

# Colonial Bondage: Liberating Theological Education

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## Introduction

As an Aboriginal scholar, theologian, author and activist I have written this paper solely from an Aboriginal perspective and I wish to show my respect and to state as I am not a Torres Strait Islander, I cannot speak for them nor reflect on their views as I don't have the authority to do so.

For several decades I have been on my own journey of discovery to explore the rich religious, cultural and spiritual heritage of my people and to affirm and embrace my people's teachings and epistemology within the development of my own academic research. Our Cosmology, Weltanschauung and Epistemology are central to our ontological quest and fundamental to what we know and embrace.

The basis of this research is that we are the oldest living culture in the world, and I am always amazed at how little this means to White Australia and how they give little recognition, respect or value to this immense treasure of knowledge and wisdom that Australia has at its fingertips.

It is important to note that the Creator Spirit was with us long before the British invaded our lands and our faith has been nurtured over thousands of years and as a result, we have a very intimate relationship with the Creator Spirit and when we speak of this relationship, we invoke the Spirit Creator in our midst. Our Ancestral Narratives reflect this relationship, and our ceremonies give praise to our Creator Spirit and reminds us of our obligations to one another, to Land, to the environment and the whole of creation, to our law and the responsibilities given to us by the Creator Spirit. Among First Nations people there are power-filled stories about the Creator Spirit's acts in the time of creation. Aboriginal Christian leaders tell of their Ancestral Narratives that speaks about our knowledge and beliefs of the Creator Spirit who through our Spirit Ancestors formed and bestowed our world and forged our identity, culture, and law. This process highlighted the relationship between Aboriginal peoples to the land, creation, the environment and the spiritual world of our Spirit Ancestors and the Creator Spirit, and how they were all linked to each other and dependent upon this interconnection. Our faith and the spiritual world were, and still are, the life force and foundation of our life existence and survival. The Creator Spirit is the source of life for us, and we cannot survive without our connection to the life source as stated by our Spiritual leaders.

Australia's First Nations people have a deep understanding of the mysticism associated with the Creator Spirit as this has been nurtured over some 110,000 years. The Creator Spirit is the creator of our world, and the creator of our humanity. We are born in the image of the Creator Spirit, and we are who we are because of the Creator Spirit. We have an intuitive sense

of God as the Creator Spirit, as a wisdom teacher on country, and as Spirit. The Creator Spirit bestowed upon us our land and entrusted this world to us, and we are to protect, care for and to rejuvenate our Earth Mother. The Creator Spirit handed down our Law which dictated every aspect of our life and permeates our spiritual life and taught us how to care for our country and our obligations and responsibilities to our kinship system, religious and spiritual life. The Creator Spirit gave us our ceremonies, songs and rituals in which to honor and remind us of the Creator's presence and that the Creator Spirit is always with us.

### **Western Colonial Domination**

When the British invaded our lands in 1788, so began the forced indoctrination of western Christendom which would be the beginning of our nightmare. The Colonisers dominated every aspect of the Bible from biblical interpretation to the point where the text was used to justify racist views, colonial theft and dispossession, subjugation and oppression, massacres and cultural genocide, and the rape of women and children. This biblical view also formed the basis on which we were cursed, deemed pagan and demonic and a racially inferior race of people. The Colonial invaders with their racist views believed their "whiteness" made them superior<sup>1</sup> and they considered Aboriginal peoples as being inferior and morally bankrupt.

What the Colonisers failed to see was the rich spiritual life in which Aboriginal people lived and the presence of Creator Spirit in us. These days, Australia's First Nations peoples continue to experience racial discrimination where the Federal government suspended the Racial Discrimination Act that protect the Human Rights of Australia's First Nations people that sees the continuing removal of our children from their families and community, this includes governments taking control of our peoples income, high incarceration rates of First Nations people, children and young people, high suicide rates of our children and the denial of cultural rights and heritage, and successive governments failure to formalize a treaty with its First Nations people.

