



RELIGION, DIVISION AND COMMUNITY: A WEST AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract: If we reflect on the meaning of community it begins to appear why this might be so. The Macquarie Dictionary defines it as 'a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share culture and have a cultural and historical heritage'. It is thus the product of ideological as well as economic factors. Here, however, the historical and cultural heritages of the two groups are profoundly different. Aboriginal people have lived in the area for thousands of year whereas the whites only began to settle here in the late 1890s with the most rapid growth taking place between 1905 and 1913--when there was little respect for Aboriginal people and culture.

Keywords: Aboriginal community, colonialism, Moore River Settlement.

In 1904, the early days of the new nation, A G Stephens, literary editor of *The Bulletin*, opined that 'the Australian environment is unfavourable to the growth of Religion' (Turner, 1968: x). More recently Ian Turner offered socio-psychological reasons. The settlers were engaged in carving 'their own lives out of a remote and monstrously difficult wilderness; what they achieved they owed to themselves, and they found little for which to thank their fathers' heaven' (Turner, 1968: x). By and large, this remains true today. But maybe religion, properly understood, has a contribution to make to regenerating community.

Colonial society was implicitly based on the story of Ulysses who left home to travel through strange places but always with the intention of returning home or making the strange places a replica of home, creating a community of sameness but also of coercion, a 'closed circle around sameness' with little respect for difference (Susin: 2000: 87). This describes the situation in the area which concerns us with in the wheatbelt of Western Australia. Once relatively prosperous, it has recently endured a series of droughts and now faces salination and general degradation of the land. Farmers are beginning to move elsewhere and townspeople are increasingly defensive as confidence dwindles, intensifying tension between them and Aboriginal fringe dwellers. So it is obviously a community in need of regeneration. Perhaps surprisingly and certainly unfashionably, this is coming from a small group of religious women from several Roman Catholic orders.

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As settler numbers grew, Aborigines were increasingly marginalised, their children denied the education to enable them to cope socially and economically and when the Moore River Settlement, designed to destroy their culture, was founded in 1917 they were deported there. So for a period, 'the natives' disappeared, 'gone between the defiled image and the indifferent gaze'(Chow, 1993: 54). But over time even before the Settlement closed in 1980, some blacks began reappearing, not all of them descendants of those who once lived here, so that they had little or no ancestral memory of the area and lacked its sanction, though even if they had it, it would have been seriously disrupted at Moore River. As for the whites, as farmers move away, those who remain and the townspeople, preoccupied with the battle to survive economically and preserve their self-esteem and had little time or respect for the Aborigines, ghosts from a past most Australians want to forget, who had played little part in their ongoing battle with the land and were seen as 'bludgers', the opposite of the 'battlers' they believed they were.

Things began to change, however when the Sisters arrived. Unlike the locals, they had a world view that was open to difference and prepared to move beyond 'the closed circle around sameness, exposed and vulnerable to the approach of others'(Susin, 2000: 88). So they became friends with the Aboriginal community, not with intention to proselytise but to set them free to flourish as themselves, but also to win respect and make a contribution to the local community and become part of it. The former presbytery has become a Meeting Place where blacks can come together in town, and a community garden, an art project and a choir have been set up. A number of middle class white people have come from Perth and even from interstate to join in this work from time to time, raising the town's profile and making it a much less limited and more inclusive community in which people now share a common culture of work, but work in which people make themselves as well as earn money. As this painting, presented to the Sisters by the women of the art class, a community of mutual respect has now been established between the two cultures.



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Biography: *Veronica Brady taught for many years in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia where she is now an Honorary Senior Research fellow. She has published widely on Australian literature, culture and belief and has a special interest in Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations. Her most recent books are; South of My Days, a biography of Judith Wright and The God-Shaped Hole, a collection of essays. She has also held a number of public offices, including the Board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Appeals Tribunal of the Department of Social Services, the Board of the Library and Information Services of Western Australia and the Older Australians Advisory Council. She is also a Roman Catholic nun, a member of the Loreto Order (the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary).*