

How might interactions between Australian Indigenous spirituality and Western Christian “orthodoxy” enrich the methodology and content of Christology?

Introduction

In this essay I discuss historical, cultural and theological interactions between Australian Indigenous spirituality and Western Christian “orthodoxy” on topics relating to the person, nature and role of Christ. In doing so, I am aware that there is neither simply one Australian Indigenous spirituality nor one Western Christian orthodoxy with regard to Christology. I am also aware of being an absolute novice and outsider with regard to Indigenous experience, culture and faith. Within the boundary of those disclaimers, I attempt to describe and comment on the valuable contributions of Indigenous theology to both the methodology and the content of our understanding of Christ.

Historical

Although Indigenous spirituality varies across tribal groups, there is a reasonably consistent traditional cosmology that includes several types of spirit beings who inhabit the world, an extensive network of foundational stories collectively called The Dreaming, the reverence of certain plants, animals and other natural objects as sacred totems, and a central role for the land (including its flora and fauna). Each Indigenous person is given stewardship over portions of the land, songs, dances, ceremonies and stories. (Paulson 2006, 313–14)

As a very broad generalisation, the history of interaction between Australian Indigenous people and Christianity has been based on Western cultural domination and an explicit condemnation of Indigenous culture and spirituality by European missionaries. Even when European settlers accepted that the Indigenous people were of “one blood” with them, they were cast as “morally degraded” (Kenny 2007, 49; Harris 1994, 24–36), culturally barbaric (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 2), and theologically uninformed (Thompson 2004, 4). Many exceptions to these attitudes have been documented (see especially Harris 1994), including speeches by both Pope Paul VI and John Paul II affirming “a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce” (Pope John Paul II 1986). But these

bright exceptions feature on a backdrop that has been painted in dark hues of judgement, rejection, arrogance and dispossession.

Historically, the only options for Indigenous people with regard to their understanding of Christ has been to either accept what they were taught by Western missionaries, along with the associated Western cultural baggage, or to reject it outright¹. Notwithstanding that many missionaries stood protectively between Indigenous communities and Western imperialism (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 7), they also frequently presented a God who required the complete rejection of Indigenous culture (Harris 1994, 869). Unsurprisingly, when Indigenous people saw the dissonance between what was preached about Christ and what was enacted by Europeans, they often rejected Christ along with their rejection of Western culture (Thompson 2004, 4). “How could the Aborigines find a meaning for the past two hundred years in Christ, when the terror and humiliation visited on them was by ‘Christian’ peoples?” (Fletcher 2013, 133).

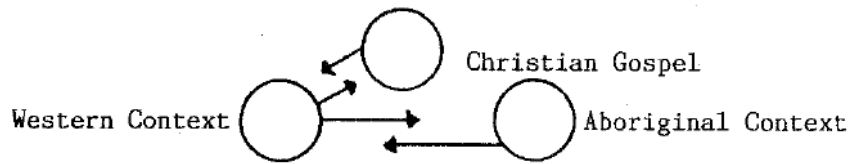
In short, the historical interactions between Indigenous and European people did not allow significant dialog regarding the person or work of Christ. The steady growth of writings, conferences and organisations relating to indigenous theology since the 1960’s, however, indicates that other options are becoming available. An influential example has been the 1997 book “Rainbow Spirit Theology”, which documents two workshops with seven Indigenous participants and two non-Indigenous facilitators (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007).

Cultural

Inculturation

Historically, the Indigenous experience of the Gospel has been mediated through Western culture. As the following diagram highlights, there has not been a direct engagement between the Gospel and the Aboriginal context.

¹ This is a bit simplistic and not intended to imply any lack of intellectual or spiritual maturity on the part of Indigenous people, but a lack of any context in which considered dialog could occur between peers. (For a more varied description of Indigenous responses to Christianity see Pattel-Gray and Trompf 1993, 170–75.)



(Gondarra 1986, 14; a similar diagram is in Thompson 2004, 3)

The same authors suggest that the Gospel needs to be *planted* in Australia rather than *transplanted* (Gondarra 1986, 21; Thompson 2004, 3; Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 63). How would this look in practice? What would an unmediated engagement look like? And what might the outcome be in terms of an Indigenous Christology?

I agree with Graham Paulson about the need to engage with the Biblical text directly rather than with Western theology (Paulson 2006, 310). A starting point for that endeavour is to reject “the western presumption that God was to be identified with western civilisation” (Fletcher 2013, 35) in order to approach Christological dialog as peers. Indigenous approaches to Christology ought not be subservient to or in response to Western approaches – but such a level playing field is hardly possible given the history described above.