The horrific acts that have been inflicted upon Australia's First Nations peoples have had a deep psychological impact on the lives of my people which has left them traumatized and the effect of this trauma is still being felt today. Sadly, the most frightening aspect of the Church's complicity in the subjugation of First Nations peoples is the heartfelt sentiment usually expressed that it was done 'with the best of intentions'. This, however, does not alleviate the enormous trauma inflicted upon my people.<sup>1</sup> The forced imposition of the Christian missionaries and, in fact, those churches that worked among Australia's First Nations communities, were partners with the Government in the genocide. Unwittingly no doubt, and always 'with the best of intentions', but nevertheless, the missionaries and churches were

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<sup>1</sup> Pattel-Gray, The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia.

guilty of complicity in the destruction of First Nations cultures and tribal social structures- complicit in the devastating impoverishment and death of the people to whom they preached.

Other genocidal acts led to the crushing of Australia's First Nations people's cultural identity, religious and spiritual beliefs. The history of colonisation is seen as the domination of the Western World, whether this is good or bad, it has impacted upon the psychical, emotional and psychological lives of First Nations people resulting in intergenerational trauma through the means of missionisation.

In defining the methodological process in which I use this must include the historical experiences and current experiences of continuing racism, discrimination and marginalization which is our lived reality. The legacy of "colonial Christianity"<sup>2</sup> and its effects on both First Nations and colonial participants in the colonisation and missionization processes meant there was a critical need for Aboriginal people to identify and to reaffirm our spirituality and cultural heritage as the first step in our struggle for religious self-determination. So began the process to decolonize our theology and the removal of all western bias.

Over the past four years Professor Norm Habel and myself began working to de-colonise biblical narratives. We began our exploration with the development of our hermeneutical process that we would use to de-colonise Genesis. On behalf of my people, I wish to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to Norm as we acknowledge his courage to give us insights into the Hebrew narratives of Genesis and to open this world to us as non-biblical scholar. Norm's incredible willingness to deconstruct and to de-colonise the biblical narratives with us has exposed the colonial bondage that has encapsulated the Colonisers interpretation of biblical narratives to legitimate colonization and expressed through their theology.

We academic scholars must examine how colonization holds both white and black Australians in bondage as we are all indoctrinated to hold a certain colonial worldview that is either conscious or unconscious and we must be aware that the very structures that we participate and function in each and every day are founded on colonial values to maintain colonial power, wealth and privilege. We need to be able to name this if we are ever to be free and liberated from this mindset that holds us in bondage. While this worldviews, structures and values remain in place we – both black and white Australians will never be liberated or freed from a life of division, and Aboriginal people will be forever confined to a life of inequality, subjugation and racism. If there ever was a time to transform our theological education the time is now.

As an Aboriginal scholar I have always struggled with the colonial narrative that was presented to us that portrays a Colonial God who favours one race over another; although this is an Israelite narrative, it's been taken over and coopted by the Western world and used to justify Western Colonisers who identify themselves as the 'Chosen Ones'. I cannot believe that this Colonial God is the one and the same as the Creator Spirit that we know and understand, and in whose spirit we breathe. This Colonial Imperial God that the Coloniser brought to our land was and still is hell bent on destroying First Nations people and

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive history of Australian Church mission activity and its impact on the First Nations of this land, see Harris, *One Blood* and Henry Reynolds, "*Why Weren't We Told?*"

we could not tolerate bearing the image of this God; nor could we find comfort in, or communion with, a God who acted like a Colonial Landlord. Unfortunately, the colonial Christianity transported to our lands in a flower plot remains in its original flowerpot and was never transplanted into the land of my people and therefore never took root in this country and this is visible by the fact that theological education still looks to the north and is only engaged in its research and discourse with Europe. Where the majority of theologians have very little engagement within the landscape where they actually live or within the political or theological context or with First Nations people whose lands they live upon and call their own.

This western Imperial God embodies all that is evil – Colonialism, Patriarchalism, Misogyny, Racism and homophobic distain which unfortunately permeates the ecclesiology and theological education today. Therefore, it is imperative that by returning to the image of the Creator Spirit prevalent in our culture and spirituality, we must de-colonise this colonial God as we must de-colonise both biblical and theological narratives. It is imperative that academic theological institutions must engage within our context and name those aspects that hold us in bondage and begin a process to deconstruct and de-colonise our Christian beliefs and theological education to be able to speak with integrity into the world in which we live.

