



Assignment question: Describe two unique features of ecclesiology or missiology arising out of one of these regions/groups. How would you apply and contextualize these insights to your own local church setting?

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Abstract

The problems of Australian society and identity while not unique continue to hamper the Australian Church's ability to have global-local conversations, and indeed conversations between the diaspora, Western and indigenous sectors of the Australian Church. The main problems facing the Church are those of identity, both on a corporate level and an individual level, and creation care. In examining the indigenous response to these issues care has been taken to approach the issue from a non-patronizing position. The main themes of everyone leading out of their expertise as a part of their community and keeping all alive are drawn out of the indigenous spiritualities as answers and applied to our own context through agreement with scripture.

Two Tentative Steps: Aboriginal Answers on Identity and Creation Care for Progress toward a truly Australian Church and Culture

The European Australian Church has remained complicit in the oppression of the both the Aboriginal expression of their own native spirituality, and the messianic or Christian forms thereof. If we are to repent and reconcile over these issues then there needs to be learning from them, and maybe even an Aboriginalisation or Australianisation of the Australian Church in order to take our proper place in glocal theological conversations. The two interlinked and strongest topics of Aboriginal theology I believe will also help us in the task of reconciliation and positioning for glocal discussion as a truly Australian Church and not just as another arm of the Western Church. One that having eschewed the sins of our past including the White Australia policy, and the stolen generation among others is truly made up of the indigenous, diaspora and western voices of Australia as a distinct nation and church.

A Note on Method

The two features of Aboriginal spirituality and theology that I believe will most help in our repositioning to have truly glocal conversations with others outside of Australia are their views of identity especially as related to community cohesiveness, leadership and reconciliation, and their views on creation care, or land as they call it. As their identity is intrinsically linked to their view of their role in being image bearers for God towards their land. In the face of the environmental challenges and the identity porous cultural milieu that the west finds itself in these two stand out not just as possible correctives to Western Christianity, but also a good news that meets the needs of western society and others that are starting to feel the cut of these problems. Following the belief as expressed in *Rainbow Spirit Theology* I have chosen to consider the belief in the Creative Spirit as found in Aboriginal Spirituality and religion as analogous to Christian belief in Yahweh.¹ Not much seems to have changed in terms of theological and anthropological literature surrounding Aboriginal community and beliefs, and indeed European interactions with Aboriginals remains as it was when Europeans first started interacting with them in the late 18th Century patronising, Western centric, and tone deaf, with a view that the way of the West is best.² If relations between Westerners and Aboriginals are to improve then this needs to change. My hope is that this paper can be one of the steps towards this change.

Our place of starting must be the Cross of Christ. We recognise that as our westernised Christianity has come in contact with Aboriginal Spiritualities that instead of the message of hope that we said we proclaimed we acted out a message of death.³ We must turn and meet our brothers and sisters in that place of death and pass through the Cross to where his life abounds. We must die to and kill the lies and sin that have been pushed as a basis for the abuse of people and land. If we are to gain any insight into what our Aboriginal brothers and sisters have to say about identity we need to first come to the point where we do not impose upon them the colonial narratives around race.⁴ One of these narratives is drawn out of the curse on Ham⁵ and has traditionally been used to make Christianity synonymous with European Culture.⁶ We

¹George Rosendale et al., *Rainbow Spirit theology: towards an Australian Aboriginal theology*, 2nd ed. (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2007), p2

²I have left some examples of this in my bibliography such as McDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit*, and Beckett, *Encounters with Indigeneity* also of note is the Australian government's view of integration into European style society as the goal of Aboriginal development.

³ibid, p4

⁴Rosendale, p3,6-8

⁵Gen 9:25, this curse has been used by all Abrahamic religions in the justification of the subjugation of whichever people group is deemed Canaanite/Hammite. cf. Robert Kenny, *The Lamb enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the ruptured world* (Carlton North, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2010). p44-45

⁶John W. Harris, *One blood: 200 years of aboriginal encounter with Christianity* (Unley, S. Aust.: Concilia,

must break this mentality and see that the God who comes to us is the God who comes and bears our burdens including those of oppression.⁷

Identity

Once we disentangle European culture from the Gospel⁸ especially with its racism and exceptionalism, we should be able to start to form a more egalitarian culture within the church.⁹ As Sveiby and Skuthorpe note Aboriginal culture is structured in such a way as to be egalitarian and dynamically lead.¹⁰ Part of this comes from the highly specialised form of training that the individuals take part in, but also that as the community needs that specialised expertise they call on said individuals to lead in those contexts.¹¹ If we have as our focus an egalitarian community formed round our dying and living with Christ then our emulation of Christ is one marked by humility and reconciliation.¹²

In God's coming to us he becomes one of us stripping back all notions of race, ethnicity and hostility, and in his body on the cross he makes out of the hostility from the warring and oppression one new nation and Kingdom, not where one group transitions from oppressed to oppressor, nor where the oppressor continues in their sin, but where those in the Kingdom might image forth Christ's reconciliation and love by their communion together.¹³ For the Aboriginal Christ is therefore an Aboriginal who struggled with the oppression that Aboriginals faced and their sins and overcame. And for the European he also is a European, again facing the same sins and struggles.¹⁴ So too in the life that we now live by faith in the Son of God it is to be marked by that tearing down of the wall of hostility which has been erected. This is not to be some human endeavour but one caused by our drawing near to God and hence near to the rest of his people. As Jesus' life giving Spirit returns to renew us may we too be open to his calling us to be those blessed peacemakers that he spoke of.

