

MARK GALLIFORD

'god never like  
the **corroboree**'

HEATHER McDONALD

*Blood, Bones and Spirit: Aboriginal Christianity  
in an East Kimberley Town*

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If anthropology came to be known as the 'handmaiden' of colonialism, then Christianity can easily be regarded as its 'godfather'. In fact, as Heather McDonald notes, in conjunction with the physical spread of the British Empire, missionary practice was busy trying to produce a parallel empire of its own: an 'Empire of the Spirit'. When land and resources were being systematically seized from indigenous territories across the so-called New World and beyond, Christianity was a primary agent of the colonising process. Missions may have provided refuge for the survivors of the first waves of frontier terror and violence, yet many of the basic assumptions made about indigenous people were already upheld or, at the very least, informed by Christian beliefs. In the case of Australia, as elsewhere, 'the natives' were generally perceived, and disdained, as primitive heathens bound by superstition and under the guidance of the Devil. And, as one of McDonald's informants suggests, 'That's why God never like the corroboree'.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, the role of missions in the colonial history of Australia is ambiguous. For those who consider the missionaries' activities as blatant cultural genocide and manipulative psycho-social engineering, Christianity's part in the attempted destruction of indigenous cultures is beyond doubt. For others, the fact that missions were basically the only 'saving grace' of many people who may have otherwise died without their help is enough to redeem their presence and indoctrinations. Missionaries, such as the Strehlow family, collected large amounts of cultural information and material from groups that could have been otherwise stolen, lost or destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Some

missionaries were also known to have learnt local languages, if only to make their efforts at conversion all the more successful. John Harris points out that while this practice may have been based on ulterior motives, it was still highly regarded by some Aboriginal people.<sup>3</sup> However one looks at it, the fact is that the relationship remains complex. Many Aboriginal people today actively identify and engage themselves as Christian, and for this reason work such as McDonald's is invaluable for understanding the contemporary significance of this religion's influence.

*Blood, Bones and Spirit* is an absorbing critical analysis detailing the interface between Aboriginality and Christianity, written by an 'insider' who has had a foot in both camps. McDonald introduces herself as coming from a 'long family line of Christian missionaries and evangelists', and as having initially spent three years studying at a missionary bible college. Her humanitarian concerns then led her to work in remote areas as an Aboriginal community health worker during the 1970s and 1980s. Although she does not elucidate on the reasons for her eventual transformation into a 'post-Christian' (itself an interesting and worthwhile topic for reflection), McDonald decided instead to study anthropology at the University of Queensland and then the Australian National University. At the latter she undertook her dissertation, and this insightful book is the result. McDonald's personal involvement with Christianity and the communities has given solid credence to her experience with the Church's ongoing influence in the Kimberley, and raised important questions for her regarding the Church's associations with colonialism and the processes of postcolonialism.

The ubiquity of Christianity in the colonial process is a point made clear by Ronald and Catherine Berndt who, with over forty years of professional practice as anthropologists, noted that:

Only on rare occasions have we carried out anthropological research in an area that was not directly or indirectly affected by missionary activity ... [There] are few Aborigines who have not been exposed in some degree, at first hand or otherwise, to some form of proselytization.<sup>4</sup>

As is to be expected from such an observation, much has been written on the general history of Christianity and its missions in Australia. This literature ranges from the extensive Australia-wide documentation of missions by John Harris, as well as his almost apologetic and exonerating follow-up volume, through to the interesting collection of diverse essays edited by the 'first Aboriginal person to earn a PhD in Religious Studies',<sup>5</sup> Anne Pattel-Gray. Some important and well-known anthropological studies on missionary encounters and the movement of Christian-based cults are available in the comprehensive collection of essays edited by Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose. Also, the early texts of the missionaries themselves, for example those by the South Australian-based Clamor Schurmann, Christian Teichelmann and George Taplin, have proven crucial to both historians and to projects of cultural revival for their information on local languages and for providing a (con)textual background to the colonial encounter.<sup>6</sup>

As the new arrival to this body of literature, *Blood, Bones and Spirit* covers a lot of ground.

McDonald's aim is to explain *how* and not just simply why Aboriginal people become Christianised in the east Kimberley town of Halls Creek. The reasons why, as McDonald explores in the first few chapters, are easy enough to understand. After a general overview of the 'flow theories' on Indigenous life, in which 'Aboriginal people do not recognise a psychic centralism' (23) but instead view an affective inter-connectedness between everything, we are then taken on a whirlwind tour of the foundations of Christianity. Although it is worth pointing out that by McDonald's reckoning only around a quarter of the Aboriginal population in Halls Creek today identify as Christian, the theological deconstruction she undertakes is, I believe, a valuable, and indeed essential, exercise for understanding the attraction of Christianity for Aboriginal people in general.

