

Aboriginal Disadvantage and Collective Moral Responsibility

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Abstract: Australia's relationship with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has changed in recent years. A most positive movement towards reconciliation is growing but not without being continually challenged by entrenched racist attitudes and sinful social structures within the community. This article attempts to offer some ethical-theological parameters around which this fragile desire for reconciliation might mature. It discusses the results of recent data in the light of the concept of collective responsibility with its corresponding ethical implications. An application of these concepts to the Australian Christian churches is initiated and an overall challenge to all Australians will be suggested.

IN RECENT YEARS AUSTRALIANS have been the recipients of an ever increasing stream of data regarding relationships with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Remarkably, the sombre conclusions from such data seem to be finding a more docile response from the Australian community in general. It is a most fragile docility, however, and the force of diverse economic-political perceptions in Australia could speedily quench such nascent sympathies. This essay aims to offer some broad ethical parameters around which this growing docility may be assisted in articulating a response to the arising moral question: What ought we do?

The approach will be four-fold. First, a brief overview will be offered of the conclusions drawn from the data. Secondly, ethical reflections on this data will be made by reference to the concepts of collective guilt, collective responsibility, culpability and liability. Thirdly, an application of these ethical parameters will be initiated by reference to Australian Christian churches. Fourthly, and finally, the overall ethical challenge to the Australian people in regard to our relationships with our indigenous people as we approach the new millennium will be suggested.

1. THE CHALLENGE OF THE ARISING DATA

One could be forgiven for being overwhelmed with the virtual avalanche of data in recent years regarding the poor historical

relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The situation presented highlights repeatedly the fact of entrenched Aboriginal disadvantage in almost every field of endeavour in Australian society. What follows are merely some brief examples which indicate such disadvantage.

First, in regard to data from the political-legal arena,¹ it is perhaps the highly influential *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991)² that best summarises the present situation. Acknowledged even by its critics as being a work of monumental importance that will guide government policies into the next generation,³ the RCADC, which included an unprecedented analysis of social attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians, reached a sombre conclusion indeed in regard to its data on the social indicators. Commissioner Elliott Johnston, for example, writes:

I wish to emphasise the fact that, on almost every statistical indicator of the status, or well being, of the Aboriginal population, we find its members to be in a highly disadvantaged position. This is the case in both absolute terms and in comparison with the position of the non-Aboriginal society. While the aggregate statistics conceal a wide variety of circumstances in which Aboriginal people live, ranging from comparative affluence in a few cases to poverty, the conclusion we must draw is that the level of Aboriginal disadvantage is very great, and that it underlies the phenomena of Aboriginal over-representation in custody and Aboriginal deaths in custody.⁴

The actual detailed analysis of these statistics need not concern us here, nor the particular and continuing worrisome matter of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Of greater interest for our purposes is the foundational reason offered by the RCADC for the fact of such persistent disadvantage. Here again the conclusion is stark: Aboriginal disadvantage continues today due to historically entrenched racist attitudes. Reflecting on the operation of past political policies, the RCADC comments: "What Aboriginal people have largely experienced is policies nakedly racially-based and in their everyday lives the constant

1. Three good examples of such material include: Commonwealth of Australia, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 11 vols. (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991); The High Court of Australia, "Eddie Mabo v. The State of Queensland" (3 June 1992), *Australian Law Journal Reports* 66 (1992) 408-499; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Racist violence* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991).

2. Henceforth denoted as RCADC.

3. See, for example, R. Brunton, *Black suffering, white guilt? Aboriginal disadvantage and the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody*, Current Issues (Melbourne: Institute of Public Affairs, 1993) 4.

4. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.2, 11.3.25, p. 62.

irritation of racist attitudes.”⁵ The major effect of such policies “is the deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Aboriginal people starting with dispossession from their land and proceeding to almost every aspect of their life”.⁶

The continuing effects of racist attitudes today are also considered. The RCADC rebukes the mistaken concept that racist attitudes are simply a sad fact of Australia’s past history. While it is true that many of the past discriminatory governmental policies have ceased, “the effects of this history continue to the present day, and impact on all aspects of Aboriginal life”.⁷ Past government policy “both reflected and reinforced perceptions of Aboriginal people in the wider community”.⁸ Such perceptions or “attitudes cannot be erased simply by changing the policy”.⁹

The cause and continued existence of racist attitudes in Australia is self-interest, according to the Royal Commission.¹⁰ In different ways and in different historical times self-interest has been the driving force. In the frontier times, “it is plain that self-interest was the motive for original expansion of the settled areas and the dispossessions of the Aboriginal people”.¹¹ During the pastoral thrust it was also “self-interest which led farmers and graziers in particular to trade rations and living areas to Aboriginal people in return for labour”.¹² In present “modern times it may equally be self-interest that often makes it difficult for Aboriginal families to get a rental home on the private market”.¹³

Secondly, in regard to Australian Aborigines themselves articulating their grievances to the wider community, their on-going capacities here continue to be nothing short of outstanding. Although impossible to calibrate accurately, the gradual Australian awakening from some kind of communal inattentiveness in this area has been greatly assisted by Aboriginal literature, drama, poetry, art, song, and the Aborigines’ increasing capacity to articulate effectively in the political and legal arenas their unfair and disadvantaged position. During this time which celebrates the tenth anniversary of the momentous meeting of Aboriginal people with John Paul II in Alice Springs (29 November 1986), one could possibly not better the statement summarising

5. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, 28.1.3, p. 54.

6. RCADC, *National Report: Overview*, 1.4.6, p. 8.

7. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 1.

8. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 1.

9. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap.26, p. 1.

10. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, 28.1.3, p. 54.

11. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 54.

12. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 54.

13. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 54.

Aboriginal disadvantage contained in part of the welcoming speech by an Aboriginal representative to the Pope:

Our being is in the land. We belong to it as it always belonged to us, but the integrity of our culture, our economy, our relationship with the land has been denied since the invasion of 1788. Twenty years ago the Australian nation first recognised our existence as Australian citizens. Now we are counted in the Australian census. Statistics tell our story: the highest death rates, infant mortality and imprisonment rates in Australia, and the highest leprosy rates in the world. We are the dispossessed Australians, refugees in our own land – the only indigenous people of a former British Colony without proper justice and recognition. Australia must not be founded on a lie. Past violence and injustices must be reconciled.¹⁴

Summing up by drawing these brief but representative examples together, a conclusion of entrenched Aboriginal disadvantage in Australian society becomes undeniable. From this data it would appear that certain negative social mechanisms still exist in Australian society which almost automatically dismiss to the periphery the Aboriginal peoples. As a result, their chances of a fair sharing of the fruits of Australian society seem dramatically limited. Tragically, even their chances of survival seem scandalously reduced in comparison to the whole Australian society. All of this is still the case despite the fact that the past racist policies appear to have been replaced by more benign governmental policies that may even favour Aboriginal Australians. Clearly, more needs to be considered than simply making important political and legal modifications. The real challenge of the data points in the direction of needed scrutiny in both Australian attitudes that produce societal structures and, at the same time, societal structures that foster attitudes in non-Aboriginal Australians towards Aboriginal Australians.

2. ADVOCATING COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY: SOME GUIDING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The regrettable practical distinction in moral theology between personal morality and social morality may not ready the theological disciplines to offer an immediate response to the above alarming situation in Australia. The post-Tridentine moral theological tradition in the Catholic Church, for example, had unduly focused attention on a forensic assessment on the moral act. It would appear, amongst other matters, that the adjudication of the precise level of personal sin

14. See "A just and proper settlement" in M. Hogan (ed.), *Option for the poor – Annual social justice statements of the Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 1973-1987* (Sydney: Department of Government and Public Administration, 1992) 262.

attached to a wrong moral act was emphasised excessively to the neglect of a complementary ethical assessment of its insertion into a particular historical and social milieu. Indeed, the latter was largely excused from moral assessment. Persuaded largely by a particular understanding of the natural (moral) law, theology chose generally to consider the social situation of a certain time to be a "given" in life.¹⁵ It was something that was morally neutral and not to be questioned lest the fragile *status quo* in society was disturbed irresponsibly.

