When Christianity came to Australia, with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, it came as the religion of the Europeans. After the new penal colony had survived the crises of the first few years, the British gradually extended their control over the whole continent. Thus they established in this country the dominance of European culture. In fact they were determined that this ‘new’ country would be British. And the religion of Britain, as of Europe, was Christianity.

The Indigenous people were gradually displaced by the new settlers. Many of them resisted, and, in effect, a frontier war was fought. Eventually the country was ‘pacified’ by the European invaders. Meanwhile efforts were made to ‘civilise’ the Aboriginal people and to convert them to Christianity. Some did become Christians, as a result of the missionary work of the various denominations, and they were taught to accept Christianity in its European form.

I do not mean to criticise the generous and courageous work of so many Christian missionaries, or to ignore the efforts that were made to bring about some kind of ‘inculturation’. Nor do I wish to say that Aboriginal Christians were simply passive recipients of the structures and customs of European Christianity. But the fact remains that the Christian churches came to Australia as part of the dominant European culture. Aboriginal Christians, at least in many cases, did not really have the freedom to develop their own forms of church life. This was no doubt especially true of those baptised into the Roman Catholic Church, since this Church puts particular emphasis on the ecclesiastical structures and liturgical forms inherited from the past. These reflect the Church’s origins in first-century Palestine, its cultural adaptation to the world of the Roman Empire, and its development in medieval and post-medieval Europe. The Christianity which came to the Aboriginal people was deeply inculturated in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. Yet the culture of the Indigenous people of what came to be known as ‘Australia’ was vastly different from that of Europe.

Jewish Origins

No doubt it is a truism to say that Jesus was a Jew; yet we do need continually to remind ourselves of the reality of this fact, and of its consequences for the understanding of the Christian Church. Thus Jesus accepted the Jewish Scriptures as recording God’s revelation to his people; he regarded the Temple as a holy place of worship; he affirmed the teaching authority of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 23.2-3); and he did not reject the institution of the Temple priesthood. Yet, while he accepted the fundamentals of the Jewish religion, he was severely critical of the way this religion was understood and lived in his time. He affirmed that righteousness of heart was more important than external observances (Mt. Ch. 5; Mark 7.1-23; Mt. 23.23); he emphasised the promotion of human values rather than obedience to a law coming from outside the human
situation (e.g. the healings on the Sabbath); he was regarded by many of his contemporaries as a prophet, and seems to have accepted this description of his mission (e.g. Mark 11.27-33); and in his parables in the last period of his life he declared that the religious leaders of the people had abused their authority and that their privileges would be taken from them (e.g. Mark 12.1-12). Thus, while affirming the essentials of the Jewish faith, Jesus, in his prophetic mission, was seeking to reform the religious life of his time, and to lay the foundations of a new understanding of what God asks of human beings.

Moreover, his life and ministry loosened the bonds that bound religious faith to the particularities of Jewish culture. He affirmed the profound humanism of the Jewish tradition; and he linked faith in God to the welfare of human beings, rather than to obedience to a written code of law. In doing this he was in fact developing the theme of universalism already present in the Jewish Scriptures (e.g. Genesis 1-11; Amos 9.7; the Book of Jonah). Although he saw his own mission as primarily to the Jewish people, he was also opening the way for the wider missionary expansion of the early Church.

All the first Christians were Jews, whether of Palestinian background, or from the diaspora (the ‘Hebrews’ and the ‘Hellemists of Acts 6.1). They saw their community of faith as the fulfilment of the hopes expressed in the Jewish Scriptures; and they may well have had the expectation that the whole Jewish people would come to have faith in Jesus (in Romans, chs 9-11, Paul struggles to understand why this did not happen).

Seen from the outside, the early Christians looked like a sect within Judaism (cf. Acts 24.14). We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that they continued to worship in the Temple, but also that they ‘broke bread’ together in their homes (Acts 2.42-47). These meals, celebrated in memory of Jesus, surely are connected with the development of the Eucharist, and no doubt they followed the Jewish pattern of blessing, breaking and sharing the bread (cf. the account of the feeding of the five thousand, Mark 6.41). The Eucharistic liturgy of the Church has deep roots in Jewish culture.

The author of Acts also tells us that, from the very beginning, baptism was the fundamental rite of initiation (Acts 2.37-41). Washing was important in Jewish religious rituals, e.g. in the ceremony of cleansing from leprosy (Lev. 14. 1-9; cf. also the healing of Naaman in the Jordan – 2 Kings 5.8-14). Ezchiel uses the imagery of water-cleansing to express conversion of heart (Ezech. 36. 25). The Pharisees of Jesus’ time had many practices involving purification by washing (Mark 7.3-4). And, of course, immersion in the Jordan was central to John the Baptist’s mission of renewal. Thus the essential rite of Christian initiation is also rooted in Jewish culture.

