

Early missionaries to Australia

Who were the early missionaries, and what impact did they have?

Early Australian colonists were heavily influenced by 19th century attitudes that regarded Indigenous people as inferior. Newspapers and journals of the time contain ample evidence of this.

In the following excerpts taken from his book, *One Blood* ^[1], John Harris uses original sources to reveal with brutal honesty the story of the first Aboriginal Christian missions in Australia, and the people they sought to engage. Harris allows the official records, articles and diaries to speak for themselves, exposing the stories of the early missions and the challenging context in which they operated.

Whilst Harris admits that *"It is hard to sum up the early missions with any word other than failure"* (pg. 125), he also notes that, *"...however unwittingly, however imperfectly, however inadequately, (the missionaries) did carry the knowledge of Christ to these shores"* (pg.18).

Nevertheless, Harris regrets that *"It is one of the great tragedies of the recent history of Australia that true Christianity was for so long so very difficult to discern in the life of this outpost of a distant nation which called itself Christian"* (pg.18).

Harris largely attributes the missionaries' perceived failure to three key factors which were present in settler society within a very few years of white settlement. These were: the low view of Aboriginal society and culture displayed by the missionaries; the brutal or immoral treatment of Aboriginal people by many settlers; and the gross contradictions between Christian values and the lifestyle of colonial white society (pg.44).

The missionaries' low view of Aboriginal society and culture is amply evidenced in the writings of the early missionaries. Harris quotes the Wesleyan missionary, Samuel Leigh, who *"described Aboriginal people as 'barbarians' to whom had been assigned 'the lowest place in the scale of intellect'"*, and the Lutheran missionary, William Schmidt, who *"wrote that (Aboriginal people) were 'the lowest in the scale of the human race'"* (pg. 29).

Harris notes that *"A consequence of this low view of the destiny and status of Aboriginal people was that the early missionaries maintained a social distance between themselves and Aboriginal people whom they regarded as their inferiors socially"* (pg. 135).

This, along with the early missionaries' failure to distinguish between the gospel and what they considered "civilisation", European culture, seriously undermined their efforts to communicate Christ's love to the Aboriginal people.

Also well-documented is the cruel and degrading treatment of Aboriginal people by many settlers. Harris laments that *"A generation of Aborigines in south-eastern Australia were to experience the brutality and corruption of white society before the church formally responded to their need"* (pg.40).

It was common practice for white men to keep multiple Indigenous women captive for sexual purposes, and many brutal acts were committed against Aboriginal people

in the name of 'sport' (pg.54 and pg.89). According to Harris, *"Aboriginal people inevitably thought Christianity to be the religion of the British colonists"* (pg.59), and consequently, the brutal treatment of Aboriginal people by the colonists also undermined the message of Christ's love that the missionaries sought to deliver.

It was not only the settler's behaviour towards Indigenous people, but the wholesale immorality of life outside the mission that contradicted the missionaries' efforts.

Harris quotes Governor Hunter, who wrote in 1798 that *'a more wicked, abandoned and irreligious set of people have never been brought together in any part of the world.'* (pg.37). Harris writes that, *"As (Aboriginal people) began to understand the missionary teaching on sin and eternal damnation, they began to ask... whether or not particular white men known to them would be punished for their very public sins, and why the missionaries preached about sin to the Aborigines so much and not to the whites"*(pg.59).

Of course, there were many other factors contributing to the missionaries' failure, including misunderstandings between missionaries and their respective mission societies, lack of financial support, the declining Aboriginal population as a result of disease and dispossession, and personal disagreements amongst missionaries, settlers and governing authorities (pg.126-145).

Catholic Archbishop, John Bede Polding, was particularly astute in his perception of the failure of the missions:

'...In great part, the want of success must be attributed to the bad feeling and want of confidence, naturally caused by the mode in which possession has been taken of their country - occupation by force, accompanied by murders, ill-treatment, ravishment of their women, in a word, to the conviction on their minds that the white man has come for his own advantage, without any regard to their rights. Feeling this burning injustice inflicted by the white man, it is not in the nature of things that the black man should believe the white man better than himself, or suppose the moral and religious laws, by which the white man proposes the black man to be governed, to be better than those of his own tribe.'

While various reasons were given for the failure of the early missions, the fact that they had failed was undisputed. Harris quotes Schmidt, the Lutheran ex-missionary, who, when presenting evidence to the Select Committee in 1845, catalogued the mission failures up to that year:

'The civilisation of the natives of Australia, it is obvious, has been in every experiment a pitiable as well as a mischievous failure.

