

## After Sorry: Towards a New Covenant of Solidarity and Embrace<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** On 13 February 2008, the Australian Federal Parliament delivered an Apology to the Stolen Generations. This article contributes a theological understanding of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia in the context of this National Apology. To explore the theological ramifications of the Apology the article focuses on two key themes which are reflected in both Christian and Indigenous perspectives on the world: narrative and relationality. From these parallel perspectives the article explores what a new national covenant might mean – after “sorry”.

### SORRY IS THE FIRST STEP TO WHERE?

On 13 February 2008, the newly elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, supported by the Opposition, offered an Apology in the national Parliament to the Stolen Generations of Indigenous Australians.<sup>2</sup> This event, along with the first Traditional Owner “Welcome to Country” at the opening of a new parliamentary term the preceding day, represented seismic shifts in the body politic of the nation. Beyond academic attempts to respect Indigenous stories within the national imagination,<sup>3</sup> these recent events dramatically acknowledge the resilience, and even the resistance, of Australia’s First Peoples. More than a decade after the *Bringing Them Home Report* had

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1. The author would like to acknowledge the generous guidance and assistance of Mark Brett in the development of this article.

2. The established practice amongst Indigenous peoples is to refer to the “Stolen Generations” using capital letters as a mark of respect. The speech of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the very different speech of the then Leader of the Opposition Dr Brendan Nelson can be found in Hansard of 13 February 2008 at <http://www.aph.gov.au/Hansard/rep/dailys/dr130208.pdf>.

3. See the overview in Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005) 11-35.

raised the consciousness of Australians concerning the policies of Indigenous child removal,<sup>4</sup> and after ten annual “Sorry Days” to remind the public of the need to acknowledge the experience of the Stolen Generations within the nation’s story, the Federal parliament and the Prime Minister of Australia finally said “sorry”.

In response, Lorraine Peeters, a member of the Stolen Generations, presented Prime Minister Rudd with a glass coolamon.<sup>5</sup> Within it was a message that not only thanked the Prime Minister for saying sorry but established a vision for the future:

We have a new covenant between our peoples – that we will do all we can to make sure our children are carried forward, loved and nurtured and able to live a full life.

As Chairperson of the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Muriel Bamblett has pointed out,

The use of coolamon as the carrier of this message is significant as coolamons were often used to carry newborn children in Aboriginal communities. Now it is the carrier of the future for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children alike, in response to the Apology for the carrying away of Indigenous children from their families, communities and country.<sup>6</sup>

The declaration of a new covenant between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia not only evokes theological language but also provokes questions about the intersections between theology and politics, beginning perhaps with the relationship between “new” and “old” covenants.<sup>7</sup> In discussing the theological effects of the National Apology, this article will focus on two key themes reflected in both Christian and Indigenous perspectives on the world: narrative and relationality. It is argued that these parallel perspectives shed significant light on what a new covenant might mean – for the church and for the nation – after “sorry”.

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4. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Australia, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

5. The traditional coolamon is a shallow canoe-shaped utensil, carved out of wood, used by Indigenous women as a multi-purpose carrying vessel, as well as to cradle babies.

6. Muriel Bamblett, “Give us the Treaty our Nation’s Oldest Children Deserve”, *Age* (Melbourne) (2 September 2008) 11.

7. See, e.g., the Jewish reflections in Michael Fagenblat, “The Apology, the Secular and the Theological-Political”, *Dialogue* 27/2 (2008) 16-32.

NARRATIVE AND RELATIONALITY

Ceremony

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death.

You don't have anything  
if you don't have the stories

Their evil is mighty  
but it can't stand up to our stories.  
So they try to destroy the stories  
let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that  
They would all be happy  
Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.  
I keep them here  
[he said]  
Here, put your hand on it  
See, it is moving.  
There is life here  
for the people.

And in the belly of this story  
the rituals and the ceremony  
are still growing.

*What She Said:*

The only cure  
I know  
Is a good ceremony,  
That's what she said<sup>8</sup>

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8. "Ceremony", from CEREMONY by Leslie Marmon Silko, copyright © 1977 by Leslie Silko. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that “history” is best understood as a narrative form that draws links between events and seeks to explain them within the particular conceptual frameworks of communities and peoples.<sup>9</sup> The poem just cited from Native American poet Leslie Marmon Silko draws attention to the way in which a people’s narrative ethically evaluates situations and suggests future courses of action.<sup>10</sup> These narratives form matrices of beliefs and concepts that assist people in making sense of their world. Being able to speak of this meaning from a cultural perspective ensures that in the face of negative events a people can be resilient.

