



NATSIEC

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THEOLOGY NEWS

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I'm Sorry

ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL SPIRITUALITY

THE THEOLOGY
PROJECT OF THE
NATSIEC

This is an ongoing project of NATSIEC which is to promote discussion about Indigenous spirituality and theology. We must remember that just as there are many denominations in Australia, there are many different ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders express their relationship to God, the land and other people. Indigenous theology continues to grow. NATSIEC hopes that this section will be a resource helping people to come to a deeper understanding of Indigenous spirituality and for the first peoples of this land to share their faith.

Rev George Rosendale:

Talk given in 2003 in Sydney to a gathering of Catholic Theologians

The GOSPEL is Good News about God. Good News about his creation and his teaching and his promise of freedom. My Aboriginal people knew about this but they did not know how the Creator or the Ancestral Being would free them. After someone died they had a Ceremony of Freedom. This ceremony is to remind them that the Spirit of the dead will be set free. This gave them hope even though they did not know about the Resurrection.

At the time of occupation Aborigines were seen as next to animals. They could be used as slaves, or they should get rid of them as trouble-makers. There were fights between the occupiers and the traditional Aborigines. The whites always did better with their guns, and the owners of the land were the losers.

The Good News was brought to the Aborigines later. Already the damage had been done. Their land and hunting grounds were settled by whites, and when they were found in the vicinity they shot at them and chased them away. Whatever the whites did to them caused hatred and distrust. When the whites with white clothing came amongst them with the Good News it took a

while for the Aborigines to trust them. They accepted them in their communities. They listened to what they had to tell them. They took what they had to give them. It took years to trust them as friends.

With all these things going on the Gospel continued to be taught. Later, when they came to understand the Gospel a little they began to say, "It is very much like our teaching. Especially the Old Testament stories and laws and all about God and the Promise of God."

One of the things the missionaries did not do is try to find out if Aborigines had religion, or teaching about the Creator. They overlooked the faith the Aborigines had in a God or Superpower that they believed in, and obeyed, and worshipped. Their attitude was, 'Poor Aborigines, let's help them; they are heathens and nomads, uneducated

and hopeless, helpless and good-for-nothing.' So, with that in mind the Aborigine had nothing. They had to leave everything and take on completely the white man's culture. It was not easy for them - not easy for the government, not for the Church and not for the Aborigines.

The government decided,



'Get rid of the problem.' That is what caused the genocide. When that was stopped they started taking away kids and placing them in homes and Church Missions. In Queensland they set up a penal settlement and sent many so-called troublemakers there. Some who were branded as troublemakers were simply people that spoke up for their rights. During my ministry I remember three men spoke to me about the conditions on

the station. I advised the men, when they got back, to talk to the boss about it. I was away at the time. The boss rang and told the police there was a riot on the station. The police went and arrested them. There was no court, but they were sent to gaol, one for three months, one for two months and the other for one month. It was an injustice.

I always have a picture of an Aborigine on the ground. One white person stepping on his neck with heavy boots and another telling him, 'My brother, God loves you. Jesus died to

save you.' What is going through his mind? Who would believe such a message under such conditions. Many of our people were conned into coming to church. If you're not in church, there will be no rations, no tobacco or clothing. They did not come to hear the Good News. Yet under all this sort of thing going on, the Holy Spirit still worked. There were many who still came to accept the Gospel and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord. We were all white-orientated Christians. We understood God and the Gospel from the white point of view.

Now at last we are looking at the Gospel from our point of view and it has been helping our people a lot to be fired by the Spirit in sharing in the Good

News.

I believe the Gospel has been with the Aborigines since creation. When I read Genesis 3:15 it reminds me that God did not send Adam out of the garden, or away from his presence, without hope. He gave Adam an

insight into his great Plan of one day opening the gate or door into his



Presence. We believe that we all come from the line of Adam. Then all should know about that hope. Aborigines never read that passage but in their ceremonies they dramatised that this freedom was going to come. In Genesis 12:1-3, God called Abram to be a blessing to all people and we Aborigines are included in it. In the Gospel or Good News there was hope for all people, not just for some. Paul writes in Romans 8:18-25, 'All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his sons.' There was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free. The Aborigines knew that and in their ceremonies they dramatised it. It was Good News of freedom and hope, and encouragement.

