too arduous in those overland days and life was too full of difficulties in India: four Franciscans who came to help him instead of going on to China, were killed by Muslims and a similar group of Dominicans struggled to stay alive. These men were all Latin rite missionaries and would have known the Syrian Christians who were sometimes suspected of Nestorianism.

When the Portuguese came after 1500, there was regular if difficult traffic with India, land of prized spices. Missionaries now came in numbers, among them the Jesuits and the great Francis Xavier. The long cut-off Syrian Christians were persuaded to align with Rome, keeping their customs and Syriac language in the liturgy, a language akin to Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

The Portuguese base in India was Goa, well north of Malabar region. With splendid churches, monasteries and convents, it became the home of the East. Erected as a diocese in 1533, its jurisdiction extended from the Cape of Good Hope to China and Japan and all places in between. In 1557 it became an archbishopric and in 1572 the archbishop was designated Primate of the East.

Thus Goa ruled the Syrian Christians. In 1598 Archbishop Menezes OSA called the Synod of Diamper to enforce the reforms of the Council of Trent on these Christians. They were accepted very uneasily—they had had their own bishops from the Middle East until 1597 when the last Syrian bishop died. Diamper looked to them like a Portuguese and Latin takeover. Without a Syrian bishop, an archdeacon looked after them pastorally, with some hurt feelings that Rome and the Jesuits were not on their side. Pent-up feelings erupted in 1653 on Mattancherry Island in Cochin Harbour. A group of Syrian Christians took a common oath to refuse to submit to Rome, represented by Archbishop Francis Garcia sj, of Goa, and they wanted no further dealings with Jesuits. The oath was taken at the foot of a cross to which they tied ropes,

then laid hold of the ropes in unity, bending the cross itself which thus became the Coonen Cross or Bent Cross, and this was a moment that started 'the Schism of the Coonen Cross', involving most of the Syrian Christians. Rome reacted by setting up the area as the Vicariate of Malabar in 1657 separate from Goa and under Carmelite missionaries whose purpose was to reconcile these Syro-Chaldaic Christians. (Twelve rebel priests imposed hands on their archdeacon and thereby declared him their 'archbishop'). Many of the rebels were led back to union with Rome, but for many others the schism has been permanent, giving rise to several new groups in turn, Syrian Orthodox, Jacobites, Mar Thoma Christians who together constitute some 40% of the six or seven million Syrian Christians, with about 250,000 in the CSI (Church of South India) and another 100,000 in various sects. There are some three million Syro-Malabar Catholics of Kerala in fourteen dioceses; and another group that reunited with Rome in the '30s, the Syro-Malankara rite has 300,000 in four dioceses.

Stepping back briefly in history, the Dutch had driven the Portuguese out of Malabar in 1663 to add to the complications; and the Dutch expelled Catholic missionaries from their areas of control, but Indian priests and Italian and German Carmelites helped the Faith to survive. In 1709 Rome suppressed the Malabar vicariate and erected the Latin Vicariate of Verapoly which has become an archdiocese with 250,000 Catholics, and the headquarters of the diocese has been moved from Verapoly Island to the centre of the big neighbouring Indian city of Ernakulam where the Catholic population has now settled. There stands the fine Latin cathedral of St Francis of Assisi, while a hundred yards down the same street is St Mary's Basilica and the Cardinal's residence as leader of the Syro-Malabar Catholics, both imposing buildings; and the basilica and cathedral as neighbours reflect the proximity in faith of Latin and Syrian Catholics whose numbers grew between 1901 and 2001 from 4,000 to 450,000 Syrian Catholics in that diocese alone.

After the 1653 schism of the Coonan Cross, some involved in the schism were soon reunited; others hankered after reunion. One section that had got into communion with the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch had several times approached Rome and finally under Mar Ivanios (a well-remembered visitor to Australia) reunion was effected in 1930. The headquarters of this group, the Syro-Malankara rite, is in Trivandrum at the southern tip of India but its members are spread throughout Kerala, if thinly, since 200,000 of their 300,000 members live in Trivandrum diocese which also has a Latin bishop.

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The Syro-Malankara primate, Mar Baselios, is current chairman of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India numbering some 140 diocesan bishops with fifteen auxiliary bishops. Twenty-seven dioceses are Syrian rite—eighteen of them in Kerala itself i.e. Malabar, the first home of the Syrian Christians.