What Ricoeur attributes to history applies in some ways also to Australian Indigenous peoples’ Dreaming/Law, although Indigenous knowledges are more holistic. Creation stories not only communicate a sense of spirituality and identity; they also establish knowledge systems concerning economics, trade, land use, legal rights and responsibilities, political arrangements, education and family relationships.<sup>11</sup>

Indigenous peoples have, however, experienced the imposition of European history as a denial of their own cultures and narratives. As Tony Birch puts it,

The victors’ histories falsely parade as the history of Australia. These histories are those of absence: of *terra nullius*. In order to uphold the lie of an “empty land”, Europeans have either denied the Indigenous people’s presence, or have completely devalued our cultures. These hegemonic histories take possession of others’ histories and silence them, or manipulate and “deform” them.<sup>12</sup>

In these circumstances, Indigenous experience has been shaped by narratives of resistance that not only retain the elements of traditional culture but also maintain the ongoing relationships that constitute Aboriginal identities.

Australian Indigenous cultures view persons as living and being according to their relationships with the family, the community, the

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9. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, (3 vols; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1.148.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 115.

11. Richard Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die: Towards an understanding of why the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact* (Darwin: Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc., 2000) 12-14.

12. Tony Birch, “‘Nothing has Changed’: The Making and Unmaking of Koori Culture”, in Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003) 152.

clan, the tribe/Nation group, the land and the spiritual beings of the Law/Lore. In short, the world is *constituted by relationality*. Kinship systems set out how all members are related and indicate position or status within the clan group, and foundational to all is a relationship to “country”.<sup>13</sup>

The characteristic cultural differences between Indigenous and European Australians might be articulated in vocabulary borrowed from Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, where he describes the difference between a “porous” self in the enchanted worlds of antiquity and a “buffered” self in the disenchanting worlds of modern Western culture. A porous self is vulnerable to the spiritual world “as immediate reality, like stones, rivers and mountains”, whereas the modern self is buffered and more self-reflexive – empowered to see religious construals precisely as construals, as *options* that may be adopted or rejected by an authentic self without thereby falling into the hands of malevolent spiritual powers.<sup>14</sup>

In the development of Western tradition, it was particularly the Protestant and Enlightenment versions of individualism that gave birth to the political doctrine that societies like Australia could be ultimately constituted by the decisions of individuals, rather than deeply grounded in metaphysical reality. Taylor’s detailed history of ideas explains how the inability of earlier societies to imagine themselves outside of a particular embeddedness in clans, tribes and sacred structures was turned within a few modern centuries into a matter of choosing individual identities and constructing liberal societies. (And in the Australian context, it is above all the individualism of liberal politics that has made national apologies, and treaties with Indigenous people, so difficult to conceive.<sup>15</sup>) Taylor’s account of secularity can be read, from a political angle, as a story about the unintended consequences of Protestantism in the West, which undermined the fundamentally corporate relationality of “porous” selves.

The ongoing business of theology does not rest, however, on those unintended political consequences. Christian faith and discipleship has an inescapably corporate dimension that is ultimately constituted by biblical narrative and Trinitarian relationality. Christians are called

13. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Working with Aboriginal Children and Families* (Melbourne: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency [VACCA], 2006) 24-33.

14. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 12 and 3-39.

15. See, e.g., Danielle Celermajer, “The Apology in Australia: Re-covenanting the National Imaginary”, in Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (eds.), *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) 153-83; Judith Brett, “The Treaty Process and the limits of Australian Liberalism”, AIATSIS Seminar Series (4 June, 2001), at [www.aiatis.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/5446/Brett/pdf](http://www.aiatis.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/5446/Brett/pdf).

into the New Testament's ethical narrative of God's solidarity with a suffering humanity, exemplified in the incarnation and cross. The biblical narrative empowers us to interpret the world in line with Christ's call to participate in the Jubilee (Luke 4:18-21). In this way the themes of ethical narrative and relationality are mutually informing, shaping how believers are to follow Christ in their particular contexts – including practices of repentance where the church has failed to live up to its founding narratives.

The dynamics of relationality also have a cosmic dimension, beginning with God's act of creation where things are both separated and bound together. God creates relationships between all things, and all things have their identity not individually or independently, but in relation to each other and *inter-dependently*.<sup>16</sup> When this principle of relationality is applied to created beings and to the relationship between "self" and "other", we can see that from the perspective of the Creator "self" exists only in relationship. "The selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other."<sup>17</sup> This Christian perspective on the relational nature of the whole created order echoes the holistic perspective of Australia's First Peoples – especially when relationality is expounded within *contextual* Christian theology, a point that I will develop below.

