

## Leaving Culture at the Door: Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice

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**Abstract:** Pat Dodson and Jacinta Elston offer perspectives on the relationship between the Christian church and Aboriginal culture with Brian McCoy. Both Pat and Jacinta grew up in very different regions, culturally, historically and geographically in north Australia. Their relationship to Aboriginal culture and Christian expression is compared and contrasted. Brian, work colleague and friend to Pat and Jacinta, continues to work with Aboriginal people around issues of health. Their contribution begins with Pat and Jacinta offering early memories of growing up within a church and its particular Christian and social context. It then moves to their reflections on current church practice, and how problematic the connection between Aboriginal culture and Christian practice can become. This leads to a focus on the conduct of funerals where culture and belief, Aboriginal and Christian, so often meet and sometimes collide. The article concludes with some challenges that face the Christian churches today.

THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS THE RELATIONSHIP between Christian belief and practice, and Aboriginal culture. It is based on interviews conducted by Brian McCoy with Pat Dodson and Jacinta Elston, who offer their perspectives on how a particular Christian church impacted on them as they grew up, and how they understand that influence today. Pat, a Yawuru man from Broome and of Aboriginal and Irish descent, was for some years a Catholic priest and member of the religious order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. He left the priesthood and has taken up several key positions since: Director of the Central Land Council, Commissioner for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Director of the Kimberley Land Council

and Chairperson of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. He is currently Chairperson of the Lingiari Foundation. Jacinta, who lives in Townsville, is of Kalkadoon and South Sea Islander descent. Her family's religious background is within the Assembly of God church. She is currently Assistant Dean Indigenous Health within the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences at James Cook University, Townsville. In this collaborative report the distinctive voices of Pat and Jacinta are heard; Brian provided the recording, editing and gathering of themes.

These reflections offer a critique that recognises the importance which many Aboriginal people place on their Christian faith. At the same time, it is an importance that can easily be assumed and taken for granted by Christian churches. Pressure can be applied for people to become assimilated into particular forms of faith expression. Important links with cultural beliefs and practice can be placed under tension as believers can experience church practices that separate them from key family, social and spiritual values. As Aboriginal people enter into the life of a Christian church community, they can find themselves compelled to leave their culture "at the door".

This contribution does not try to present a full or complete picture of the complex historical and continuing relationships that Aboriginal people have with a wide range of Christian churches and their different beliefs and practices. Nor is there an attempt made to unite or reconcile these two different voices. Rather, the article aims to present two very different perspectives on the relation between Aboriginal culture and Christian faith within Australia to be expressed and contrasted. Within this article the word "church" will, as much as possible, be linked with or will imply a particular denomination; at times there will be reference to "churches", indicating a more general understanding of the institutional Christian experience within Australia.

The article begins with memories of growing up within a church and its particular Christian and social context. It then moves to reflections on current church practice, and how problematic the connection between Aboriginal culture and Christian practice can become. This leads to a focus on the conduct of funerals where culture and belief, Aboriginal and Christian, so often meet and sometimes collide. The article finishes with some challenges that face the Christian churches today.

## 1. MEMORIES

While Pat grew up in Katherine, he was born in Broome. His family was strongly influenced by the Catholic church and the history and proximity of the Beagle Bay Mission that had been founded north of the

town in 1890. His grandfather, Paddy Djiagween, had been baptized a Catholic at the turn of the twentieth century and Pat's mother, as did many in Broome, grew up as part of that Catholic social and religious world.<sup>1</sup> Jacinta's family, particularly through her mother's family, was evangelized by the Pentecostal missionaries who worked with the South Sea Islander communities in North Queensland. These communities had arisen as a result of "blackbirding", where from the 1860s large numbers of people from the islands of the South Pacific were brought as "contract labour" to support the sugar plantations of North Queensland. Both Pat and Jacinta had grandparents who were removed from their families and traditional lands. Pat's grandmother was taken from Spring Creek Station and sent to Broome. Jacinta's grandfather was removed from western Queensland and taken to Palm Island.

