

JAPULU KANKARRA

(The Father in Heaven)

Part III: The Law of the Aborigines

Kevin McKelson sac

THERE were many occasions when the people of La Grange reminded me of their Law. Should they as a group be invited to go to another community on 'business', it was for the Law. Should they go in the evening for a corroboree, it was for play or because of Law. Should a girl be forced to go to her promised husband, it was the Law. Should an incorrectly paired couple elope and were caught and punished, it was because they had broken the Law. Should two women after a dispute take it in turns to hit one another on the head with clubs, to square things up, it was because of the Law. Should all women, children, non-initiated males and Europeans be forbidden to go anywhere near the ceremonial grounds, it was because of the Law.

Once when fire threatened the 'business place', old men streamed out from the camp in panic and did their utmost to contain the fire, lest their Law grounds be damaged. Something similar happened in Sydney in 1994, when the main Jewish synagogue was burnt down. Elders did their utmost to save the bible from the fire. Should a kangaroo make a thumping noise with its tail as it hopped along, it was its Law.

In Part II, I mentioned the way the community was divided into four sections or skin groups. Once another distinguished scholar, Dr Carl von Brandenstein visited the mission. His studies had lead him to state that not only human beings had 'skins', but animals and natural phenomena had them also. For example, the sun, the moon, the salt water, birds and goannas all had 'skins'. Dr Brandenstein set out his findings in a book called *Names and*

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Substance of the Australian Subsection System. He discussed the matter with some of the people who told him they understood what he was talking about. It was indeed part of their Law, but at La Grange it was not stressed. But his views interested me very much because they seemed to confirm what I had been suspecting for some time, namely that the universe as viewed by the people was a closed system. The Earth on which they lived, the sun, moon and stars which they saw in the sky were one 'country'.

Such an idea of the universe would have delighted the heart of St Francis of Assisi who used to talk to the birds, and spoke once to a wolf which listened to him. Francis had called the sun Brother, and the stars Sisters. He also called water Sister and fire Brother. He called the earth Sister but also Mother. *Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra, matre terra.* Be praised my Lord for our sister the earth, our mother (my translation).

What was this Law the people spoke about so often? I hardly heard it mentioned in Broome but that probably was my fault as I was so busy doing all sorts of things. The Law was like a magnet drawing everyone and everything to itself and putting them under its influence.

Man-making time was the occasion when I noticed most the Law in action at La Grange. The ceremonies happened every year at the mission and usually again at some other community like Jigalong or Looma. Before the event some women would be fashioning hair-belts out of human hair. These would be worn by the young men who would be selected to take a leading role in the ceremony. Old men accompanied by younger companions would go from camp to camp placing their hands gently on the shoulders of already selected candidates who then would be gently but firmly 'grabbed' by their companions. The young men would go quietly with them to a private place where they would be divested of their ordinary clothes and be clothed with a loin cloth and hair belt. After saying goodbye to their family and the rest of the people, the young men would be taken to another community. Through their companions the young men would invite others to return with them

to La Grange for the meeting, as these ceremonies were usually called.

Once I asked Jack Mulardy, the leading man of the Karajarri how long should they stay away before returning. To my astonishment he pointed to his hands indicating the joints of his fingers, twelve on each hand, showing they would be away for twenty four days. Then he indicated the two joints on each thumb which showed another four days they could stay away if they were delayed. In all, 28 days, a lunar month,

At the time of my writing these lines, Jack or Wanyjirra as he is known, is still alive. He is now very old, but this man like Moko knows all the songs. He knows the Law and knows the country around La Grange or Bidyadanga as it is called today, like the back of his hand.

There was never really any serious problem regarding the co-operation on the part of the mission with the people, regarding the man-making ceremonies. The elders agreed that the young men would be taken only after they had finished school. And in mission days the mission truck used to take the people wherever they wanted to go. On many occasions I had the chance to go with them, if not with as much excitement as the people felt, but certainly with a great deal of interest.

Mothers-in-law would be tucked away in a corner of the dray, usually gazing in a different direction from the mob on the truck. If they felt they were too close to potential or real in-laws they covered themselves up with a blanket. But they were happy. They together with the rest were on the way to a meeting.

Once when going to Marble Bar via the overland telegraph line, we stopped at the cattle dip at Wallal Station. All were off the truck in a flash, looking for tracks on the ground which they could identify readily as those of their friends living at Wallal, commenting on how long ago they had been made and suggesting that so and so could have been ill. Off we continued to our destination. Clancy had told me to camp on the back of the truck at night as there might be snakes around. I did so without questioning.

handed on by the elders from one generation to the next. It was a living tradition that was passed on by word of mouth and often enshrined in song. It was a tradition telling the story of the people eventually communicated through symbols and patterns incised on wood or chiselled in stone. The stories in the christian bible originated in the same way. The bible tells the story of what the people did and believed in the early days, stories which were first passed on by word of mouth, from generation to generation and then when writing was invented, put down on two flat pieces of stone.

Knowledge of history of the Aborigines has also been passed on by means of paintings and rock art but of these I know little, although Father Worms had discovered many examples of very old rock art down Hedland way about sixty or more years ago. These days Aboriginal art is revealing an immense treasure trove of knowledge left behind by the people who lived in the very early times, shall we say the Dream Time. It is about the idea of the Dream Time that I wish to write in Part IV. □

BOOK NOTICE

Kevin Barr msc 1995, *Fire on the Earth: Prophetic religious life for the 21st century*. Spectrum Publications, Melbourne, paperback, 124 pp, ISBN 0-86786-355-2, RRP \$17.95.

Kevin is at present recuperating at Randwick parish, Sydney, from excessive labours, one of which is the production of yet another book. Last issue we reviewed *Let's Change the World*. The present work is aimed straight at 'religious' in the church, in case we were just managing to settle down and enjoy a quiet life.