The challenge is not merely that the Bible was written from a cultural standpoint radically different than the Indigenous one. Indigenous people can, and often do, accept the historical details of Jesus life and death in a first century Jewish culture in Palestine, but for those facts to become life-giving they need to be related to traditional categories and lived experiences of Indigenous people. This is true for all cultures, though less obvious in the context of the dominant culture due to the unconscious acceptance of the presumption noted above by Australian Catholic Frank Fletcher. As with any culture, the Gospel needs to be “inculturated” within Indigenous cultures, and this is what I take to be the meaning of the evocative term “planted”. The same seed planted in different soils, with different weather and nutrition, will grow into different plants, albeit of the same species.

Anne Pattel-Gray expresses a similar sentiment when she quotes P. Arrupe: “Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context ...” (Pattel-Gray 2012, 292). Graham Paulson also writes of “the incarnation of Biblical truth within an Indigenous culture” (Paulson 2006, 311). Although I agree with the intent of these statements, Pattel-Gray’s and Paulson’s use of the term “incarnation” seems to me to negate

the universality of the Christ event. Christ was already incarnated in Australia, at the same time as he was in Palestine. The Word became flesh for all people and for all time. As Pattel-Gray wrote elsewhere, Indigenous people of Australia had experiences of God within their traditional culture that established a relationship to Christ prior to hearing from European missionaries (Pattel-Gray 2012, 280). This does not question the need for inculturation, but separates the repeated need for *inculturation* from the single, unique and universal *incarnation*.

Story-telling and symbol

One core part of the Indigenous “soil” is the esteem given to story-telling (Pattel-Gray and Trompf 1993, 175), which serves as a reminder that Christ’s preferred mode of teaching was also story-telling. How would Christology look if it was story-driven rather than propositional? In particular, how would Christology look if viewed through the type of timeless story found in the Dreaming? The Dreaming exists in the eternal present, and conveys a symbolic network in which the story-teller and traditional audience are participants rather than external observers².

In their attempt at inculturation, the Rainbow Spirit Elders claim that “The starting point for this theology is the land as a central spiritual reality for all the participants” (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, vii). What would it mean to Christology if the land itself was part of the *dramatis personæ*? How would the land speak to us about the person and work of Christ? For Fletcher, the land can be a source of symbols that revitalise our religious experience (Fletcher 2013, 260), for instance by acting as an icon³ of the divine presence (Fletcher 2013, 284). “The land is like the Scriptures – sacred stories and signs are inscribed in the landscape, and readily available for those who can read them” (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 20). Western theologians without a cultural connection to the land may not be able to read that language and should look to Indigenous theologians to teach us.

² As Frank Fletcher notes, the symbolic has been dominated by the cognitive in Western culture, but there is much in the Bible that can be read in the same symbolic mode as the Dreaming. An example he gives is Paul’s declaration that “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Such a claim is not literally true, but rather a figurative expression of Paul’s participation, in the present, with a foundational story from the past (Fletcher 2013, 180–87).

³ The term “icon” reflects Fletcher’s own Catholic cultural background. Perhaps an Indigenous theologian would favour “totem” in place of “icon”.

Another aspect of story-telling is that existing cultural images can be used as metaphors to help explain the Gospel. For instance, in some Aboriginal traditions, when spears are thrown at a criminal who has been sentenced to death, a defender called a Maladigarra stands in front of the criminal and deflects the spears with a woomera. The Maladigarra can be used as a powerful illustration of the work of Christ (Thompson 2004, 18).

Theological

Contrary to the message of early missionaries, Indigenous people can affirm the core tenets of Christianity without abandoning their traditional culture. Djiniyini Gondarra, for instance explicitly affirms the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that all power in heaven and earth belongs to Jesus, and that through the saving work of Jesus, God has reconciled the entire world (Gondarra 1986, 21). But within such affirmations there exists plenty of room for creative discernment about the person of Christ, the nature of the incarnation, and the work of salvation through Christ.

The voice of God from the margins

Before considering what contributions Indigenous theology might have to Christology, I first want to comment on why we should expect such contributions to be valuable. The Bible is replete with examples of theological insights springing from people on the margins: from children (Matthew 21:15-16), blind men (Matthew 9:27, 20:30), a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:22); women are the first to see the resurrected Christ (e.g. John 20:10-18); the good news is found among the poor (Matthew 5:3) rather than the wise, influential or nobility (1 Corinthians 1:26). Why is that such a frequent motif?

In my experience, the inertia of habit, orthodoxy and institutionalism can easily prevent us from hearing the voice of God. In contrast, personal and cultural disruption can break down those defensive barriers and create a “zone of proximal development” in which learning can occur. Fletcher observes that such weakened defences will not occur in the centres of power but at a boundary: a place of vulnerability alongside those who have been pushed to the fringes, which in Australia means especially with Indigenous people (Fletcher 2013, 28). In such spaces we encounter Christ and through that encounter can learn Christology.