As a generalisation, Syrian Christians are very devout and love their faith. The pictures of the Sacred Heart, Mary, St Sebastian and other favourite saints find a place of honour in homes, businesses and vehicles. Family prayer such as the rosary is common, Mass attendance exemplary. No wonder the rite is rich in vocations, men and women—Syrian Catholics at about a quarter of the total Catholic population provide some two-thirds of the vocations of India. Multiple vocations in a family are common. A local Carmelite Sister, (a teaching group) is one of five Sisters in the convent. A headstone in the Catholic cemetery at Bangalore (Karnataka State) recorded a whole family of eight in religion, a bishop, priests and nuns, though this could have been a Goan family where Goa too is a prolific source of Catholic life. Long may the Syrian rites flourish, be it in Malabar or elsewhere!

As a topical footnote, our parish church, St Mary's, is a fine massive building from the 16th century. The parish was set up in the year 1002AD, and has 10,000 Catholics with five station churches. The church is built in a florid baroque Portuguese style and was doubled in size by a large extension in 1996. There are no seats of pews, people sit on the floor and two to three thousand can crowd inside, using long wide verandahs as well. A notice in Indian-English says: 'Footwears Out.' And in the wall by the side door are a number of stones from previous churches inscribed with a language that no local can read today.

As well as the MSC novitiate, there are five convents in the parish, two large schools each with a thousand or more, a hostel/orphanage, a Catholic hospital, and the parish has a history of many vocations, men and women. The State of Kerala, population thirty-million, is about a quarter Christian and the Catholic Directory bristles with Catholic institutions, especially in education, providing 100% literacy for Kerala. A sobering note is that the average family in the State now has only 1.8 children, and this trend in the West has caused the steep decline of vocations in country after country. It is said by vocation promoters that the decline has already begun in the once prolific field of Kerala. Close to Kanjoor is the Pontifical Seminary of Always that ten years ago had 700 students, the biggest in the world. It has now split into two seminaries: Latin rite, Syrian rite, with a total of 600 seminarians diocesan and

religious. The pattern of decline could soon be threatening here just as it has blighted the Western Church.

Notes:

1) 'Malankara' in the designation Syro-Malankara has a meaning something like 'mountain region', and is equivalent in meaning to Malabar, for it is the same region differently designated. The Malankara Syrian Church has three groups: Jacobite, Mar Thoma, Catholic. All should have been Catholic if the Latin rite had not sought to absorb rather than co-exist with the Syrian rite Christians.

2) No mention has been made of a central issue causing division in the Missions of the Portuguese: Padroado or royal sponsorship as opposed to Propaganda sponsorship. The right to nominate bishops as well as the duty of providing revenue were both involved and caused sometimes bitter conflict in India and many problems for missionaries and local clergy until the Padroado disappeared in the 19th century. □

From the Secretary's Desk.

FIRST of all I wish to thank all the kind people, friends, subscribers, some of whom I had not actually met, who offered me their sympathy and condolence on the sudden death of my sister, Patricia Haugh, in May this year. I am very touched by your thoughts and concern, thank you, and for the Masses and prayers offered for Pat.

* * * * *

In lighter vein, I thought I'd give a little report on an event in which I was involved last month. My younger daughter had received a parking ticket for allegedly overstaying her time at a parking meter to the value of ten cents. I'm not quite *au fait* with all the details of her confrontation with a City Council officer, but it transpired that she was convinced she was not to blame, that the meter was faulty, also that she had not overstayed her allotted time.

In due course along came a demand for payment of a \$50 fine. My daughter, affronted, rang the Council three times without satisfaction, finally asking an officer on the phone: 'Are you *really* going to take me to Court over ten cents?'

The reply: 'Yes, we are.'

Accordingly, she decided that she would dispute the summons and defend the case herself (this against the advice of a solicitor friend of ours.)

Action Stations!

So our household went into fighting mode; family support was strong; many photos were taken and enlargements

made of the controversial parking meter, statements were typed up—and I booked my seat to Melbourne on the XPT.

It took quite some time for the hearing date to come around, but as it got closer we became rather agitated at the spectre of Going to Court. I was only there to give moral support to my daughter because I feared she could be putting herself through an awful ordeal, maybe to end up in sobs, and perhaps a few hundred dollars out of pocket—all just to prove a small point about the condition of a parking meter. However, the day came at last and we both set off, seemingly dressed, to face the music.

At 10.00am there we were, sitting up in the courtroom, waiting. Another case was heard before ours, then my daughter was called to come forward. The Magistrate listened as the Council's prosecuting officer described the misdemeanour, how her car had outstayed its welcome at a 15-minute parking site, and that only ten cents had been put into the meter instead of the 'required' twenty cents. Then he looked at this slip of a young woman standing before him. He asked if she pleaded 'Guilty or Not Guilty?'