Vatican II pushed priests and religious off their pedestals and exalted the christian vocation of all the baptised. Some of us probably felt a bit put out by it all, but the good side of it was that we didn't feel so uncomfortable any more when reading out gospel incidents of Jesus' confrontation with the professional religious of his day, the Pharisees.

But what are religious about as we move towards the 21st century? Kevin gathers together modern opinions that emphasise their role as prophetic witnesses to Christ. Fiery people!

A Voice from the Desert

Martin Wilson msc

The voice of Brother Cletus Read fms was not quite from the desert, but it was pretty close to it. The last 18 years of his life were spent at Santa Teresa, beyond which the Simpson Desert stretches for hundreds of kilometres. Santa Teresa is harsh, arid country. It was out of such country that John the Baptist emerged crying out for a new way of the Lord. Cletus did much the same thing.

In his panegyric and summary of Br Cletus' life his Provincial, Br James Jolley fms, divided it into four seasons. The third was when he was Provincial of the Melbourne Marist Brothers province 1972-1977. Apparently Cletus himself, at one time of writing, saw that as a most enriching experience for himself personally. It was post-Vatican II, a time of great change, a difficult time to have authority within the church. Whatever courageous and insightful decisions Cletus made during his provincialship, from the *Nelen Yubu* perspective at any rate his next, the fourth season was of particular importance, the years of very active retirement just on the edge of the Simpson Desert. They were enriching for others. I don't know if Cletus liked that marvellous poem of Robert Browning, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, but its theme describes his fourth season—probably the whole of his life—extremely well:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His Hand
Who saith 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'

In the last season of his life he did quite a lot of things that were significant within a fairly narrow geographical range. In the final years, however, he *reflected* on his experience and on the special

situation he found himself in, and decided to share with others the wisdom he had acquired—

... all instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:
Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped ...

Cletus clearly felt that his was a privileged position. In 1986 eighty kilometres away in Alice Springs Pope John Paul II had proclaimed an outline of apostolic action for the church in Australia. The Australian church will not have reached its proper status until the richness of the Aboriginal religious tradition—the oldest continuing religious tradition on earth—will have found a home within it.

And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you [the Aboriginal people] have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

This constitutes a challenge both to the Aboriginal people and to Australian Christians at large. Cletus knew he was living with the very persons who had directly received this challenge on a rainy day in 1986. In themselves they were, and are still, particularly symbolic of the Aboriginal situation in Australia. He described them as the 'Aboriginal anawim', *Nelen Yubu* 56:5-10. They are the remnants of clans who were traditional owners of the Alice Springs town site and of the surrounding country nowadays taken over by cattle stations. The Aboriginal people in the Top End have their land rights, where they can live in their own country. The people of Santa Teresa are the dispossessed.

Cletus looked at the endeavours of the church of which he was a member, and was troubled at what he saw. He believed that church policy was formulated with the land-endowed Aborigines of the Top End too much in central focus. Authentic evangelisation is directed primarily towards the poor, the *anawim*. He praised the Lutheran church in Central Australia for the way in which it has endeavoured to provide pastoral care for the scattered bands of dispossessed people.

Cletus' reflections led him to pronounce a profoundly disturbing theory, but like a good prophet, he also outlined a way towards reform.

His theory he propounded in an article in *Nelen Yubu* No. 57 with the significant title, 'Inculturation or Assimilation?':

I am of the opinion that the manner in which the Catholic Church in Australia is carrying out evangelisation among Aboriginal people in the present system of dioceses and parishes is resulting inevitably in the destruction of Aboriginal spirituality and is tending to assimilate Aborigines into western style churches rather than inculturate christianity into Aboriginal culture.

In an open letter he wrote in support of our *Nelen Yubu* periodical (No. 59:29) he expressed his opinion thus:

Today the Catholic Church is losing credibility because it is talking Post Vatican vision but it is still using pre-Vatican thinking and praxis.

By way of solution to the problem he proposed two areas of change:

- The Catholic church has to come up with a new attitude towards Aboriginal ministry.
- New ways of incorporating Aboriginal people into the structure of the church have to be developed.

In *Nelen Yubu* No. 54 Cletus began a series of what turned out to be five articles in which he planned to outline his views and provide an historical, sociological, theological, in brief, missiological rationale for them. He noted in the fourth article ('Towards Pluralism', *Nelen Yubu* 58:1) that he had earlier planned a book. He decided on a series in *Nelen Yubu* as a means of addressing people in the field directly, rather than academics.

Church Structure

He believed that experience in places like United States and Canada showed that where the "targets" of evangelisation are a cultural minority and the "agents" are the cultural majority, the process of interaction cannot be left to the informal interplay of cross-cultural dialogue without the minority being smothered out of existence, assimilated. Hence a means has to be instituted whereby

the Aboriginal people can stand secure in their own identity, and from that position can engage in formal dialogue with the evangelisers crowding around them. He proposed a three-level system:

Level 3: The Bi-Cultural Church

Level 2: The Aboriginal Community Church

Level 1: The Basic Aboriginal Churches.

Level 1: Basic Aboriginal Churches

The Basic Aboriginal Churches would be what are in fact the basic social units of Aboriginal society: the 'band', hearth group, extended family as a residential group. In the Lutheran situation in Central Australia these groups are scattered across their traditional range as homeland or out-station groups. In the Catholic situation of being the dispossessed *anawim* they are mainly massed together at Santa Teresa or on the fringes of Alice Springs. The church, Cletus maintained, should recognise the factual and social reality of these groups and enable them to become worshipping communities in their own right. As church regulation stands today (as opposed to Paul's time), the elders in these communities cannot be recognised as priests capable of enacting the eucharist. Accordingly, the prayer and worship style of the Basic Aboriginal Churches would be 'rabbinical'.