Today we are trying to help the young to understand the Gospel through their culture and teaching, using Aboriginal stories to make the Gospel relevant for them. We've heard so much this saying, 'It's the white man's Gospel'. If we say, 'God created us and we are from the line of Adam and Noah and Abram, then God was with us always. He is the Creator of our country and we are part of it. Even though our forefathers did not know Him as we know Him today, they understood His teaching and laws in their own way and they had faith in Him.

The missionaries said Yiirrnbal, the Ancestor Spirit, was an angry one. The old people could not accept that this was true because Yiirrnbal gave life and cares for them. How could He destroy them when they looked to Him every day for their daily food? One day my cousin and I went with an old man to get turtle. We got all our gear ready, pushed the boat in and rowed to the place to hunt. The old man asked us to row him ashore. We did so and he went and called out to the god he believed in and asked him for turtle, while we in the boat sat laughing to ourselves. From the running stream he picked up a stone and brought it and put it in the boat. Then we went out to the reef again. Then there were turtle everywhere and we got one and he made us take the stone back

and he thanked his Giver. I couldn't get over it because the missionaries condemned the Aboriginal understanding of God. They destroyed the language and customs of their culture and left many with nothing. But the old man believed, and he received and was thankful.

ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY OR THEOLOGY

Did Aborigines have a religion? Religion is something that man believes in and it keeps

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him together and keeps him going. Today football is a great religion. Aborigines had a religion. They believed and had faith in their Ancestor Spirit and relied on Him for all their needs. He was their Protector, their Provider, their Carer and Saviour; His name was honoured.

Our name for Him was Yiirrnbal. Initiation was



held every year. This is where the people were taught the stories and laws. It went for one month or two. If, according to the old men, some did not graduate they went through it again. The missionaries said it was very devilish and heathen, but initiation was like university, where the people had to learn the law, teaching and moral living. The basic teaching was based on relationships and honour and respect. For teaching they use stories: stories about creation, stories about caring and sharing and stories about moral living. They had ceremonies that were very sacred and special. There are two stories I want to share with you. The first one I call the Ceremony of Freedom. This ceremony they held after someone had died. They would send word to all relatives and friends and tell them that on such- and-such a day of a certain month this ceremony would be on. They would have the place ready with two humpies built opposite each other. They had two men in control so that nobody would make any noise, no talking or laughing.

Everyone would be so quiet, with only the sound of the singer with clap sticks, the drummer and the didgeridoo player.

After a while two men would come out from one of the humpies, one man all dressed and painted, and he had a snake tied on his leg, and the other man had a fan made of bird feathers. The one with the snake on his leg would be howling, groaning, falling and moaning. The other would be running around fanning and saying, 'It will not be long! You will be free! You

will be free!'

While this is going on another chap comes from the other humpy and follows them. He has a big stick; he

keeps coming closer. When he is close enough he runs and hits the snake off the first man's leg. He sends out a call of being free. He jumps and starts dancing. The other two join him and then the rest of the people get into it and they will dance for some time. Feasting comes after the dancing. This story is about setting free. 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8: 36). 'Christ has set us free' (Gal. 5: 1).

The man with the snake on his leg played out the life of the one who had passed away. The man with the fan symbolises the hope that Yirrnbal gave when he promised to be with him in the happy place. The man with the stick reminds us that man was set free by Jesus through his death on a wooden cross. The snake on the leg symbolises the snake that caused man's death. It was interesting to see the man who knocked the

snake continually hit the snake on the head.

The second ceremony is about the Burn Time. It is usually held around July or August.



When the Elders decided on the day they let everyone know where they will be having it. When the people get together the Elders will have a meeting with the women and children and they will tell them not to go out of the camp at night. Three nights the Elders will go out and speak with their Ancestor Spirit. After the three nights they get the men to go and hunt for kangaroo. They will kill only one. They get it ready for cooking. They collect all the blood and cook the meat in a ground oven. While the meat is cooking they take the blood and get everyone to take a sip; what's left over they put on the forehead of the sick and the elderly. When the meat is cooked they make special cuts for the old men and women. Another part is for the fathers and mothers, another section for the young people, and a special cut for children. They see that everyone gets a bite.

