

Introduction

The Task and Its Difficulties

RECENTLY IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, THERE WAS A REPORT OF AN AIR crash involving two small planes. All reference to the male pilot omitted any reference to his gender, while references to the other pilot said “female pilot.” This could be repeated in many situations, with “female” being replaced by “black,” “Middle Eastern,” “Muslim” or other descriptors irrelevant to the situation. The point is that “white” and “male” are considered to be normal and usual, while all else is different.

This book is concerned for what is accepted as normal in social analysis and theology in Australia, with particular reference to Indigenous people and the invasion of this country. It explores the way we defend interests—personal, social, political and economic—through our descriptions of the world and our theology, the way we define frontiers, and how we deal with people on those frontiers. It is concerned for what it means to be part of that people who are Second peoples, invaders and newcomers, and how faith must be approached differently if we are conscious of our place in this land.

I am a fifth-generation white Australian male. My family on my paternal grandfather’s side arrived in 1839 on assisted passage as farm laborers. Other parts of the family came more recently, and still other parts reveal little of their history and roots. What they had in common was that they were poor, lower-middle-class families who worked the land and lived in relative isolation in the rural areas of this country. They either actively or passively participated in the imposition of British rule and society onto this land that was inhabited by Indigenous people. Those who came early played a role in the dispossession of Indigenous people, the taking of their land, and their removal to the edges of society.

In all my growing up I heard no references to the people, the particular people, who once occupied the land on which I lived. I just

accepted without question that the land that provided my early security and stability was “our land.” Nor were questions raised in the church I attended from an early age. Nowhere in worship, Sunday school, or youth group did I hear about Indigenous people or see a church reflecting on its life in this place.¹ My awakening has been a slow one. Years spent building friendships, revisiting my theological roots, facing the racism that seeps into one’s soul in this land, and taking tentative steps for justice have brought me to the place where I needed to write this book. This is an attempt to do theology as a white person whose family history has located him as an uninvited guest on Indigenous land in Australia. It is a faltering step towards a contextual theology that takes seriously a history of invasion, dispossession, massacre, racism and continuing disadvantage, and the way that the dominant society (including the church) explained and justified that history and the world that was built after invasion.

Contextual Theology

This is an attempt at contextual, cross-cultural theology. It recognizes that theology is always and necessarily contextual and suggests that those who have been in control of the theological agenda (largely white males) have usually forgotten this, claiming their reality as universal and excluding all other voices. I share Stephen Bevans’s understanding of contextual theology as “taking *two* things seriously: the experience of the *past* (recorded in scripture and preserved and defended in tradition) and the experience of the *present*, that is, *context* (individual and social experience, secular or religious culture, social location, and social change).”²

Neil Darragh reminds us that contextual theology does not begin with some sort of clean slate. We are already immersed in a theological tradition, and our concern is the reinterpretation of all that we have inherited in the light of a self-conscious awareness of our context.³ The task of contextual theology is always circular—we move back and forth,

1. Only recently have I read an account of the history of relationships between Indigenous and Second peoples in my local area. See Blyton et al., *Wannin Thanbarran*.

2. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, xvi.

3. Darragh, *Doing Theology Ourselves*, 30.

reading context in the light of the gospel and reading the gospel from the perspective of people's particular location and experience. It is not a question of determining the tradition and then working out how it works contextually, as if the tradition just "is," but of reading the tradition from the perspective of the context. This applies also to the questions one asks, and the framework for the exploration.

Theology that is consciously contextual and that seeks to hear the voice and experience of people who are not always heard will question the way we have read the tradition, the assumptions that people take to that task, and suggest that the tradition is incomplete. It will suggest that the tradition has been constructed by a particular part of the population to meet and pass on their experiences of the journey but does not take account of people who have found themselves in a different relationship with the Christian faith and its practices. The goal of such theology is not simply to describe "reality" but to enable and encourage a more just, liberated, holistic world that reflects the Triune God's intention for the whole of creation.