*Jacinta: I suspect that the influences that are stronger in my life actually related to faith more than they do to culture. Because my Aboriginal grandfather was taken away from Kalkadoon country to Palm Island, and then not ever able to return to his land or his family, means that when I was growing up I didn't have a strong sense of what my Aboriginal culture was all about. I don't even recall when it was that I would have become conscious of being Aboriginal or being different or anything like that. I guess that is something that melded into our existence at one point or another. But from very early days I can remember faith interactions and experiences. I remember being at and around the Assembly of God church in the city of Townsville.*

What has been particularly relevant to the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in North Queensland, as distinct from the north of Western Australia, has been the variety and range of different Christian churches that have engaged them. While most people would follow and worship in the church they had first experienced in their home community or mission, this did not prevent them moving between churches or setting up "new" or "splinter" churches, especially in urban centres such as Townsville or Cairns. These family-centred churches allowed for greater flexibility of church structure and practice.

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1. Growing up in Broome and Beagle Bay, Aboriginal people experienced a perceived priority of the Roman Catholic Church over the Protestant churches. While there were other and larger Christian churches in Katherine, such as the Church of England, the Salvation Army and gradually the AIM (Aborigines Inland Mission), the experience of growing up in Broome affected those who moved elsewhere. Because these other churches were seen as Protestant, they were also perceived as being English and not Irish. Whatever their teaching of Christ and Scripture, they were not considered to be holding the "truth". Instead, they were churches that sought to justify their taking of the land and oppressing the Irish.

They were also able to draw on leadership and ministry from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women. Many of these splinter group communities arose out of the Assembly of God and Pentecostal churches, but also out of the Anglican Church that was strongly represented in the Torres Strait Islands.

The relatively small, "family" type of churches of North Queensland provided a source of constant social interaction and support amongst the members of their congregations, not unlike the urban Baptist churches that resourced and gathered neighbourhood communities of African American people in the United States over many decades.

*Jacinta: In those early days both Mum and Dad were both taking us to church and being part of that life. That was something we then just grew up with. It was almost as if there was no choice in that. I next remember small, splinter groups of churches, mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander churches that had splintered off from mainstream churches, mostly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministers. There were groups of families that came. It was an adult church but the kids were part of it. For example, you go to mainstream churches and you don't see kids having to set up chairs and help carry in the equipment for the band, and help set up the communion table, and all those sorts of things. You set up in the morning and then come back at night and set it all out and pack it all up after night service as well. It was that sort of level of involvement.*

The experience of these churches could be contrasted with the more institutional experience of Aboriginal people within the Catholic church, such as in Broome. In this case, as also the experience of early evangelisation in most Aboriginal and Catholic church communities in north Australia, the cultural and historical roots of the local churches largely came from different parts of Europe.

*Pat: The earliest period of life was where the church occupied a space that was different to the social space. It occupied some other spiritual space that didn't seem to be connected to the reality of life. In fact its life was a bit of a mystery. Not just a mystery in the sense of the sacramental side of the church, but somehow it was Rome, it was Italy, it was medieval, it was saints, and people that were nowhere within our sphere of experience or knowledge. It had no real dialogue or discussion about anything to do with the cultural life of Aboriginal people. It was very much about the moral behaviour of people and whether people were fulfilling the commandments, whether they were attending the Easter services, whether they were complying with church doctrine or teaching or practice or protocol, particularly the sexual relationships stuff. It was a God who seemed to*

*belong to social, ethical and moral teachings, at least what the white folks had.*

While the smaller family-focused churches of North Queensland were often financially poor, and relied heavily on the resources of a small group of people, they lacked the influence and stability of the larger, more institutional churches. And, while the former strongly endorsed their own particular forms of male ministry and leadership, they also encouraged the participation of women within the church. Some of these churches also ordained local women for ministry. There was less focus on a hierarchical, male leadership that came under the umbrella of a universal church as, for example, in the diocesan structures of the Catholic church.

## 2. REFLECTIONS

When Vatican II introduced many changes into Catholic church life in the late 1960s, these changes impacted on Aboriginal communities.

*Pat: The church has become more clerical, particularly since John XXIII. It seems to have drifted back to becoming more clerically dominated, rather than what the Vatican Council talked about as a "community of believers". There's no sense of the "community of believers" anymore. It's now the hierarchy as deliverers of the dictates for conformity and compliance and therefore for salvation. That seems to me a pretty fundamental shift from the 60s, 70s period to where we are now....*

*You start from a basis that the Holy Spirit does what it does anyway. It's not contained, it's not in a little box held in the Vatican. It works where it works. But the church has been, certainly in recent years, fearful of modification, adaptation and variation. Clerical domination is being placed at threat. And it's reasserted itself. The reforms that took place in Vatican II were about letting in a new breeze into the church. Since then they have rapidly closed the windows, because the clerics perceive they've lost control. Their unique special role was regularised within the community. Now they want to restate that clerical role and set it apart from the community of believers. That's a totally contrary model to an Indigenous model where your ceremonial people are absolutely essential to your normal everyday life. They're part of that ordinary everyday life.*

Aboriginal people's experience of male leadership within the churches could be contrasted with their own cultural experience where male authority was more clearly identified with the rightful performance of ancient ceremonies.