Whereas for First Nations people, our image of God is unlike the one portrayed by many colonial churches and missionaries, who presented God as dwelling at a distance, living in heaven in splendid isolation. Many early missionaries did not discern either that God was present in the Land of Australia, or the significant understanding of the Creator Spirit and the high level of spirituality that was present in our Aboriginal culture long before they appeared.

First Nations people cannot help but contemplate that this colonial God is a distant ruler who has handed over to the human coloniser the whole created order as a resource under their oversight and for their own use and benefit. God is a faraway king who has ceded control of all the animals and plants to his human landlord. This God instructs his human landlord to rule over what has been entrusted to them. If God, the heavenly monarch, has handed the whole created order over to the human colonists as his landlords, the outcome is that they, in turn, are free to do what they want with it. This was further seen in Western Christian interpretation that they were the 'Chosen Ones'. This reading paved the way for colonisers' early attacks on the First Nations people's religious and spiritual beliefs that the sacred spirit permeates all of nature. This Colonial concept of God as a disembodied deity uninterested in earthly affairs, which stripped the world of any spiritual significance or meaning. This created a separation between our kinship with our environment.

It is important that the churches and Christians realise how essential it is to de-colonise both the biblical and theological narratives, we need to restore our relationship first and foremost with the Creator Spirit and next to make a radical transformation that sees us reconnecting physically and spiritually with the Land and our common kinship with each other and all creation. We need to understand our human necessity to see ourselves as part of creation but not as nature itself, or as a power over nature. We must regard ourselves as living in creation and with creation being important to

our very existence. We long for our primordial sense of belonging to Mother Earth: our existence is dependent on her.

As my people have stated over the past several decades that Adam and Eve could not have been Aboriginal because if they were, they would have eaten the snake and not the apple. Based on this understanding, Adam and Eve would not have been the basis for Original Sin entering the world. However, for Aboriginal people we see the basis for sin entering this world was through colonization and this being the foundation for evil to thrive. Nevertheless, through Western colonisation and Christianity this became the means in which they brought their cultural views and baggage to make others inferior to them and the source of their superiority. For First Nations theologian the development of our theology could not be done without setting the experiential context of the suffering, subjugation and oppression of our people under the weight of colonization. Their lived experience, both historical and current defines the First Nations peoples' anguish and cruelty of Western colonization and missionization in Australia, through the theft of land, massacres, genocidal acts, slavery, segregation, the government and church process of force removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their mothers and referred to as the stolen generations, the Western environmental destruction of Aboriginal land, seas, waterways and lifeways. The colonial view of a God is one that separates the Creator Spirit from creation. It is not one which the First Nations people can relate to at all—the Creator Spirit is the centre of our universe and the life force of our Mother Earth on which all life depends for survival. We cannot comprehend a life that is not Creator-centered.

The role of First Nations women is considered critical to the maintenance, continuity and survival of the entire societal structure. First Nations society, as we knew it then and as it still is, depends on the equal participation of women. Today, the status and position of First Nations women within Australia differs, depending upon the impact and absorption of the colonisation, missionisation and Western patriarchal beliefs and misogynist acts in our society. This biblical interpretation and these Western values have done much to undermine the status and role of First Nations women throughout our Land.

That is why it is critical for biblical narratives to be de-colonised so that they dismantle and hopefully eradicate colonial power and domination and will give way to the empowerment of all First Nations people around the world. From our perspective, this blatant colonial tradition which confirms the original harsh mandate to dominate the Land and all living creatures of the Land (Gen. 1.26–28), also reflects the colonial worldview and colonial actions of the Europeans peoples who invaded and colonised the Land of Australia. Our response is to discern the falsity of this biblical tradition, recall the truths of our First Nations relationship with the Land and the Land Beings of our Country and to endorse the alternate interpretation.

As First Nations theologians, we are not only free to take this stand because of our rich spiritual relationship with the Land and the Creator Spirit in the Land; because we believe that Christ has liberated us from the sin of colonial control and freed us to correct ancient biblical narratives and retrieve the underlying spirit of the Gospel that is colonial-free. Today, we challenge the colonial inheritors who continue to benefit from the colonial structures, laws, and systems as the descendants of the Colonizers – who have inherited great power, wealth and privilege, resulting from the barbaric acts

of their forebears upon my people; that saw the theft of our lands through legal fiction, massacres of literally thousands of my people, and the multiple generations of stolen children and the 235 years of oppression and subjugation.