The theology in this book takes seriously the struggles and questions posed by people in this situation, and seeks to give heed to what they say about their experience of God. The voices that I am seeking to privilege in this account of Second Peoples' theology are the voices of Indigenous people—both those who are present and those from the past. It is theology that consciously and critically reads the theological tradition from the perspective of a person who lives in this land. It recognizes that there is no uncultured *us*, for whom the God revealed in Jesus Christ is always the same across time and place, and it asks what our theological claims mean for *us* today.

Contextual theology draws carefully on a number of conversation partners.⁴ The crucial issue is whom one listens to, whose voices we trust, and who we privilege in our conversations. One important and unchanging foundation of this book was the choice to read from within a liberating context in which I privilege the voice of those on the margin, and where I read with suspicion the voice of those in power. I have given particular weight to the voices of Indigenous Australian

4. Clive Pearson speaks about conversation partners or textual foils and allies in "Cross-Cultural Theologies in Australia. In Search of Conversation Partners," in Pearson, *Faith in a Hyphen*, 186.

people and theologians, and black, Asian, Latin American, and feminist theologians.

In its own particular way, this book is an attempt to explore faith and identity as a hyphenated reality. The hyphen, though, is very different from what has generally been part of theology, such as Tongan-Australian, Korean-Australian, or Korean-American.⁵ This is not about my dual identity in two ethnic cultures, but my identity within colonial invasion: Anglo Australian—on Indigenous, invaded space. My concern is to explore the way the hyphen makes identity and theological expression more open and contestable.

Among our multiple identities (women/men, young/old, gay/straight, migrant, refugee, second-generation), there is one that is essential for theology in the Australian continent. Second people are a people who live on another's "land," not as guests but invaders. We must reflect on humanity, church, and salvation in Christ in the light of a very broken relationship with Indigenous people. I am seeking to explore theology with a suspicion of colonial telling, an awareness of the ambiguity of the good news for a colonized people, and a sense that theology has to do with real socio-political issues and not simply with spiritual realities. I am seeking to do theology in the face of the claim of Indigenous people that they are in this place because of the sovereign purposes of God, that they are made in the image of God, and that they knew God before the invaders brought the gospel.

Any effort to confront the history of colonial invasion and racism in this country will challenge our lives at the deepest level of identity and bodily practice. It is to walk a very fine line between the need to write theology out of a deep encounter with Indigenous experience and the need to be responsible for this theology as a form of self-examination (and not to simply to put the burden on Indigenous people or to use them as an arena for my work). We cannot confront our fear and guilt in solitude and isolation from Indigenous people, yet neither can we ask Indigenous people to do the work of facing racism that belongs to me and others like me. It is also to recognize that theology that seeks to face racism must encounter not just text and story (as important as

5. There has been wonderful work done in Australia in recent years on the whole issue of theology that emerges from Diaspora, from hyphenated identity, and the cross cultural struggle. It has largely been from recent immigrant people seeking to find a new identity in a multicultural Australia. See, particularly, Pearson, ed., *Faith in a Hyphen*.

they are), but real people in their anger and pain. It is to confront what invasion and racism has done to people's bodies, to their way of being in society, and to what Indigenous bodies mean in terms of fear and guilt in European society. As James W. Perkinson says in a different context: "What is required in place of denial is continuous self-confrontation, slow exorcism, and careful revision in a conscious resolve to live 'race' differently. It is ultimately a matter of learning to live creatively out of one's own diverse genealogy and experiment with one's sense of embodiment gracefully—*against* the dominating structures and conforming powers of white supremacy that have already conscripted one's body for their service."⁶

When I began this book, I explored the possibility that I should call it "white" theology in an attempt to be clear that I was not writing an Indigenous theology or telling of the life and experience of Indigenous people. Yet while there are fine examples of "white" theology⁷ that have arisen in other places, the Australian context is different at two levels. First, non-Aboriginal Australian identity is not so shaped by race as it is in the USA or in South Africa, for example, largely because Indigenous people are such a small minority (about 4 percent at present). It is possible for Second people to live most of their lives as if they were the "only people." Second, Australia is a very diverse, multicultural community and "white" does not honour that diversity. For people seeking their own cross-cultural, hyphenated identity, "white" is a dominant and dominating identity, a majority worldview that excludes rather than includes.