In effect, they would be similar to the Small Christian Communities that the Lumko Program was promoting, the difference being that they would be kinship based and not neighbourhood groups.¹

Level 2: Aboriginal Community Church

Just like Small or Basic Christian Communities, the Basic Aboriginal Churches would be coordinated on a higher level. Again, there is a traditional cultural model to follow. In the past the various discrete social groups that formed part of a large myth-chain would gather at special times for combined ceremony. In the same way the Basic Aboriginal Churches would gather at special times, e.g. for funerals, to act as a worshipping community that would incorporate a range of basic churches.

Again, their worship would be non-eucharistic by present necessity.

Level 3: Bi-Cultural Church

The Bi-Cultural Church would form when members of the Basic Aboriginal Churches and non-Aboriginal believers would meet for worship together. Typically such worship would be eucharistic.

Cletus saw this form of the church as something that would happen regularly: Sunday Mass; on smaller scale, daily eucharist. In fact, it would be very much like what happens normally at Santa Teresa and Alice Springs already. The difference would be the big one of attitude and style.

Ministry

As David Thompson indicated in his article on 'Leadership and Aboriginal Churches' (*NY* 60:9-22) each of the denominational churches has been searching for ways of developing Aboriginal ministers. We Catholics are rather out of the picture:

The Catholic Church has been unable to ordain married priests, but instead is empowering lay pastoral teams. The drawback in this model is that the Aboriginal church does not have complete ecclesial life while unable to celebrate Mass without an outside priest. (*NY* 60:21)

Obviously, the development of an Aboriginal catholic priesthood would be a high priority. All the same Cletus warns (*NY* 58:7):

Existing Australian seminaries would be socially unacceptable and theologically unsuitable for the training of Aboriginal ministers. The Catholic Church could work in more closely with the Nungalinga system for this purpose.

Before the present series of articles was commenced Cletus had written a paper on 'Lay Ministry' in 1991 (*NY* 46:3-7). He sketched in outline the historical development of the clerical institution, underlining the fact that various elements that we tend to see today as part and parcel of the church are only developments in response to the pressure of circumstances. He stated his point dramatically:

Seeing that Jesus had these attitudes [social equality, respect for women, tax collectors, others] how can he ever have been led to institute different classes of people in the Church?

How did it happen that Jesus instituted a clergy with all the power and exercising all the important ministries — and a laity who possess little power and who have a very minor share of the ministries?

The answer is quite simple. He didn't.

While Cletus supported the development of lay ministries within the church, he did not believe that features like married or 'lay' deacons which have been developed to suit the circumstances of other countries or previous times should be imported into our country now. As in Apostolic times new forms of ministry should be allowed to emerge that take stock of presently changing social circumstances, like the ongoing change in the status of women.

In regard to the Aboriginal community Cletus proposed that a change in church structure could be accompanied by a new and appropriate development in ministry. The practical means for developing catholic Aboriginal ministers could be provided by Nungalinya College in Darwin, a combined venture of the Anglican and Uniting churches—and also since 1994 of the Catholic church.

Impact?

In a letter Cletus wrote to me in December last year he reaffirmed his belief that the idealistic developments envisaged by John Paul II in his 1986 address to the Aboriginal people of Australia cannot come to pass within a common diocese/parish system. He went on to comment on the reaction of various groups of people to his 'radical thinking'. His brothers in religion, the Marists, were 'men of the schools' and found his pre-occupation with evangelisation and inculturation a bit odd. The Catholic church authorities were friendly towards him but never referred to his articles. He himself was critical of the MSC manner of apostolate in the Territory.² The old adage, Christ's after all, about no prophet in one's own country, was once more realised. Cletus was invited by the Anglican bishop of Northern Territory to attend a meeting of Aboriginal Anglican ministers in Arnhem Land. Cletus gladly accepted the invitation but on second thoughts asked to be excused

at that stage lest he might seem publicly disloyal to the Catholic church in the Territory.

He concluded his letter by remarking jokingly that maybe he should solve his 'problems of relationships with various religious groups in the Territory by founding an Anglican Branch of the Marist Brothers!'

He continued: 'How do I cope personally? I have an enormous toleration for aloneness, so I live the life of a hermit', and after an expression of warm regards to the *Nelen Yubu* staff he signed off as 'Cletus Read, Marist Eremites'.

¹This observation is of particular interest to me as I was the one who brought the Lumko Program from South Africa to the Northern Territory back in 1987 and in the succeeding years, along with Sr Delores O'Sullivan SSpS, endeavoured to promote it. At that time *apartheid* was still dominant in South Africa; accordingly Lumko placed heavy emphasis upon neighbourhood, social intermingling. It took us some time to realise that that element should be discarded here in Australia. David Thompson illustrated this point perceptively in *NY* 55:7-9.

²He suggested I might like to show his letter to MSC provincial authorities. They expressed interest and suggested they and I meet up to discuss the issues, but I incurred a health problem that prevented the meeting. And then Cletus died.

Book Review:

Eugene Stockton: *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation.* Millenium Books, Sydney, 1995.

Reviewed by Frank Fletcher msc of Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Sydney.

Folk music in Australia was for a long time the settlers' re-doing of the sweet mellow tunes of their mother lands. However, this music slowly took on a rougher quality as the bush society and landscape asserted itself in their consciousness. Now there thrives a folk music which has roots here. In a similar fashion Christian spirituality may at last be ready to escape the hegemony of other lands as the spiritual music of this land enters in.

Eugene Stockton believes the moment for our own spiritual music has come. He discerns a spiritual force is blowing to raise a new people. The land is re-creating the people. Australia is something still in the making (p.3). Explaining that 'making', Stockton argues that immigrants to an old land need a process to become grafted on to the land. This grafting must relate not only to the land itself but to that ancient human stock whose life and spirit has been formed by the land. Finally this grafting must be a spiritual, indeed a mystical, process; that is the insight foundational for Stockton's project. If persuasive, it may lure us to a radical conversion.

