

To Liberate Theology: Pursuing Segundo's Project in an Australian Context

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Abstract: This article discusses what Segundo means by “the liberation of theology” and considers his emphasis on the importance of the social sciences in the theological enterprise. It then reviews the four stages of Segundo's hermeneutical circle, using one of his examples, the work of James Cone. The model of a four-stage hermeneutical circle is then applied to four works by Aboriginal authors: Kevin Gilbert, Anne Pattel-Gray, Aileen Moreton Robinson and the Rainbow Spirit Elders. In each case a liberating process is seen as taking place; and in each case, at least to some extent, the stages of Segundo's circle can be discerned.

THE PUBLICATION IN 1971 of Gustavo Gutiérrez' book, *A Theology of Liberation*, was an event of major significance for the development in Latin America of what has come to be known as liberation theology.¹ It was not that this new way of engaging in the theological enterprise began with this book. Much thinking had already been done, many discussions had taken place, and various writings had appeared. Especially important had been the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate which met in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, and the documents that emerged from this conference. Nevertheless it was Gutiérrez who gathered together much of this material in a substantial theological work. The title of his book emphasises the central theme of the whole enterprise: liberation. Its publication marked a decisive step forward for Latin American theology in the second half of the twentieth century.

When Juan Luis Segundo published his book, *The Liberation of Theology*, he presumably had in mind the title of Gutiérrez' important work.² The reversal of the order of the two nouns in the title is obviously significant. Segundo was not expressing disagreement with

1. G. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (Lima: CEP, 1971). English Translation: *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

2. J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1976). This is John Drury's translation of *Liberación de la teología* (Buenos Aires: Lohlé, 1975).

Gutiérrez; rather, he was taking the project a stage further. He saw the need to explain more fully the methodology that was being employed in the theology that was developing in the Latin American situation. He realised that this methodology was of central importance to the whole enterprise.

In a previous article I considered some aspects of Segundo's theological methodology, and suggested an Australian application of it, namely, theological reflection on the situation of Aboriginal people in this country.³ In the present article I want to continue this discussion, focussing especially on the nature and function of theology itself, and examining what Segundo means by the title of his book. Then I will turn to the theme of Segundo's "hermeneutical circle", outlining the four stages of this circle; finally, in the light of these stages, I will reflect on some writings by Aboriginal thinkers themselves, showing how they are, to some extent at least, applying a similar methodology to their own situation. I see this as part of the process of liberating theology from its captivity by the dominant European and North American culture.

AUTONOMY OF THEOLOGY?

While everyone recognises the great changes that have taken place in the teaching of theology in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in Roman Catholic centres, Segundo affirms that, according to his experience, theology is still taught in what he calls an "autonomous" way.⁴ This is a fundamental issue, and needs to be examined carefully. On the following page he gives a brief account of what he understands to be the task of theology, namely that of "interpreting the word of God as it is addressed to us here and now". In this description, "word of God" does not mean simply the Scriptures – or, indeed, any of the official Church statements or theological elucidations of the past. Clearly these are indispensable to us if we are to remain genuinely Christian, and to engage sincerely in the task of trying to discern God's word to us in the present. But these documents do not deal directly with our situation. The concreteness of the problem is emphasised in Segundo's phrase, "addressed to us here and now". Thus the "word of God" is directed to people who are facing real-life issues and making decisions in their present historical context. The task of theology is to bridge the gap between the "word of God" (known in some way from documents and experiences of the past) and the present situation (with its inescapable requirement that practical decisions have to be made –

3. John Wilcken, "Juan Luis Segundo and Australian Theology", in *Pacifica* 15 (2002) 324-36.

4. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 7.

decisions which will affect the course of history, that is how people's lives will develop in the future).

What then does Segundo mean when he declares that theology "continues to be taught in an autonomous way"? He begins by noting the fact that "Christianity is a *biblical* religion". Its fundamental document is the Bible.⁵ Theology must return constantly to the interpretation of this book. Segundo goes on to make the important statement: "Theology is not an interpretation of mankind (*del hombre*) and society, not in the first place at least." Thus, to remain Christian, theology must continually be engaged in the re-interpretation of the Bible.