In an early, otherwise very helpful conversation, it was suggested that this could be a "settler" theology. Yet such a way of naming the project contradicts its very heart: this is not a settled place but invaded space. This is no peacefully entered land, but entry without invitation, a violent possession and dispossession, as well as the location of invaders in ways that have dis-located Indigenous people.

Over the last couple years of conversation with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, the Indigenous community that is part of the Uniting Church in Australia, there has been an increasing tendency to speak of Indigenous people as First Peoples.

6. Perkinson, *White Theology*, 47.

7. For example, Perkinson, *White Theology*.

This means that all those who are not Indigenous peoples are Second peoples. Thus it seemed appropriate that I describe this as a book is about Second peoples' theology. Whatever our internal issues, whatever care we must take that some will not dominate the agenda, our common identity at this point is that we live on Indigenous land⁸ as a Second peoples.

Of course it may be argued that the experience of recent immigrants is different from that of those who arrived early within the history of European occupation, and cannot really be described as invasion. There is some truth in this claim, certainly to the extent that the experience of coming to the continent was different for each time and people. Yet all of us have come without invitation, have claimed the right to occupy the land of a sovereign people, have not recognized that sovereignty, and have claimed a welcome that was not offered. To those who say Indigenous people could not offer a meaningful invitation in present day Australia, the response must be that this is part of the tragedy of Invasion.

The Shape of the Conversation

"He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak . . . and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so' (Mark 9:16–18).

In commenting on this passage, Ched Myers makes three claims that are central to the claims of this book.⁹ First, he suggests that the discourse of capitalist culture has been internalized in ways that render us blind, deaf, and mute to the practices of power and privilege that

8. The use of the word "land" is indicative of one the difficulties that are inherent in this attempt to do contextual theology in this country: the struggle with language and meaning. To call this place "land" is to define it within the discourse of European colonialism. It is a discourse that leads to real estate, economic worth, measured space and ownership. It is a discourse that stands over against the metaphors that mark Indigenous discourse: "mother earth," "place," "country," or "home." There is a need for an ongoing conversation about the right language to use. What is important at this point is that this brief sentence about "land" is intended to convey the sense that theology needs to occur with an awareness, a primary and shaping awareness of colonial occupation and the need to relate to Indigenous people as the First peoples of this place that they describe as "mother-earth."

9. Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* 76–110 (chapter 4).

mark our own lives. Second, the reason the disciples could not heal the man from his demons was that they were too possessed by their own demons to release others. Third, hope and the capacity to set ourselves and others free begins when illusion ends, when we face our real history and our real participation in structures of power and abuse. In short, hope begins when we are dis-illusioned.

This book is written on the assumption that the churches in Australia have internalized the values of an invading society and its racist and class-based explanations and justifications of invasion. This has made us, even with the best of intentions, unable to hear and see or speak words that provide justice. We have been caught in the “normalcy” that has been imposed on this place and people. The hope of this book is that it will contribute in some small way to disillusionment. I hope it will be a challenge to what is described and accepted as normal, to the capacity to face our captivity and demons, and to be the church and theological community in different ways. “Historical honesty, if the dominant culture has the courage to practice it, would compel us to admit that our ‘prosperity’ is predicated upon a legacy characterized as much by racism and greed as by liberty and democracy. But we do not face the shadow side of our own story because we are shame-bound and instead suppress historical contradictions while reciting vicious fictions such as the European ‘discovery’ of the Americas, thinking them essentially benign.”¹⁰ Connected with this is the need to recognize the real pain and suffering in invasion and dispossession. Theology has often sought to too easily and quickly incorporate such things into its worldview and to explain them away, when in fact they should challenge and seek to break open that world.

