

Australian Aboriginal Catholic Women Seek Wholeness: Hearts Are Still Burning¹

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Abstract: This article is both a celebration of the changes in the Catholic church since 1986 and is critical of the oppression that still exists concerning Australian Indigenous Peoples. The material comes from field research, undertaken when I stayed with the East *Arrente* at Santa Teresa mission outside Alice Springs, and the *Tiwi* Islanders near Darwin. I have selected this material specifically because both these communities are Indigenous Catholic and the Santa Teresa Community partook in Pope John Paul II's visit in 1986. The Aboriginal Santa Teresa women have a deep love for their "spiritual father" as they call the Pope, but are not forgetful of the abuse the church has put them through, and the church is making a sincere effort in this community to rectify spiritual ontological, cultural and theological oppression. In the *Tiwi* Islands community the church is not quite as forthcoming in dealing with oppression, particularly theological. The women, however, find they must inculturate Christianity into their Indigenous Spiritualities if they are to find salvation. They have to make Catholicism contextual. Thus, this article will reveal their historical and present-day *Sitze im Leben* and *Weltanschauungen*, their Indigenous Christian theologies/spiritualities, and their attempts to find salvation and wholeness while suffering, what I term, Quadri-dimensional oppression, that is racism, classism, sexism and naturism (abuse of nature) through church and State.

1. This article is extracted from my PhD field research *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Christian Women's Creation Theology* (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005), esp. chapter 3, with some references to my Masters field study, L. M. Skye, *Kerygmatics (Messengers) of the New Millennium: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Women's Christology*, (MA thesis, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1998) ISPCK Publications (in press). Even though all denominations are represented in the research, and numerous tribal groups, for the purpose of the theme of this publication only the views of Catholic Indigenous Christian women are presented from the relevant tribal groups. There is not enough room in the article to cover all their beliefs, nor to explain the research methodology at the base of the data analysis. I think it is sufficient to say that the women have unique and distinct theological/spiritual views that must be analysed respectfully and can be analysed academically.

INTRODUCTION

THE INDIGENOUS CATHOLIC WOMEN interviewees are revealed, within this article, as powerful theists and womanist theologians following the academic tradition of womanist theology which works primarily from *experience* and critiques Church and State of racism, classism and sexism.² (It is oppression on conscious and subconscious levels.) But our women fight another oppression, that of naturism. These women are so connected to Land that its abuse is their abuse. They believe God's Spirit is in all of Creation, and to hurt Creation is to hurt God. Thus, God's Spirit *interconnects* Creation, and is centred in Creation. In the light of this central belief they must be described as Creation theologians. It is from this central belief that the dichotomous relationship with God created by White Western fall/redemption theology is challenged.

The voices of these women are silent no longer; they have been considered for so long as insignificant, yet the phenomenon is: their theology helps them survive multi-dimensional oppression. It is theology of the least that considers the least of the least, the Land, and offers faith that celebrates its preciousness and value. They indeed have a unique voice in both womanist and Christian theological traditions.³

THE BACKGROUND AND PROFILES OF THE ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN INTERVIEWEES

The first group of women interviewed were the East *Arrernte* (the proper spelling, not the one used by anthropologists) who live at Santa Teresa Community, which is approximately eighty kilometres south-east of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. It is a Catholic Mission establishment with some attending priest and nuns, a large church, presbytery and accommodation for the clergy; as well as a school and community facilities for approximately five hundred people.

2. Capitalisation of certain words is mainly to bring/give emphasis to words or concepts which are deemed insignificant from a White Western perspective or are significant to the Aboriginal interviewees, or are common in Black/womanist scholarship. The capitalisation of the word "Church", however, is done to include all Christian denominations. See the work by African-American womanist theologian, Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ: Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (American Academy of Religion, Series 64, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), where she defines the womanist academic tradition.

3. It has been a delicate process to lift their Sacred views from the context of the research and not lose meaning. I hope the task has been successful both as celebrating and providing insight into their uniqueness, to help in the struggling reconciliation process in our country.

Immediately next to the church, and quite symbolically, is Santa Teresa Healing Spirituality Centre. This centre is frequently visited by people of all races who want to come in touch with their spirituality. I came to know of the function of this centre when its creator, Agnes (*Lyaakiyi* pronounced "Yargi") Palmer, was asked to give a paper at the *Our Lives Our Choices II*, Mental Health Conference, in Adelaide. This is a consumer-run mental health conference that studies all forms of mental health healing. *Lyaakiyi's* work is well-known in the spiritual healing of people of all races, and she often is asked to give talks and papers throughout Australia; she is in the process of writing a book on her work. The centre was created because *Lyaakiyi* was so very concerned for her people and others being so spiritually out of balance; she sees such balance of the mental, physical and spiritual as fundamental to complete healing and wholeness for Human beings. She is having particular success with the healing of alcoholics. Central to her healing practice is the deep spirituality and spiritual ontology⁴ of her Aboriginal culture. Hence, she stresses the great importance of her cultural knowledge. *Lyaakiyi* also deeply relates, spiritually, to Catholic Christianity and brings the two spiritualities together in her healing centre. She is very articulate, possessing a Diploma of Teaching, and is able to express Indigenous spiritual/cultural concepts competently in English (this was a dilemma for the study, finding participants with this ability). She is also a respected elder and spokesperson for her People. Consequently, *Lyaakiyi* was an ideal choice as an interviewee in order to study the inculturation of the Christian message into Indigenous spirituality/ theology and to discover the resultant Indigenous Christian theology/ spirituality.

I thought I would need only three elders from all the communities that were chosen for this study, as it is usually the elders who are more experienced in culture and cross-cultural communication; but I was fortunate to find numerous other Aboriginal women who were willing to share their personal story of Jesus. I was also successful in interviewing two other women elders from the Santa Teresa Community who still practise culture and Christianity, as well as five other women, three of whom were elders, who were involved in the Medjugorje (Marian) Movement. Most of the Aboriginal Christian women in the community are involved with this movement which has

4. In Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*, I discuss at length racial ontology as I define it "racial way of being in the world", where I discuss and present academic argument for the existence of such. I analyse what I see as distinct and almost opposing racial ontologies that of White Western intellectual/cerebral ontology and Australian Indigenous spiritual ontology. I also believe that full understanding of such can indeed help the reconciliation process.

its origins at Medjugorje in Bosnia, where an apparition of Mary has been reported to have occurred. Nearly all the women interviewed who belonged to the movement had visited this foreign country and city. Santa Teresa Community is also a place of pilgrimage for the Marian movement because a young Aboriginal man is reported to have had a vision of Mary in the same form as She was seen at Medjugorje; this vision involved the miraculous appearance of a healing spring. Water in this area at the edge of the Simpson Desert usually can only be found by sinking a bore. The healing water has been reported to have cured many people mentally, spiritually and physically. The Catholic church community of Santa Teresa provides accommodation for the numerous people who seek this healing water. Hence, there are two healing spiritualities present at the Santa Teresa Community: one Christian and one Indigenous; both respect each other and use each other as the need arises. A common and distinctive attitude held by most of the women participants, due to their spiritual ontology, is the tendency to seek healing and wholeness from whatever source can provide it. They are not predisposed to a particular doctrine or way; they look at the spiritual essence of that source and require only that it professes and provides: goodness, healing and wholeness.

