

A CONFLICT OF FAITHS: ABORIGINAL REACTION
TO THE FIRST MISSIONARIES IN NORTH QUEENSLAND*

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This paper is concerned with the following missions from their foundation, indicated below, to 1897:

Mari Yamba	1886	- on the Proserpine River	- Lutheran
Hope Valley	1886	- at Cape Bedford	- Lutheran
Bloomfield	1887	- South of Cooktown	- Lutheran
Mapoon	1891	- on the Batavia River	- Presbyterian
Yarrabah	1891	- near Cairns	- Church of England

It should first be noted that missions to the Aborigines were seen in terms of a charity rather than as an inescapable Christian responsibility demanding an unavoidable call on the individual's or the church's resources. Very few Christians indeed would have considered their Christianity tested or salvation threatened by their response to the material or spiritual needs of the Aborigines. They were an optional extra.

It was the aim of all invading Europeans to control the Aborigines they came into contact with. The missions aimed at probably the most total control for the belief that Christianity was the only true faith produced the imperative to convert; that is, to change how Aborigines thought, felt and acted. By 1885, the necessity of establishing a village composed of missionaries and those who could be induced to abandon their nomadic life was accepted by all churches interested in converting the Aborigines. There was thus the need to develop an economic base to make the village self supporting, or partly so, to ease the financial drain on the associated missionary organization, for the missions were always starved for funds. The attempt to create a Christian village resulted in a conflict of values with the traditions, life patterns, and values of Aboriginal society. E.R. Gribble of Yarrabah noted: "To instil the idea of a fixed home is the first task of the missionary". This produced a channelling of energies and resources away from purely

* This subject is dealt with in more detail in the writer's doctoral thesis, Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1861-1897.

religious teaching. Indeed, the Aborigines had the reputation of being the most difficult people to convert to Christianity. Missionary John Flierl, the founder of Hope Valley and later the Lutheran mission to New Guinea, claimed his church could support two missions in New Guinea for the cost of Hope Valley.

¶ The economy and work patterns of Europe were deeply ingrained in the missionaries' concept of civilization and Christianity. The need to induce Aborigines to accept regular, agricultural employment was seen as essential to conversion. Missionary Poland of Hope Valley described the Aborigines as "Wild and vulgar; very workshy and used to absolute, unrestricted freedom. The men have neither strength nor energy. They loaf all day long. Their two or three wives have to feed them". A Moravian missionary at Mapoon, probably Mrs. Hey, wrote: "Thanks to the missionaries they have learned to use such instruments as hoes and are beginning to have some idea of earning their own livelihood. The small mission farm is a valuable teacher of thrift, diligence, kindness and many matters belonging to the settled life. It has daily lessons for a people who never used to do any work". And E.R. Gribble enunciated the aims of Yarrabah as: "The elevation and the evangelization of the Aborigines by preaching the Gospel, and by teaching them habits of industry".

These and other attitudes of missionaries, indicate both concern and contempt for the Aborigines. The missionaries also believed that Aboriginal life was suffused with satanism. They believed literally that they were confronted by the devil. Nicholas Hey of Mapoon wrote: "We started work with very poor material ... There was the stifling heathen atmosphere pressing heavily upon us. Besides we could not help feeling the Satanic power arrayed against us, and we realized as never before how completely he was holding sway in the heathen world". Such a view was echoed again and again on all missions: "Mission work is a battle against the realms of darkness; that is our experience here". Countless manifestations of Satan were seen in the behaviour of the Aborigines, especially in Aboriginal polygamy and the role of women in Aboriginal society, but also in Aboriginal child rearing practices, women fighting, nakedness, Aboriginal standards of cleanliness, and most particularly in

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Aboriginal mortuary practices. Moreover, the missionaries saw unreclaimed Aborigines as animals, or nearly so. A photograph, in a missionary journal, of Nicholas Hey and four Aborigines was referred to as: "A lion-tamer amid four of his half-tamed young lions", "An animal expression", and "Bloodthirsty, treacherous lions". Gribble wrote of the Yarrabah Aborigines affectionately as "Children of Nature", implying they were not fully human.