There is always a question of whether one begins in context or methodology or tradition. I have made the decision to start with the context. Chapter 1 is an account of the social, political, and religious context of invasion and dispossession and of the way these have been construed to disadvantage Indigenous people. It is an account of stolen land, massacres and frontier wars, violence, exclusion at law, deaths in custody, the abuse of labor, the many forms of racism, and present disadvantage. It speaks of the church and its location within this struggle. It is a story of location and re-location, of location and dis-location.

10. *Ibid.*, 98. He is speaking of the invasion of the Americas, but it applies equally to Australia.

Chapter 2 begins with a consideration of the way we construct our world and meaning and then explores the way invasion was explained and justified and the role of the church in constructing such a world. It is about *Terra Nullius*, racism in old forms and new, invisibility, and the denial of history. This is not a detailed account of the relationships that exist in this country but a rather inadequate attempt to highlight the core issues: invasion, dispossession, massacres, loss of traditional culture, racism, marginalization, and continuing disadvantage. Readers can check the bibliography if they wish to explore any issue further.

Chapter 3 explores the task of theology, how that relates to the way we encounter God, and how theology brings together and is shaped by the context and the theological tradition of the church. It speaks of the role played by theology in the construction of social reality, a role generally determined by the church's location and relationship with dominant society.

There are at least two, interrelated dangers in this task. The first is the danger that we describe Indigenous people as victims, as people we can pity and do things for. That is not my intention. I have tried to describe the destructiveness and pain of invasion and dispossession, but I also want to acknowledge the strength of Indigenous people and the extraordinary ways they have confronted this invasion. Second, we must at least ask, and continue to be aware of the question, when we speak of oppression, invasion, and disadvantage, whose perspective and question is being privileged? Is this invasion and oppression as defined by well-meaning Europeans, those seeking to contest the colonial discourse for the sake of solidarity, or is it what is described by Aboriginal people? Have we again defined Aboriginal people in terms of categories privileged by invaders, and in terms of what Europeans have done to the "Other," rather than allowing Aboriginal people to define the experience and outcome from their perspective as subjects rather than objects?

The second section of this book confronts us with four particular challenges to Second peoples' theology. They are challenges to the "white" church's claim to define the church and its faith in this place. They challenge the view that doctrines and practices are determined by one tradition, and that others must find a place in that tradition, rather than together exploring what the tradition says and how it is to be claimed today. Each issue asks that other, usually mute voices be heard in the conversation that is the theology and practices of the church.

Each issue is introduced through a story that calls me and the church to face our place, who we stand with, whose voices are heard, and whose interests are protected. Those issues are:

1. Does God actually matter or make a difference, or is “God” just a name for a distant Being who has left the world to its own devices? Is language about God really meaningful in a world shaped by invasion and dispossession, by the Enlightenment, and by science and economy?
2. What does ‘justice’ mean in this place, and how is power and control exercised around Indigenous peoples?
3. What are the signs and marks of the church in the face of the challenge that the church cannot truly be church apart from a just relationship with Indigenous people?
4. How are we to understand reconciliation and the demand for covenant and treaty?

Readers will quickly recognize how many important issues are missing—the relationship between gospel and culture, land rights, and the relationship between Christian faith and Indigenous spirituality, for example. Clearly a book that covered all the issue would be very much bigger than this one. My interest in this initial book is for questions that touch the identity of the church and the shape of its faith, for rethinking the place from which we can reflect on these other major issues. Unless we rethink these core issues, we will continue to respond poorly to the central issue of the relationship between First and Second peoples.

Some Issues That Make This a Difficult Conversation¹¹

There are issues that make this attempt at contextual theology a particularly fraught one. I have already spoken of the way we define “land” and have suggested that who we listen to is crucial. This latter point needs further reflection, along with the issues of the accepted framework of discourse, how we refer to First people, the danger that who is Indigenous will be narrowed, and the filtering of experience through postinvasion experience.

11. I have previously engaged some of these issues in “Exploring Contextual Theology in Australia.”

Australia was populated by hundreds of communities prior to invasion. There is some debate about whether the First peoples should be called Aboriginal people or Indigenous people, both terms in their capitalized version being names and not descriptors. I have chosen to use both, although I largely use Indigenous peoples, as well the term “First Peoples.”