In the Christian tradition, relationality is reflected in the very being of God who, as Trinity, is the creator (Father), impetus (Spirit) and fulfilment (Son) of relationality in creation<sup>18</sup>. For those who live according to the Christian narrative of existence, relationality not only means how the persons of the trinity relate to each other, or how the trinity relates to the world but also how the faithful community relates to context and text.

Encounter with Christ, life in the Spirit, journey to the Father: such, it seems to me, are the dimensions of every spiritual walking in the Spirit according to the Scriptures.<sup>19</sup>

God's triune encounter with humanity creates a relationship through which we are known by God and perceive God, as Paul suggests, "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12). Faith in this triune God enables

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16. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1996) 66.

17. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

18. Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 6.

19. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo* (Lima: CEP, 1971) 58, as cited in Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988) 52.

the Christian community to perceive the world from the perspective of God as Creator, crucified Son and Holy Spirit – discerning the presence of the triune God, and the tears of God, in our particular contexts.

In developing his conception of contextual theology, Stephen Bevans notes:

Contemporary understandings of God as Trinity speak of God as a dynamic, relational community of persons, whose very nature it is to be present and active in the world, calling it and persuading it towards the fullness of relationship that Christian tradition calls salvation. Through the presence of the Spirit and the concrete flesh and humanity of the *Logos*, God works for salvation in the midst of human context, its cultures, its events, its sufferings, its joys.

Consequently, “Christian theologians need to do theology contextually because God is present and acts contextually”.<sup>20</sup>

Contextual theology will necessarily have regard to the local testimony of the marginalised – that is, their history and life experiences – as almost another “old testament” comprised of narratives of oppression, struggle, moments of liberation and survival. The resonances of memory, resistance and survival between the narratives of the world’s poor and the narratives of the Bible can be seen as mutually interpreting. Native American theologian, Steve Charleston, suggests that there is an “old testament” for each of the Indigenous peoples, their own cultural tradition that needs to be placed alongside the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> Such an understanding is a healthy riposte to centuries of oppressive missionary practice that sought to replace Indigenous peoples’ culture with a supersessionism described by Australian Indigenous theologian Djinyini Gondarra as “spiritual genocide”.<sup>22</sup>

An authentic dialogue between Indigenous narratives and the narratives of the Bible needs to be respectful of both horizons of tradition. Where there has been a lack of such respect, we can expect to find statements like the following:

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20. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Rev. ed., Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002) 15.

21. Steve Charleston, “The Old Testament of Native America”, in S. B. Thistlethwaite and M. B. Engels (eds.), *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco CA: Harper Collins, 1990) 54. Mark Brett highlights the theological benefits of such an understanding in “*Canto ergo sum: Indigenous Peoples and Postcolonial Theology*”, *Pacifica* 16/ 3 (2003) 247-56.

22. Djinyini Gondarra, “Aboriginal Spirituality and the Gospel”, in Anne Pattel-Gray (ed.), *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future* (Blackburn Vic.: Harper Collins, 1996) 42.

John-Paul II, we, Andean and American Indians, have decided to take advantage of your visit to return to you your Bible, since in five centuries it has not given us love, peace or justice. Please, take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do.... The Bible came to us as part of the imposed colonial transformation. It was the ideological weapon of this colonialist assault. The Spanish sword which attacked and murdered the bodies of Indians by day at night became the cross which attacked the Indian soul.<sup>23</sup>

#### ECHOES OF EMPIRE

Since that fateful day in 1770 when Captain Cook claimed for the British Crown the land then known by Europeans as *Terra Australis*, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have been distorted by colonial and racist power. What was considered "the Law" for over 60,000 years was ignored and usurped by a process of colonisation which created conditions of oppression for approximately 400 Indigenous nations and peoples, with inevitable consequences for Aboriginal economies and health.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous theologian Anne Pattel-Gray has termed this process "The Great White Flood".<sup>25</sup> Sovereignty has never been ceded by the First Nations; unlike most jurisdictions of the common law, there is no treaty.

The colonial invasion of Australia can be understood theologically as an episode in the history of human desire for Empire.<sup>26</sup> The biblical

23. Open Letter to the Pope as cited by Pablo Richard, "1492: The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity", translated by F. McDonagh, *Concilium* 1990/6, 59-67, see p. 66.

24. David Horton (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Vol. 2 (Canberra: The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994) 1318. Indigenous peoples in Australia have higher incidences of diabetes, heart disease and infant mortality. The average age for mortality for Indigenous people is seventeen years below that of non-indigenous people. For these details and other statistics on the health and welfare of Indigenous peoples, see The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (Canberra: Government Printers, 2007).