The first step to conversion, following Stockton, is to move to another view of Australian history, beginning with archaeological findings from 47,000 years ago. The event of 1788 is to be set within a long perspective. Stockton's second step is to sketch out in seven chapters the traditional Aboriginal religious culture. As one engaged in Aboriginal Ministry I found these chapters useful and their material with a treatment of what he believes is 'a bridge between Aboriginal mysticism in the traditional form and an Aboriginal mysticism which is thoroughly at home in the Catholic tradition.' This bridge is a spiritual exposition by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr of Daly River, NT. In her own language she calls it *dadirri*. *Dadirri* is, she says, 'something like what you [Mainstream Australian

Catholics] call contemplation.’ It is an inner deep listening and quiet still awareness (p.104). Miriam-Rose challenges non-Aboriginal Australians to test this ‘contemplation in and through the land.’

Stockton’s third step is to suggest how we non-Aborigines might take up the challenge to *dadirri* so that it revitalises our spirituality. To that end he weaves together insights of scripture, liturgy, theology and of the new quantum science. This is somewhat complex so I will not attempt a summary here. Further Stockton provides practical exercises for awakening a spiritual encounter with the land.

It is clear that many people will find this book and its gently whimsical style both useful and attractive. Some of my Aboriginal friends have read parts of it and are quite pleased with it. Eugene Stockton has spent years of his ministry in the service of Sydney Aboriginal people and is much loved.

In viewing this book we must also take account of the Aboriginal activists who are suspicious of any non-Aboriginal writing about their culture, especially a Christian. They have good reason for suspicion as they point to much writing which is clearly deficient or even spurious. But in the face of this critical position Stockton’s book holds up. His foundational insight, as I have set it out above, is genuinely respectful of the cultural difference. Most Aborigines that I know would be pleased to see such an insight accepted. As regards the final section where he relates Aboriginal spirituality to the non-Aboriginal Catholic tradition, Stockton is taking up the challenge which Miriam-Rose issued at the Liturgical Conference in Hobart, 1988. She described *dadirri* as ‘the gift that Australia is thirsting for’. As Stockton’s title makes clear, his aim is to take up this challenge which Miriam-Rose regards as *a gift for the nation*. This surely provides the legitimate grounding for this project. Stockton’s book never seeks to use Aboriginal spirituality for his own egoism or for the egoism of the Church. Within the challenge of Miriam-Rose his is an authentic response. ◻

KIRIBATI

Chris R McPhee msc

ONE of the most remarkable events that took place in modern history is the christianisation of the Pacific area. In little over one hundred years the missionary venture into the Pacific saw the ideals and practices of christianity integrated into village life. Today, if one were to visit any of the Pacific islands, one could not help but notice how christianity is central to their way of life. Kiribati is no different in this aspect from any other Pacific island. However, Kiribati is different from most other islands in the way they have discerned the way or model in which they practise christianity. What this paper wants to explore and look at more closely are the issues and maybe the reasons why a predominantly Protestant mission becomes overnight a predominantly Catholic mission. To look at these aspects from an historical point of view (I believe) will help us gain a better understanding of culture as a whole, and as bearers of the 'Good News', to become more sensitive to the differences that are unseen and unknown within groups of people.

Kiribati is a nation that gained its independence from England in 1978; it consists of 33 islands, creating a chain of atolls which were historically known as *Tungaru*.¹ It has a land area of 260 square miles of which all the islands are no more than twelve feet above sea level. To have any understanding of the issues involved, I believe that it will be necessary for us to have an overview of Kiribati history. Prior to European involvement these people lived outside a cash economy, they were self-sufficient, and relied on fish and local produce for their survival. Their first contact with the West was via whaling and trading ships. Trading for coconut-oil began in 1837, and was followed in 1860 by the establishment of a copra industry.² It was during this time that slave traders would kidnap islanders for labour in the mines and plantations of Tahiti, Hawaii, Samoa, Fiji

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and Queensland. These were commonly called 'blackbirders'; however, as a people known for being a warlike race, they were able to defend themselves, causing a deal of damage to those who endeavoured to force into labour.⁴ In 1877 the British High Commission for Western Pacific was set up to protect all islanders from 'blackbirders'.⁵ This initiative saw the establishment of the Gilbert Islands as a British Protectorate in 1892⁶, then in 1916 the Islands changed and became a British colony⁷; finally in 1978 Kiribati became an independent republic.

Contact with the West opened up for the Gilbertese a new world of technology, education, trade, and religious practices. Those who travelled and worked overseas were able to bring back a wealth of new ideas, ways of living, and ways of incorporating these new things into their own cultural life. Unfortunately, the village people began to rely on these new goods from the West. This massive new contact with the West saw a new religion being introduced to the people via contact with missionaries on their own soil, and via those who travelled overseas and brought back with them a new belief in God.

The first recorded introduction of christianity into the Gilbert Islands was in 1857, when a missionary from the 'American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' (Boston) [ABCFM], a Rev. Hiram Bingham arrived with his wife and two Hawaiians.⁸ Bingham found the task of teaching christianity to the locals difficult because he could not speak the language. He would go around the island pointing to different things, learning their names in Gilbertese. The language became Bingham's expertise, for it is said that he was more scholarly than missionary.⁹ The ABCFM mission was centred around the northern islands, and here Bingham found and experienced great difficulty in converting these people. What he did do however, was to produce a written form of the language, and then he began to translate the Bible into the vernacular. Bingham never really became acculturated and with few conversions the people remained believing their own gods and spirits. By 1873, and after 16 years of missionary work, Bingham could only report that his Pacific pastors had about a hundred converts.¹⁰ Due to sickness

Bingham returned to Honolulu and it is from there that he completed the translation of the Bible.