As we look to our particular context the deficits that this corrective of having a deep identity that flows into both the individual's work, specialisation and leading are clear. Having had metanarrative and community narrative stripped from us through the rise of Postmodern thought Western society as a whole, the Western Church, and Mosaic Baptist in particular have a need once again to be grounded in the narrative of the Bible, the God who creates all things, for us as his image bearers to represent him in graceful love.¹⁵ As a community brought together out of a broken world made to be for the healing of that brokenness planted firmly in the radical reconciliatory work of the Father through the Son for the sake of the world around us and the Glory of God.

Identity and Creation Care

An area that is becoming increasingly linked to our view of what it means to be in the image of God is the area of creation care. As we seek to have a wholeness of identity we should also have that identity flowing out of what it means for us to be image bearers,¹⁶ God's representation (2012). p72, Noel Loos, *White Christ black cross: the emergence of a Black church* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007). p45

⁷Rosendale, p3

⁸Something that is similar to what some Pauline scholars see as Paul's goal theologically, cf NT Wright, *Paul and the faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). p1498

⁹Noel Loos, *White Christ black cross: the emergence of a Black church* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007). p45

¹⁰Karl Erik. Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe, *Treading lightly: the hidden wisdom of the worlds oldest people* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006). p111-114

¹¹ibid.

¹²Rosendale, p69

¹³ibid, 70

¹⁴Rosendale, p61-62

¹⁵ibid, 79

¹⁶ibid.

tives on earth. Here too can the Aboriginal Spiritualities inform and help us to have a deeper understanding and appreciation for not just God with us bringing healing to the human race, but Christ in us, God's answer to the groaning of all creation in anticipation of the revealing of the children of God.¹⁷ For the Aboriginal to be a person is to be in relationship with the land. All things have their place and if we find ourselves here then it is because God has placed us here, not to exploit or to have power over this place but to encourage and bring his life here.

As with other cultures that have a close link to land the types of knowledge that Aboriginal cultures had was more focused on hunter-gathering and navigation.¹⁸ However unlike other cultures as far as we can tell the form of hunter-gathering that was practised by Aboriginal communities actually yielded a plenty that left them comfortable with eschewing farming,¹⁹ and other technologies that Europeans consider to be more advanced. This coupled with their use of family planning and possible use of natural contraception actually kept the land in an ecological balance.²⁰ At the center of the driving force of these concerns was the goal of keeping all alive.²¹ We do see such concern through the flood of Noah in scripture, but also in an eschatological sense in which all creatures live in harmony.²²

It is no question that post-industrialised societies, and even post farming societies have lost a connection to land. The question that needs to be asked is whether this is a bad thing and how if possible can we reignite that link that is apparent in non-industrialised and non-agrarian societies. Possibly even without losing the comforts that we take for granted. The Aboriginal interaction with the land was not merely an unthinking form of hunting and gathering, but with a focus of upholding proper relationship between humans and other animals.²³ It is quite possible that Scripture also holds this idea. We see that the permission to eat meat is only given after the flood, with the caveat of not eating blood. We also see later that meat eating was only seen as a part of the cultic practices of Israel, in this way there was to always be a connection and consciousness of the life that was taken, the same sort of consciousness that Aboriginals have in their quest to see all survive.

Excess also flows from our disconnect from land. As long as we're not mindful of the effects that our consumption has on the world around us we will be extorting creation rather than tending and protecting it.²⁴ Both scripture and Aboriginal theology stand as a needed corrective towards our views on creation as it connects to identity. We need to recalibrate our identity towards conservation and balance with creation. Our God is the God who upholds all creation.²⁵ If we are to properly image him then we must have this part involved in our understanding of who we are. Creation longs for the proper appearing of the children of God and if the Gospel is a Gospel for the world and not just for us then a part of who we are should be oriented towards tending and protecting creation, especially the part of creation that God has placed us in.

If we are to answer in grace and humility for the hope that is within us in our contemporary culture two of the greatest problems that face our society and the individuals therein are those of identity and creation care. However these two can be linked and made into a forceful answer to the worries and concerns of those in our society. This answer has come from dialogue with Aboriginal theology and hopefully as this is opened up Australian identity can be more grounded in the land that we live on rather than our relationships with big players such as the US or Europe, and as our identity becomes more authentically Australian that we might have reconciliatory peace between all that God has placed in this land.

¹⁷Rosendale, p91-94

¹⁸Sveiby, p75

¹⁹ibid.

²⁰ibid, p91-92

²¹ibid, p170-171

²²Isa 11:6, 65:25, Hos 2:18

²³Sveiby, p170-171

²⁴Rosendale, p80

²⁵Col 1:17, Heb 1:3

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