All missionaries believed civilization was only possible through Christianity. They wanted Aboriginal conformity with European expectations. Yet they had limited expectations of the degree of civilization Aborigines could achieve. Thus Gribble praised an Aboriginal convert for seeking spiritual strength to overcome his quick and violent temper and mused with wonder at the power of God to effect such a change as they were "only Australian Aborigines". Yet the missionaries did develop surprising degrees of tolerance which often grew with the passing of time. Thus Nicholas Hey was horrified by the first corroboree he witnessed at Mapoon, but derived satisfaction from the corroboree of welcome he received at Aurukun some years later. At Yarrabah, a church service was often followed by a corroboree. All missionaries accepted the doomed race theory. Thus Poland of Hope Valley noted: "All the mission can really achieve for them is a kind of Christian burial service, a kind of promising sunset glow, which cannot be followed by any bright dawn in this life here on earth". This accounts to some extent for the early limited ambitions.

The "dying race" was only too happy to have its pillow soothed but often found the moral and spiritual medicine objectionable. This conflict was crystallized in the concept of sin. Nicholas Hey believed that the Aborigines' absence of a sense of sin was one of his greatest problems and observed, with some degree of exasperation, they "Could not see there was any wrong in themselves". Indeed, the Aboriginal converts often kept on "sinning" in Christian eyes. They often participated in mortuary ceremonies, initiation ceremonies and retained or reverted to their own code of sexual morals.

The missionaries adopted a variety of strategies in their attempts to establish a Christian village. They tried to make the Aborigines dependent on the mission by food and tobacco hand-outs for a few hours work.

Thus Missionary Pfalzer of Hope Valley recorded: "The simplest way to reduce them to compliance is not to give out food for a day. In no time at all they are willing to co-operate again". This was only a negative control on Aboriginal adults who consequently exploited missionaries intelligently as an additional source of food. Aborigines flocked to Hope Valley when there was no work to be done but avoided it when there was. In difficult times they brought the old, the sick, or the very young to the mission. The missionaries tended the sick with great dedication and enough success for some Aborigines to seek their aid. All tried to convert the adults but soon diverted most effort to the young. Missionary Hoerlein of Bloomfield had devoted a good deal of his efforts to the adults when he first arrived but some years later wrote: "Our hope is centred on the young people. The older people are too set in their nomadic ways". Thus the chief aim of all the missions was to induce Aborigines to leave their children or orphans at the mission. The children were then housed in separate dormitories, and had highly organized or supervised daily programmes. The adult Aborigines left their children at the missions for a variety of reasons: convenience; an initial lack of understanding of Christian indoctrination and its effects; and the difficult conditions in the bush because of their disturbed environment. The children were kept in dormitories to remove them from traditional influences. They were intended to grow up and marry and never to leave the mission. The aim was thus to produce not only a Christian village but a closed one.

In a surprisingly short time, Aboriginal leaders emerged to assist the missionaries. With few exceptions they were young Aborigines with little or no experience of traditional Aboriginal values and religion. The young Aborigines soon lost the ability or desire to fend for themselves in the bush as their eating habits changed. It should be noted that, before 1897, adults could not be compelled to stay on a mission. Yet many did.

The reaction of the first generation of adult Aborigines to have contact with the Missions is interesting. Initially there was a rejection of Christian ideology and morality. It was thought to be irrelevant to Aborigines. Indeed, the white man's religion often produced scorn and

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hostility. Thus, at Bloomfield, the Aborigines were astonished that the Ten Commandments were meant for all human beings. However, access to the missionaries' material wealth necessitated a good deal of conformity with their expectations. This resulted in two patterns of behaviour: one for the mission and another for real life.