In order to understand the various writings of the Bible, in their historical setting, theology makes use of all the tools of scholarship available: the study of biblical languages, form criticism, redaction criticism, the knowledge of ancient cultures, and so on. Such scholarly work must be done. In this way theology is dependent on knowledge of the past, and on the sciences which help it to understand the past; it is not "autonomous" with regard to these. But Segundo claims that theologians seem to see themselves as independent of the sciences which deal with the present. As becomes clear from what follows in his book, he has in mind such human sciences as sociology and politics: theologians appear to consider themselves "autonomous" with regard to these. He criticises "a theologian as progressive as Schillebeeckx" for imagining that the theological task can be carried out independently of "the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day". The liberation theologian, on the contrary, suspects "that anything and everything involving ideas, including theology, is intimately bound up with the existing social situation in at least an unconscious way".⁶

The importance of this statement for Segundo cannot be over-estimated. For the liberation theologian, the scientific study of the sources inherited from the past is essential, but not sufficient. To it must

5. Robert Kress, in a severely critical review of *The Liberation of Theology* in *Horizons* 4 (1977), 134, attacks Segundo's statement that Christianity is "the religion of a book", saying that though this view "may delight Protestant Christian ears...it describes neither the Catholic stance, nor, for that matter, the truth of the matter". Segundo, who is deeply grounded in the Catholic tradition, of course does not mean that the Bible is the only source of Christian theology. In the introduction to *The Liberation of Theology* he had already noted that liberation theology "resorted to the traditional means of theologising: that is to biblical tradition and to dogmatic tradition", and he wrote of a responsibility towards "the canons of world-wide theology" (pp 4-5). In his works, Segundo often makes reference to Vatican II, especially "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World". In his book, *The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises* (New York: Orbis, 1987), chapter one is entitled "Jesus and God: Approach to the Council of Chalcedon", and it provides an illuminating commentary on the Council's Christological teaching. One might note also that Vatican II, in its "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation", no. 24, states that "the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology".

6. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

be added the scientific study of present day society. Even the claim to be a theology of liberation can be misleading, if by this is meant that theology simply discusses the topic of liberation. Unless the *methodology* is changed, the theology will not in fact be liberating. As Segundo put it rather grimly, such a theology “would eventually be reabsorbed by the deeper mechanisms of oppression”.

A little later in the chapter Segundo declares that the aim is to *be liberative*, not simply to *talk about liberation*. What is important is not so much the content of the theology, but rather the *method used*.⁷ Where the emphasis is on content, the danger is that theology will be seen as a body of knowledge inherited from the past, which is developed to some extent by including discussions of present day issues, but which essentially remains under the control of an academic and ecclesiastical élite. It claims to be faithful to its sources in Scripture and tradition, and hence to have a guarantee of perennial validity. What it fails to recognise is that its interpretation of the sources reflects to a large extent the social and political interests of those engaged in formulating it. Since these are among the privileged and élite members of society, its bias is inevitably – if unconsciously – towards the maintenance of the *status quo*. Even though, in response to the challenges of the present, it may *speak of liberation*, it will not in fact be liberating. Hence the importance of challenging the theological method that is being employed. And that is why Segundo rejects the attitude of “autonomy” with regard to the sciences which deal with the present.

THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

Central to Segundo’s methodology is what he calls – following Bultmann – the hermeneutical circle. He provides a preliminary definition: “it is the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by (*en función de*) the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal”.⁸ In my previous paper I wrote of the two preconditions Segundo insists must be present if the hermeneutical circle, in his understanding of it, is to be effective. They are, first, that the questions arising from the present are significant enough to force us to change our customary ways of thinking, and, second, that we are willing to change our interpretation of Scripture in the light of the transforming experiences of the present.⁹ But I did not, in that paper, discuss the four decisive points, or moments, or stages, of that circle. It is to this task that I now turn.

7. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 9.

8. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

9. Wilcken, “Juan Luis Segundo and Australian Theology”, 324-36.

The first stage, according to Segundo, concerns our way of experiencing reality, which leads to ideological suspicion.¹⁰ Perhaps the most convenient way of explaining Segundo's meaning is to take one of the examples he provides later in the chapter, namely James Cone's book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.¹¹ Segundo admits that "the language of the book might seem to be a bit demagogic and shocking – all depending on the colour of your skin and thinking perhaps", but he considers the book to be "a much more serious theological effort than many people might think at first glance". In this book Segundo can discern all four stages of the hermeneutical circle.