The women consulted from another tribal group were from the *Tiwi* Islands. These women lectured in, and studied, theology at *Nungalingya* Theological College in Darwin. This college is Indigenous and inter-denominational, and the body of Indigenous students are the ones who are the most articulate of their tribal groups in expressing in English their cultural theology and spirituality, and the relationship of these views to Christian theology/spirituality.⁵ I interviewed four *Tiwi* women elders with a Catholic background, and the principal of the college was available to interpret if there was any difficulty with cross-cultural theological concepts, but there was not any difficulty. At the college I took the opportunity to interview three other women elders, two were lecturers and one a student.

As part of the research process, I had in-depth cultural experiences through a "smoking Ceremony" and bush walk with the East *Arrernte*, and a course in "traditional spirituality and reconciliation" at *Nungalingya* College. With these experiences, and spending every waking moment in informal conversation and sharing food with these women and their families, late into the night, as well as being in quiet meditation absorbing the spirit of each community, and the spirit of the

5. The *Tiwi* theological/spiritual understanding of the melding of two spirits, the *Yiminga* (Spirit) of the *Tiwi* with the *Yiminga* (Spirit) of Christianity in Christ, was the initial inspiration for this research.

surrounding Land, I felt equipped to write in an authentic and respectful way about my People. I am a *Palawa* and we are keeping our culture alive in spirit, but I live in a different State to my homeland, and it was healing to be absorbed in the spiritual ontology and culture of my People on the mainland, and to be made aware of how much in solidarity I am with them in ontology, in the spiritual nature of their *Weltanschauungen* and Indigenous/Christian theologies/spiritualities that develop from that ontology. I express this phenomenon as data relevant to the research. It is important to note, too, that one of the main reasons the Aboriginal women were responsive to the idea of the interviews was my promise to keep their individual identities anonymous in the reporting of the data unless they requested otherwise. This action is not only ethical, and part of ethics protocol procedure, but makes the women feel more at ease to tell the interviewer their real thoughts rather than what they think they should or might be expected to say. I have reported, therefore, the data only in direct reference to the analysis.

EXPLORING INCULTURATION

The concept of inculturation is covered extensively in this article; it is helpful for explaining the foundation of the women's Indigenous Christian theologies/spiritualities. Inculturation is a relatively new study in Christian theology, and its meaning is still developing. While there are various understandings that come to us from different areas within the academic discipline of Christian theology, I am concerned here with the understanding of inculturation that comes to us from the Australian Aboriginal Christian women I have interviewed, and, hence, the contribution they make to its meaning.

Within the academic discipline of Christian theology most works on inculturation have Catholic authors. This is because Catholicism, more and for a longer time than any other Christian Church denomination, has practised and studied this phenomenon in and through its missiology. Theologian, Peter Schineller S.J. is Superior of the Nigeria-Ghana Jesuit Mission, and in his work *A Handbook of Inculturation*, presents a working definition of inculturation:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs

and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about "a new creation".⁶

Upon close examination, it becomes clear that the missionary who puts into practice this definition of inculturation has at the base of his or her evangelisation subversive praxis. The arrogant assumption is that the culture to be evangelised is in need of transformation. This imperialistic consciousness, epitomised in colonialism, is still with us in present-day theology/missiology.

Even when Schineller presents what he calls "adequate words" to help the inculturation process, conscious and subconscious, imperialism is present. When discussing the adequate word "indigenization" he states that the local church is to establish its own identity, which is to be based on "its own cultural heritage and situation". Also in the same statement he emphasises that links to the larger church must be ensured so the local church "remains in faithful yet creative continuity with the universal church". Even though in his writing there is use of the word "expatriate", which is honourable, the imperialistic overtones cannot be denied. When Schineller discusses the adequate word "contextualization" he understands this to mean an "interweaving of the gospel with every particular situation". He is unaware, however, of the destructive implications of this statement, of the damage to Indigenous spirituality, theology and culture, as in some situations there is total destruction.⁷

African theologian, John Waliggo, mirrors our experience in his work "African Christology in a situation of suffering", in which he states that the word "inculturation" itself has been rejected in some African and Western circles, and the "Instances of Africa's rejection within the history of Christian theology can be multiplied indefinitely". He maintains that the reasons for this stem from the fact that:

Western Christianity has been equated to Christianity itself. Western christology has been made equivalent to Christ himself.... Psychological and religious suffering in Africa is most felt in

6. P. Schineller S.J., *A Handbook of Inculturation* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990) 6.

7. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 18-19. Thus, there is insensitivity to the harmful effects of a "pre-inculturated" Catholicised Word, predominantly Eurocentric in spirituality, and with particular and distinct theology, which will cause ontological conflict, and thus spiritual and cultural confusion, and hence, the experience of oppression. While I acknowledge that in some Indigenous, Black and coloured cultures throughout the world there are cultural practices which have been abusive of Human rights, and Christian doctrine and practice has been a vehicle for elimination of such abuse, it is important to recall that the general experience of Christianity for many Indigenous, Black and coloured Peoples from around the world through colonialism/neo-colonialism is one that has not brought Human and Environmental wholeness.

cultural oppression, racism, tribalism, and a feeling of being rejected. In this field both the colonial and missionary masters have done harm to the authentic African personality.⁸

Schineller makes reference to the anthropological activities and studies of “acculturation” and “enculturation”. He understands acculturation to mean “the contact or encounter between two cultures and the changes that result”; and enculturation, “the process of learning about a new cultural tradition through, for example, the process of socialization into that new culture”.⁹ By making reference to these areas of study and their teaching value in relation to inculturation, he is placing the study and practice of inculturation within the imperialistic, racist, classist and sexist legacy of anthropology. All such study involves expatriate interpretation, usually by privileged males, of an Indigenous culture that more often than not offends the members of that culture by the hermeneutics that develop.¹⁰ Hence, we believe the only true interpretation of our individual tribal cultures can come from Indigenous membership.

Schineller, among other authors, understands the adequate word “incarnation” to be “the most directly theological word to express the meaning of inculturation”.¹¹ He quotes an interpretation of the meaning of incarnation in this context, by fellow Jesuit, Pedro Arrupe:

The Incarnation of the Son is the primary motivation and perfect pattern for inculturation. Just like him and because he did so, the Church will become incarnate as vitally and intimately as it can in every culture, being enriched with its values and offering it the unique redemption of Christ, his message and resource for a new life.¹²

Schineller adds to this understanding of incarnation by stating, and rightly so, that Christ:

did not consciously indigenize or inculturate, but instinctively took part fully in the culture he was born into, and then critically affirmed and challenged that culture in the light of the Spirit.¹³

8. J. Waliggo, “African Christology in a situation of suffering”, in R. Schreiter (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (London SCM, 1992) 170 and 172.

9. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 22-23.

10. See Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*, esp. chapter 2.

11. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 20.

12. Pedro Arrupe, quoted in Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 20.

13. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 20.

It is important to comprehend that this is what Christ did, but the missionaries who followed have unto this present day evangelised the Word of God,¹⁴ which they understood to have taken on Human form in Jesus,¹⁵ and was already encased in a cultural context, that of the Jewish culture. Schineller explores this understanding of Christ's relationship to Jewish culture and the reception of Jesus' teachings in that cultural context. He cites this as the first epoch of Christian history, the second being the inculturation of the words of Jesus into the Gentile culture that dialogued with Greek and Roman philosophy.¹⁶ Thus, the Word of God in the form of the New Testament came to Australian Aboriginal Peoples *pre-inculturated*¹⁷ into Jewish and Gentile cultures. Its vehicle was another stage of inculturation, that of Western European culture, and as Schineller states, stemmed from Greco-Roman thought patterns.¹⁸ Hence, Australian Aboriginal People received the Word of God expressed through multi-stages of pre-inculturation. I understand this to be one of the foundational problems of ineffective evangelisation and the destruction of Indigenous spirituality, theology and culture.

THE CONTRIBUTION SOME AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN WOMEN MAKE TO INCULTURATION THEOLOGY

The women of the *Tiwi* Islands give the clearest example of a faith rather than doctrinal inculturation of the Indigenous women consulted. They met the Christian message in the powerful depths of their spirituality. The most interesting fact is that *they* inculturated the message. They met the Christian message on their own terms out of the situation of their own culture, theology and spirituality. Out of the powerful depths of their genetic, fundamental spiritual ontology,¹⁹ and their natural theistic orientation, they met the Christian message in the spirit of Christianity, in the being of Christ. Sister Ann Gardiner in the

14. From an Australian Indigenous ontological perspective the hermeneutic practised by such missionaries was Fundamentalist in nature, the Word of God, the Scriptural text almost verbatim; and through the vehicle of colonialist culture to Australia, intrinsically narcissistic, Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*, esp. chapter 1; see also Skye, *Kerygmatics*.

15. It is important to understand, as will be made clearer in the course of the article, that the Australian Indigenous women consulted for this research, theologizing out of a genetic, fundamental spiritual ontology, relate to Christ in spirit and do not take issue over the distinction between the functions of Jesus and Christ because, for them, they are one and the same, *the same spirit*.

16. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 9-10.

17. This is a neologism I have created to explain the cultural nature and state of the Word of God before we received it.

18. Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, 10.

19. Part of the discussion of racial ontology, the second main hypothesis of the thesis, concerns its genetic nature. See Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*, esp. chapter 2. I believe my argument supports this aspect of racial ontology where our People are concerned.

title of her article: "The melding of two spirits: From the *Yiminga* of the *Tiwi* to the *Yiminga* of Christianity",²⁰ is stating exactly the process of faith inculturation among the *Tiwi*. It involved a meeting and melding of two spirits, the spirit of the *Tiwi* and the spirit of Christianity in the spirit of Jesus. Encounter with the *Tiwi* women reveals initially this powerful spiritual relationship between Christ and culture.

There is, however, a gradual breaking down of this spiritual relationship by the effects of doctrine, mostly brought about by pressure from clergy and lay members of the Church (predominantly Catholic) who are usually not traditional Aboriginal people, to live out that doctrine (usually Catechismic). How can a truly unique spiritual relationship with Jesus and the Word of God, arising out of the innocent event of the meeting of a virgin (although much less so than prior to colonialism) Indigenous culture and the heavily pre-inculturated doctrine of Christianity, be fully realised with such dogmatic attitude? The *Tiwi* women are trying desperately to hold onto their spiritual hermeneutics, and hence, culture, but are victims of White Western Christian ontology, epistemology and pedagogy. The women really do love their natural spiritual relationship with Christ and doctrine (a doctrine which is definitely not literal); I have seen them become overwhelmed in joyful salutation and witness only to have this severely quashed, because of its invalid representation of doctrine. This imperialistic attitude so often not only nullifies the needed joy for healing and wholeness, but also destroys the unique witness of Indigenous/Christian hermeneutics. It is this type of White Western imperialistic inculturation theology that eventually wears away at Aboriginal spirituality, theology, culture and ontology until it is no longer recognisable as Indigenous. We only can hope that the women will gain the strength through their faith to stand against imperialistic Christian ontology, epistemology and pedagogy, and be the unique witness of Jesus they are called to be.

The women of the *Tiwi* Islands inculturated Christ, but they understand that Jesus had "preincarnated" before Christian colonialism came to Australia. This belief is shared unanimously throughout all the tribal groups interviewed. The belief that Christ was with God (however God is perceived), and the Ancestors (the depth of this belief varies from group to group, but is ever present), and our People from the beginning of Creation, is also unanimous. In relation to this the women will constantly make reference to Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1.

20. Ann Gardiner, "The melding of two spirits: From the *Yiminga* of the *Tiwi* to the *Yiminga* of Christianity" (Occasional papers 35; Darwin: Northern Territory Library, 1993).

The remarkable phenomenon that occurs with the *Tiwi* women is their ability, because of their spiritual ontology, to pierce through the pre-inculturated layers of Christian doctrine and discover its true essence: a living relationship with the living God, and it is through this relationship that they interpret Christianity, if permitted. The East *Arrernte* women, in my experience, seem to have been allowed to develop this relationship less than the *Tiwi* women. They have been more heavily indoctrinated by Catholic teaching, and suffered physical maltreatment by nuns in earlier years of the established mission, hence, there is a stronger presence of fear more than reverence for God among these women. This community of women is struggling to hold onto its Indigenous spirituality, theology and culture, but they say respect for this aspect of their lives is far better than it was in the past. The clergy of the present day are generally much more supportive of Indigenous leadership than their forebears, and they hope and plan for such leadership to eventuate in the church community for the sake of preserving more of the Indigenous heritage. The strength of the Medjugorje movement, with its devastating effect on culture is not greatly welcomed by the clergy, but I believe it is because of the effectiveness of previous indoctrination that such a movement was able fully to possess most of the Christian community of women and children. The Medjugorje movement, however, is a powerful spiritual movement and the immediacy by which it has been possessed speaks of the still very strong spiritual ontology of these women. Hence, the East *Arrernte* women are the victims of inculturation theology that has nearly destroyed and is nearly destroying much of their Indigenous heritage, but not their ontology (its genetic nature is more difficult to eliminate). Thanks to a group of traditional women and supportive clergy within the community, the Indigenous heritage has been awakened and still is surviving.