This overly sharp distinction in Christian anthropology between the personal and social dimensions of human existence is being redressed in more recent times in theology. One important expression of this theological development is the concept of "social sin" or "structures of sin". It is beyond the scope of this presentation to examine this recent concept in any depth.¹⁶ It does struggle, however, to balance the Christian theological tradition, which insists upon the exercise of human freedom and will when discussing sin, with a more evolutionary and sociological understanding.¹⁷ Nevertheless, and this is directly pertinent in regard to the conclusions of the data presented above, it does insist on the "osmosis" between attitudes and societal structures.

Applying this "osmosis" to the Australian situation, a self-perpetuating metaphor for racist "sin" may be offered.¹⁸ In other words, racist attitudes express themselves in various societal manifestations that marginalise and cause dependencies amongst Aboriginal Australians and, simultaneously, social structures that marginalise actually encourage and ferment the further development of these racist attitudes, albeit in more incipient and insidious forms. It is essential to appreciate here the moral dimensions of such "diseased" and negative social mechanisms that work against the common good in Australia. Namely, it is human persons who have produced these alienating social arrangements, it is human persons who perpetuate them and, conversely, it is human persons who ought strive to correct and reverse them. In short, such sinful social structures are not

15. See J. Fuchs, "Strukturen der Sünde", *Stimmen der Zeit* 206 (1988) 617. Fuchs demonstrates his arguments by reference to slavery and private property.

16. For more recent examples of presentations of "social sin" / "structures of sin": see G. Baum, "Structures of sin" in G. Baum and R. Ellsberg (eds.), *The logic of solidarity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989) 110-126; S. Bastianel, "Strutture di peccato. Riflessione teologico-morale", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3328/1 (1989) 325-6; M. Mynatty, "The Concept of Social Sin", *Louvain Studies* 16 (1991) 3-26.

17. For example, see J. L. Segundo, "Evolucion y culpa" in J. L. Segundo, *Teologia Abierta*, 2nd edn., 3 vols. (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1972, 1983) II: 347-482 and D. Tettamanzi, "Teologia morale e peccato: alcune discussioni attuali", *La Scuola Cattolica* 115 (1987) 610-57. For a helpful overall presentation on this matter, see M. Sievernich, "'Social Sin' and its Acknowledgment", *Concilium* 190 (1987) 52-63.

18. The evocative metaphor of the mystery of evil as a "spiral" is developed creatively in P. McCormick, *Sin as addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 100-122.

independent of human intervention. Consequently, because the complexities of entrenched Aboriginal disadvantage have the capacity to diminish in some way the unity of the entire Australian nation, the moral challenge to heal such “diseased” and “infectious” social mechanisms is incumbent upon all Australians.

“What ought we do?” One ethical principle that could be encouraged is that all Australians, slowly growing in their awareness of the depths of this national “dis-grace”, ought cultivate a spirit of collective responsibility for the situation. This type of responsibility would contain various levels and distinctions.¹⁹ What follows are some theological reflections as to what collective responsibility for Aboriginal disadvantage may imply.

2.1 Collective Responsibility is *not* Collective Guilt

It seems best to avoid altogether any scenario that encourages the equating of collective responsibility with collective guilt. The nurturing of theories that suggest that the present generations of Australians are to be held morally culpable as a whole for the establishment of racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians is theologically absurd. This diseased social arrangement has been inherited from past generations. Present Australians have been born into a social situation that fosters entrenched Aboriginal marginalisation. It is one significant aspect of the objective social reality in Australia that continues to cause national disunity, confusion, alienation and, for Aboriginal Australians in a dramatic way, limits life’s possibilities. As such it is cause for national regret and even for national mourning. Collective guilt, however, from a theological perspective, is an inappropriate response here. To promote collective guilt would seem to imply that the present Australian generation as a whole and in equal measure is culpable for initiating and perpetuating Aboriginal disadvantage. This has not happened. Propagating collective guilt notions may, in fact, only serve to polarise and confuse people even further and would not advance reasonable efforts towards national reconciliation.²⁰ Theologically,

19. The categories that follow are influenced by K. R. Himes, “Social sin and the role of the individual”, *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986) 183-218, esp. 188-91.