There was also a conflict of religious concepts or the illustration of common concepts. Thus, Pingilina, the Eieri evangelist who was associated with Hope Valley and Bloomfield, tried to instruct a group of Aborigines on the Biblical account of the creation. He reported:

"I was telling the blacks about creation: how everything was made and by whom".

But they said:

"Nonsense, the old men [their totemic ancestors] made everything".

But I replied:

"You are ignorant. There is one up there in Heaven, who is the Father of all, and He has created us and later on He saved us through His own Son, Jesus. In Heaven His children dwell forever and will be blessed".

But they only laughed and asked:

"However would people get up there? It's so high".

To a fundamentalist explanation of "Heaven" and "Hell", the Aborigines laughed that "It was not like that at all". Indeed Heaven was sometimes associated with the missionaries as a place where dull menial work was paid for with inadequate hand-outs of food or tobacco. The missionaries often knowingly or unknowingly attacked Aboriginal beliefs. Thus Schwarz of Hope Valley deliberately cooked a meal at a sacred fire and incensed the Aborigines. On another occasion, Poland had lectured Aborigines on God, the Creation, Adam and Jesus. The Aborigines decided to teach him their understanding of the Divine. Poland responded by declaring such beliefs "Silly ideas some of them obscene". There was no appreciation of the common quest: to understand the nature and destiny of man.

Indeed, the Aborigines' tolerant scorn of the Christian religion was brought out in one of Poland's accounts. He had been preaching to the adults:

"What's the matter with old Barbi? Is he ... sick?"

"Not sick but very tired. We were out on the coral islands to catch the pigeons, and he had to tie up the wind to enable us to get back ... Even you must have noticed the wind is no longer blowing as hard as before."

"But Barbi is no more responsible for that than you or I."

"Isn't he? Then we should like to know who is!"

"... God did, of course; God, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, who created land and sea and man, who lets the sun and moon shine upon us, who ..."

"Ngamungakuburla can also bring the rain."

"Oh, don't talk rubbish. I am telling you the truth: only God can let the rain come."

"Of course he is right," says the rainmaker and looks mockingly at his friends.

"Be quiet and don't mock him!" says another a little anxiously.

"Don't get angry!" They try to keep the missionary calm.

"Don't make him angry," another one repeats. "He may not give us any tobacco otherwise."

"Now let him talk!" exclaims one man. "Haven't I been telling you all along? He talks well and we ought to stay with him."

The bored look on his face leaves [the missionary] in no doubt about his insincerity'.

Scorn and hostility was directed with much less restraint at Aboriginal converts. At Yarrabah there were even fights between the camp Aborigines and mission Aborigines; and girls who wouldn't rejoin the tribe were scorned. Indeed, the Aborigines soon came to understand the threat posed to their traditional life. Thus they shouted abuse at Poland and Schwarz on one of their visits to Cooktown. The adult men encouraged boys to become initiated and to leave the missions and repeatedly urged the mission girls to go to their promised husbands. In fact, this was probably the cause of the most intense opposition. The missionaries' opposition to polygamy was deeply resented and even the mothers told Poland there was no sense in the older girls being at the mission. Poland wrote: "The point is that these backward people cannot grasp the purpose of a school, especially for girls. They regard it as disgraceful to try to copy the white man". The young, especially the girls, used the missions to evade Aboriginal authority, especially marriage obligations. Hostility to the

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missionaries was encompassed in the general hostility of Aborigines to the white colonists. Indeed, the word for "white man" near Cooktown was Aboriginal for "evil spirits" which as the missionary noted was "not very flattering".