25. The title of Pattel-Gray's book is derived from Indigenous poet Lyndel Robb (Kairi)'s poem of the same name, cited in Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia* (Atlanta GA: Scholars, 1998) xvi.

26. Throughout this article, I use the notion of "Empire" as a shorthand way of referring to systems of political domination. See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 6; Don Carrington, "Theologians Struggling to Cope at the End of an Era: Theological Educators Confronting a Multicultural World" in Jim Houston (ed.), *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1988) 12-14. Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther use this concept as the basis for their commentary on the Book of Revelation in *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1999) 236. Walter Wink uses the term "the domination system" to

narratives refer to the empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome as all deserving of divine judgment.<sup>27</sup> More importantly perhaps, according to the prophetic tradition in the Books of Amos and Jeremiah, Israel and Judah were driven into exile because their crimes of dominance over the marginalised were considered by God to be no less grave than the war crimes of the ancient empires. Similarly, in the Gospels, the system of domination in Jerusalem includes not just the agents of Rome but also the collaborating Judean authorities – that is, the elites amongst the colonised who followed the values of the coloniser.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, Jesus' mission to Israel is understood as a rejection of collusion with Empire and a re-affirmation of the prophetic critiques of oppression.

Australian history provides one chapter in the story of Empire's self-proclaimed right to rule over "uncivilised peoples".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the former Principal of the Indigenous theological college, Nungalinga, the late Don Carrington, named Empire as an epistemological problem for the church:

One of the characteristics of colonial empires is that all subjects and colonies are expected to exist with one epistemology which governs all things. The Empire becomes a way of life and its religion becomes the monolithic determination of successful thinking, indeed the only successful epistemology possible. Throughout history, empires have had a way of co-opting religions and Christianity itself has had a sad history where it has been so co-opted.<sup>30</sup>

Christendom, we may conclude, co-opted the faith of Jesus and the prophets within an ideological framework that generated colonial oppression. But the ideological linkages between Europeaness,

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describe this reality; see Walter Wink, *Engaging The Powers* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1992) 9. Walter Brueggemann refers to the "royal consciousness" throughout *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1978); he refers to "empire" in *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1999); *Texts that Linger, Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2000); and *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2000).

27. Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, xxiii; Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

28. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 40-42.

29. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 8-10. The labelling of Indigenous people as uncivilised, and without legal claims to sovereignty, shaped the national myth of Australia as "empty land" or *terra nullius*. In this context the debate over when the term *terra nullius* was first used, and its relationship to the earlier term *res nullius*, is of minor significance as it is clear that the attitude to the Indigenous relationship to land before the Mabo decision assumed that Indigenous peoples had no legally significant tenure.

30. Carrington, "Theologians Struggling to Cope", 12.

Christendom and colonialism are contingent historical products that have no lasting validity, a point that even the secular historian Robert Kenny has recently emphasised.<sup>31</sup>

Historically, the churches in Australia have played a role in both the process of colonisation and the unfinished process of reconciliation, supporting for example Indigenous leaders such as Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls in their historic campaigns.<sup>32</sup> The churches today seek, in the main, to repent of their role in the process of dispossession and cultural disconnection and, instead, to act in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. The challenge for the church in Australia is to go deeper now and to see how covenanting with Australia's First Peoples resonates with its covenant with God.

#### DECOLONISING THE CHURCH / EMBRACING THE OTHER

In his paper for the Eighth Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia, Djiniyini Gondarra closed with an appeal for unity, making a connection between the church's Trinitarian reading of the biblical narrative of liberation and a call to solidarity.<sup>33</sup> In similar vein, John W. De Gruchy made the following observation in the context of reconciliation between black and white South Africans:

Covenant is...theologically speaking the framework within which reconciliation is to be understood and within which it becomes a reality. It is God's gracious covenant with Abraham that sets in motion the "grand narrative" of redemption, and for Christians it is the new covenant in Christ that makes it possible for Gentiles to participate in God's saving purpose. In other words, God's reconciliation is contingent on the covenant. The covenant makes reconciliation possible; reconciliation makes the promise of the covenant a reality.<sup>34</sup>

This interpretation of the biblical narratives embodies the early Christian insight that a radical embrace of Gentiles could not include the imposition of Jewish law and culture, but rather implied the

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31. See, e.g., Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathaniel Pepper and the Ruptured World* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007) 231.

32. See, e.g., Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigine* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003); Dominic O'Sullivan, *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation: Catholicism and the Politics of Indigeneity* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005).