Then they have a closing ceremony. The Elders will announce that they can hunt; there will be food for them. It is a time of new life and growth. In this second story the kangaroo becomes a sacrificial animal. It's like a Jewish Passover. It is a new start for them spiritually and physically. St Paul talks about new life in Christ and I believe the Aborigines believed it was coming. When the Gospel did come it came after guns and damage was already done. It made it difficult to accept and believe the message.

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There is another story, one about moral living, about how we should care for others. It is about the Emu, Brolga and Jabiru. The Emu was a cousin to the Brolga and Jabiru. She lived in the highland and forest, and the other two lived in the wetlands and salt pans. One day the Emu decided to visit the cousins. So she went and collected yams and berries, filled her dilly bag, and started walking

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to the wetlands.

When she got to the last ridge she rested, looking toward the saltpan. She saw dust. She had another look and she noticed two figures-it was the Brolga and Jabiru fighting. She grabbed her bag and started running towards them. When she got close enough she started calling out for them to stop. But they kept going. She ran in between them to stop them. But one of the sisters hit her on the back accidentally. The blood of the Emu got on the legs of the Jabiru and on the neck of the Brolga. To this day they still have the stains of blood on them and the Emu



has the hump on the back. Granpa often said, 'You are to be like the Emu peacemaker'. This story makes me think of the great Peacemaker who also carries the scars on his hands, feet and side.

Then there is the story of the black and white cockatoos. They were brothers. One day the white cockatoo found the black cockatoo sitting under a shady tree looking angry and upset. 'What is wrong, brother?' 'I'm angry with dad because he made me black. Why didn't he make me like you? I'm going to change myself'. He went to his uncle's country and asked him for honey and clay. 'Get as much as you want, there's plenty there'. He got the clay and honey and went back home. He powdered the clay and rubbed honey all over himself and put the powdered clay on. He looked at himself and said, 'Now I look like my brother'. His grandpa got so angry with him that he called on the monsoon to bring rain. It washed all the clay off him.

Later his brother came and spoke to him. He reminded him about his father's love for him. He took him to the father and made things right again. Today the black cockatoo is happy. He's singing when flying and

feeding. Jesus our Big Brother has made things right for us. He has broken the barrier that kept us away from our Father and each other. (Eph. 2: 11 - 22; Rom. 5: 1 - 11.) This story is to help people to understand the importance of reconciliation.

Our people have done this for years. My mother told us her story, how her parents and all her clan were shot by troopers and she did not know what happened to her brothers and sister. She found out about the two brothers after the war, and we found her little sister in 1991 after mother had passed on. It was sad for her and hurtful. But since coming to know Jesus all of her pain and anger has been taken away.

Her message to us was, 'I have forgiven them in my heart and I want all of you children to do the same'. That little sermon I will never forget. I'll die with it. When I discovered all of my people's teaching and laws I used it for my work in preaching and teaching and I found I had good results.

There was one man from one of the tribes I worked with. He was a little man but he was a law to himself. The police often said to me, 'Pastor, do something for the man'. I told them that when he came to receive the Gospel he will change. He came to my place one day and said, 'Pastor, I want to read that book', and pointed to the New Testament. Within three months I had him reading the Gospel for me. He became a leader in the

community and my congregation grew. He had been hearing the Good News through his culture. He had to work out his own salvation.

God did not call us as Holy Spirit, but as helpers in saving souls. He did not say to me as an Aborigine, 'Preach as a white minister'. All He says is go and tell the Good News about Christ Jesus, his life, death, resurrection and his judgment. It is a privilege He has given to everyone, to be part of his plan of saving humankind.

To advance dialogue in this Theology area, the Commission has agreed on the following aims for it's project:

- **To educate themselves in this area. This will entail inviting speakers into their meetings to give presentations on some current thinking in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Contextual Theology**
- **To educate the wider community on Indigenous spirituality in a series of talks entitled, 'The light of Australia'.**
- **Produce resources.**
- **His is an attempt to share this information with the wider community.**

Any comments about this publication or the project can be directed to natsiec@ncca.org.au