For the women interviewees inculturation theology is liberation theology; they ache to be freed from the effects of racism, classism, sexism and naturism inherent in Christian colonialist inculturation theology and its legacy. They want to be free to find their God out of the context of their culture, theology and spirituality, and for most of them this means rediscovering culture all over again. The healing effects that only can come about by "identity" must occur, along with the critical analysis of White Western Christian inculturation theology that in many instances reveals a God that is anything but a healer, a creator of Human wholeness. Many are experiencing the "end-times" in their state of oppression, in ongoing physical, cultural and spiritual genocide, and need an inculturation theology that helps reverse this genocidal activity. We are really only at the very beginnings of this reversal process and it

is hoped that works like this research, in its ability to educate the hegemonic Church culture, will help that process.

Here I have been discussing attitudes and activities that will aid in developing an inculturation/liberation theology for Australian Aboriginal Christian women. Robert Schreiter, a theologian from Africa, summarises three major situations within which such a theology can be developed: cultural reconstruction, cultural resistance, and cultural solidarity.²¹ These Indigenous women are engaged in one or all of these activities. It is important that we be empowered to engage in all of these activities if the inculturation theology we develop is to be liberating. It seems the degree of freedom we have to express and live our culture has been determined by how valuable our Land has been to White Western people; the depth of dispossession depending on Land value. For *Palawa* people, the Land was a small island with rich soil and a good rainfall; the habitable parts were limited and physical genocide occurred over the fight for Land. The Land to the north of Australia was not as valuable to the colonialists, and consequently the traditional cultures there are more alive. The phenomenon is that even though there was conscious genocidal activity to destroy our cultures, and hence, connection to Land, our spiritual ontology *could not* be destroyed.

The Australian Indigenous Christian women consulted for my researches are unanimous in their view of the "preincarnate" Christ, who was with them in spirit before time began, and before the era of Christian colonialism. Hence, the "incarnation of Christ" aspect of White Western inculturation theology is inaccurate. Their understanding challenges the new Christian area of study in inculturation theology. They are challenging the present structure of inculturation theology, and they seek *their* Human right to indigenize and contextualize the Christian message. Because they inculturate faith they will be, as Coleman envisioned,²² a source of revelation and spiritual directors, and will reformulate White Western theological language.

In the light of this, as Schreiter states:

inculturation remains a risk [for the hegemonic Church], but a necessary one. Without it faith cannot take root. With it, the

21. R. Schreiter, "Inculturation of faith, or identification with culture", in N. Greinacher and N. Mette (eds.), *Christianity and Cultures (Concilium 2)*, Maryknoll, New York: SCM and Orbis Books, 1994) 15-25.

22. See Skye, *Kerygmatics* and L. Skye, "An Investigation into Black Feminine/Feminist Christology/Theology in Comparison to White Feminine/Feminist Christology/Theology", in A. Pattel-Gray (ed.), "*Tiddas*" *Talking Business* (Voices from the Edge Series, No. 1, 22Delhi: ISPCK, 2000) 74-88.

possibility of new and deeper insights into the meaning of the mystery of Christ is always present.²³

CHRIST TRANSFORMED

The women interviewed in my earlier research, and the women participants for this research, have met Jesus and the Christian message in spirit, out of the depths of their spiritual ontology.²⁴ They perceive doctrine through faith, believing in Christ's power to make it relevant to us in our Indigenous and feminine context. The data analysis in my earlier research produced two paradigms after discerning the Christologies of the Aboriginal women. The women consulted for this current research unanimously share the Christology of the first paradigm:

The first and most generally shared by the Aboriginal women of the paradigms, and one into which I personally fit, presents a Christology that understands Christ to be the very essence of the "spiritual" existence of Australian Aboriginal Christian women; the issue of gender is unimportant to them, just His wholistic spiritual "saving" power that uplifts them in all dimensions of their being, spiritually, mentally and physically, in the depths of their great suffering; His central expression is holy "love", by holy I mean love that treats Human Life and Land as sacred; their Christ is one that allows them to identify with, and draw the good from, their native cultural/spiritual heritage and celebrate the "wholeness" that this brings; He is seen as being of equal value to the community of Australian Aboriginal Peoples as He is to the individual.²⁵

23. Schreiter, "Inculturation of faith, or identification with culture", 23.

24. See Skye, *Kerygmatics* and Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*.

25. Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 33; for these women participants in my Masters research, and for myself, Christ as "He" is a natural expression. (I also refer to Jesus as "He" in the communication I have with the women in the interview process because that is how they generally refer to Him, and are comfortable with this.) We have a spiritual relationship with Christ, and in the depths of our suffering He reveals himself as the "perfect male image", or perhaps better, the "complete male image", in the depths of pure love there is no offence to our spirit. This is an amazing phenomenon, it is shared by other Black women in deep suffering who partake in the spiritual in ontology, see Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 205-30; and the concept of the perfect/complete male image is explained in detail by another African-American womanist theologian Patricia Wilson-Kastner. *There is little issue over the gender of Christ, Jesus is met in Spirit*. (Many other Indigenous, Black and coloured womanist theologians throughout the world are in solidarity with this perspective.) These views culminate in one of the main distinctions between womanist and feminist Christologies. From a spiritual ontological perspective, it seems the intellectual/cerebral ontological consciousness of feminists naturally leans to a greater psychological (being involved more with the spatio-temporal/locative realm than the atemporal realm) than spiritual relationship with Christ, and thus makes more issue of

The phenomenon is that even though a paradoxical, phantom Christology was presented to the women through Christian colonialism and its legacy, they were able to perceive a Jesus who is one with us in our depths of suffering, identifying with the oppressed and broken-hearted, uplifting and empowering us to experience the fullness of joy, freedom and life. Surely the women are experiencing the wonder and witness of the "true" Christ revealed to the least, in order to save the least. It is in this particular perception of Jesus that most valuable contributions are being made to soteriology.

Christ is being transformed, is inculturated in faith, and revealed through that Indigenous faith, White Western Christology is being transformed. Jesus' spirit becomes melded to the *Yiminga* (Spirit) of the *Tiwi*, the *Pilirrpa* (Spirit) of the *Warlpiri*, the *Tiggana Marrabona* (Spirit) of the *Palawas*, Christ's spirit melds with the spirit of the *Yolngu*, the East *Arrernte*, and the *Ngarrindjeri*. (All the tribal groups of this research are included in this statement.) Jesus, thus, becomes one with the full spiritual dimension of each tribal group, this dimension being the very essence of Indigenous life. Christ, therefore, becomes one with spirituality, theology and culture. Jesus is one-in-spirit with the individual, the tribal group, the Ancestors, and all of Creation. Because of this, Christ is one with the Land, held so *sacred*, especially in Australian Aboriginal culture. Jesus is absorbed into religious rites, rituals and cultural practices. Faith in Christ through spiritual revelation determines how Indigenous culture and the Christian message are to relate. In theology Jesus is one with all female and male God principles; hence, challenging White Western patriarchal models of God. Christ is one with the Creation and Ancestral stories. Jesus' presence is felt or said to exist at all religious rites and rituals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Hence, those Aboriginal women with Catholic backgrounds understand Christ to be one with Mary and all the saints; and Jesus' presence is felt at the Eucharist. In the words of an East *Arrernte* woman: "Mary is one with Jesus and a Helper of Jesus, both are of equal importance".