33. Djiniyini Gondarra, "Overcoming the Captivities of the Western Church Context" in Jim Houston (ed.), *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1988) 172-82, see p. 182.

34. John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2002) 187.

building of new covenant communities that embraced a multiplicity of laws and cultures.

There was, however, a dangerous irony in this early Christian insight to the extent that it generated an intolerance of “the old covenant” and actually failed to embody the vision of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. The historical examples of such intolerance are undeniable, but the New Testament does not in fact demand such anti-Jewish interpretations. As Charles Cosgrove has argued in relation to the Pauline letters, the universal embrace of the new covenant does not entail an “expropriation” of Israel’s identity, which belongs rightly to the Jewish people. Rather, in Paul’s understanding, Israel’s spiritual identity also belongs *metaphorically* to all peoples “cherished by God in their particularity and social concreteness and charged with a vocation of justice”.<sup>35</sup> On this reading of Paul, God’s love is accordingly made known both in the Mosaic Law and in the grace of Christ, and especially in the love *between* reconciled Jews and Gentiles.

Like Gustavo Gutiérrez before him,<sup>36</sup> Miroslav Volf suggests that love takes precedence over freedom in Christian understandings of liberation, and that liberation is best understood within a theology of embrace.<sup>37</sup> Reconciliation, guided by a theological understanding of covenant, is therefore a dynamic process of seeking embrace and an ongoing “struggle for a non-final reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone”.<sup>38</sup> In the context of ongoing inequalities and cultural differences, Volf rightly asserts that “reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other’s alterity”.<sup>39</sup>

For non-Indigenous Christians, this re-adjustment requires an embrace not only of the Indigenous other in solidarity but also a repentance that redefines non-Indigenous self-identity. The ability of the mainstream churches to apologise to the Stolen Generations soon after the publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* was a positive example of the church’s willingness to seek such an embrace. But in taking the next steps towards reconciliation, I would suggest that a postcolonial church will need to see itself not only as a mixed body of

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35. See Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 175; cf. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 82-86.

36. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1974) xxxviii.

37. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 105.

38. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110 (emphasis in original).

39. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.

“honorary Jews” (to borrow Krister Stendahl’s now famous phrase) but also as a mixed body of “honorary Australians”.

In many respects, the most appropriate reversal of the ideology of Empire would begin with a hermeneutic of exile.<sup>40</sup> Like the ancient Israelites who learned from the prophets that their rights in land were conditional upon social justice, the church in Australia needs to be re-constituted through solidarity with the marginalised. In this connection, Catholic theologian Terry Veling writes:

To speak of an exilic hermeneutic is to speak of the experience of finding ourselves “outside the book”. Exilic hermeneutics is profoundly and acutely aware of the stark contradictions that exist between the claims of the book of our belonging and the jarring, interruptive realities of our contemporary situation. These “interruptions” have taken the form of the radical questioning of Enlightenment modes of confident certitude; the recognition of the contextuality and multiple narratives of history; the feminist critique of a patriarchal, Eurocentric, colonial hegemony; the tormenting discontinuities of historical “progress” represented by the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the genocide of indigenous cultures; the “irruption of the poor”; the critique of scientific and technological rationality and its arrogant disregard for earth and ecology; the recognition that hidden within our claims to truth are also claims to power and domination.<sup>41</sup>

As the Western church learns new ways to “re-inhabit” the book of its faith, the Bible, it may well find itself dwelling outside the dominant Australian cultures. Taking its cues from the “ruptures” or “epiphanies” that Veling lists, the Church will be relinquishing its dependency on the comforts of Empire, and developing a hermeneutic of solidarity.<sup>42</sup>

Ched Myers provides another perspective on these issues in his stimulating work *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* Myers contends that discipleship today requires a renewed “literacy” (understanding the biblical text in the context of the world and its power structures),<sup>43</sup> “dis-illusionment” (rejecting the dominant myths of power which privilege and possess us),<sup>44</sup> revisioning, repentance and relocation.<sup>45</sup> In

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40. See, especially, Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2002) 189-203 (“Towards a Diasporic Christian Theology”).

41. Terry Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York NY: Crossword, 1996) 77.

42. Veling, *Living in the Margins*, 13-126.

43. Ched Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?: Discipleship Queries for First World Christians* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1994) 45-47.

44. Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?*, 76f.

essence, this kind of discipleship entails a non-violent resistance of Empire, and living a prayerfully engaged life in solidarity with the poor and crucified of the world.<sup>46</sup>

Australian scholar Mark Brett links exilic self-understanding to a *kenosis*, or “self-emptying”, that reverses colonial appropriation:

A postcolonial ecclesia will not draw a distinction between the spiritual and material implications of *kenosis*. If we are to move justly beyond the lies of *terra nullius*, Anglo-Australians need to appropriate a self-understanding as a diaspora group, grafted on to the spiritual inheritance of the land’s ancestors who interpreted each part of the “Book of Nature” in Australia by “song, dance and design”. If the dominant diaspora groups can learn to be respectful of Aboriginal needs, and to respond to their just claims, then we will be in a better position to receive their gifts. The self-limiting and space-making practices of “*kenotic*” listening may then be turned towards the stories of other diaspora groups, such as Asian Australians – not through a thin appeal to equal rights or through a civic rhetoric of multiculturalism, but by actually attending within the body of Christ to the particularity of all the songlines which have become, or may become, incorporated into our life together. This is not to suggest a self-negation on the part of any group, but rather, a receptive incorporation into the life of God.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, I contend that the church should develop an exilic hermeneutic through the disciplines of “relocation”: respecting the original Indigenous “songlines” of the lands and waters, overturning the lies of *terra nullius* and responding justly to Indigenous claims of custodianship and sovereignty. In an important sense, all non-Indigenous peoples remain dependant on a “welcome to country” from traditional owners, and claims to “freehold title” may be illusory from a theological perspective (cf. the Jubilee legislation in Lev 25:23).

The experience of the Stolen Generations points to another dimension of “relocation” that is also a painful process for many

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45. Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?*, 111f, 161f, 200f.

46. Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?*, 100-108. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959) 79, where Bonhoeffer writes of the need for disciples to break free of all earthy ties and bind themselves to Christ alone; Athol Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working for Justice* (Homebush West NSW: Lancer, 1990) 35-41, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle* (Scottsdale PN: Herald, 1992) 87-112.

47. Mark Brett, “*Canto ergo sum*”, 256; cf. William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 86: “However, this *kenosis* is not mere altruistic self-emptying but participation in the infinite fullness of the Trinitarian life”. See further, Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 182-85 (on “*kenotic* hospitality”).

Indigenous people who are re-discovering the traditional country from which they have been removed.<sup>48</sup> In this respect, relocation is a shared journey that cannot be undertaken without embracing the Indigenous narratives of pain. As Norman Habel has suggested,

For me to be Australian at this deeper level I need to embrace even the “death of the other” as points where I seek to identify – in some sacred way – with the indigenous oppressed rather than the non-indigenous oppressors. My goal is not a kind of cultural appropriation even of the dead, but a journey from shame to sorrow, from personal *Angst* to suffering with the sufferer. My hope is that I might know – vicariously in some small measure as a human being – the pathos of Aboriginal history so that I may not be alienated from my Australian soul forever.<sup>49</sup>

But it is important to bear in mind that “relocation” in its *kenotic* mode is a journey primarily for those who have power that may be relinquished. In his discussion of the Federal Parliament’s Apology to the Stolen Generations, Michael Fagenblat suggests that this secular act had an underlying Christian logic:

The point, however, is that the humbling of sovereignty defines Christianity from the very outset. Indeed what makes the Apology of a sovereign nation, whether in Australia or elsewhere, so strikingly new in political history and political theology is that here, finally, sovereignty has deployed its transcendence with respect to the law in order to practice humility rather than violence...

At once a secular and profoundly Christian act, the Apology attested to an abasement of the power of the sovereign to transcend the law by an extraordinary act of recognition of the violence of its own sovereignty.... The Apology was a sovereign assertion of power enacted in the mode of humility before Indigenous

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48. Traditional Aboriginal Australians consider themselves strangers outside their own specific country, and for this reason Bill Edwards questions the homogenising of “Australian Aboriginal spirituality” without reference to the logic of country. William H. Edwards, *Recovering Spirit: Exploring Aboriginal Spirituality* (Adelaide: Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 2002) 5 and 16; cf. Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

49. Norman Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia’s Soul* (Pymble NSW: Harper Collins, 1999) 157. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s suggestion that compassion should be seen as *kenotic*, in his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 217.

Australians. It thus revealed a kenotic overcoming of its own essential violence.<sup>50</sup>

The fact, however, that Christian theology “transcends the law” does not imply that the churches have no role in advocating for just laws; it is precisely the separation of church and state that enables the prophetic tradition of critique. In the 1990s, for example, many mainstream churches took a stand on the issue of recognising native title after the Mabo Decision (1992). Native title became even more controversial after the High Court’s Wik Decision (1996), which decided that pastoral leases did not necessarily extinguish native title rights. The churches rightly supported a public movement that sought the protection of native title rights against amendments to the *Native Title Act* that watered those rights down. A new advocacy body emerged called Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). With assistance from a range of non-indigenous NGOs and churches, ANTaR branches were established throughout Australia, with much of the locally based support coming from congregations and reconciliation study groups.