20. This is a reasonable concern expressed by Brunton in *Black suffering*, 1-4, 61-64. Even as the title of his monograph (*Black suffering, white guilt?*) correctly implies, the undeniable evidence of Black suffering does not necessarily imply that White Australians are to be rendered automatically guilty. Care needs to be taken lest one unthinkingly becomes a victim of “reverse discrimination” here. Namely, the tendency of simply transferring one’s bias and prejudice from one group and placing it on another. It may also indicate a lack of categories and concepts in which Australians are able to discuss clearly negative and complex features of their life together. Overly privatised notions of a theology of sin may not have helped the historical contribution of the Christian churches in Australia to broaden these horizons.

discussions regarding moral guilt are appropriate here only when the personal conscience willingly chooses to perpetuate or augment this negative social reality. Prior to this personal intervention, descriptions of racist attitudes in Australia must take care to emphasise this reality as analogous to a moral understanding of sin and guilt.

2.2 Collective responsibility involves all Australians

Describing racist attitudes as analogous to a theological understanding of sin is not, however, an alibi for inaction. The very presence of deeply embedded racist attitudes in the Australian community and their particular expression in the many forms of Aboriginal poverty in some way diminishes all Australian people and is an affront to the common good. The moral incentive and cause of appropriate prudent action ought be the promotion of the belief that individual Australians can flourish as human persons only if all Australians are able to flourish as a people united in a collective and profound duty to care for each other, especially those poorest in their community. It is difficult to better the often quoted words of John Paul II (Alice Springs, 29 November 1986) to Aboriginal Australians on this matter which were applied to the Church but could easily be expanded to include all Australia.

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.²¹

This collective responsibility ought avoid the extremes of simply advocating, on the one hand, an appeal that Australians, particularly those involved directly in Aboriginal programs, be more considerate and generous in response to Aboriginal disadvantage. Although undeniably a commendable response, this appeal to personal consciences, which hopes for a satisfactory “trickle down effect” which will assist Aborigines, suffers from a serious defect. It can too easily avoid scrutiny of the organised and structural dimensions of this national malaise in which are found mechanisms that seem to marginalise Aboriginal Australians automatically from the rest of the community. Also, it can lapse easily in practice into a benign patronising of Aborigines themselves and perpetuate racist attitudes despite the theoretical support given to policies of self-determination and empowerment. On the other hand, the extreme of advocating the mere changing of formalised social realities is to be equally avoided. Alteration of structures without change of attitudes simply scapegoats

21. AAS 79 (1987) 978, n.13.

“the system” and is used too easily to avoid collective responsibility for essential attitudinal conversion.

2.3 The Question of Culpability

Whilst all are called to be collectively responsible, some Australians are actually culpable of perpetuating Aboriginal disadvantage. Whereas it is clear that present Australians as a whole share no collective guilt for the initiation of racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians, the perpetuation of this negative social reality in time has been activated by some Australians in various ways and in different degrees. In other words, moral choices are being made which collude with this “sinful” social reality and not only maintain it, but possibly propel it into deeper spirals of negativity. The RCADC has suggested that self-interest has undoubtedly been one of the chief reasons for this moral collusion with racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians in the past and suggests that self-interest may be a continuing cause in the present.

This sensitive area of individual culpability requires a careful ethical response which avoids initiating some hysterical “witch hunt” or scapegoating of individuals that might become an alibi to distract the Australian community from their collective responsibility. Yet, an honest “examination of conscience” in this area may be one important step towards reconciliation and may help to stress the moral character of the debate. One approach to such an examination could take the form of appropriating the reflections contained in a section of the 1984 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* 16, concerning personal sins aiding social sins.²²

Therefore, paraphrasing this section of *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* 16, we could suggest that the issue of culpability in present times concerns those Australians who support or exploit racist attitudes towards Australian Aborigines. It concerns those who are in a position to avoid or limit racist attitudes but who, out of laziness, fear or silence, fail to do so. It also pertains to those Australians who presume that the situation is impossible to change and, consequently, avoid accepting moral responsibility.

If this “examination of conscience” is accepted as an assistance or criterion for determining culpability, then, clearly, moral culpability does not concern the vast majority of Australians. Even for those who identify themselves in some of these categories, standard mitigating factors, such as ignorance due to the “blinding” effect of certain ideologies, would diminish moral culpability.²³ Yet one must avoid the extreme of excusing too readily all or any culpability. The issue of

22. AAS 77 (1985) 217. Also quoted in the social encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 36, n.65. AAS 80 (1988) 562.