'Not Guilty, Your Worship' she replied bravely.

After the parking meter man had been sworn in on oath (to our amazement), he described how he'd found her car, 'cream in colour', in an overdue situation. The details began to sound lurid: surely some heinous deed had been perpetrated.

She then asked if she could question him. The Magistrate nodded, and she

began to describe how she had put ten cents into the meter, but nothing happened; so then she tried five cents after which a 9 showed up, followed later by an 8. She didn't know whether these referred to minutes or cents. His Worship seemed to be following her story with interest, and a few of the audience grinned at her serious attempt to defend her own case, stressing that, anyway, she had only left her car for 3 or 4 minutes while she'd dashed into a nearby shop to exchange an article. Mercifully, she didn't go into detail as to what the article was or how much it cost, etc., but she was determined to get her ten cents' worth in Court if she hadn't got it from the meter in the street.

She pointed out, waving her hand about convincingly, that there was a permanent street sign overhead that read: 'Parking 15 Minutes'. The Magistrate was nodding at her recital, observers were nudging each other, perhaps relishing the entertainment of this performance, but I was squirming in my seat.

The Parking Attendant said she should have paid twenty cents! I looked up at the Magistrate at this stage to see him watching my offspring with a suppressed smile on his face. An argument seemed to have developed between Parking Attendant and this irate female defendant. He was saying '20 cents'; and she 'No, ten cents' was on the meter. He said she should have looked at the other end of the meter where she'd have seen '20 cents' showing. She replied that she tried to look there '...but I couldn't read anything because it was all

covered in bird droppings — and I have here a photo to prove it!

By this time the 14-odd people all waiting in the courtroom were trying not to laugh, when the Parking man turned to the Magistrate and said: 'I have brought the meter with me today, Your Worship, to show you.'

His Worship, stunned, sat upright:

'What! You mean you've actually brought the parking meter here for me to see?'

'Yes, Your Worship.'

Up from the hidden depths of the witness box came a greyish lump of metal looking like a great grey frog, which was deposited on a nearby shelf. A gasp from the audience.

'May I see it, please?'

A rush to take it across to the Magistrate—while the two combatants seemed to be arguing again about '10 or 20 cents'. My daughter said it was faulty and had shown 10 cents, which she had paid...The parking man was insisting that the meter, though old, was in excellent condition and very accurate and that it had shown 20 cents.

'At the moment it's showing 27 cents!!' offered His Worship rather whimsically, as he fondled the grey frog and looked with a grin from one to the other of the litigants.

But the parking man said that was because the meter just didn't like being turned upside-down (as now!), or handled much... By this time His Worship was laughing outright. He looked straight at me sitting directly in

Nelen Yubu

front of him—including me in the performance. Of course I laughed too.

But Justice had to be done. He said he did have other cases to hear that day, so addressed my daughter by name, very gently:

‘Have you ever been in Court before?’

‘No, Your Worship.’

‘Nor been in trouble with the police at all?’

‘No.’

‘And you’ve never been Trafficking in Heroin, have you? Or Armed Robbery, or anything like that?’

‘No, never!’ frantically.

‘Well, you don’t look to me like a person who would be running in and out of Court on a *trivial* matter. [‘Not trivial!’ was muttered from the prosecution end of the room.] You probably have a busy life to attend to, and you have come here today to defend yourself, and I am going to dismiss this case — Then, perhaps, I may be able to move on to my next job, eh?’ He was smiling at her in fatherly mode.

‘Case Dismissed!’ he pronounced.

After a feeble attempt to get Costs awarded in her favour, which the Magistrate kindly cut short with the observation that the case had been dismissed, hadn’t it, along with the prosecution’s request for Costs on their account, my daughter saw the light (mother meanwhile suffering palpitations) and thanked His Worship graciously; we both bowed, gathered up our papers and belongings (clothes for Pentridge?) and fled.

We are very grateful to that humane magistrate who had treated the matter with dignity laced with merriment, because obviously we were new chums at such proceedings. But I do not think it likely our family will ever be found in Court again. It was a frightening prospect for us, but finally a joyous result, marking the completion of another facet of our education.

* * * * *

We at NYMU wish all our friends a happy and holy Christmas 2001 as we pray that peace will be restored to our troubled world, and people will be able to live safely in happiness, to enjoy life with one another.

Secretary Keren