The importance of both inculturation and listening to the voice of the marginalised needs to be weighed against the charge of syncretism that has sometimes been directed at pro-Indigenous theologians such as the Rainbow Spirit elders (Edwards 1998, 143; Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 99). In one sense, syncretism is a necessary correlate of successful inculturation and marks the important difference between inculturation and cultural domination. But the charge of syncretism is often based on a fear that some essential theological feature of Christianity is lost. The trick in avoiding both cultural domination and theological loss is to separate the cultural from the theological. Achieving that requires not simply good intentions – for it is impossible from *within* any culture to make such a separation – but a deliberate openness to hearing the critique of another culture. Without that deliberate openness, syncretism is just as likely to occur within one’s own culturally-adapted theology as it is to occur in the other’s.

In the light of those principles, we can now note some specific aspects of Christology where an Indigenous perspective has been voiced.

The person of Jesus

Who is Jesus Christ from the point of view of Indigenous spirituality⁴?

In one sense, Jesus is a foreigner to all cultures, even to that in which he was born: the Word was “with God in the beginning” (John 1:2) and “lived for a while among us” (John 1:14) before “returning to God” (John 13:3). But in another sense the central implication of the Incarnation is that God became one of us: God shared our humanity (Hebrews 2:14), was like us in every way (Hebrews 2:17), and shared our common life (Anglican *Prayer of Thanksgiving and Consecration*).

But in what sense is Jesus *like* an Australian Indigenous person? Does Jesus *belong* in Indigenous culture or simply a foreign import? Uniting Church minister Grant Finlay wrote that “If we restrict ourselves to speaking of Christ coming to us, or being present in, this land exclusively within the witness of Christians, we both severely limit our Christology, and we are left with a dominant image of a colonising Christ” (Finlay 2007, 35). By “colonising” I take Finlay

⁴ I’d like to note once again that such questions ought not imply any second-tier position for Indigenous spirituality or culture. It is not that Western Christianity has defined who Jesus Christ is, and that any input from Indigenous thinkers is a mere appendix. This question is no less (or more) important (or difficult) than the question of who Jesus Christ is within Western cultures.

to mean a Christ who imposes on us rather than stands in solidarity with us, who controls rather than being one of us.

In contrast to thinking that Christ only arrived in Australia through the words of missionaries, a more Biblical view would be that the eternal Christ was here from the beginning. “In the light of John 1:1-4 and Hebrews 1:1-3, [Jesus] was present in a hidden way in the creative process behind their country and tradition” (Thompson 2004, iv). In Indigenous Christian thinking, God has *always* lived among people and in the sacred land (Thompson 2004, 5). This leads to a different understanding of the Incarnation. In Western tradition the concept of linear time so strongly influences the interpretation of history that we naturally think of the Incarnation as a progression from BC to AD. But in the eternal now of the Dreaming, there effectively is no “BC”.

George Rosendale, one of the contributors to *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, suggests that the Rainbow Spirit was the agent of creation in a way that parallels the Biblical depiction of Jesus (Thompson 2004, 6)⁵. The image was rejected by missionaries because the Rainbow Spirit is often imagined as a snake and consequently considered evil in the light of Genesis 3 (Thompson 2004, 7). Norman Habel concurs with Rosendale when he writes that although it is “bold and staggering for Christians to say that the Rainbow Spirit became flesh and camped among us ... that is what the Creator Spirit did in Jesus Christ” (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 90). In that quote Habel is co-opting the term *logos* in John 1, attempting to remove it from its Greek cultural heritage, and translating the core meaning via a term that will be understandable in Indigenous cultures. This process of appropriating a concept from one culture and re-aligning it to concepts within another culture is exactly what John was doing in the original context when he applied *logos* to Jesus.

What did the Incarnation achieve?

Among the intentions and outcomes of the work of Christ that Indigenous experience can illuminate, this essay discusses three.

First, the New Testament claim that Jesus fulfils the Law (e.g. Matthew 5:17; Romans 10:4). In the immediate context of the Biblical text, “the Law” refers to the Jewish religious laws that

⁵ This does not, however, reflect a consensus among Indigenous Christians. Some traditions view the Rainbow Spirit as an ancestral spirit rather than the Creator Spirit (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 57).

include the Ten Commandments. That concept, however, can be re-contextualised in a way that allows an Indigenous theologian to claim that “our traditions are the law that he came to fulfil for us” (Thompson 2004, 28).