Christ as Spirit is "living energy", the "pulse and breath of life" (a *Tiwi* understanding that is shared by all the tribal groups of this study), which moves through all Creation. To the women this means that all animate and inanimate Creation is lifted up in Sacredness; it is unfortunate that Human beings are so often unaware of their own Sacredness, the Sacredness of others, and the Sacredness of the natural

gender; generally we are neutral concerning gender unless Fundamentalism has done its job too well. See, also, Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*.

Environment.²⁶ In the light of this, Christian views on Creation are being challenged, and healing contributions to ecotheology are also being made.

The spirit of Christ is treated with great sacredness and Jesus' presence and participation at Sacred ceremonies is felt, welcomed and celebrated. The Sacred Sites where these ceremonies take place are likened to the Cathedrals of White Western Christianity, and their desecration is as equally devastating. In the light of this, Christian ecclesiology is receiving "new life"; and "new dimensions" are being added to the understanding of Indigenous Sacred ceremonies that have for so long been a violent taboo for White Western Christianity. To the East *Arrernte*, where a child's spirit is conceived is the birthplace of the soul of the child and becomes a Sacred Site, and that child must take care of that Site. It is the place that nurtures their soul and where they are to be buried at death; and if the person is Christian, this Site is where Christ gave them their soul and their physical body to experience physical life. Hence, Sacred Sites can have individual as well as community significance, and are likened to a place of Christening or a Church cemetery; they are Sacred places that should be given due respect in both cultures. In this light, Church and State must be more sensitive to the claims that are made by Aboriginal Peoples concerning the existence of Sacred Sites. With Jesus' presence and participation at Totem ceremonies and Celebrations there is the celebration of Nature, its Flora and Fauna, all the gifts of the Earth, all is lifted up in Sacredness in the presence of Christ, and this has always been so. Again the ancient and still prevalent Christian fear²⁷ and disdain for such Ceremonies and Celebrations is being questioned and challenged; and the views of Creation theology are being broadened.

The women's understanding of Christ applies, too, to Aboriginal Law. Jesus having been present with Aboriginal Peoples since the beginning of Creation gave them the Law, and nearly every tribal group studied has stated that their Law is extremely similar to the Old Testament, especially the moral code and Creation story of the Old Testament. Hence, such understanding, it is hoped, will bring more respect for Aboriginal Law, which for so long has been abused, by Church and State, as being evil or insignificant.

26. The point has been made to me that some of the views of the Aboriginal women sound like New Age spiritual concepts; it needs to be understood that many such concepts have been co-opted from Indigenous cultures.

27. From a spiritual ontological perspective, I think the intellectual/cerebral consciousness of White Western Christianity makes for the response of fear to the unseen, developed by being located more in the temporal not atemporal realm. And this hinders perception and consequent celebration of the spiritual/atemporal existence of Life.

Furthermore, all the women interviewed for this research see Christ as one with the Ancestor spirits, they have been together since the beginning of Creation. I witnessed a *Tiwi* lady tell the story of her departed brother who now lives in his Sacred place, how she spoke to him at this Sacred place and prayed for his help in their lives; this was met with reprimand from a Christian clergyman who was listening to the story, stating: "Why don't you speak to the Big One, instead?" In her eyes she was speaking to the Big One, the Jesus that lives in her brother, who is at-one with her brother's spirit. To her this action is no different than seeking the intercession of the saints. The Church abuses Indigenous culture, theology and spirituality as it consistently imposes a pre-inculturated Word of God on a culture in its innocence and wears away its uniqueness until its innocent and unique perception of God is no more, devoured by hegemonic Church theology, spirituality, and culture. This is one very important reason for documenting the Indigenous theologies/spiritualities of these Aboriginal women, just in case the hegemonic Church does its job too well, and these unique perceptions are lost forever. It is the hope of this research that the Church will recognise the valuable contribution these women make to Christian theology/spirituality, and give to such women the respect that is their *Human right*, and hence, protect their theology, spirituality and culture, and consequently their identity. Therefore the hegemonic Church is being challenged to review its theology, to eradicate its imperialism and to act as Christ would want, in the love, protection and support of the innocent in any situation. There is no greater act of love than respect; there is no room for fear or ignorance in this action. Therefore, space is given to really listen to the witness and wisdom of these women in their theologies/spiritualities.

The Aboriginal women who are Catholic and practise their traditional beliefs believe in the oneness of Christ with the Ancestors. In the words of an East *Arrernte* lady: "Mary brings us closer to Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Indigenous is all one [meaning oneself, Mary, Jesus, the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Ancestors are one]". These women, and those who are not as traditional, equally believe in the oneness of Christ with Mary in spirit, and that Mary and Jesus are separate persons. In the light of this, views in Mariology are being broadened. All of these women believe in the oneness of the living spirit of Christ with the Eucharist, in this they are contributing to the "study of transubstantiation". In oral history, the East *Arrernte* do not believe in the existence of bad spirits, only good and bad energy, hence, individual spirits can choose to convey good or bad energy. *Lyaakiyi* centres on the good energy of the Spirit in the smoking/healing circle, she said: "This

is especially good [helpful] with an angry person, we don't believe in demon spirits only negative energy, I centre on the goodness in them." All the other tribal groups of this study, however, believe in the existence of bad spirits, similar to the biblical representations. Such views can broaden and challenge the study of demonology.²⁸ All the women consulted believe in Jesus being one with God (however God is perceived) and the Holy Spirit, and that this country is the "Land of the Holy Spirit" with which Christ is one; hence, through such understandings contributions are able to be made to the study of the "doctrine of the Trinity", and to pneumatology.

There is also the phenomenon that we all sense in Spirit and know that our country is the "Land of the Holy Spirit", and this is a message to us – we have a mission for our People to share the healing value gained from our genetic, fundamental spiritual ontology with Western peoples, who are out of balance and need to be mentally, physically and *spiritually* whole. In this I see Australian Aboriginal Christian women become saviours of their oppressors.

It is undeniable that Jesus has been transformed after being inculturated, in Spirit and faith, into the Indigenous theologies/spiritualities of the East *Arrernte*, *Tiwi*, and *Palawa* women mentioned here. It is this central and most significant act that influences all our other areas of Indigenous/Christian theology/spirituality.

THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE!: SOME AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN PRESENT THEIR SALVATION

All the Indigenous Christian women interviewed, regardless of denominational background, see their salvation as taking place in their lifetime, not just in the afterlife. Their suffering which is experienced at the hands of hegemonic cultural ontology, epistemology and pedagogy, makes them aware of the "saving power" of Jesus in identifying with them in their pain and struggle, in supporting and uplifting them, in healing them and making them renewed and whole. Hence, Christ's identification with the least, including the sacred Land, and promise to deliver "the captives, and the oppressed and broken-hearted" is the main hope that they live by in their day to day struggle; and they do see Jesus deliver and renew. Christ gives them the strength to claim their identity, this is a particularly important point with most of them.

The women came to realise the salvation aspect of Jesus in various ways.

28. I expound on this in Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) Calling*, chapter 4.

Salvation for *Lyaakiyi* was “here and now”, she “didn’t know where she was going, pain consumed her whole being”. She said she felt: “helplessness, hopelessness, directionless, lost” and “close to suicide”. For her “consolation was not enough”, then she felt the “love that was there, meant for me, and it was there when I needed it”. She said further: “I give my whole self to Him. The meaning [of salvation/Life] comes in simple terms when you feel that love.”

It is through the Creation story of “*Japarra and Purrukupali*”, a resurrection story, that a *Tiwi* lady came to believe in the Jesus story. This is the aspect of the Creation story that made her accept that the story of Christ was true:

Japarra said, “Give me that baby, so I’ll make him better and he’ll come back to life on the third day.” But *Purrukupali* said to *Japarra*, “I won’t give you my son, because you and I will follow him when we die.”²⁹

To her the baby is Jesus and the central persons of the story are going to follow Jesus when they enter the spirit realm. We are witnessing an example of a Creation/resurrection story which mentions the cycle of life common to Creation stories, and one of the many instances where the women find their Creation stories reflect the stories of the Bible. They see through their spiritual ontology where the Spirit of God has been at work in the stories of their culture and the cultures of the Bible and its stories.

THE LAND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Australian Aboriginal Christian women consulted for my researches are unanimous in the view that God (however that is perceived), Jesus and the Holy Spirit are One. The Catholic women, those from the East *Arrernte* tribal group, and the women from the *Tiwi* Islands, see Mary as sharing Oneness. The Godhead and Mary, are all united in spirit, and the Aboriginal women are united with them in spirit. As an East *Arrernte* lady stated: “Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit, and Mary, one with All [meaning they are all One].” The Holy Spirit is one with the Land and with all Creation. In the words of another East *Arrernte* lady: “This country of Australia is the Holy Spirit country, and the islands.” The women, as well as myself, see Australia and the Torres Strait Islands as Holy Spirit country, and that this is a very spiritual Land. We sense this in our collective spirit, and we know

29. From the *Tiwi* Story of *Japarra and Purrukupali* (Casuarina, Darwin: Nungalinga Theological College, n.d.) 11-12.

this is a spiritual message to us from God that we have a mission to educate others about the value of our spiritual ontology in bringing balance to the Human creation, in order for them to become mentally, physically and spiritually whole. White Australian theologian, Denis Edwards, is able to perceive our vision; as he states:

The concept of "apprenticeship" implies a fundamental attitude of respect before those who can teach us about the mystery that is revealed to those that have ears to hear and eyes to see in this South Land of the Holy Spirit.... It does mean recognising that Aboriginal perceptions of the land are a way, I would believe a central way, towards the development of a genuine spirituality for all Australians.³⁰

The Holy Spirit is a *sacred* entity, all of Creation is sacred, our country is sacred. Embodied in this Sacredness is the mystery of what Aboriginal People have to offer to White Western Christianity: because our Land belongs to God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, and their united Spirit moves through all Creation, then the Land, our country, becomes Sacred. The Holy Spirit is an entity that is very easily understood by the Indigenous women because of their spiritual ontology.

The *Tiwi* understanding of *Yiminga* (Spirit) means "pulse, breath, life, energy", and, this understanding of spirit is shared by all the Aboriginal women consulted, and a similar understanding is developing in Christian theology.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has found the Holy Spirit to be of central importance in its ecumenical work. The renewal of the "whole Creation" (the theme of the WCC 7th World Assembly), is a view the women definitely share, and one the Holy Spirit can bring into reality if people abide in the Spirit of God and seek God's will. The WCC also recognises the reason for the growth of the Charismatic Movement in recent times throughout the world which is centred in the work of the Holy Spirit, as being: (a) "the longing for a truly spiritual life, in reaction against an *over-cerebral* [personal emphasis] Christianity"; (b) "the longing for strength, in reaction to Christianity which has denied or explained away the miracles and the mighty works attested in the New Testament".³¹ The Aboriginal women would see absolutely these two needs as pronounced in the healing of White

30. D. Edwards, "Sin and Salvation in the South Land of the Holy Spirit", in P. Malone (comp.), *Discovering An Australian Theology* (Homebush: NSW: St Paul Publications, 1988) 89-102.

31. A. Bittlinger (ed.), *The Church is Charismatic: The World Council of Churches and the Charismatic Renewal* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981) 9.

Western Christianity, a deeper spiritual life, and a more theistic, personal relationship with God; and overjoyed that White Western Christians are recognising the activities that are keeping them from wholeness.

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN WOMEN
MAKE TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The Australian Indigenous Christian women of this study believe in the three spirits of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit; but due to their genetic, fundamental spiritual ontology they perceive the spirit of Mary is also one with this trinity and the spirits of the Ancestors share in this oneness, just as we ourselves share in this Oneness. In the light of this, normative Trinitarian theology is challenged. The Spirit of God moves through all Human and non-Human life; therefore, the Trinitarian form of the Godhead loses emphasis and the Godhead and Creation become more as One; Creation cannot be *separate from God*. The strong theistic natures of the women cause them to see the Trinity as three *persons*. In *Lyaakiyi's* words: "I am in love with the three of them." In East Arrernte language they are called: *Ngkarte* (God) *Akngeye* (Father), *Ngkarte* (God) Jesus, *Ngkarte* (God) *Utnenge* (Spirit) *Akngerre* (Big), and *Altyerrengge* (at the moments when they are one). She told the story that she: "becomes so full of joy" in her love relationship with them, and "they make me feel like a beautiful butterfly or broлга; as I danced a spiritual dance my arms became wings". The women will frequently use nature metaphors to describe their relationship with any aspect of the Godhead. She has felt the person of the Holy Spirit at moments: "like a breeze; or like a drop of water blessing me; or like someone kissing me on the cheek". *Lyaakiyi* stated that often in her healing sessions: "I am controlled by the Spirit, I am told when to talk and when not to talk." She said: "The Holy Spirit is given to us to strengthen us in times of need"; this happens especially when someone is professing the depths of their pain and suffering to her. Also when in the healing circles she told me: "I hold the Spirit for a while and pass it on for others to feel it." The Holy Spirit, like the rest of the Godhead, Mary, the Ancestors, and each one of us, is seen as an individual spirit or personality, and all spirits are collectively united in the great Spirit of God the Creator who moves through all Human and non-Human life.