- 1. The government schools, established by Lady Darling in 1821, failed.*
- 2. The mission on Lake Macquarie, under Mr Threlkeld in 1826, failed.*
- 3. The German mission to Moreton Bay in 1836 failed.*
- 4. The church mission to Wellington Valley in, 1832, failed.*
- 5. and 6. The missions to Port Phillip, under Mr Langhorne in 1837, and Mr Tuckfield in 1836, failed.*

And lastly, 7. and 8. The Protectorate has failed, and the native police have failed. The Roman Catholic and Lutheran missions at Moreton Bay are recently abandoned.' (pg.127)

Despite their flawed approach, Harris credits the early missionaries for their adamant belief in the essential humanity of Aboriginal people. *"It is unfair to criticise these missionaries for being negative towards Aboriginal culture", he notes, "while outside the missions Aboriginal people were being shot, tortured and sexually exploited by those who would deny them their very humanity"* (pg.137).

Missionary encounters with Indigenous spirituality

Harris uses original sources to examine the early missionaries' encounters with Indigenous spirituality. These official records, newspaper articles and journals expose the thinking that informed the early missionaries' actions as they sought to bring the gospel to Australia's Indigenous people.

Harris acknowledges early on that, *"The first fleet did not transport God to Australia in 1788... God was already here, present and active as Creator and Sustainer of every remote corner of the earth. God was not indiscernible to Aboriginal people, a religious people who sought to relate to their environment in spiritual terms."* (pg. 17).

However, according to Harris, *"Missionaries arrived in Australia not expecting to find among Aboriginal people ideas of any intellectual or spiritual depth"* (pg. 541), and they largely failed to perceive any trace of spirituality among Aboriginal people. Harris quotes one such missionary, John Dunmore Lang, who wrote:

"[The Aborigines] have no idea of a supreme divinity, the creator and governor of the world, the witness of their actions and their future judge. They have no object of worship. . . They have no idols, no temples, no sacrifices. In short, they have nothing whatever of the character of religion or of religious observance, to distinguish them from the beasts that perish." ^[2]

The Lutheran missionary, Christopher Eipper, similarly failed to discern any tangible evidence that Aboriginal people had the capacity to worship:

"I confess the prospects here are less encouraging, for the presence of an idol shows yet the dependence of the creature, and the necessity presented. . . to the mind, of having something to worship. This here must be first created..." ^[3]

According to Harris, the Jesuits in the Northern Territory acknowledged Aboriginal spiritual beliefs insofar as they ridiculed them, however they *"modified their attitude when they observed supernatural phenomena which 'staggered' them"* (pg. 542). ^[4]

Nevertheless, those missionaries who did recognise spirituality in Indigenous culture commonly associated it with evil, referring to Aboriginal people as *'devotees of the devil'* (pg. 543). ^[5]

There were some exceptions to this trend. Harris notes that John Bulmer, a long term missionary at Lake Tyers in Victoria, *"was pleased to discover that Aboriginal people shared his belief in a creator of the world and in the immortality of the soul"* (pg. 543). Bulmer wrote:

"The question has been asked. 'Have the Aborigines of Australia any idea of a supreme being?... ' They certainly have ideas of beings who existed long ago... and that to them all things as they now exist are due... Thus the Murray people had their Ngalambru or ancient of days... The Gippslanders had their Ngalambru, meaning the first... The Maura people had their Boganbe... meaning big or high... The people of the Wimmera had their Ngramba Natchea, meaning the oldest spirit... The blacks did not think death was the end of existence. They recognised the fact that a man had a spirit, Gnowk." ^[6]

Moreover, Harris writes that in New South Wales, the Wiradjuri people spoke to the Presbyterian missionary, William Ridley, of 'Baiaime', "whose very name was derived from the word 'to create'" (pg. 543), and whose distinctive attributes were "immortality, power and goodness" (pg. 543). ^[7]

Nevertheless, according to Harris, "very few missionaries acknowledged the possibility that Aboriginal spirituality could have been derived, even in part, from God's general revelation of himself." (page 327). He notes that Ridley, alone of all the nineteenth century missionaries, "recognised Aboriginal religious tradition and speculation for what it was - 'the thirst for religious mystery', a reaching out to God" (pg. 543). ^[8]

Early missionary theology

In *One Blood*, Harris explores the theology that informed the early missionaries' efforts to proselytise Australia's Indigenous inhabitants, and the effect their theology had on Indigenous people.