One of the changes that was introduced within the Catholic church, and which had the potential to resonate with Aboriginal communities, was a renewed emphasis on the local church being a “community of believers”. Arising from the Second Vatican Council, Catholic church communities were encouraged to understand the presence of divine grace within their communal history and experience. This offered local church communities the possibility, but also the challenge, to be more sensitive to Christian communities arising from within other cultures. At the same time, emphasis on the Eucharistic meal offered Aboriginal people the opportunity to share a “meal” with those whom they could rarely share “communion” with outside the church, such as the local policeman, magistrate, teacher or shopkeeper. However, once the church eucharist concluded, non-Aboriginal people reverted to the social order of separation between themselves and Aboriginal people.<sup>2</sup>

*Pat: The churches should have an insight into the absolute significance of a community of believers. The communal aspect that underpins Aboriginal society should be something that resonates quite readily with them. Most of the talk in the church is about community, creating community, being in community, a community of faith, whatever. However, the churches just don't use their data-base, their learning, their information base, to help them understand another culture. They forget that what is essential to community is action, not just intellectual assent to faith.*

*So when it comes to this notion that evolves or comes out of native title, which is called a community of native title holders, that's not understood. Whereas, you've got the community of believers, which people supposedly believe, but having a community of native title holders, having a Crown holding land on behalf of the people, there seems to be no variance between those three kinds of concepts. But because it is native title it is seen as something separate, better and different to the max. And the church doesn't enter into that field. The church could help the nation understand the centrality of community to Aboriginal culture.*

While ministers, priests and members of religious orders were largely respected for their role within the realm and context of the sacred, they were not necessarily considered to have authority beyond those moments of ritual. However, whatever the form and faith expression of a particular church, the churches provided ministers who, for the large

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2. The sharing of meals between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people largely did not occur. Prior to the Federal Referendum of 1967, and in the time of Pat's early life, Aboriginal people were not legally recognised as citizens. State and territory jurisdictions enacted discriminatory laws affecting Aboriginal behaviour and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

part, were seen to be good, trustworthy and generous. They could be found to support those who felt weak, alone and vulnerable in a dominant, often hostile and alien, non-Aboriginal world.

*Jacinta: The church provided a safe place for individuals who had lots of hurt in their lives. It provided a set of fellowship with individuals. It was almost about forgetting. Everybody comes to the door with some baggage and, regardless of what baggage you have in your life, you're here fellow-worshipping with us and you're our brother and our sister and we can accept you at that level.*

Hence, some churches were particularly welcoming and supportive of those people who carried a history of hurt, anger and marginalisation in terms of non-Aboriginal society.

*Pat: There are many, many good individuals in the church, many good lay people who are concerned about justice and the human rights of people and the position of the church itself, vis-à-vis its relationship to the believers. There was a lot of emphasis on kindness and forgiveness, but not on challenging the cause of the injustice in terms of land rights and access to the nation's resources.*

At the same time, both North Queensland and the Kimberley have a long contact and oral history of massacres, of painful experiences of racial discrimination, imprisonment and dispossession. Aboriginal people continue to carry memories and deeply emotional wounds of many forms of separation: children separated from parents, families separated from other family members, and large groups of families separated from their traditional lands. At the same time, they also carry the memory that many non-Aboriginal people, over several decades, considered their Aboriginal culture to be inferior and that it would inevitably die out.

*Pat: You had a policy in society that was talking about the passing away, the loss, the inferiority and the weakness inherent in the culture. It had inevitably to crumble under far superior westernised cultural forms. This is when belief or faith in politics either accepts the status quo, gets confused or helps towards justice.*

This pressure to assimilate from the churches has rarely been acknowledged, nor have the churches' own particular and historical forms of prejudice about Aboriginal culture and traditional beliefs been much explored. Not only did most missionaries work closely with the Government and accept its policies, but they accepted their own

assumptions that Christian faith was superior to Aboriginal belief. Aboriginal culture, as also its belief about the sacred and spiritual, was considered to be lacking and deficient. In popular and scientific belief, Aboriginal culture was considered to be in a process of dying out; the best Christians could do was to “smooth the dying pillow”.<sup>3</sup> Christianity not only promised a home beyond this earthly life, but it also offered, in this life, the fruits and benefits of belonging to a church that was strongly aligned with a western culture and its understandings about being “civilised”.