23. Himes, “Social sin”, 207.

ignorance, for example, may assist to clarify this point. Indeed, there may be moral fault in not knowing certain things. A venerable Thomistic teaching would suggest that ignorance of certain moral principles may excuse but not if the moral agent refused to take reasonable steps to eliminate this ignorance. In other words, according to the Thomistic approach, this latter type of ignorance “implies a lack of knowledge which one ought to have”.²⁴ If a person’s negligence is directly voluntary (that is, I am not interested or too busy to learn something that would deter sin) then, says Aquinas, “this type brings about ignorance which is both voluntary and sinful if one could and should have known these things in the first place”.²⁵ Therefore, the question presents itself: do moral choices of certain Australians regarding Aboriginal Australians lack knowledge that is simply unavailable to them or is the knowledge readily available but not sought?²⁶ Clearly, Australians would be blameworthy in this situation if they failed to make a reasonable effort and exhibited a lack of care to eliminate ignorance through advice or taking advantage of available education surrounding, for example, Aboriginal perspectives of the land.

The issue of assessing moral culpability of individual consciences in Australia’s past history in regard to racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians seems fraught with virtually insurmountable difficulties. Basic and accurate historical data upon which such an adjudication could be approached would have to be present for a start. Also, attempting to judge the personal consciences of past historical figures with modern sensibilities and knowledge, for example, regarding “blinding” ideologies and biases, seems lacking in a basic fairness. Rather than judge the subjective consciences of past personalities of Australian history, it may be more advantageous ultimately to adjudicate the objective social realities at the time that caused otherwise good men and women to perform certain reckless acts and adopt certain assumptions and viewpoints that assisted in marginalising Aboriginal people. These insights may well assist us in our present difficulties.

2.4 The Question of Liability

The question of liability may arise when present non-Aboriginal Australians have inherited a negative social arrangement in which they remain beneficiaries. For example, a present day landowner may not be culpable for property that his great-grandfather appropriated without agreement from Aborigines, but if he or she still benefits from this

24. *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae, q.76, a.2.

25. *Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae, q.76, a.3.

26. This is a paraphrase of two possibilities presented by Himes. See Himes, “Social sin”, 207.

property and if the Aborigines have not relinquished their associations with that land, then the question of liability arises.²⁷ New formalised social arrangements would need to be set in motion whereby the complex issues of compensation and ownership could be negotiated. Included in these issues of liability ought be the degree to which one has benefited from an inherited but diseased social arrangement and the extent to which the Aboriginal "owners" have been disadvantaged.²⁸ The establishment of these new and positive mechanisms would certainly be at least an implicit acknowledgement that the arrangements that were formerly in place were sinful social structures and only mirrored and crystallised pre-existing racist attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians.

3. INITIAL APPLICATION TO AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

A moral evaluation of the historic commitment of the Christian churches towards Aboriginal Australians is complex. It may be helpful to approach this delicate topic by beginning to apply the general ethical principles regarding collective responsibility articulated immediately above. By so doing, there may emerge certain ethical parameters around which the discussion of the conclusions of the RCADC, the historic involvement of the churches and the issue of moral responsibility can take place.

To begin with, it seems best to avoid specific moral assessments of the personal consciences of past generations of church missionaries to the Aboriginal people using the insights and criteria of our present times. To pursue such an endeavour may place rashly in the shadows the heroic contributions of innumerable Christian missionaries over the years who proclaimed the Gospel and established the Christian church in many Aboriginal communities, whilst offering health services, educational facilities and many other social services. The speech of John Paul II in Alice Springs acknowledges this contribution of the missionaries quite explicitly:

Whatever their human frailty, and whatever mistakes they may have made, nothing can ever minimise the depth of their charity. Nothing can ever cancel out their greatest contribution, which was *to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to establish his Church in your midst.*²⁹

Also, the RCADC makes it quite clear that many non-Aboriginal people who conducted missions were undoubtedly motivated by the highest

27. See W. Daniel, "Aboriginal self-determination" in F. Brennan (ed.), *Reconciling our differences: a Christian approach in recognising Aboriginal land rights* (Richmond, Victoria: Aurora Books, 1992) 57-8.