Paul provides a precedent for the expansion of the concept into symbolic territory when he refers to “the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2). Jesus sets us free not just from a specific set of religious/legal requirements but from a deeper corpus of “law” common to all cultures. As a consequence, a meaningful and legitimate direction for theological reflection is to consider what the law means in Indigenous culture and how those meanings might inform our understanding of being freed within Western culture⁶.

Second, the Biblical theme of exile. Marcus Borg notes three “macro-stories” of salvation in the Bible: liberation from bondage, return from exile, and forgiveness from sin (Borg 2004, 176). All three have relevance to the Australian Indigenous experience, but some authors have placed a particular emphasis on the experience of exile (e.g. George Rosendale in Thompson 2004, 34–35). Some Indigenous people have been physically removed from their land and even families. Exile, dispossession and alienation are no less real for others who, although still living within their traditional home lands, no longer have ownership or control over the place for which they nevertheless retain stewardship responsibilities. “We Aboriginal people have been torn from our home country ... estranged from our own land and many of us have lost our spiritual connection with the land” (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 69).

Part of the work of Christ is to stand in solidarity with people in exile and to assure those within that space that they are still valuable and loved by God. Another part is to enable a return from exile, to “loose the chains of injustice and ... set the oppressed free” (Isaiah 58:6 and similar in Luke 4:18). Jesus is “the Way” back to home from exile, whether that exile be physical or existential. Many of us in Western culture are also lost and unhomed, and our salvation also depends on a resolution to this experience of exile. A Christology enriched by Indigenous experiences of exile may well inform that resolution.

Third, the work of Christ heralds a renewal of all creation (e.g. Romans 8:19-21; Revelation 21:5). This renewal starts with reconciliation between people, and between people and God

⁶ The converse is also true.

(Ephesians 2:13-16) but also includes a renewed engagement or spiritual connection with the world around us. “Christ came to redeem lives, communities and, ultimately, all creation from all the forces of evil at work in the world” (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 23).

Fletcher argues that the renewal of creation is not simply about saving the environment: the broader need for such renewal in Australia must incorporate reconciliation, justice, environmentalism and eschatological hope in a conflict that is fundamentally with modernity (Fletcher 2013, 63–77). The traditional Indigenous connection with the land suggests an important priority for their input to that process. This is an aspect of Christology that Western Christians are more likely to learn from Indigenous theologians than figure out themselves.

Conclusion

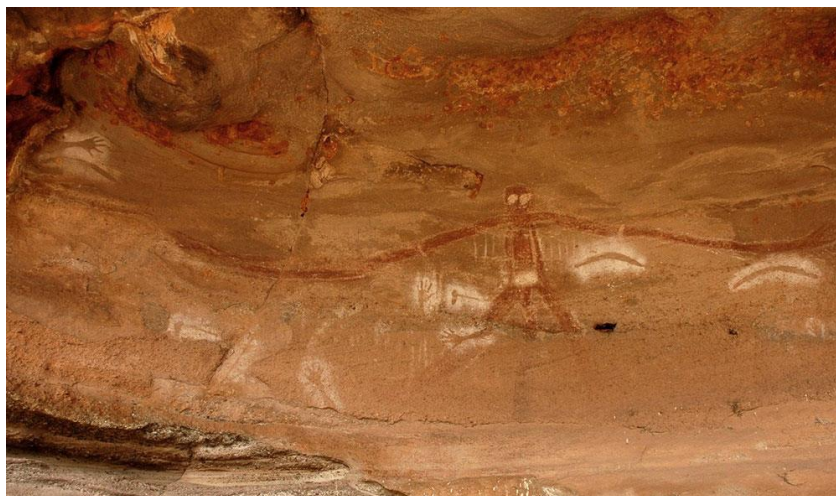
Although the observations above have been categorised under the headings historical, cultural and theological, the key points can be rearranged as comments on the methodology and content of Christology.

Methodologically, students of Christology should expect God to speak from the margins. We should eschew cultural superiority and engage in dialog with the marginalised and people of different cultures as peers in order to understand how the Incarnation becomes inculturated. This ought to lead to a questioning of our own inculturation of the Gospel. From the example of Australian Indigenous cultures, we can learn that stories and symbols provide richer means of expressing the truths of Christology than cognitive propositions.

With regard to content, my limited reading of Indigenous spirituality has already raised for me several new understandings of Christology. Though I have previously understood that Christ is metaphysically present across time and place, a new thought has been that Christ could be equated with an image specific to Indigenous culture (such as the Rainbow Spirit) in the same way as he has been equated with an image that arose specifically within ancient Greek culture (i.e. that of *logos*). I have also noted that the idea of Jesus fulfilling the law need not be limited to the Old Testament Jewish Law. Indigenous experience and theological reflection can inform our understandings of salvation as a return from exile, and how the work of Christ leads to a renewal of all creation.

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