The missionary work of the American enterprise was mainly left to Hawaiian indigenous who, having only converted to christianity in a short period of time, were sent to Kiribati with limited training and expertise. They established missions on each island in the north, but unfortunately for the mission, the Americans would only visit occasionally to supervise these otherwise abandoned missionaries.¹¹ The Hawaiian missionaries established strict controls over the people, largely due I believe to their inexperience, their lack of training, and their constant drive to convert as many Gilbertese as possible. This came to a head when in 1886, the Hawaiian missionaries urged those who had converted to christianity to kill all those who were still pagan.¹²

To the south of the equator it was a different story: there the London Missionary Society [LMS] had moved in from Samoa, which was their Pacific base, and set up missions on five islands from Beru southwards. They were able to provide Samoan missionaries rather than Hawaiian, who were more numerous and forceful.¹³ This I believe helped their cause; the close vicinity of Samoa assisted communication between them and their pastors.¹⁴ The LMS Samoan church was well established and much better organised than that of the Hawaiian enterprise of the north. Each year an English missionary from Samoa would visit and make an extensive tour of the missionaries' works. However, it was not until 1900 that an LMS from Europe took up residence in Kiribati; up till then these white missionaries were content just to visit rather than actively participate.¹⁵ By 1875, just five years after their venture into the southern islands of Kiribati, the LMS Samoans had acquired considerable influence and power over the converts and pagans alike. The Gilbertese had a fascination with things that were western, and in the southern islands it seemed to be a fascination with literacy. Here was a way for the people to learn western ways and the LMS missionaries were the ones who were going to teach them. Like the Hawaiian missionaries they too established strict controls over the indigenes, suppressing significant cultural values for strict supposedly

christian ones. The London Missionary Society's role in the south seems to have been successful in persuading (converting) the people to Protestantism, so much so that when the Roman Catholic mission tried to establish a mission on these islands they were met with hostility.¹⁶

One may ask at this stage were these conversions genuine? Or were they a way for the islanders to gain support from foreign powers? Or was it a way to have access to western goods that were seen by the people as a symbol of prestige? Whatever the case, one has to ask the question whether these conversions in the beginning were serious or not. This leads us into the next wave of christianity that hit the Kiribati islands, which from an historical point of view saw the introduction of Catholic christianity being introduced via their own people. Some might say that this could have been the sole reason why a predominantly Protestant faith, with its strict controls, turns to a predominantly Catholic position. However, as we will see, this is only one of the many reasons for the turn-about.

It has been said that the first missionaries of the Catholic faith were Gilbertese themselves. From 1864-65 the first Gilbertese began to arrive as labourers in Tahiti, and being a French colony the islanders came in contact with the Catholic religion.¹⁷ In 1870 the Bishop of Tahiti, Stephen Janssen, appointed a priest to learn their language, which then enabled him to instruct the islanders in dogma, prayers and hymns.¹⁸ This priest having learned the language was able to put together a simple catechism as well as translate various sections of the New Testament into the Kiribati vernacular.¹⁹ These items were given to those who wanted to hear and respond to this new style of religion. By 1880 many of the Gilbertese who had gone to Tahiti were baptised Catholic prior to returning to their own islands. And so it was that, upon returning home, they would begin to instruct and convert their own people.

The history of mission is often about those who took the faith to others, but rarely is it about those who hear the Word of God and respond to it. However, in the islands of Kiribati there is such a story of two people who heard the Word of God and responded to it.

Two men, Betero (Peter) Terauati and Rataro (Lazarus) Tiroi, left Kiribati to work as labourers in Tahiti.²⁰ While there they came in contact with the Catholic faith and after seven years of catechetical instruction, Bishop Janssen appointed both of them as catechists.²¹ They both returned to Kiribati in 1880 to begin instructing the people of their own island. They did this work for eight years before a Catholic priest appeared. During that time they conducted church services, built eight small churches in their villages, and by 1886 had baptised 560 people together and another 600 were being instructed in the faith.²² Finally in 1888 three priests of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart arrived on the island of Nonouti and there continued the work of these two indigenous missionaries.²³ There are similar stories of others who had come back from overseas to convert their own people to Catholicism. On the island of Abemama a woman called Nei Tengti persuaded others to join her in reciting prayers that she had learned in Tahitian. There are also those who worked in Samoa, where the Marist Fathers were stationed, and, having been converted to Catholicism would begin instructing their own people upon their return. Bishop Paul Mea, the present bishop of Kiribati, stated at the 100th anniversary of the MSCs in Kiribati that: 'This unique method of the reception of the Faith remains a distinctive mark on . . . the church in Kiribati. It even strengthens [its] position within the Universal Catholic Church.'²⁴

It is interesting that here in the midst of an anti-papist Protestant environment Catholicism begins to emerge as an alternative. When the MSCs finally arrived they found that they could begin their work straight away. Never before had a party of missionaries found the path so smooth.

We celebrated Mass in the church that the faith of these people had built while they awaited missionaries. At the end is a kind of altar with a crucifix; truly, all that was lacking here was a priest . . . Mass was said in the presence of about 200 . . . had missionaries ever encountered a people so keen on acquiring an education. (From Fr Bontemps' Journal)

However, it was not all 'beer and skittles', for they too experienced virulent anti-Catholic feelings, particularly from the

Samoaan LMS of the south.²⁵ There the LMS had a monopoly of the southern islands. so much so that when a priest tried to live and work on one of them he was faced with non-cooperation and was almost starved out of the place. Towards the north the story was different. There the priests concentrated their attention on places where the Hawaiian pastors had established their missions. On these islands the French missionaries lifted Catholic practice, ritual, liturgy, straight out of a European context and placed it into Kiribati culture. Processions, feast days, the rosary, the saints, were all central to the life of a Catholic, but even more central to these was the adoration of the Eucharist. By the end of 1889, the mission was firmly anchored in Nonouti, with half the population being baptised.²⁶ As well as this there were calls for missionaries and priests from the councils and chiefs from islands such as Tabiteueu, Makin, Marakei and Beru.²⁷ At the turn of the century the Catholic mission had established itself on eight of the islands, recording 11,000 plus conversions, 60 chapels, 50 schools together with 57 indigenous catechists.²⁸ This was a remarkable achievement in anyone's language, and so one might ask why the sudden change from Protestantism? The final section of this paper will look then at some of the issues which may have influenced these people in discerning the style of christianity in which they can say 'Yes' in the depths of their hearts.