Although the early missionaries encountered many problems, some that "were beyond the power of the missionaries to solve" (pg. 20), Harris notes that "it is also true that in most cases the missionaries themselves were not equal to the task" (pg. 20). According to Harris, "The better educated missionary candidates were usually sent to such places as China or India where it was anticipated that they would be competent to debate Buddhist or Hindu philosophies. The standard for Africa, Australia and the South Pacific was much lower" (pg. 651).

The early Australian missionaries's theology was not only inadequate, but deeply flawed, particularly their belief that Indigenous Australians were the cursed descendants of Noah's son, Ham. This view was the result of a serious misinterpretation of Genesis 9 and 10:

'And the sons of Noah, that went forth from the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan... And [Noah] said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem: and Canaan shall be his servant. . . And the sons of Ham; Cush and Mizraim, and Phut, and Canaan.' (pg. 35)

According to Harris, "Instead of seeing the fulfillment of the curse of Canaan in the Hebrew conquest of the Canaanites, the curse was seen to apply to Ham and all his descendants: Cush (Ethiopia), Mizraim (Egypt) and Phut (Libya). These were African nations and included black races. By extension, the curse was given universal application, not only to the black peoples of Africa, but to all black races of the southern hemisphere" (pg. 29-30).

Harris identifies two significant consequences of this misguided theological perspective, one positive, and the other negative.

On the negative side, writes Harris, Indigenous Australians were consequently considered by missionaries of the time to be *'the lowest scale of degraded humanity'* (pg. 30). The Presbyterian Minister, Thomas Dove, wrote:

"They live in the lowest stage of degradation lacking all moral views and impressions... such is the depth of their degradation that they have reached the level of the beasts, every thought bearing upon the nature of rational beings has now been erased from their breasts"

The extension of Ham's curse on the African nations to include Indigenous Australians on the basis of their skin colour also perpetuated the imagery of light as good and dark as evil. This is evident in the writing of the Anglican preacher, William Henry:

"O Jesus, when shall thy Kingdom come with power amongst them? When shall the rays of thine eternal gospel penetrate the gross darkness of their minds (well represented by their faces) and illuminate their benighted souls".

Nevertheless, there was one vital positive outcome resulting from this otherwise damaging theological perspective. Harris points out that *"The view that Aboriginal people were degraded, even that they were the most degraded of all people, still contained within it one essential safeguard. They were still human. Although the belief in their utter degradation was terribly flawed, it was not therefore fatally flawed... In the final analysis, the belief itself demanded the essential humanity of the Aborigines. If they were descended from Ham, they were also descended from Adam"* (pg. 32).

Although acknowledging Indigenous people as human hardly seems extraordinary, in the context of colonial Australia it distinguished missionary opinion from that of wider settler society. This is expressed by a pastoral letter from Catholic Archbishop John Bede Polding written in 1869:

"[Some of our fellow colonists] have, in justification of a great crime, striven to believe that these black men are not of our race, are not our fellow creatures. We Catholics know assuredly how false this is: we know that one soul of theirs is, like one of our own, of more worth than the whole material world, that any human soul is of more worth, as it is of greater cost, than the whole mere matter of this earth, its sun and its system or, indeed, of all the glories of the firmament." (48)

Likewise, 'Philanthropus', who was almost certainly the Church of England clergyman Robert Cartwright, wrote in the Sydney Gazette in 1824:

"In the sight of the Creator, their souls I believe to be of infinite importance... If we therefore now hasten their destruction or neglect to promote their salvation, shall we be innocent or without blame?"

The missionaries, regardless of their church denomination, maintained this opinion despite strong and relentless opposition, often citing Acts 17:26:

'God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth' (pg. 35).

The Christian community's belief in the essential humanity of Indigenous Australians had profound implications. According to Harris, "There were times when the whole Christian community... rose to their powerful best when confronted with community agitation for the massacre of Aborigines" (pg.). In response to the trials over the Myall Creek massacre in 1838, the Reverend John Saunders wrote:

'Does it seem strange to speak of the majesty of the New Hollanders? Wilt thou despise the Saviour of the world? Then despise not him who sprang out of the same stock, despise not him for whom Christ died. The Saviour died as much for him as he did for you. Now by every sentiment of humanity and love you are bound to love him, to admit him to your fraternity and to treat him as a fellow man.'

It is important to acknowledge and understand some of the damaging effects of the early missionaries' theology, whilst also recognising the extreme counter cultural nature of their opinion on Indigenous humanity, and their consequential efforts to protect and proselytise the first Australians.

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