28. Himes, "Social Sin", 212-3.

29. AAS 79 (1987) 976, n.9 (emphasis as in original).

motives and established strategies whereby some threatened Aboriginal clans were, in fact, able to preserve their threatened unity.³⁰ John Paul II singles out Archbishop John Bede Polding, the former Catholic Archbishop of Sydney (1834-1877), as exemplary in advancing the causes of Aboriginal concerns to the wider and largely indifferent community.³¹

More objective considerations, however, would want to probe into the reasons why Christian communities as a whole have in the past been largely indistinguishable from the wider community regarding a general and widespread characteristic of Australian indifferentism towards Aboriginal concerns. Edmund Campion, reflecting on the Catholic Church, suggests that the defence of Aboriginality had simply taken an historically lower priority in the Australian Catholic Church in comparison with the pastoral care of a rapidly developing British colony.³² Could the same be said regarding the other churches? Could it be that today's willingness to classify certain societal structures as "sinful" was simply not truly reflected upon by earlier Australian Christian generations? The defence of such arguments is possible, but they must never be presented as excuses for evident ecclesiastical ambivalence and curious silences in the midst of destructive Aboriginal marginalisation. The disturbing fact remains that the RCADC makes it quite clear that in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries missionaries as a whole were key government advisers regarding Aboriginal policies.³³ The implication is that they not only approved of, but also assisted practically in the administering of government policies which present generations are more willingly prepared to classify as racist. The destabilising effects of these past policies are still being felt by Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.³⁴

What response is to be made to such harsh realities by the Australian Christian churches? Applying the principles and arguments articulated above, we could begin by stating that disseminating concepts of collective guilt are to be dismissed as theologically without foundation and, indeed, adding unnecessary confusion to the issue. Present generations of Australian Christians as a collective and in equal measure cannot be held culpable for initiating and perpetuating Aboriginal disadvantage. However, present day Christians do have a grave and collective moral responsibility, like all Australians, to dispel

30. RCADC, *National Report: Overview*, 1.4.13, p. 10. Brunton states that the RCADC has not sufficiently appreciated the historic contribution of Christianity to Aboriginal culture. See Brunton, *Black suffering*, 49.

31. See AAS 79 (1987) 976, n.9.

32. E. Campion, *Australian Catholics* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987; Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1988) 241-2.

33. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.2, 20.3.31, p. 518.

34. RCADC, *National Report*, vol.4, chap. 26, p. 1.

the ideologies, ignorance and biases in which racist attitudes may still fester and largely be hidden from conscious awareness. Given the immense Christian commitment to education and the very large system of educational facilities that reach out into every part of Australia, the Christian churches are ideally situated to give a higher priority to educating attitudes, within Christians and beyond, that are totally opposed to all forms of racism.

The question of liability, when applied to Christian churches, raises complex practical issues. The issue seems to originate in the churches' direct involvement in advising and implementing past discredited government policy. The extent of this church influence claimed by the RCADC would need to be investigated further. However, a case could be made which suggests that, as the paralysing effects of these policies are still reverberating within contemporary Aboriginal communities, the church has some special responsibility to ameliorate the situation. This is particularly the case when the topic is centred on the intricate Aboriginal cultural links with the land. Given the immense real estate holdings of the Christian churches in Australia, vigilance ought to be exercised by the churches in examining if there still exists certain inherited social arrangements whereby church property is situated on land from which Aboriginal Australians have not yet relinquished their associations and for which there does not exist any mutually agreed formalised arrangement between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples. A factor in the new social arrangements to be implemented would be consideration of the extent to which the local Aboriginal community has continued to be disadvantaged by the former arrangements.

4. STRUCTURING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS THAT RECONCILE

Further practical implications of these complex issues need not concern us here. It could be, however, that the above ethical principles arising from a concept of collective responsibility may provide some assistance in articulating a moral response to Aboriginal disadvantage. Collective responsibility, as an ethical principle aimed at restoring the common good, may have the capacity to reverse slowly the shared attitudes, assumptions, expectations and formal social arrangements that have tended to marginalise Aboriginal Australians to date.