McDonald suggests that a religion's power is tied to a peoples' own conceptions of life force, place and belonging, and in this respect the Bible is a 'colonial document' describing acts of dispossession and displacement, exile and diaspora. (5) Drawing on Foucault's historiographical method and Bakhtin's study of narrative construction,<sup>7</sup> McDonald explains how Christianity eventually developed into an universal religion from previous agriculturally based cosmologies, delivering a disembodied utopian answer to the historical waves of invasion and colonisation by successive empires. This was achieved through positing a dualism of reality, with the 'true home' of the spiritual realm taking precedence over the material world, thereby overcoming the problem of losing the sense of one's own homeland or being forced into subjugation. Following

this, it becomes apparent why Christianity has been so appealing to some Kimberley people. (80) Having initially experienced the traumatic dispossession of their land and a secondary displacement from station life (where they were still in touch with the land), groups were finally forced onto the missions and into reserves around town. Once in town, the Protestant churches began to preach about the virtues of a work ethic to people who had very little chance of gaining employment, and continuously reminded them not to worry about land or possessions in this life as it was the next life that was important.

The problem, of course, is that the evangelists' promises of utopian salvation were themselves another form of colonisation. The complex and complicit relationship between politics and religion becomes strikingly evident when the analysis examines how Christianity further developed in response to the political organisation of hierarchical and patriarchal city-states and monarchies, and then became increasingly more individual-orientated through the Renaissance and in line with the development of capitalism. (30) This, for me, was one of the book's major attractions, allowing the reader to draw a straightforward understanding of how gradual socio-economic changes were incorporated within the Christian cosmology. Not only this, it also illustrated just how different this was to Aboriginal world views and values. As McDonald states, 'The basic conflict in values between Western Christianity and Aboriginal world views has not been erased by Aboriginal conversion to Christianity. Aboriginal Christians see themselves as "following a way" rather than transforming a core self or essential being'. (181) This difference is reflected in such

things as sin, or 'breaking the Law', where the Aboriginal view is not simply that it is a guilty individual's own personal burden, as it is seen in the West, but becomes a family or community responsibility involving kin-based forms of restoring the equilibrium. And while the transcendent Christian God awaits for *his* saved souls to arrive in a place untouched by earthly problems and evil, Aboriginal spirits of Dreaming ancestors and deceased relatives exist with an 'egalitarian' immanence, occupying the same landscape as the living, looking after them in some instances, and even travelling around with them in the backs of utes. (32)

This study presents a very accessible approach to understanding the complexities of the developing postcolonial relationship between Christian Aboriginal locals and the churches in Halls Creek. It must be noted, though, that a work attempting such an enormous scope cannot help but make certain generalisations or take necessary shortcuts in some instances. Of the three churches that operate around Halls Creek, the Catholic, the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) and the Assemblies of God (AOG), I found my curiosity regarding the Catholic church was left a little wanting. McDonald notes early in the book that her involvement with the Catholic church was limited, resulting in a correspondingly limited analysis. She does mention throughout that the Catholic church has been far more culturally aware and sensitive than the other two churches, even allowing some Aboriginal practices to be acceptable within their Christian hegemony (73), especially since the mid-1960s. But this church does deserve greater depth of treatment, especially because of the relationship

McDonald mentions between the mainly Protestant people of mixed descent and their more Catholic-affiliated 'traditional relatives'. (8) This is a crucial relationship considering the described antagonisms that exist between the churches, begging the question of how these are dealt with by relatives under the different denominations. When re-establishing their links to the land and each other through their shared activities away from the churches' scrutiny, as McDonald points out, do these kin leave behind their Christian or 'half-Christian' (92) selves, or is the universalist approach of Christianity an attribute to be also shared, regardless of differentiating church loyalties?

This leads to some related questions. What is the relationship between Christian and non-Christian people in the township, especially that of relatives? To what degree does the individualism inherent in Christianity affect the sense of Aboriginal community? This is addressed to some extent, McDonald noting that 'in times of crisis ... family solidarity becomes all-important, and family directives override church affiliation', (171) but I was left wondering what sorts of pressures or divisions, if any, are experienced by people during the quieter, ordinary times. McDonald also observes that the denigration of Aboriginality by the Church (especially the AOG, and the UAM to a lesser extent) has led to self-deprecation being internalised by people—'[a] phrase commonly heard around Halls Creek is, "I'm just a rubbish blackfella"' (81)—although it is later stated that 'Traditional values, particularly kinship values of balanced reciprocity and justice, remain strong.' (165) There appears to be something of a contradiction here leading to the question, 'Why

wouldn't *Christian* Aboriginal people prefer to change and even discard their traditional beliefs and practices, rather than suffer from such a poor self-image?' In places, it is stated that some have in fact abandoned their 'traditional' cultural practices and this becomes a little confusing. As far as the internalisation goes, I couldn't help feeling, with certain friends in mind, that this may be nothing more than a strategy for achieving particular ends, which, once you're used to it, can be quite amusing. In my experience, the difference between self-mocking denigration and actual dignity can at times be very slight. One contradiction that is addressed to good effect and that has an enjoyable sense of irony about it concerns the AOG. This church is the staunchest critic of the importance of earthly pleasures and attachment to land and yet its congregation comprises the highest number of people seeking land claims. (90, 167)