The first area I want to explore is how serious were the Gilbertese in accepting christianity from the first missionaries who landed on these islands? We have seen how the islanders were fascinated with western things, together with their desire to learn and be educated. I wonder then if the missionaries who first visited Kiribati become a means to their ends? One good example of this was a protégé of Hiram Bingham, Moses Kaure, from the island of Abaiang. Bingham thought highly of him, and while in Honolulu he called for Kaure to help translate the Bible into the language of the Gilbertese. When in Honolulu, Kaure was ordained and in 1890 returned to Abaiang with five volumes of pencil manuscripts. After a period of time back home it was said that Kaure 'relapsed into wild pre-christian customs'²⁹; participating in 'erotic merrymaking'³⁰, and dancing. He was also seen by his supervisor³¹ to be in collusion

with the island's king, Binoka, who was denounced as a heathen. These activities saw him being alienated from the church and his mentor, Rev. Bigham. In the end, however, Kaure became a successful statesman on the islands, winning prestige from the Colonial Government as a liaison, as well as a successful property developer. To be able to generalise here a bit, I think, in the case of Kaure's alienation from the church, it was not so much his non-belief in Christianity, but rather his supervisor's inability to see the situation, his inability to understand the culture, and more importantly, his inability to understand the religious and political situations of these islanders. So from a western point of view Kaure's actions may be seen as a means to an end, but could it be just a simple fact of not really understanding these people?

The Protestant missions offered an overall facility for education but what let them down, I feel, was their failure to hold people's attention. In other words here was a new religion that lacked the idolatry and pomp that was highly integrated into their village society. The new religion of the Protestant missionaries lacked the legendary creators, the heroic ancestors, which were all venerated in story, dance and daily rites. Instead of trying to understand their practices and learn from them, they would enforce rules and regulations that actually suppressed village life. 'Swinging, waving, and posturing . . . till they worked themselves up to a frenzy . . . We decided to stop the whole thing.'³² This kind of rigorism that was enforced on these people could not last; 'where there is least dancing there is most thieving and vice.'³³ These practices represented their principal form of entertainment and traditionally played a large role in their religious life.

On the other hand the Catholic position was much different, for they were able to offer an alternative to the relatively colourless worship of the Protestant missionaries. For the Catholic missionary it was about pomp and ceremony, incense and bells, re-telling Bible stories rather than having the Bible read, and all this was centred around the mystery of the Eucharist. This was led in great processions around the islands, and in some places cowed the crowds who were armed to attack.³⁴ Soutanes, coifs and crucifixes became

the accepted norm of a predominantly Catholic island. Even stories of the saints and their miraculous endeavours seemed to have tapped into their own mythical stories of heroism. The sacred language (Latin), the sound and colour of the processions, the sung Masses, all appeared to have won the hearts of the people who were able to integrate their own colourful stories from Catholic tradition. Even dance that was outlawed by the Protestants, was used to celebrate religious occasions (as long as it did not celebrate pre-Christian divinities or sexually-charged fertility symbolism) and festivals. This area alone was, I believe, one of the major factors that turned these village people towards Catholicism; the simple fact being that they could relate to the symbolism that tapped into their own lived experience of worship and celebration.

Another reason why these people became predominantly Catholic could have been that they were just tired of the stringent, strict control of Protestantism, and the conversion to Catholicism became for them another alternative to relate with the west. This was highlighted when the people from Tabiteuea asked for missionaries. This was the island where 600-plus people were massacred in 1880, being incited by Hawaiian missionaries to kill all the pagans.³⁵ In other words the request for missionaries was more political than spiritual as the aggrieved faction could now call on these Catholic missionaries as a counterweight, thus enabling them to gain the benefits of education without the need to take up the religion of the Protestants.

Another factor that could be a reason why these people changed to Catholicism, was that the Catholic missions seemed to show stability. In other words instead of travelling from island to island overseeing the indigenous missionaries (who lacked the training that the Catholic priests and sisters engendered), they would set up base and live among the people. This allowed the missionaries to learn the language and so were able to communicate at a much deeper level. In other words life in these religious houses, and especially the religious sisters' houses, seemed to those on the outside to radiate orderliness, a feeling of welcome and an open door.

So why does a predominantly Protestant mission become a predominantly Catholic mission? Was it because the Rev. Hiram Bingham led the way, opening up new territory for Christian belief overall? Or was it because of the inexperience of the Hawaiian indigenous missionaries: having only limited experience of christianity and finding it difficult to relay the real message of the 'Good News'? Or was it because the European Protestant missionaries never became acculturated with these people: they never lived permanently on any one island, and so were unable to understand them culturally and religiously? Or was it because the missionaries enforced too strict a rule, suppressing significant cultural values for strict supposedly christian ones? Or was it because the Catholic faith was firstly introduced by their own people? Or was it because of the Catholic sacred language (Latin), the sung Masses, the integration of dance into the celebration? Or was it that these symbolic actions hit it off with their own colourful stories and celebrations? Or was it all in the beginning a political manoeuvre to gain the benefits from a western education without having to take on the religion of the Protestants?

Who really knows why this particular culture changed from primarily a primordial religion to that of a strict Protestant one and then to a Roman Catholic position? What we do know is that 140 odd years ago these were a people who believed in ancestral gods and spirits; they have become a group of people who all proclaim to be christian, and once converted, whether Catholic or Protestant, have taken seriously a deep belief in Jesus.