In secular Australia is it possible still to employ an historically popular Australian principle of fairness, the "fair go" philosophy, as a moral incentive which encourages all Australians to support this concept of collective responsibility? Is it Utopian to suggest still that this much loved sentiment of egalitarianism among Australians can be awakened and directed to the undeniable and incongruous fact of on-

going Aboriginal disadvantage?³⁵ It would appear that the beginning of this type of “awakening” is already taking place among non-Aboriginal Australians. Is it too cynical to suggest that such an “awakening” is more of a transitory fad for a society disillusioned with the supposed sterility of technological progress at the expense of profound ecological and community needs? Surely if this nascent “awakening” is to be given depth, it must envisage reconciliation with the Aboriginal community as far more than merely advancing political solutions. Aboriginal disadvantage cannot be resolved without the political component, but it cannot be solved with only political reform. Steering general attitudes away from the perceptions and stereotypes that isolate and ostracise Aboriginal people must also be undertaken. Examining how these racist attitudes have assumed and continue to assume a structured historical and political expression is an enormous challenge facing all Australians. It is, though, a necessary component of reconciliation with the Aboriginal community in Australian society.

If secular Australia is tempted to offer merely the “outward/political solution”, could it be that Christian theology is tempted to offer the purely “inward/devotional solution”? The latter connotes a response that limits itself to mere intersubjective and charitable expressions whilst failing to consider the structural causes for Aboriginal disadvantage in the first place. Both extremes are to be avoided. A simultaneous double analysis is required. Not only must the victims of racist attitudes meet a compassionate response that is ready to offer compensation where injustice is evident, but also questions need to be asked which probe into why, amongst other matters, Aboriginal people continue to be one of the poorest groups of people in Australia despite the undeniable shift away from racist policies. Such latter inquiries may reveal all sorts of negative social mechanisms remaining in Australian society that require further transformation and reconciliation.

Theological anthropology may prefer the word “conversion” to summarise the need expressed above. This is certainly true. In Christian theology, sin and conversion, whatever forms they assume, are inseparable theological partners. Collective responsibility for Aboriginal disadvantage demands, consequently, a conversion away from sinful social structures and a movement towards the construction of grace-filled structures and assumptions of the formal and informal ways whereby we live together. The warning issued above against too sharply separating personal and social sin, now applies in like manner

35. Notably, the “fair go” principle is appealed to and identified with the concept of the common good in the Australian Bishops’ celebrated statement on the distribution of wealth in Australia. See Australian Catholic Bishops of Australia, *Common wealth for the common good: a statement on the distribution of wealth in Australia* (North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1992) 128.

to personal and social conversion. The theological challenge is to begin to articulate conversion from racist attitudes in a manner that simultaneously addresses conversion's personal and social dimensions. In short, the quest is to describe conversion here within a more amplified theological anthropology of structured human relationships. A narrower anthropological base has been tempted to articulate conversion in terms of a "first-then" approach. This approach is not without its difficulties. Italian moral theologian, S. Bastianel, adjudicates well this alternative:

In terms of conversion, the alternative "first personal conversion or first the conversion of structures?" is a false alternative. It is not appropriate to place on one side structures and on the other persons in relationship. On the contrary, it is structured human relationships. It would be illusionary to pretend to have reached the expressions of "just" structures without changing or before the changing of the morality of consciences. But no less illusionary would be the thought that a true personal conscience could leave between parentheses for a future time the problems of structures of real co-existence.³⁶

If this broader anthropology of structured human relationships is accepted, then the interaction between attitudes and formalised arrangements may assist the Australian churches to become better aware of the social and political dimensions of their message of evangelisation at a time of entrenched Aboriginal disadvantage. It would certainly deepen the leadership of witness the churches offer to all Australians regarding a community attempting to reconcile itself to the original inhabitants of this land.

5. CONCLUSION

Reflections regarding the social dimensions of sin and conversion are recent in moral theology and require further theological development. A continuing healthy and balanced dialogue between the theological and sociological sciences on the matter would prove advantageous. Some implications of this development have been applied here to the continuing scandal of Australian Aboriginal disadvantage. This article has argued that the concept of collective responsibility with its corresponding ethical principles may provide a helpful key around which present hopeful discussions could be deepened in their moral dimensions. Such an approach is best advanced by basing its considerations on a more amplified Christian anthropology which envisages the human person as existing in a complexity of structured human relationships.

³⁶ Bastianel, "Strutture di peccato", 338.