In the first stage, as illustrated in Cone's work, there is an acute awareness of a situation of oppression, and a commitment to work *against* this oppression and *for* liberation. Thus there is an explicitly embraced partiality, a determination to take the side of the oppressed. Universal truths, which somehow stand outside history in their eternal timelessness, are of little use in the actual pursuit of liberation. A stance must be taken *for* some people – the oppressed – and *against* others – those who, consciously or unconsciously, maintain the system of oppression. If the system of oppression is accepted by society – in this case, white society – and good people within this society regard it as appropriate, then the system is presumably supported by a world-view, an ideology, which at least *seems* to give it justification. Hence arises "ideological suspicion", that is the need to unmask and challenge this world-view, this ideology, this set of ideas.¹²

The second stage of the circle is "the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular". With regard to the situation in North America, for which Cone is writing, "the whole ideological superstructure" can be summed up in one phrase: belief in white superiority. With this belief as a foundation – possibly not acknowledged, but nevertheless real – a whole system of law, philosophy and religion is developed. This system deals in universal concepts, which theoretically are valid for all, but in fact represent simply the white point of view, and ignore the real problem, that is, the oppressed situation of black people. Thus white

10. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 9. On pages 10-34, Segundo explains what he means by these stages, using as illustrations works by Harvey Cox, Karl Marx, Max Weber and James Cone. Then, on pages 40-47 of the following chapter, he provides further illustrations from the notion of sacrament, the problem of the unity of the Church, and the concept of God.

11. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, twentieth anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis, 1990).

12. Here the word "ideology" has a pejorative sense: it is a set of ideas that masks and justifies oppression. This is not in fact the sense in which Segundo uses the term later in the book, where he discusses the relationship between faith and ideology. There, "ideology" is, in itself, a neutral term. On page 102 of *The Liberation of Theology* he refers to "the pejorative connotations" that the word had in chapter one.

theologians may accept the notion that God is in favour of liberation, but this notion is not applied to the actual situation of black people.

The third stage of Segundo's hermeneutical circle is "a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads to exegetical suspicion". Since white theology is simply not in touch with black people's lives – except insofar as it re-inforces their oppressed state – a fresh starting-point needs to be found. This starting-point is the actual experience of black people, and what they suffer as a result of white racist attitudes and policies. As black Christians they want to develop a theology that is in touch with their needs and hopes and yearnings. What does God say to them in their historical situation? How can they develop and elaborate on an understanding of God as the One who cares for them and desires their liberation?

At this point one reaches the fourth stage of the circle: a new way of interpreting Scripture must be found, one that is in touch with the situation of black people. This is in fact a fundamental issue for Segundo, and the brief discussion he gives in this first chapter foreshadows a much more detailed treatment later in the book. Briefly Segundo stresses the *situated* character of Scriptural texts. These deal with specific issues which arise out of the history of their times, and have to be interpreted according to their contexts. One might say that God is revealed differently according to the different situations in which people find themselves. Moreover, this is true not only of the revelation of God in the Scriptures. It is also true today, when people are trying to discern what God is saying to them in the real-life situations in which they are placed. Segundo quotes Cone's words: "As a black theologian, I want to know what God's revelation means right now as the black community participates in the struggle for liberation." As a *Christian* theologian, Cone affirms the importance of the Scriptures; as a *black* theologian, he asks what these Scriptures say to his oppressed people today.¹³

Concerning Cone's interpretation of the Scriptures Segundo remarks: "Sometimes I am in agreement with him, sometimes I am not. Be that as it may, I think that his theological efforts afford us a fine example of the hermeneutic circle."