*Pat: It was a God who seemed to belong to the social and ethical and moral teachings that the white folks had. There was no dialogue, never any real consideration of Aboriginal people. It was as if we were deficient. There was a sense of deficiency, in whom we were as human beings and as if the concept of baptism wasn't sufficient to transform Aboriginal people. There was deemed to be some kind of flaw that hadn't been healed by any of the things that Christ's life has done. We really needed to be guided and corrected and shown at every point and every facet of our life how to go forward. There was no dialogue, never any real consideration of being Aboriginal people. There was a remaking and remoulding and a restructuring and a reorienting of our society without any negotiation with us. It was as if baptism and the sacramental life were not powerful in their own right to effect what they were meant to signify.*

A challenge, for both Christians and Aboriginal people, has emerged: can an Aboriginal person who believes strongly in her culture be also a Christian believer? How might the churches engage with Aboriginal culture?

*Jacinta: How do you get past that superficial level of engagement with culture? How do you get past that, to be able to actually engage people? How do you accept people with their culture? So, if somebody is fellowshiping with you all the time and are part of your Church, but then come June every second year they go off to Laura dance festival.<sup>4</sup> And they're up there dancing and singing and doing “culture”. How does the church embrace that? I'm not sure many of the Pentecostal churches embrace that particularly well. I think some of the Aboriginal Pentecostal*

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3. The phrase “smooth the dying pillow” was attributed to Daisy Bates who first came to Australia from Ireland in 1880. Over several decades she spent time with Aboriginal people across different parts of Western Australia and South Australia coming to believe they were a dying race.

4. This Dance and Cultural Festival is held every two years at Laura, about 300 km north of Cairns, North Queensland.

*churches probably embrace it better than others, but I don't think mainstream Pentecostal churches have moved that far.*

*Pat: In the Catholic church there were some early discussions on missiology, some attempts at liturgy, in the Eucharistic Congress period of 1973, but that's all dropped away, basically. There's no further development of the theology of that encounter between the ritual form and the Roman rite. There is no desire to endorse and adopt ritual practice in Aboriginal culture as capable of the same salvific encounters as the performance of the sacramental rite in the Roman rite.*

*Jacinta: The primary concern of the church is the salvation of the flock, and it's about adding to the size of your flock or getting salvation for an individual. It's not necessarily about those social justice issues; it's not about putting the weight of the thousand people in your congregation behind a really important cause.*

### 3. FUNERALS

What many Aboriginal people have experienced, over the many decades of mission activity and Christian influence, is a strong pressure to be assimilated into very particular forms and cultural expressions of Christian faith. One of the more obvious and practical arenas where this occurs, and on a regular basis, is that of death and funeral practice. As Christian forms of funeral service have become normative for many Aboriginal communities, questions or issues about culturally appropriate forms of grieving and burying have often been ignored.<sup>5</sup>

*Jacinta: I think what is interesting for our mob is this loss of culture. It means that you lose the understanding of who has what rights in a time like death in a family. And so, in our family every time there's a death there's often conflict. And you hear the same in a lot of other families. When there's a death in a family there's often a lot of conflict. What creates that conflict is not necessarily understanding who has what roles and who it is important to include and exclude.*

Funerals assume an important part of Aboriginal life today. They provide a constant reminder of the reality of chronic disease, illness and premature death that Aboriginal families and communities regularly

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5. While funerals occupy a central focus for Aboriginal people in the contemporary world, there is a danger they can be seen to stress the death and demise of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal culture, while having its own and varied forms of rituals around death, also strongly continues to celebrate the living, and their relationships to the land and to other living creatures.

experience. At the same time, they express important cultural beliefs and practice around kinship, loss, grief and death. They continue to be rituals shaped by people's desire to perform them in appropriate ways, but also adjust to contemporary and changing social situations.