Action and reaction occurred in a very complex setting. All mission sites were subject to settler influence and interference. This was especially true of Mapoon which was popular with the pearl-shell and beche-de-mer fishermen for recruiting labour. The settlers thus offered an alternative means of subsistence to the missions and were often preferred by adult Aborigines, as indicated by the comment of one of the Bloomfield Aborigines: "Does the one in Heaven tell you to give us so little? And ... they start to sing the praises of the folk in Cooktown who are far more liberal than we are". As well, traditional Aboriginal life was continued in a modified form. Thus each mission became one of the resources of its region and its great virtue was surety. Missions attracted Aborigines from far afield, which sometimes produced conflict as occurred when the Weipa Aborigines visited Mapoon. However, they were used to look after the old, sick and the very young. Increasingly, as European settlement spread and the menial labour that Aborigines provided became less useful to the settlers and disease wreaked more havoc, the missions would become more important to the Aborigines. Finally, missions created their own communities. Mission Aborigines married mission Aborigines and produced mission children to grow up, work, live and die on the mission.

By 1903, the government's acceptance of the missions to control Aborigines was complete. Apart from the missionaries' caring for the sick, providing a sure source of sustenance for the healthy, protecting all their Aborigines as much as possible from opium and alcohol, and the women from prostitution, the representatives of government seemed most impressed by the way the missionaries were producing village communities moulded on European-Christian values. The first Northern Protector of Aborigines, W.E. Roth reported with enthusiasm on the Aborigines' carpentry, agricultural, basket-making, and home-craft skills. He praised the choir and the playing of the piccolo, cornets, accordion, and the

organ. He was impressed with the mothers' meetings, prayer meetings, confirmation classes, and the church service. He thought the "promotion" system by which girls and boys received in-service training in domestic service and farm work "excellent". He thoroughly approved of the way the missionary arranged the marriages so that a stable mission community could be set up. He noted the improved health of the mission communities and that at Yarrabah there had only been six deaths in six years and fewer at Hope Valley. Of Yarrabah, he concluded: "To attempt to describe the noble self-denying work of these missionaries in sufficiently eulogistic terms would be futile: the organisation, management and discipline leaves nothing to be desired: the aims and objects of the mission are practically Christian". And certainly no pun was intended.

Yet it seems that the factor that most impressed the authorities was expressed by the one word: control. Thus Roth reported that the Aborigines came and went as they pleased at Bloomfield: "... the mission people have no control over them, and herein lies the secret of what I would call their non-success". Ultimately, control involved stabilizing a mission population and moulding it until it was acceptable to the European mind. In fact Roth and the Home Secretary, Foxton, were convinced that in North Queensland the Aborigines could be raised to "a higher scale of social order" only "by the influence and precepts of the missionaries". By 1902, Foxton stated publicly that he intended to divide Cape York Peninsula into Aboriginal reserved apportioning the interested Presbyterian and Anglican denominations certain geographical spheres of influence, the area expanding as far "as the enthusiasm of the Church members would carry it". Foxton made it clear that any denomination could have an Aboriginal reserve. He believed (erroneously) that there were then 25,000 Aborigines in Cape York Peninsula and he was willing to deliver this number into the hands of the missionaries. As the new century opened, it seemed that a new age of a new faith was about to come to Aboriginal Queensland. After the early frustrating years, the efforts of such pioneers as Flierl, Schwarz, Hey, and Gribble showed promise of rewards that none could have imagined. Yet, the promise for the first generation of mission Aborigines was limited. They were being offered the religion of their white conquerors which few of the settlers

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they encountered paid more than lip service to. They were being offered an eighteenth century, paternalistic arcady in an industrial-scientific age. They were being admitted to one aspect of European intellectual life but their mission education denied them access to the intellectual, social, and scientific developments that placed European-Christianity in perspective. These were not valid considerations for the first wave of missionaries to come to North Queensland. They brought with their spiritual message the hope of physical survival in black enclaves protected from the diseases and some of the demoralization of culture clash. They were creating new, if institutionalized, societies for the future on land that could be claimed to be Aboriginal. They were providing future Aboriginal generations with the possibility of rejecting Christianity as the religion of the invaders. Some few might reassess its relevance to Aboriginal Australians.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

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In the preparation of this paper extensive use was made of the records of the Australian Board of Missions, the Presbyterian Board of Missions, and the Lutheran Church of Australia, together with records in the Queensland State Archives, and reports published in Queensland Votes and Proceedings after 1896.

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