KEVIN GILBERT

I now come to the consideration of the work of some Aboriginal thinkers, as they reflect on their situation in Australian society, and on the Christianity that was preached to them. What they have to say is a radical challenge to the customary views of white Australians, and to

13. Segundo discusses at depth the question of Scriptural interpretation in chapter 4 of *The Liberation of Theology*, which deals with "Ideologies and Faith".

the theology taught in the major theological centres in this country – theology that is derived mainly from Europe and North America. These Aboriginal thinkers are often quite blunt and forthright in the expression of their views. Segundo's comment on James Cone's book is perhaps even more applicable to some Australian Aboriginal writings: the language "might seem to be a bit demagogic and shocking – all depending on the colour of your skin and thinking perhaps". This is true especially of the first Aboriginal thinker I will consider: Kevin Gilbert.

Kevin Gilbert was born in 1933 in Condobolin, New South Wales. His parents suddenly died when he was seven years old. He got into trouble with the police, spent time in an orphanage, then was looked after by a married sister. He experienced poverty, and came to know what it was like to be a fringe-dweller. He had no education, and no training in a trade. He married, but a family disaster resulted in his being imprisoned for over 14 years, in the Bathurst, Maitland and Grafton gaols. During this time he educated himself, and discovered his considerable artistic and literary gifts. After he was given parole in 1971, he became active politically on behalf of Aboriginal people, and was prominent in the establishment of the Tent Embassy in Canberra. One of his books, *Because a White Man'll Never Do It*, is a major political work from an Aboriginal point of view. He died in 1993.¹⁴

Aboriginal Spirituality. Past, Present, Future, edited by Anne Pattel-Gray, is a book containing contributions to the First National Conference on Aboriginal Spirituality and Perceptions of Christianity, held at Victor Harbour, South Australia, in August 1990.¹⁵ Kevin Gilbert's presentation is entitled "God at the Campfire and that Christ Fella" (pp. 54-65). Its style is conversational, its range of topics wide, and its language hard-hitting. Let us look at what he has to say in the light of the four stages of Segundo's hermeneutical circle.

As regards the first stage, there can be no doubt that Gilbert speaks from experiences of reality which challenge the way in which white Australian Christians normally see and interpret the world. He talks of the destructive and genocidal effects of the colonisation process, of the fact that the English came with the Bible and the gun, and that, as they took the land, they promised heaven to the meek. Having sent the Aborigines to live by the river bank, they built big churches on the land they had taken. How could this have happened? Gilbert declares

14. See K. Gilbert, *Living Black* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1977) 238-45; D. Horton (ed.) *An Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* vol 1. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 413. See also: K. Gilbert, *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973).

15. Anne Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past Present, Future* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1996).

simply that Christians “have never been able to face what that Christ fella was saying never been able to understand what he was saying”.¹⁶

The second stage of Segundo’s circle is: “the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general, and to theology in particular”. Gilbert focuses in a special way on the issue of land. It is the *greed* of the whites – the Christian whites – which is the fundamental problem. The whites want control of the land, and the power and wealth that this brings. As a result, Gilbert says, their intention is “to commit genocide against Aboriginal people. No self-determination. No real land rights.”¹⁷ That is why there must be a continual struggle for Aboriginal sovereignty, for Aboriginal management and ownership of the land.

Gilbert speaks powerfully about how Christian people have been indifferent to what is going on. He refers to “those fellas thumping on the Bible saying, ‘This is my good book. I go to Church on Sunday’.” Yet they are the ones who are crucifying “little baby Christs”, who are “images of God”.¹⁸ He does not refer specifically to theology in his attack. Yet it is easy to see how his ideological suspicion can be applied to white Australian theology. This theology has simply not considered the issues that are vital to Aboriginal people. In discussing human beings, it has – no doubt unconsciously – considered only white human beings. And the God of white Australian theology is a white God.¹⁹

The third of Segundo’s stages is “a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads to exegetical suspicion”. When one reads Gilbert’s paper, with its colloquial style and rather extravagant language, there is a danger that one might simply dismiss it as wild rhetoric. To do this would be to miss the positive suggestions he makes for a new theology and a renewed Church life. He speaks of bringing together the Bible and Aboriginal culture, and developing an Aboriginal Church, because, he says, “we have to grow the Whitefella up; we have to teach the Whitefella”.²⁰ He is critical of white society itself: “They let their kids starve on the streets. They let their old people die in those old cold homes.” He speaks of an Aboriginal Church of healing, “because you have to heal the Whitefella”. Moreover, white people have lost spiritual contact with the land, and through greed are destroying it. Aboriginal people must teach white people “so that they can encompass

16. Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 55.

17. Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 59.

18. Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 61.

19. Segundo discusses Cone’s excellent treatment of this issue on pages 28-29 of *The Liberation of Theology*. In his situation, Cone rejects the notion of “a colourless God”. In the Australian situation I think it is appropriate to speak of – and reject – the notion of “a white God”.

20. Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 61.

the Spirituality of this land, so that they can actually find out who God is...".²¹

The fourth stage of Segundo's circle is to discover a new way of interpreting the Scriptures. What Gilbert has done is to take some of the fundamental images of the Scriptures and apply them to the situation of both Aboriginal people and white people in Australia. Christ was "the bloke who spoke the truth". Each Aboriginal person is "a true child of God" (p. 61). Christ was "the fella who wiped the feet" (p. 63). Gilbert declares that "the real Gospel is God and the *message* of Christ – love thy neighbour, love one another" (pp. 61-62). His emphasis is on *praxis*, the actual living-out of this message in the reality of Australia today.

It may seem surprising that I have taken this colloquial, earthy address by an Aboriginal activist as an example of theology. It certainly does not follow the accepted canons of theological discussion today. What Gilbert says can be readily understood by people who have never been trained in the academy. In fact he presents a challenge to academic theology. His great merit is that he gives voice to people who have suffered massive injustice, and who put fundamental questions to the dominant society which has perpetrated the injustice, and to the Christian Church which has failed adequately to denounce it. (The comparison with Latin America and liberation theology is obvious.) Gilbert reminds us of the life and teachings of Jesus, and indicates a new starting point for theological reflection in the Australian context, that is theological reflection which arises out of the experience of Aboriginal people. (Again there is the comparison with liberation theology.) In analysing the train of thought in Gilbert's address, it seems to me appropriate and enlightening to apply the stages of Segundo's hermeneutical circle.

ANNE PATEL-GRAY

Anne Patel-Gray is a committed Christian dedicated to the cause of justice for Aboriginal people in Australia. She has worked in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Aboriginal and Islander Commission of the Australian Council of Churches, and she was involved in the organisation of the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope in Sydney in January 1988. Her book, *Through Aboriginal Eyes. The Cry from the Wilderness*, was published by the World Council of Churches, Geneva, in 1991. Her doctoral thesis, submitted to the University of Sydney in 1994, was entitled, *The Great White Flood: Racism*

21. Patel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 65.

in Australia.²² She has experienced the force of racism in Australian society and writes passionately on behalf of her people.

What I want to look at primarily here is the section of her thesis which is entitled, "an Aboriginal Womanist Critique of Australian Church Feminism".²³ In this section Pattel-Gray takes up the themes of the global Black womanist movement, and gives expression to them in the context of Australian society. Here too we can discern, at least to some extent, the methodology which Segundo describes in his hermeneutical circle.

Pattel-Gray expresses forcefully the subjection and exploitation of Aboriginal women since the arrival of the white colonists in 1788. She writes that "Aboriginal women's role within Australia was one of inferior being, slave, servant, prisoner and beast of the frontier".²⁴ She illustrates this statement through the stories of Aboriginal women about their life experiences. What is particularly relevant to the theme of this section is that white women were part of this system of oppression, and "often the women were more ruthless than white men".²⁵ Aboriginal women have suffered not only from sexism and classism, but also, and very particularly, from racism. They are at the bottom of the Australian social hierarchy, white men being at the top.²⁶ Australian feminism reflects the privileged position of whites in Australian society.

We have come to the second stage of the circle and the oppressive and exploitative social structure has been exposed. What part has theology played in this situation? Here we need to turn to another section of Pattel-Gray's thesis, where she writes of Australian Church racism and theological imperialism.²⁷ She makes the claim that, for over two centuries, the Australian Church has been simply heretical. It "continually contradicted the liberating truth of Jesus Christ", and "refused to speak the truth in the face of dispossession, massacres, cultural genocide, physical and mental tortures of many kinds, and more".²⁸ The Church has been permeated by the racism of Australian society and Australian feminist theology reflects, in general, the racist attitudes of white society.