Minor criticisms aside, there is an impressive amount of information packed into two hundred pages of text. The book includes a very comprehensive bibliography and the addition of colour photographs appears to serve quite a significant purpose. All but the last photo add a much needed sense of cultural worth to the contemporary 'traditional' activities of people hunting, cooking, gathering foods and digging wells. This stands in welcome contrast to the disturbing situation McDonald has detailed throughout the book concerning the single-minded and, at times, self-serving and insensitive evangelists, who continue to disparage Aboriginal practices as being prescribed by Satan. The fact that the people in the photos are obviously enjoying what they are doing illustrates to some degree the

amount of importance placed upon the evangelists' proselytising. But it is the last image that is the most telling. A large group of well-dressed people, 'part of the AOG mob', are photographed from up high, as if from a pulpit, forcing the reader to look down upon them. Whether intentional or not, this single moment encapsulates well the sense of superiority which the Church, through its very *raison d'être*, ultimately cannot avoid.

Obviously, it is the function of religions to provide their believers with answers to the problems in the world, including explanations for the inequities brought about by colonisation. Indeed, an old acquaintance of mine once argued by way of an interesting blend of Hindu-based reincarnation philosophy and vegan New Age spin that the reason Aboriginal people had suffered so much was simply due to their being meat-eaters, and that colonisation was their karmic retribution. Of course, the argument reached an impasse when I recalled that one of the colonialists' first major industries in Australia was meat farming on a grand scale. Personally, I find it hard to locate a comfortable place from which to damn the Church outright for its role in colonisation. The thought of a frontier Australia without genuinely compassionate missionaries (although not all of them were) would have made this country's early colonial history even more devastatingly shameful than what it generally is.

However, while McDonald, in a very interesting last chapter discussing the effects of post-modern discourses upon Christianity, only implies a need for greater responsibility being taken on by the Church in affirming difference, I believe

that the Church's ongoing paternalism and assimilationist expectations require a lot more soul-searching and modification. No matter where one stands on this issue, this book is a fascinating portrayal of the degree to which Aboriginal identity and cultural agency continue to assert themselves in the face of and in relation to the Church's ongoing attempt at cultural and spiritual reprogramming. On the back jacket of the book is the heady claim that *Blood, Bones and Spirit* 'presents a challenge to the very history and philosophy of Western religion'. It is to McDonald's credit that the book has so successfully laid down this challenge in such an interesting and provocative style.

5. Back cover of Anne Pattel-Gray (ed.), *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future*, HarperCollins, Melbourne, 1996.
6. See Harris, *One Blood*; John Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, Openbook, Adelaide, 1998; Pattel-Gray; Swain and Bird Rose; Christian Teichelmann and Clamor Schurmann, *Outlines of a Grammar, Vocabulary and Phraseology of the Aboriginal Language of South Australia*, Committee of the South Australian Wesleyan Methodist Auxiliary Mission Society, Adelaide, 1840; George Taplin, *The Narrinyeri: An Account of ... the Tribes of South Australian Aborigines ... their Manners and Customs*, J.T. Shaw, Adelaide, 1874.
7. McDonald refers to Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, Allen Lane, London, 1975, and Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981.

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MARK GALLIFORD has completed an honours degree at the Unaipon School, University of South Australia. His thesis considered the appropriations of Aboriginal identity by various non-Aboriginal artists and writers in relation to the concept of cultural becomings. <mgalliford@hotmail.com>

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1. Part of a comment by 'Maddy Jarra', p. 60. (McDonald has used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of contributors.)
  2. There has been considerable controversy surrounding the 'Strehlow collection'. While much of it has been housed in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs, this has not prevented some of it being dispersed by the 1999 auction in Adelaide of the late Theodor Strehlow's (Carl's son) own personal collection. Some of this material was withdrawn at the last moment by a court injunction, and collectors paid some extraordinary prices.
  3. John Harris, *One Blood. 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*, Albatross Books, Sydney, 1990, p. 324.
  4. Ronald and Catherine Berndt, 'Body and Soul: More than an Episode', in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*,