In 2001, the Executive of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) affirmed the *Bringing Them Home* report and its recommendations. It adopted the following statement after consultation with the National Sorry Day Committee.

Australian governments of the past adopted laws which gave warrant to practices resulting in many Indigenous children being inappropriately and forcibly removed from their families.

It was a complex tragedy. But the fundamental truth of the stories of the Stolen Generations, and their pain, cannot be denied. As representatives of the churches, we call on our people, and the nation at large, to acknowledge the validity of the *Bringing Them Home* report and its recommendations.

The harm experienced by Indigenous people, and the healing that has been too long delayed, cry out for attention by governments, by others involved, by all Australians. Christians must try to understand what happened from the perspective of the Christian faith....

In consultation with the Stolen Generations, we will

- help educate the churches on their involvement in the history of the Indigenous child removal,
- make church and agency records accessible,

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50. Fagenblat, “The Apology, the Secular and the Theological-Political”, 28.

- identify ways of supporting Indigenous groups working with removed people, and
- address instances of alleged abuses, particularly in church-related institutions.

Many churches have offered apologies and taken steps towards reconciliation. Reaffirming these initiatives, recognising the pain and trauma of the Stolen Generations, we advocate the establishment of a healing commission. The churches stand ready to participate in such a commission in whatever way may be appropriate.<sup>51</sup>

Yet in spite of such statements, Indigenous Christians within mainstream denominations still do not have autonomy or sufficient resources in their ministry to their people.<sup>52</sup> European-styled denominational structures still dominate the organisation and administration of faith communities, taking insufficient account of cross-cultural dynamics of power. Dialogue may have replaced misguided “protection” as the normative mode of mission but, apart from some level of acknowledgement and apology, the churches have a long way to go in their solidarity with Indigenous peoples. As Christopher Prowse suggests, “if the Church is to assume her role of encouraging a culture of solidarity to emerge from...reconciliation, she herself must be seen as just in the eyes of others”.<sup>53</sup>

#### THE NEW POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Rudd Government’s Indigenous policies are in many ways still emerging. The success of the *Close the Gap* campaign (which involved ANTaR, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Oxfam, the Fred Hollows Foundation, the National Council of Churches and other NGOs), has meant that the Rudd Government is committed to policies which seek to close the disadvantage gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, particularly in the area of longevity and health. The Rudd Government has also committed itself to endorsing the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) and to re-establishing some form of Indigenous national representation. Of remaining concern is whether the recommendations of the *Little Children Are Sacred Report* are to be

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51. Edited version of National Council of Churches in Australia, “Churches Support Stolen Generations”, Media Release, National Council of Churches in Australia, May 2001.

52. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 153-55.

53. Christopher Prowse, “Reconciliation with the Aboriginal Community: Some Theological Reflections”, *Pacifica* 7/1 (1994) 31-45, see p. 44.

fully implemented, and whether Indigenous leadership is sufficiently respected within the ongoing Intervention in the Northern Territory.<sup>54</sup>

National and international evidence demonstrates that effective Indigenous involvement in decision-making and governance provides the best processes for addressing Indigenous disadvantage. In Canada, New Zealand and the USA, where Indigenous communities have the leading roles in service delivery to their communities, outcomes in areas such as health and education have been more positive than in Australia.<sup>55</sup> Self-determination, exercised through culturally appropriate corporations and institutions, cannot continue to be displaced in favour of a “practical reconciliation” imposed by bureaucracies.

The “2020 Summit” held by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in March 2008 included an Indigenous working group that once again raised the issues of “treaty” and of constitutional change. An emerging perspective is that one national “framework agreement”, ultimately secured by the Australian Constitution, may facilitate a variety of treaties with local Indigenous nations as well as protection for the rights of Indigenous people in general.<sup>56</sup> The treaties would need to have cultural, economic and social dimensions – acknowledging the past and providing some form of restorative justice for the future. A critical issue will be that of encompassing the various expressions of Indigenous self-determination: firstly within communities of traditional owners and native title holders, and secondly, within mixed “diaspora” communities (including so-called “historical” Indigenous people who may not hold rights, under Aboriginal traditional law, in the particular country where they live).