*Pat: In some churches people pontificate and proselytise to the nth degree about Christ and salvation that bears no relationship to anything they do outside that particular ritual occasion. And without any regard for people. Take five hours to do a funeral in the middle of the heat. They get up and rant and rave and carry on and no-one challenges them. And it's very little to do with the individual whom you're actually burying. It's more to do with the particular preacher's personality, and his particular cult, and his particular relationship to what he says is his relationship with God or how he assisted this individual in that relationship with God. And the relevance of the deceased is pretty well secondary to the occasion.*

What becomes critical and contested at the time of a death and funeral is more than simply what the church might do or what its preacher might say. What else is being contested is whether Aboriginal people are able to enter into the rituals around death and shape them according to their own way. This is not to suggest that all Aboriginal communities would like to perform their funerals in the same way, nor is it to argue that there needs to be one ritual established for all Aboriginal people. However, what is evident is that many of the important values that Aboriginal people express at the time of death can be subverted by church preaching and practice.

*Jacinta: What is difficult about going to church for a funeral is the damnation type of speech you get. This is personally confronting for most individuals who still come to church. This deceased person is the reason why we're here. Whether or not they were a Christian or not, or whether they were a part of God's saved flock or not, is always very interesting. For those who died and was in the church there's almost a celebration of the person. They're going to a better place and we will see them again. But what happens to those who are sitting in the church and who are not going to see them again, because they don't go to church? You get this double message of acceptance and not acceptance.*

How then might funerals be more attentive to Aboriginal values and beliefs?

*Pat: In the Aboriginal context, the deceased is the central person. The deceased is the central being that you are dealing with, and you've got to, not only celebrate that person's life and contribution, but acknowledge*

*them in a cultural way that enables the rest of the families, and those with wider kinship relationships, to engage. Not just by reciting prayers or saying the rosary or singing a few hymns but engage, physically. Not in some sterile process of viewing the coffin in the church, and then going back to your pew and waiting for the rest of the ritual to take place, but to actually engage and embrace the coffin, to cry and to do that in a orderly manner that acknowledges the various kinship relationships to the person whose died. It is to allow people to let their feelings be expressed and not have them pent up, not have them suppressed in ways that leads to all sorts of difficulties and problems, but to do that in a communal, recognised endorsed and supported manner. There's a particular way in which Aboriginal people do that, and different groups of people will do it differently. The churches have got to accept that's how people need to do things and modify or adapt the ritual practice to accommodate this.*

*What is important at a funeral is the ability to cry with other people, not just family but the extended family, and extended relationships, and the release of that kind of pressure and anxiety that people carry. That pressure and anxiety is released at the cemetery. It is buried in the hole at the same time. You know that person's body is there, but their spirit has already gone back to their country somewhere, or up into the sky in the part of the Milky Way. This brings closure to that relationship, that human being. And you know that the spirit that gave that person life can reappear in some other generation down the road. So there's a sense of not just a reincarnation aspect, but a sense of life which is bigger than we understand it to be. So why can't Catholics understand that life is part of death, as they say, "life is changed not taken away"? Really, it's as much about life as it is about death.*

#### 4. CHALLENGES

There continue to remain serious challenges for Christian churches. Not only have they participated in the historical separation of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and cultural heritage, but they can continue to affect and effect a range of other forms of separation. These separations serve to alienate people from one another, to divide communities and families. As men are often absent from church life, church practice can act to separate partners and some family members from others. This is particularly evident in those funeral services where there is a strong emphasis on the chosen, the faithful and

committed church members, apart from those who do not participate or attend church.<sup>6</sup>

*Jacinta: It is the same if you go to church for a funeral for a person who wasn't in the church, then there's this absence of acknowledgement of the fact. The person didn't go to church and therefore might not end up in that better place. The moment of farewell reinforces separation.*

One might consider the history of colonisation as a history of separation. As people were separated from traditional lands and as children were separated from families, so also church preaching and practice could serve to separate people within communities and families. In some cases, churches competed against other churches, creating more than one Christian church in a geographical and local community. Or, they actively worked to convert members of other churches. They also separated those who were believers from those who were not, even within families. The churches justified the separations they were effecting by believing their ways of acting lay beyond politics, and hence divorced from the social implications of whatever Government policy happened to be in force.