The rest is Mystery!

¹John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, p.148; also, up till independence in 1978, Kiribati was known to the West as the Gilbert Islands.

²Juliette Baker, 'The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands' *History of the Australian Province of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, ed. Mary Venard, p.209.

³Ahling Onorio, 'Early European Contacts', *Kiribati: Aspects of History*, pp.53-55. These page have a good account of the problems encountered

by the indigenes, especially the references to the forced labour — ‘Blackbirding’.

⁴Ernest Sabatier, *Astride the Equator: An Account of the Gilbert Islands*, p.168.

⁵Baker, ‘The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands’, p.209.

⁶Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to WWII*, p.260.

⁷Baker, ‘The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands’, p.209.

⁸James Waldersee and J F McMahon, ‘NEITHER EAGLES NOR SAINTS’ p.323.

⁹Waldersee and McMahon, ‘Neither Eagles Nor Saints’, p.323. Bingham came to Kiribati fresh from Yale University, with no real missionary experience. See Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p.149.

¹⁰Waldersee and McMahon, ‘Neither Eagles Nor Saints’, p.323.

¹¹Charles Forman. *The Island Churches of the South Pacific: Emergence in the Twentieth Century*, p.26.

¹²ibid.

¹³Waldersee and McMahon, ‘MSC Mission in Oceania’, p323.

¹⁴Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea*, p.260; also Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific*, p.26.

¹⁵Etchiera, ‘The New Religion’, p.59. William Goward was the first resident European missionary to live permanently on the Kiribati islands.

¹⁶The two most southern Kiribati islands, Tamana and Arovae were totally Protestant. See Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific*. p. 28.

¹⁷Waldersee and McMahon, ‘Neither Eagles Nor Saints’ p.323.

¹⁸Baker, ‘The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands’, p.210.

¹⁹Sabatier, *Astride the Equator*, p.366. The catechism is the first of two works that was prepared by a Fr Latuin Lévêque in 1880. Upon arriving in Kiribati it was sent by Frank Even (a European Catholic trader on Kiribati) to California for publication. The catechism was finally published by the Catholic mission in Honolulu. Even sold the catechism for a shilling.

²⁰Etchiera, ‘The New Religion’, pp.59-60. Baker, ‘The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands’, p.210. Waldersee and McMahon, ‘Neither Eagles Nor Saints’, p.324.

²¹Baker, ‘The Story of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands’, p.210. Etchiera, ‘The New Religion’ In this chapter the author states that both believed in this new God, became for them a strong conviction, and that the conversion was not about western ideals.

²²Waldersee and McMahon, ‘Neither Eagles Nor Saints’, p.324.

²³In June 1886 a letter from Betero and Tiroi (translated by Frank Even) was sent requesting priests to service the islands. This request ends up in

the hands of Fr Navarre msc, as Micronesia was entrusted by the Holy See to the MSC in 1881. He then writes to Fr Jules Chevalier, the founder of the MSC. 'Would you believe that in the Gilbert Islands there exist several Christian communities operating alone, without priests, with just the help of a few native catechists...' Ibid. Three MSCs were Fr Joseph Leray msc, Fr Edward Bontemps msc, and Br Conrad Weber msc. Fr Leray was later appointed Bishop of Kiribati.

²⁴Kevin Dobbyn. *Towards a more Catholic Spirituality in Kiribati. A contribution to the conversation about what it means to be Catholic today.* Unpublished, 1991, p.6.

²⁵MSCs, being French, would have difficulties in competing with a combination of two well outfitted anti-Papal Anglo-Saxon establishments as well as being foreigners in a British Protectorate.

²⁶Walderssee and McMahon, '*Neither Eagles Nor Saints*', p.331.

²⁷ibid.

²⁸ibid. p.341. If by 1900 the total conversions were 10,000 plus, then this figure really does represent a remarkable figure, as the total population of the Gilberts, Ellice and Ocean Islands was estimated at 50,000. * This estimate seems to have been an over-statement, for the first census that was taken in 1930 had the population of the Gilberts as being only 23,350. * 50,000 was estimated by W T Brigham in '*Index to Islands of Pacific*', published by Bishop Museum Press, 1900. For further information regarding population refer: R W Robson, '*Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony*'. *The Pacific Islands Year Book: 1939*, 3rd edition, p.159.

²⁹Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea*, p.266; *To Live Among the Stars*, p.154.

³⁰ibid.

³¹Kaure's supervisor was Alfred Walkup, a spirited red-head from San Francisco, a preacher and ex-prize fighter. Joined the mission in 1880 and lived much of the time on board a boat. He died from a boating accident in the Marshall Islands in 1990. Ibid., p.264.

³²Statement made by W E Goward — LMS missionary who established strict discipline over the Samoan pastors. Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific* p.107.

³³ibid.

³⁴ibid. p.27.

³⁵Walderssee and McMahon, '*Neither Eagles Nor Saints*', p.332

BOOK REVIEW

Waldерsee, James and McMahon msc, John F 1995, *Neither Eagles nor Saints: MSC Missions in Oceania 1881-1975*. Chevalier Press, 698 pp, \$27.95

Review by James J Littleton msc, Navarre House, Drummoyne, NSW.

In many ways this is a unique book. James Waldерsee, a senior lecturer in history at Sydney University, was commissioned by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart to write a history of the MSC missions in Oceania. He died suddenly after completing 16 chapters. The final three chapters were written by John F McMahon, an MSC historian, who himself died before the book was published. Another aspect of its uniqueness is that, unlike many other records of the ministry of a religious congregation, it is written in most part by an outsider, who brings objectivity and sound historical skills to the research.