Many Indigenous leaders suggest that a treaty would begin, rather than conclude, a process of true reconciliation.<sup>57</sup> Modern treaties usually establish appropriate protocols and relationships – both cultural and legal – through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures can engage fruitfully with each other. They provide some

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54. See the moving testimony in Galarrwuy Yunupingu, “Tradition, Truth and Tomorrow”, *The Monthly* (Dec 2008 – Jan 2009) 32-40.

55. See, e.g., William Jonas, *Social Justice Report 2003* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004) 201-7.

56. See, e.g., Graham Atkinson and Mark Brett, “The Making of Treaties”, *Arena Magazine* 98 (Dec 2008 – Jan 2009) 37-39.

57. Many such views are expressed in *Treaty: Let's Get it Right!* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), a collection of papers emerging from the ATSIC Treaty Think Tank and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study. See, for example, Mick Dodson, “Unfinished Business: A Shadow across our Relationships”, in *Treaty: Let's Get it Right!* 32-34; also Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 222-34, from a theological perspective, see especially, 232-34.

structure to the ongoing process of decolonisation. It is also worth remembering that the Hebrew word for treaty, *berit*, is often translated as “covenant”. Hence, as Muriel Bamblett writes:

A treaty is about making a commitment, not unlike the covenant of marriage. And if we take our vows seriously they are not only binding, they also have the potential to bind us together. To get the nation to the stage of binding our peoples together is what the journey of reconciliation is all about.<sup>58</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Prime Minister Rudd’s speech on 13 February 2008 was marked by great simplicity and sincerity. It reflected on the inhumanity of the policies that led to the trauma of the Stolen Generations, as well as on the humanity of the Stolen Generations themselves, their families and communities. It was arguably a moment of *kenosis* and compassion – indeed repentance – that brought tremendous relief to the national soul. The stories of the Stolen Generations has now entered the national narrative in a much stronger sense than it has in the past.

Yet we have heard soul-searching speeches before, most notably in December 1992 when Prime Minister Paul Keating’s Redfern address called for recognition of who did the dispossessing, who took the traditional land, and who broke the continuities of culture.<sup>59</sup> There was memorable directness and grace in Keating’s act of repentance as well. In the years that followed the Redfern speech, however, the hopes attached to native title and to treaty were frequently frustrated. The discourse of reconciliation will continue to ring hollow for many in the public arena if it does not lead to the making of just laws in line with the international benchmarks now established by the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* – which includes not just cultural recognition but appropriate reparations for dispossession from traditional lands and resources. Whether the story of the Rudd Government will include constitutional recognition for Indigenous rights remains to be seen.

While Christian love will always involve *more* than social justice, it should never amount to *less* than this.<sup>60</sup> For the church in Australia, it is to be hoped that a sense of covenanting will affirm not just the need for repentance, but also active participation alongside Indigenous com-

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58. Bamblett, “Give us the Treaty our Nation’s Oldest Children Deserve”.

59. For a transcript of the speech by Paul Keating, see <http://www.nswalp.com/redfern-speech>.

60. See Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

munities in the ongoing struggle for justice. In the new context of the National Apology, the church should look to the redemptive prescriptions of the Jubilee for a vision of restorative justice.

When Isaiah 61 took up the idea of redeeming families and land in the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25), the prophet linked liberation from debt and sin with social regeneration – a return from exile to a fertile Judah. It is this regeneration that Jesus identified as the kingdom of God.<sup>61</sup>

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release (*aphesis*) to the captives  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set at liberty (*aphesis*) those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

(Luke 4:18-19, citing from Isa 61:1-2).

There is no distinction here between economic and "spiritual" liberty.<sup>62</sup>

In the contemporary Australian context, a Jubilee vision would include the restoration of families; the reunion of the Stolen Generations with parents, with space for mourning and healing; the resourcing of communities so families once again have the capacity to look after their own. The native title system would be reformed in line with international best practice, and negotiated land settlements enriched with economic opportunities.<sup>63</sup>

For the postcolonial church, after "sorry", there would be a practical involvement in the struggles of Indigenous peoples in light of the resonances between Indigenous narratives and biblical narratives. The hope of decolonisation lies especially in the growing number of congregations, intentional communities and faith-based organisations that seek both prayerful and practical ways of entering into the narrative of Indigenous resistance to Empire – beginning with an exilic self-understanding. This is not about being politically correct, or founding a new asceticism: a postcolonial "*kenosis* is not mere altruistic self-emptying but participation in the infinite fullness of the Trinitarian life".<sup>64</sup>

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61. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 269-74.

62. William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 107-8.

63. Atkinson and Brett, "The Making of Treaties".

64. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 86.