One might, of course, question whether it is appropriate to use the word "heretical" in this context. One could say, for example, that the failure was in the area of "orthopraxy" rather than "orthodoxy". Yet

22. Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

23. Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 162-86. This part of her thesis was published as an article in *Freedom and Entrapment*, edited by M. Confoy and others (Melbourne: Dove, 1995) 165-91.

24. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 175.

25. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 173.

26. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 165.

27. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 120-32.

28. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 121.

this, I think, would not adequately express what Pattel-Gray means. She is pointing to a racist way of seeing the world which has influenced the thinking and acting of Australian Christians. This racism – which many people may not be aware of, in themselves or in others – is in fact quite contrary to the Christian message. Hence there are grounds for using the word “heresy”. It is not simply a matter of sinful behaviour.

Pattel-Gray’s thesis is above all a critique of Australian society, and does not have so much to say about the positive task of reconstruction. This is not surprising, given the magnitude of such a task, and the fact that people first have to be persuaded that it should be undertaken. Hence the third and fourth stages of Segundo’s circle, which are more reconstructive, are not so well reflected in her thesis. But a few suggestions are indicated.

With regard to the “new way of experiencing theological reality” which Segundo mentions in his third stage, one might point to Pattel-Gray’s brief account of the contribution Aboriginal women might make to Australian feminism through their religious traditions and Dreamings, and through the significant role that women have had within their own traditional societies. Men and women have collaborated for the welfare of the whole community.²⁹

In his third stage Segundo also mentions “exegetical suspicion”, and this leads to the fourth stage, a new way of interpreting the Scriptures. Here we might turn again to the part of Pattel-Gray’s thesis where she discusses Australian Church racism in general. For example, she makes this statement:

The Australian Church however, taught – either directly or by implication – that the people of the Bible were white, and that to be white was a good thing because it was to be “like God”.³⁰

She goes on to list a number of people of “black identity” in the Bible, such as the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10). She makes the point that the church has adopted a “selective exegesis”; it has deprived Aboriginal people of role models. White scholars have taken over the text of the Bible and interpreted it in accordance with their own world-view, and the interests of the white population. This is a racist approach, which excludes black people.

Anne Pattel-Gray is keenly aware of the injustices done to her people, of the destructive force of racism in Australian society, and of the fact that the white feminist movement does not represent the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal women. She writes with power and passion on these issues. However she is not so well equipped to carry out the

29. See Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 176ff.

30. Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*, 124-25.

social analysis of the situation. This task is admirably done by Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

AILEEN MORETON-ROBINSON

Aileen Moreton-Robinson belongs to the Koenpul people and her country is Quandamooka – renamed Moreton Bay by white people. She is an academic and has taught Women's Studies at Flinders University in Adelaide and Indigenous Studies at Griffith University in Brisbane. She has been prominent in writing and working in support of Indigenous rights. Her book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, is a scholarly contribution to the discussion of the relationship of Aboriginal women to the Australian feminist movement. It is written with passion and commitment.³¹ Although her approach is that of the social scientist, she has one particularly significant reference to Christianity. She notes that, while white people saw Christianity as a way of keeping Aboriginal women under control, the fundamental Christian message of justice and human dignity also provided support for Aboriginal resistance.³² However, she does not develop this theme any further. Hence her book covers only the first two stages of Segundo's circle – but it does this brilliantly.

In her first chapter, "Tellin' It Straight: Self-Presentation within Indigenous Women's Life Writings", she gives an account of Aboriginal women's experiences in white Australian society. Her whole book makes clear that these experiences have not been taken into account by white Australian feminists. A phrase that occurs constantly is: "the subject position middle-class white woman". This, she declares, is the position from which Australian feminists see the world: they, as subjects, belonging to the middle class, generalise from their own experience, formulate their theories and engage in political action. Moreton-Robinson writes:

The subject position middle-class white woman has been historically shaped, redefined and represented in Australian culture as the embodiment of true womanhood.³³

This "subject position" is one of dominance; and it is quite unrepresentative of the experiences of Aboriginal women. It reflects the view of white colonial society, not that of those who have been subjugated by the colonising process.

A point which she makes strongly is that whiteness – which involves power and privilege – is taken for granted by white feminists. She

31. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up To The White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (University of Queensland Press, 2000).

32. Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up To The White Woman*, 30.

33. Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, xxiv.

notes: "White feminists who teach about 'race' leave whiteness uninterrogated and centred but invisible."³⁴ This privileged category of whiteness needs to be interrogated and made visible. Until this happens, the relationship of dominance and subjugation remains in place.

These are just a few glimpses of the richness of this book. Its critique is well suited for incorporation into a challenge to white Australian feminist theology from the point of view of Aboriginal women.

Earlier in this article I mentioned Segundo's comment that theology "continues to be taught in an autonomous way", that is "autonomous" with regard to those sciences which help us to understand the present, such as sociology and politics. He insists that this "autonomy" has a conservative effect on theology, such that the maintenance of the *status quo*, with its injustices and oppressions, is simply taken for granted. Here is where Moreton-Robinson's social analysis is valuable. It is relevant to the first and second stages of Segundo's circle, that is those concerning "ideological suspicion", and can thus help towards the development of an Australian Aboriginal womanist theology.

RAINBOW SPIRIT ELDERS

If Aileen Moreton-Robinson's book reflects only the first two stages of Segundo's circle, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*, by the Rainbow Spirit Elders, puts emphasis on the third and fourth stages, attempting to present a genuinely Indigenous Christian theology, and suggesting new ways of interpreting the Scriptures.³⁵ This book results from two workshops held near Townsville in 1994 and 1995, where a number of Aboriginal Christian leaders, following an idea of Pastor George Rosendale, met together to work towards the formulation of a theology reflecting the spirit and culture of Aboriginal people. The workshops were facilitated by Norman Habel and Robert Bos. The text that emerged is a work in progress, not a final product. It expresses the thinking of the Elders, although the actual wording is that of Norman Habel.

Segundo perceived that theology itself has to be liberated. The Elders were also aware of this. Aboriginal people have not had the opportunity to formulate their faith in their own way. As one of the participants said, "Jesus was thrust down my throat".³⁶ The group noted that most Aboriginal pastors "have been indoctrinated into this European Christianity". The Elders respect the "European and Western

34. Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, 149.

35. Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology* (HarperCollins, Melbourne, 1997).

36. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 4.

Christian leaders", but want them "to free themselves from the European cultural bondage in which their theology is imprisoned".³⁷

Land is central to Rainbow Spirit theology. This book is dedicated to those who gave their lives for the land and to the survivors who "have lost their spiritual connection with the land". Four of the six chapters have "land" in their title: "Land and Culture", "Land and Crying", "Land and Christ", "Land and Reconciliation". In the first appendix, which is a re-interpretation of Genesis chapters 1 and 2, the emphasis is on the place of the land in the biblical creation stories.

Chapter 2, "Land and Crying", describes the destructive effect of the coming of the Europeans and their taking of the land. It was not just a matter of the number of Aboriginal lives lost. Those who survived, but who suffered separation from their land, were culturally and spiritually destroyed. As the Elders state: "Stealing our land is stealing our souls.... Stealing our land means taking our lives. Stealing our land is murder."³⁸ The chapter makes heart-rending reading. The Elders ask, towards the end of the chapter, whether the Gospel brought by the missionaries was part of the enslaving culture, or whether it had the potential to liberate and empower them.³⁹ When this question is asked, we are moving through stage two of Segundo's circle and onto stage three: "a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion".

When Aboriginal people see Jesus as God "camping among us as a human being", then for them he is "an Aboriginal Australian, not an alien or foreign human being".⁴⁰ This Jesus continues to suffer and die in the Aboriginal people of this country. Indeed, the land itself cries, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"⁴¹ Yet this suffering Jesus can also bring about reconciliation.

The Elders tell a story of George Rosendale about the reconciliation that came about between the black and the white cockatoos.⁴² The black and the white cockatoos were brothers, but the black cockatoo was angry with his father because he had made him black and his brother white. He set about trying to change his colour, spreading honey over himself and sprinkling on powdered clay. But the monsoon rains came and washed away the honey and clay. His white brother came to him as he sat under a tree, angry and sorry for himself. The cockatoo gently reproved him for his foolishness and spoke of their father's love for both of them. He appealed to him to be happy and rejoice. His words were effective and reconciliation took place.

37. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 6.

38. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 44.

39. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 52.

40. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 60, 61.

41. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 67.

42. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*.

This story has an obvious application to the Australian situation. George Rosendale regards it as one which can help Aboriginal people to understand the notion of redemption through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christ is the one who brings reconciliation and peace. Here is an Aboriginal story about reconciliation. It could be used, according to Rosendale, to illustrate the meaning of a text such as 1 Tim 2:5 (Christ is the one mediator between God and humankind). White people might not find it helpful to link the story with a text about Christ the mediator. But Aboriginal people, who come from a radically different cultural background, need to have the freedom to reflect on the Scriptures, and interpret them, in their own way. The Elders conclude the chapter with this statement: "We believe we are free in Christ to proclaim Christ in terms of our own culture. *Rainbow Spirit Theology* is an expression of that freedom."

We have already arrived at stage four of the hermeneutical circle, that is the new way of interpreting Scripture. Four substantial appendices deal specifically with this. The first appendix is a commentary on the creation stories of Genesis chapters one and two, from an Aboriginal perspective. I will note just two points, which indicate the significance of the land. The first is that, on the third day of the first creation story, God makes the land appear, separated from the waters, and commands that the land itself produce vegetation. Similarly, on the fifth day, the land brings forth animals of every kind. Thus the land has an active role in the emergence of life. This accords with an Aboriginal understanding of the land and its potentialities.

Then, in the second creation narrative, the man is placed in the garden in order to till it and keep it. Aboriginal people have a profound sense of being responsible for their land. They have a duty to care for it. Of course in their traditional life they were not engaged in agriculture. They lived from what the land provided for them. But they had a deep respect for the land, and a strong sense of their obligation to protect and preserve it. In this sense the task given to the man in Genesis 2:15 can have special significance for them.

Thus one can discern the four stages of Segundo's hermeneutical circle in this short book by the Rainbow Spirit Elders. Yet the aim of the book is somewhat different from that of the other three authors. The others wrote in what one might term a "prophetic" style: experiencing deeply the injustice of the situation, they challenged the structures and the thinking which maintained this situation. Gilbert and Pattel-Gray do make suggestions for a new theology, but these are not well-developed. Hence they have not so much to say about Segundo's third stage, that is "a new way of experiencing theological reality". Their emphasis is on prophetic challenge rather than reconstruction and reformulation. It is to this latter task that the Rainbow Spirit Elders

especially give their attention. Of course they point out the enormous injustice of what has happened to Aboriginal people, and the theological and ecclesiastical domination of Aboriginal Christians by Europeans. But they write in gentler mode, trying to reformulate Christianity in accordance with their own cultural and religious traditions. This involves, for example, the preservation of ethical values that are vitally important to them, such as the need to respect and care for the land. They use stories about creatures native to Australia to illustrate moral and religious truths. More importantly, they draw upon profound religious symbols from their own traditions as they try to express their Christian faith in a thoroughly inculturated way. The main symbol they use, of course, is that of the Rainbow Serpent. They write: "For us, the Rainbow Spirit is a symbol of the ancient mystery of our culture and the promise of a new beginning."⁴³ One hopes that the European reaction these days is not simply to dismiss such symbols as "heathen". Aboriginal Christians, under the guidance of the Spirit, need to have the freedom to develop their own Indigenous spirituality, theology and Church life. However, this last statement leads to large issues which are beyond the scope of the present paper.

CONCLUSION

Theology in the European and North American tradition has flourished in this country. Yet this theology has, in general, reflected the dominant white culture of Australia, and expressed the views of those who, through education and position, are among the privileged members of this society. Jesus, however, seemed to be more at home with the outcasts and underprivileged members of his society. Moreover, there have been, in recent times, official statements by church authorities affirming a preferential option for the poor. Hence the project of liberating theology from its captivity by the dominant culture is an important one. The methodology proposed by a Latin American theologian such as Segundo can be of assistance here. In this article I have tried to show that such a methodology is in fact being used by an underprivileged group in Australian society, namely Aboriginal people, and especially Aboriginal Christians. No doubt it could be more widely applied, that is, to other underprivileged groups in Australia.

43. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 14.