*Pat: The church often says it doesn't want to appear to be involved in politics. But the life of an Aboriginal person is tremendously caught up in politics, as of necessity, not as of choice. The unresolved interface relationship hasn't found a resolution in the politic of the nation. Reconciliation, treaties, constitutional change: fundamentally the recognition of the Indigenous people within the modern politic of Australia hasn't been resolved.*

*The interface with the governments and the churches has become far more regularised. There's no longer a contest in terms of the traditional contest you would have seen under Mannix.<sup>7</sup> The churches have adopted mediocre, middle class type positions in many, many ways and ostracised many of their people.*

*Aboriginal people are not seen as a unique group of people who require serious dialogue with, in order to explore belief and practice, celebration, community, all of those underpinning aspects of Aboriginal society and life: kinship, extended obligations, sense of identity and being. It's not seen as a useful or even a productive learning forum for the church. It shies away from that, particularly if it becomes sharp edged in politics. That is, if*

6. In relation to the separation of children from their families see: *Bringing Them Home, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

7. Daniel Mannix, born in Ireland in 1864, was Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne from 1917-1963. He campaigned strongly against conscription during World War I.

*the Government comes up with a policy, Aboriginal people take a different view and it becomes contentious. It's understandable, because it is hard to know where to step or stand or be supportive in some of these fields. And a good example of this is the Mabo native title stuff, where the people in the church saw it as important to save the nation from a racist type of election by supporting Senator Harradine and the Catholic lawyers that were advising him.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the rights of Indigenous people became expendable in a political context. Instead of allowing the full rights of native title to be supported, politicians voted to compromise the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The playing field is never even for Indigenous people and the churches tend to stick with the Crown or the State. And the government can be either Liberal or Labor.*

*The church sits with the Crown quite comfortably. Aboriginal people's rights and interests are seen to be non distinguishable from what the Crown seeks to do. And so the church becomes totally irrelevant to the day-to-day interface that Aboriginal people have with politics. However, if it doesn't become irrelevant, it becomes an ally to the opposition. It becomes allied with the opposition, rather than it taking a prophetic role and calling for justice or calling for fairness, or being prepared to make sacrifices internal to itself in order to demonstrate what its commitment is, because that is not where it sits. It's about retaining its comfort zone as well.*

There remains a serious challenge for the Christian churches today.

*Pat: The uniqueness of the Catholic church has got to be, not that you've got Black African bishops or cardinals, but that you've got a greater genius in what it is you've got to preach. And it doesn't matter who you are, what colour the skin, or what culture you've got, but what it is you've got to preach. It's the message. And it's the message that has to be presented and it has to be fearlessly presented, not with a view to converting people. And that's what is not happening.*

*The difficulty that the Christians have is that they've got this notion that you've got to park somewhere, be assessed by a set of people or some spirits or some type and then deemed to be worthy to enter into the gates, or to be sent in another direction. If you're saved, if Christ died and saved people, why is there a further test, if people have been saved and Christ "washed their sins away"? What does this mean? People have somehow corrupted what the good news was about. They've already been made worthy by*

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8. Eddie Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander from Murray Island who successfully brought a native title application to the High Court; Senator Brian Harradine, a Catholic, held the balance of power in the Senate when important legislation in relation to native title was being decided.

*virtue of what Christ has done. They have to be.... the reality of their life is what confronts them. God will judge that, but they're not lost. Purgatory and hell, since the incarnation of God in the form of Christ, is just a nonsense, that's a medieval construct it seems to me. The church has lost the real message.*

*The churches are often remembered for the various ways in which key individuals supported and stood in solidarity with Aboriginal people, sometimes over many years. However, many of the younger generation of Aboriginal people today, coming from families who were brought up in a particular Christian denomination, no longer attend church or worship on a regular basis. While many of them would respect, and perhaps even share, aspects of Christian belief, a number are finding it difficult to reconcile their own experience of being Aboriginal with Christian church belief, preaching and practice. At the same time, many of this new generation are seeking to re-claim and strengthen their own Aboriginal cultural and religious beliefs and values. In many ways, it is this generation that has brought back to the public arena of policy, programs and practice, the importance of recognising, respecting and expressing their people's spirituality. As they stress the importance of the spiritual as an essential ingredient for living healthy lives, so also they challenge the churches to express their faith in ways that are open and supportive of Aboriginal culture. In this way, the challenge that is posed to the churches is to recognise and oppose those many forms of separation that have served to divide, wound and alienate Aboriginal people over many decades.*

*Jacinta: The big challenge is for those who have been separated from a lot of the tangible bits of culture, no ceremony, no country. How do the churches support the spirituality of those individuals who have lost, or have had stolen from them, their confidence and capability to engage in a spiritual life? How do the churches support our mob to develop and retain their spiritual strengths? And, how do they do it in a way that doesn't mean that people feel they have to choose between being Aboriginal and being a Christian?*