The first five chapters tell of how the MSCs came to be entrusted by the Holy See in 1881 with responsibility for the vast mission area of Melanesia and Micronesia. It was a time when the MSCs had fewer than 40 members; to accept such a responsibility must have seemed foolhardy.

Waldерsee's next eight chapters focus on the development of the MSC mission in Papua, after an initial settlement at Yule Island. His final chapter commenced the story of the New Britain mission after two chapters on the MSC foundation in the Gilbert Islands, now known as Kiribati. McMahon's three chapters continue the story of the New Britain mission up to 1975.

Throughout the whole book extensive use is made of correspondence between the missionaries and their colleagues and authorities elsewhere. One soon realises that 'neither eagles nor saints' was quite an accurate description of these early missionaries: they faced extreme hardships, they were not always tolerant of one another's deficiencies, and yet they at length succeeded in establishing a local church.

The history is interestingly written, though it would be easier to read if the paragraphs were shorter. There are good photographs

of the principal personalities and John McMahon deserves credit for maintaining in the final chapters the same style and approach as that adopted by James Waldersee.

The book will be of considerable interest to anyone concerned with the growth of the Catholic Church in Oceania. Since it can be expected that many readers will be Australian, it is somewhat disappointing that the work of the Australian MSCs in Milne Bay Province received little attention. Maybe the growth of the church in West New Britain could also have been recorded in greater detail.

Nevertheless the book can be recommended with enthusiasm, and for its size the price is very reasonable. □

CUMULATIVE INDEX

With this No.61 we include:

1) A cumulative index of all issues of *Nelen Yubu* from the Pilot back in 1978 to No.61. Our policy is to update the cumulative index every ten or so issues, in conjunction with the last number in a year. (Postal charges are a determining factor: once a postal unit passes 50g into the second cost category, one can add another 75g before the next rise in postal cost.)

2) The invoice/statement for subscription renewal for 1996. We have not changed the unit price of \$5 per issue, i.e. \$15 for an annual subscription. This includes postage within Australia.

We do charge postage for overseas subscriptions. Surface postage is used unless the subscriber asks for air mail or economy air.

Normally we presume that subscribers wish to continue on into the next year. If accounts get into arrears by more than 2 years we generally ask the subscriber to settle the account. □

FROM THE SECRETARY'S DESK . . .

Br Cletus Read fms died at Santa Teresa as we went to press with *Nelen Yubu* no. 60. I was one of the huge mob who'd lost a dear friend. I spent two years at Santa Teresa in the 80s, and many a chortle Br Clete and I had on the quiet. Later, when he was writing for us, he used to send me cheeky messages about his contributions, though he got as good as he gave. RIP.

Fr Martin Wilson is now back on deck much to his relief. He was a very forbearing patient, and he wasn't the only one to breathe a sigh of relief and gratitude for his recovery [eye infection].

I have just returned from three weeks in Melbourne with my family. We spent a few days down at Waratah Bay in a lovely cottage right at the water's edge. Daughter Judy took my grandchildren and me to this wild and lovely spot where the Bay is so vast one can hardly see the horizon. It was overcast at first and I just saw distant clouds across the sea, but on the last evening I was staggered to look out from the beach to see a range of high mountains rising out of the sea! Incredible. It was the 'Prom' which had earlier been lost in cloud. It was quite eerie to see them there as if they'd

suddenly risen up from the ocean. Next day I took the children, aged 5 and 9, for a walk along the lonely beach, near the end of which I spotted a midden. This meant more excitement for me.

We three sat down on the grassy bank and I explained the history of our find: why the old old shells were still studded in the bank and who had put them there. Rob felt he knew quite a lot about Aboriginals because of unending stories of my experiences in the NT and WA. But this was a newey. Why did they put the shells in so deeply? Why didn't they crush them to mix up with yellow ochre to paint themselves? (He expects to be an anthropologist.) How long ago were the Aboriginals here — a million years, or what? And little Anna was most intrigued. 'If I'd been here, Nan, would dey make me eat dose hard shells too? Dey'd have to wash dem first!' Nevertheless, they made a very interested audience while I told them about the midden, and how lucky we were to have found it. I mused about those ancient fishermen too, who had sat just where we were sitting, gazing out across the rollers to the Prom. Or was it even there then?

Secretary Keren

We were in the middle of nowhere driving along the old telephone line that linked Marble Bay with Broome. Once we came to a dry river bed. There were two strips of concrete on the bed of the river, linking one side with the other. Roger Henry, the driver, was a very good driver, but the truck had a very heavy load on it. At one stage it gently slipped off the rim on one side into the sand. The truck stopped. All except the mothers-in-laws were off the truck in a moment and then pushed the truck sideways back on to the track. Suffice to say we went by the main road on our return. But it was something to remember.

As the truck came nearer to our destination, smoke signals would be sent up to announce the fact. On arrival after being ritually greeted, grievances discussed, boomerangs thrown to clear the air, ceremonial introductions were made by means of which the hosts and visitors would be introduced to one another according to their 'skins' and particular kin relationships. Then sooner rather than later it was off to the business of the day or rather the night and eventually we would return home laden with presents, usually with bags of flour and sugar, all having had a wonderful time.

These man-making ceremonies were central to the Law, as it was practised at La Grange and by communities of the Great Sandy Desert and beyond. It was through these meetings the young men would begin their schooling in the Law. This period of instruction would be punctuated by parties during which special damper would be cooked and game caught and roasted for the participants to enjoy on the occasion.

When the young men had completed the course they were 'through the Law' and technically could get married. This initiation process had its practical side also. Young men could not get married before they knew where all the water holes were. Water meant life for the people. For the people there are really only two kinds of individuals, namely those who know the Law and those who do not. You were *miranu* if you knew the Law or *ngurra* if you did not.

Without venturing at this time a reflection on the nature of the Law, I could safely describe it as a Tradition, a body of knowledge