The Australian church's racism is evident in its abysmal failure to stand united against racism in this country. Recognizing the existence of racism in general is the easy part, and so, many churches decry this "evil" in the widest possible terms. Some churches even go the next step and recognize the existence of racism in the church itself...The church's silence is deafening – its lack of action is shocking...By keeping quiet, the Australian churches are accepting the situation of racism against Aboriginal People, and implicitly espousing the cause of the privileged white majority. The churches are reinforcing their own racism, as well as that of society in general. They are endorsing inequality and injustice.

### **Liberating Theological Education**

As the newly appointed Head of the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity, I take up this leadership opportunity with great humility and grace. It has been what I have yearned for, for such a long time and I am deeply moved to have been appointed to this really important role at this critical time in Australia. To have the opportunity to influence theological education and discourse to bring a First Nations theological insight, hermeneutics and exegetical process, to share a First Nations biblical interpretation and to share ancient knowledge and wisdom with you. To provide First Nations Christians with access to academic theological education to raise up the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

The School of Indigenous Studies will be a national platform to raise up the First Nations voice and to also speak into all social and political areas that are of concern and relate to securing justice and equity for our people. It is important to note the School of Indigenous Studies would not have been established if not for the University of Divinity's capacity to hear the aspirations of Aboriginal people who wanted a recognized place within theological education and their institutions.

The Council of the University of Divinity moved to make our aspirations a reality with the establishment of the School of Indigenous Studies. It is vital to acknowledge those Council members and Christian individuals who saw our value and worth and made this happen through their own generosity and personal investment which saw Aboriginal theological scholars moved from the periphery to the center of theological education and by doing so raised the status of Aboriginal academic scholarship into the heart of theological scholarship, with the potential to be a critical paradigm shift in theological education. We are deeply grateful.

I am excited about our future, as the School of Indigenous Studies is a major achievement and reflects the commitment of the University of Divinity to take this bold step to provide us the access to influence theological education in Australia. Until now theological education was seen as the last bastion of white supremacy and now this has changed for the better. This is the radical change that we so desperately need in this country. Some of the member colleges of the University of Divinity are already engaging with us seeking ways to include our academic scholarship into the seminary's curricula. I invite Christians

all over Australia to walk with us and to show their commitment by investing in securing a sound economic future for the School of Indigenous Studies and to help us educate, develop and nurture the next generations of Aboriginal academic leaders and scholars.

The School of Indigenous Studies will provide a national and at times a global theological voice and education through workshops, seminars, conferences, lectures and I hope some of these will be in partnership with our partner colleges. I firmly believe that it is an honour to educate the next generation of Christian church leaders, clergy, biblical scholars, missiologist and theologians etc.

Just think to be able to shape, and equip them, develop their skillsets, and to nurture the next generation of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal theologians in their growth and understanding of the Trinity and to bring inspiration to them to be bold, fearless, courageous seeking Christ's justice for all who suffer, are oppressed and need love and acceptance and a home to belong too. We need to remind our future leaders, of God's call to us all to fight for justice but most importantly to transform the lives of humanity. For them to see themselves as instruments of God and not vis-vera and we should be excited about our incredible Creator Spirit. The One who has created us in the image of the Creator Spirit and who knows the number of hairs on our head, to have an intimate relationship with the Creator is something to be excited about. The One who has no limitations but the ones we place on the Creator Spirit.

In conclusion, I must therefore state if we are to have any hope of reconciliation and restoring wholeness in creation then we, First Nations people must first begin by challenging the colonial inheritors as to how do they do theology on stolen land, and what does it mean for them to be seen as colonial inheritors? Because it is time for 'Truth Telling' and exposing the lies, the brutality and the power, privilege and wealth colonial inheritors have gained at the injustices committed against First Nations people. As the Truth shall set us free...Amen.

Together we can make a difference as we wrestle with these challenging questions and to recognized how colonized we are and to begin the process of decolonizing ourselves in the endeavor to liberating our theological education from the bondage of colonialism.

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