The Holy Spirit to them is not, however, an object of intellectual/cerebral study; it is a spiritual experience. It is an experience of "living spirit/energy", the "pulse and breath of life" (as stated, originally a *Tiwi* perception), that is intimately connected to the Land, as they are connected to the Land, and lives and moves through all Creation.

CREATION OUR CHURCH

My research, and my experience of the Australian Aboriginal community of women, reveals that Australian Indigenous Christian women do not see a church building or a church-structured clerical and denominational hierarchy as important for being with God. Creation is their Church. With a Creation-centred spirituality, God is not confined or limited in any way to a building or an institution.

Christ is within them and lives through all Creation; they feel closer to God in the wide open spaces than they do in Church buildings. In the Jesus story of the Bible, Christ would go to the wilderness area to talk to God, feeling closer to God there than the church buildings and institution. Interestingly, the activity of *talking to God* seemed to be of greater importance than worship to all the women interviewed for this study. Worship is more a White Western Church hierarchical creation. Their form of worship could be stated as more a worshipping of the God within their Sacred-selves and the Land. The Land and all of Creation is sacred, Creation is their Sacred place, and their Sacred Sites are their cathedrals. Their cathedrals are where they have spiritual Ceremonies of significance, where the sacredness of Creation is recognised, celebrated and upheld in their Laws, and where they talk to God and the Ancestors and feel spiritually rejuvenated.

Lyaakiyi has created Sacred space in her Healing Spirituality Centre at Santa Teresa Community.³² This centre is like the combination of a Christian church and a Sacred Site. Even though like most of the East *Arrernte* women she has had predominantly Catholic influence in her life, interestingly, the religious symbols, rituals and composition of the Centre reflect more the spiritual essence of Catholicism than the church's structure; when denominational religion is approached in the *spirit* of Christ all external divisions fall away, because they are external. It is the same Jesus within us we share in *spirit*. The two cultures are brought together in spirituality. She practises her spiritual healing in a predominantly traditional way through a "smoking Ceremony". This involves a circle of chairs centred around a fire that is always hot enough to produce smoke when water is thrown over the coals. In her words: "It is a circle of love, truth and honesty." When people sit around this circle there is no shame. They are able to express their true feelings,

32. I am pleased to see White Western feminists are beginning to comprehend the value of creating "sacred space" in their pursuit of genuine identity. Australian feminist, and critical psychologist, Jennifer Rolfe, studies this process in her work, "The Wild Zone: Women's Arena for Ritual, Psycho-Spiritual Connection and Celebration of Divine Feminine Creative Principles" (Research Project, MA Critical Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Sydney, 2002).

in a safe place. When they leave this circle, they leave behind negative energy, and *Lyaakiyi* smokes it away. To the East *Arrernte* smoke is magical; it opens up another world, the world of the spirit. It also connects the spirits of the people in the circle, *Lyaakiyi* will pick up the spiritual load of a person, and she prays for the Lord Jesus to take the load away. An altar is present at the top of the circle, representing Catholic influence, but it is also symbolic of unity of culture, for there are pictures of Jesus and Mary, a photograph of a sculpture of a Black Christ, flowers, fruit, and paintings done by *Lyaakiyi* which portray the spirituality of her culture. These paintings dominate the centre, they are very sacred, and she wishes people to view them only at the centre in order to be influenced by their spiritual healing power. Admittedly she is allowing a book to be published about the paintings, but she prefers to limit their viewing. The paintings also powerfully display East *Arrernte* Indigenous theology/spirituality and the inculturation of the Christian message. I spent a considerable amount of time viewing and discussing them with *Lyaakiyi* in order to understand the inculturated vision.

Due to our spiritual ontology all the Aboriginal women mentioned in this work relate to all cultures and institutions spiritually. Just as the Healing Spirituality Centre is seen as Sacred space, so too is the Christian Church seen as Sacred space. The East *Arrernte*, and all the women interviewees for this study, sense the presence of God everywhere, but Sacred spaces that are set aside to commune with God and the Ancestors, and to celebrate God, and Sacred Sites are places of heightened Spirit activity and are greatly enjoyed; it does not matter if they are of traditional origin or Western creation. In the experience of all the women consulted, most of the Western churches of their communities allow the practice of culture in the services to varying degrees, usually to a lesser degree than the women would wish. For the East *Arrernte* People, the Catholic church has changed its liturgy to incorporate most of the songs and responses in language; the prayers recognise the local Flora and Fauna, and the particular *Humanness* of Mary and her motherhood is emphasised more than her virginal or hallowed state. Local flowers and fruit are brought to the church, and a painting of a Black Mother and Child hangs in the church. This seems to be the limit to which culture and Christian ceremony are united in this Catholic church.

Traditional ceremonies and Christian ceremonies are brought together more directly in the Catholic churches attended by the *Tiwi* women. As they emphasised: "We love singing, gestures and clapsticks in church, and language, it's [spiritually] very powerful in language." It is a spiritual language formed out of a spiritual ontology and more

suited to spiritual celebration and activity than English. The emphasis of coming together more as a "community" is particularly important to all the women interviewees whether it is a traditional or Western ceremony.

CONTRIBUTIONS SOME AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN
MAKE TO ECCLESIOLOGY

Creation is their Church, and in the light of this Christian ecclesiology is strongly challenged because its historical praxis is a White Western structure that is out of touch with Creation. The women present a Creation-centred ecclesiology which will breathe life into the Church; it will bring the Church into a state that is "in touch" with all that is living rather than being locked in the cupboard of archaic, patriarchal, hierarchical history, seeking to serve only primarily itself. A Church out of touch with all that is living has an ecclesiology of death; a Church that is dead cannot bring life and wholeness to its people, or the Environment. The egalitarian consciousness of these Australian Indigenous People does not comprehend the internal struggles of hierarchy. To them it is necessary to work as a community with men and women in partnership for the peace and wholeness of the community, the Environment, and for universal balance, a central aspect of the cosmology they share.³³ A Church that is Creation-centred will be a seeker-sensitive³⁴ Church that "serves" its people (not itself) in the depths of their need. It is a Church of context, a place of the celebration of Creation and nurturing of life and wholeness and balance (mental, spiritual and physical), a place of joy and healing not suffering, a place of "wholistic" ministry. It will reflect all the good nurturing qualities of God the Mother/Father/ Lover/Friend; it will not know imperialism, racism, classism, sexism, and naturism, it will not know segregation or separatism.³⁵

To these Indigenous women the intellectual/cerebral consciousness of White Western Christian spirituality borders on secularism. They are

33. There are patriarchal anthropological attitudes that have not documented clearly the part the women play in Australian Aboriginal culture. My research is attempting to help fill in some of those gaps in knowledge. I know concerning egalitarianism it may appear that I am making an homogeneous statement, but my life-observation and experience of my People causes me to make this statement; egalitarianism arising from a deeply spiritual, genetic fundamental ontology that centres dynamically in the non-corporeal and atemporal realm, thus giving significance to the nurturing of the spirit of the Human and Environmental community.