When the church decides to whom it will listen, it needs to be aware that such a decision is also a decision about to whom one will not listen. There is a danger that we will not accept those whom Aboriginal people have appointed to speak on their behalf, or that we will expect people to be able to speak for everyone when they cannot, or that we will listen only to those whom we have known for a long time, and who may tell us what we wish to hear. It is easy to exclude the voice of the angry and the truly radical. It is also easy to ignore the voice of women. It is a temptation to act out of ideological presuppositions and to decide what we should do before we listen to what will always be diverse and complex voices.

When anyone seeks to describe a social reality other than their own, they do so within the available discourse of their language and culture. Stephen Muecke reminds us that Europeans always struggle with the fact that Aboriginal people first appear in our discourse as “them,” as the other who is never allowed to be subject.¹² The well-worn tracks of discourse in white society are anthropological, romantic, and racist. The challenge is to recognize how easy it is to fall into this sort of discourse while trying to critique it.

In an essay titled “Would the Real Native Please Sit Down!” Jione Havea suggests some other issues that make this task more difficult. He reminds us that at this point in history there is always so much interaction between cultures, culture is always so fluid and changeable, and culture is not a monolith but is always genuinely “multi,” that it is difficult to define what “native” (indeed any) culture is. Who can define the Fijian way, the Tongan way, or the Indigenous Australian way? “What non-native values and concerns have assimilated into, and co-opted, those definitions? What native cultural differences are silenced, ignored, and/or homogenized in order for those definitions to delimit? In whose

12. Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, 23.

interests?”¹³ And, one might add, who decides, and whose voices are allowed to speak? Havea reminds us that identity and culture cannot be settled in essentialist ways, as if there were some unchangeable core, for culture is too fluid and diverse.

It is normally assumed that Indigenous Australian culture is an oral culture, by which it is meant that it is not a book culture. Havea adds that oral cultures are first and foremost *cultures of relations*. It is relationships that determine stories and how they are told, and stories can change as relationships change.¹⁴ The aim is to sustain and transform relationships, which also change stories. The issue for theology as it seeks to listen to the encounter between cultures and theologies is how the hearing can occur within the priorities of relationships, and how a culture of written texts and rules can be open to change that will sustain the merging relationships.

Conclusion

There is a risk in contextual theology that we have not escaped imperialism but only changed its form. There is the danger that people like me will use the experience of others for my own purposes. I have tried to avoid this, but only readers and, particularly, Indigenous people will know if I have succeeded.

There is also the temptation for the contextual task to still be controlled by the academy. There is an openness to new contexts, new stories, and new content in theology, but is there an openness to new ways of doing theology? Is there still the imperialism of one account of academic rigor, of an insistence that all the possible companions are encountered, that the time spent must largely be with academic resources rather than relationships, conversations, and new ponderings? I have been torn in this writing process, wanting to honor those who have attempted this journey before me, but wary that their journey will overwhelm mine, will misshape it, and draw it towards accepted “standards” rather than being my contextual enterprise. I have not resolved this tension. Just as I was finishing the first draft, I spent four days with Indigenous people in a gathering around theology, worship, and liturgy. I was reminded of

13. Havea, “Would the Real Native Please Sit Down!” in Pearson, *Faith in a Hyphen*, 201.

14. *Ibid.*, 203.

how much I still need to hear and understand, and how dangerous it is to be locked into libraries and away from real relationships.

I am not trying to make people feel guilty. Nor do I wish to suggest some idealized past to which we must return. We live in this historic moment, which we did not create, but have inherited—good and bad. The issue for us is how we will follow Jesus in this moment, and how and where we will locate ourselves in relation to Indigenous people and our shared history.

At times I have named issues and suggested resources but have not explored them further. The task before us as Second peoples is a big one, and I have only just scratched the surface. My hope is that other younger and smarter theological minds might be challenged to enter the task, to build relationships and pursue these issues, and to redo all that I have done here.