34. G. McIntosh, *Make Room for the Boom or Bust: Six Church Models for Reaching Three Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: F. H. Revell/Baker Book House, 1997).

35. The Aboriginal women are totally ecumenical and inclusive, they do not see the need for denominational division, judgement, excommunication, or division of religions.

a People “alive” in the Spirit. And they centre themselves in the Spirit, and the Spirit centres them in Creation. Creation is the Sacred place of the Spirit; therefore, Creation is their Church, they have an ecclesiology of Spirit/Life that encompasses tangible and intangible spirit existence. A Church and people who are Spirit-centred cannot know division because it is the one Spirit, the same Spirit, who lives in and through us all.

END-TIME?: ETERNAL LIFE!

All the Indigenous women of this study had difficulty with the question on eschatology. Their cultures unanimously share an understanding of the Eternalness of life. Because of their genetic, fundamental spiritual ontology they perceive that Human life “never ends”, there is never a spiritual death; and the life of the Earth is continual, perpetual energy. Their different cultural perspectives differ concerning the spiritual existence of Human life after physical death, but the understanding of the Eternalness of life is still unanimously shared. This view, coupled with a lack of understanding of the Fall, not knowing a state that is ever away from God, makes the Christian doctrine of eschatology the most difficult for them to inculturate. They believe that if there is ever a state of being away from God it is in our present lifetime, and that is by not allowing ourselves to be immersed in the God we know is always there, in order to experience and manifest His/Her Goodness in the world.³⁶ Hence, for us the *eschaton* is now if we do not abide in God for the manifestation of *goodness*; and the Apocalypse is what we experience in our everyday lives.

Lyaakiyi of the East *Arrernte* calls the Second Coming the “Big Destruction”. This is the only way she can comprehend such an event because from her spiritual ontological perspective, she perceives that such a thing could be possible through not abiding in the spiritual Being of God. By not abiding we bring destructiveness to our lives and the Environment, and the Big Destruction is merely the end-product of Humankind out of harmony with God. She says she cannot comprehend the way the judgement aspect of this Christian eschatological story is presented. Hence, in her words: “I can’t see how the three people [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] who have carried me in so much healing till now will cause that Destruction.” The concepts of heaven and hell are not common in their cultural beliefs, hence we merely exist in a

36. Like our women renowned Creation/spiritual theologian, Matthew Fox, presents theology that is Creation-centred, with God centred in Creation, not fall/redemption theology that places God outside of Creation. He admits he has co-opted his Creation Spirituality for White Western people from Indigenous cultures. See M. Fox, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 14.

spiritual state of being that is in harmony or out of harmony with God; this perception is one shared by all the women interviewees. All the East Arrernte women were deeply puzzled with this question of the end-time for the reasons I have described; if they did answer, the uniform expression was: "If it is going to happen God will tell us, we will know in our spirits."

For a *Tiwi* lady: "Heaven is now; you know like in the Wilderness of the Old Testament – the Promised Land – that's where I am now." Hence, their heaven is to be part of the Land where they were born. This displays the depth of Sacred meaning the Land can have to Australian Aboriginal Peoples; White Western hegemonic Church, theology and culture does not have the right to impose its spiritual concepts and doctrines and laws on others, which so often place Humankind, God and Creation apart from each other, as is the case with its concept of heaven, presented in the common Church theology we have received in this country. Not only is this practice imperialistic and abusive of Human rights, it is often philosophically, theologically and psychologically destructive for Creation.

CREATION, SACREDNESS AND SERVANTHOOD

The most dynamic aspect the Australian Indigenous Christian women interviewed for this research share concerning their views of Creation is an extremely deeply spiritual, intimate *interconnectedness* and symbiotic relationship with the Environment. They identify so strongly with the Land and Environment that its abuse is their personal abuse. It is a relationship with the Environment White Western people have found and will find difficult to understand. Their attitude has preserved their race and the Land since the beginning of their time, and in the present state of ecological crisis of our world, requires serious investigation and contemplation in order to gain the benefits of their *Weltanschauungen*. A spiritual ontology and a theistic disposition and relationship with God is required to comprehend fully their connection with the Land and Environment. One of the best ways to demonstrate their *Weltanschauungen*, and one of the ways they find best to express their perspective, is through their cultural stories/rituals/ beliefs.

To the East Arrernte, destroying Land is destroying culture, and this is a view shared by all the women interviewees. They all believe that Jesus feels the pain and destruction of the Land and Environment and that Christ is constantly looking after it, a task in which the women share. As *Lyaakiyi* states: "A plan was put in place in the Dreaming, of the Land, and the Land told the story, the Dreaming tracks are God's sandpainting, the elders would draw in the sand to describe the

Dreaming tracks, these sandpaintings are where the dot paintings we see today come from.”

All the women consulted see the raping of the Land as like the raping of Black women’s bodies. In their cultural memories, through oral history, are the stories of the raping of their women by White men.³⁷ The women of this study intimately and naturally relate this abuse to the abuse of the Land; their emotional turmoil and pain is felt in equal measure when either abuse occurs.

All of the women interviewees from the Northern Territory hated greatly the mining for uranium there. As a *Tiwi* lady said: “God is like our Mother; she feels it [rape of the Earth] through the Earth.”

SOME AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN CONTRIBUTE TO THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

The women of this study have Creation-centred (non-anthropocentric), Indigenous/Christian theologies/spiritualities that view Creation as Sacred because the Spirit/Energy of God moves through all things and, therefore, are honoured and overjoyed to partake in *diakonia*, in service of the Land, Environment and Humankind. They challenge and transform Christian theology/spirituality that possesses a history of apathy concerning care of the Land and Environment, and spiritual/cultural violence towards the theologies/spiritualities of Indigenous Peoples. Christian theology/spirituality cannot help but be humbled and educated by the grace, benevolence, and message of the Australian Indigenous Christian women consulted for this research, who offer a way of peace and salvation for this world that is based on reverence for Creation.

CONCLUSION

In the light of what has been stated the hearts of our women are still burning for the wholeness they seek. They challenge the Church and State to understand and support their uniqueness. To give freedom to that uniqueness that is their Human right and reflection of the wonder of God.

37. The women share this experience with many Indigenous, Black and coloured women throughout the world; I explore this in more depth in *Skye, Yimiga (Spirit) Calling*, chapter 4.

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