As the Christians grew in number, it was inevitable that organisational structures would emerge. These structures tended to be modelled on those of the surrounding society. In the Gospels and the Acts of Apostles there is regular reference to Jewish elders or presbyters (e.g. Mark 11.27 and 14.43; Acts 4. 23 and
6.12). It is not surprising that in Acts 11.30 there is mention of Christian elders in Jerusalem. Moreover, just as the Jewish elders were part of the supreme council in Jerusalem, i.e. the Sandedrin (Acts 4.5), so we are told by the author of Acts that the Christian ‘Council of Jerusalem’ was composed of apostles and elders (Acts 15.6). Thus we see the Church, in its original Palestinian setting, developing organisational structures patterned on those of Jewish society. Just as the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptist are culturally conditioned in their origins, so also is the Christian presbyterate. The Church, which in essentials is a community of faith, hope and love, manifests itself historically in forms conditioned by the culture in which it takes shape. Hence the Church, as it exists today, owes a great deal to Jewish culture.

The Roman Empire

As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire it adapted to the social structures that it found there. The family was centrally important in this society, and hence it is not surprising that the Christians gathered in house churches (e.g. Romans 16.5; Col. 4.15. They were anxious not to give offence to their non-Christian neighbours, but rather to assure them that Christian families maintained the appropriate order and decorum; and so we find in the New Testament letters the so-called haustafeln, i.e. lists of instructions for the various members of the household (e.g. Eph. 5.21 – 6.9; Col. 3.18 – 4.1). Moreover the Church itself was spoken of as the ‘family of God’ (1 Tim. 3.15; and it was required that the presiding elder be a respectable man who looked after his own family well – for if he was unable to do this, how would he be able to take care of the Church of God (1 Tim 3.5)? Thus the Church was modelling itself on the patriarchal family of the Roman Empire.

The second century saw the development of an episcopal Church order. In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the authority of the bishop is described in extraordinarily strong terms. He is said to preside ‘after the likeness of God’ (Magnesians ch 6); people are to respect him as ‘a type of the Father’ (Trallians ch 3 ); no one is to do anything ‘pertaining to the church without the bishop’ (Smyrneans ch 8); Christians are to be ‘obedient to the bishop as to Jesus Christ’ (Trallians ch 2). The role of the ‘monarchical bishop’, as it came to be called, is expressed here very forcefully. No doubt such a role was felt to be necessary for the survival of the Church, and the preservation of its unity, in the context of the highly cultured and elaborately organised society of the Roman empire.

Another important factor was the numerical growth of the Church, and the reality of intermittent persecution. Strong leaders, who had the qualities to be prominent figures in secular society, were often the ones chosen to be bishop. This was true, for example, in the case of Cyprian of Carthage in the third century. He was a man of stature skilled in rhetoric, and of high moral qualities. Although he was only a recent convert to Christianity, the people wanted him as their bishop. Another example is Ambrose of Milan, in the fourth century. He was a man of obvious administrative gifts, and had risen to be provincial governor. Although he had not yet been baptised, he was chosen bishop by
popular acclamation. Thus the situation of the Christians in the Roman Empire greatly influenced the way in which the office of bishop developed.

The Christian community in Rome had always been of special significance for the Church, partly because Rome was the capital of the Empire, and partly because the two greatest of the apostles, Peter and Paul, were martyrred there. As the world-wide Church came to feel the need for centralised leadership, the role of the bishop of Rome became more significant. The clash between Stephen of Rome and Cyprian of Carthage, in the middle of the third century, can be seen as marking an important early step in the historical development of the papacy. By the end of the fourth century the Bishops of Rome were strongly affirming their position as successors of Peter, leading and guiding the universal Church.

The Reformers of the sixteenth century questioned the theological status of these historical developments, especially those that emerged after New Testament times. For the Reformers, only what was in the Bible was normative. (Indeed, for Luther at least, questionable also were those parts of the Scriptures which seemed to clash with his understanding of justification by faith.) The institutions which developed after the close of the New Testament period had no particular authority, but simply emerged in order to meet the needs of the time. As times change, such institutional elements can change. But for Roman Catholic theology (and for the Orthodox, and, to some extent, the Anglicans) these developments in the early centuries occurred under the guidance of the Spirit, and are part of the structure of the Church. It is true that they are historically conditioned. Yet Christianity, as an essentially historical religion, is, in some ways, indelibly marked by at least some of the contingent situations through which it has passed. As an earthly community, as well as a spiritual communion, it recognises at least some aspects of its identity in its history, especially its early history. To put it in somewhat exalted terms: when God decided that the Word would be made flesh in a remote region of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago, that decision had historical consequences. It is for theologians of the various Christian traditions to discuss what exactly those historical consequences were, and how far they are binding on the Church today.

**Aboriginal Society**

An enormous contrast to all of this was the Aboriginal society the Europeans found when they began to settle in this country at the end of the eighteenth century. For quite some time the Europeans had very little understanding of Aboriginal culture, social customs and religious beliefs. Gradually, as a result of the observations of perceptive Europeans, and, later, of the work of trained anthropologists, some kind of picture began to emerge. Needless to say there have been many disputes and disagreements in this difficult process of cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, the writings come almost entirely from the European side. Nevertheless, some aspects of traditional Aboriginal social and religious life, which are relevant to ecclesiology, can be discerned.
Fundamental to the Aborigine’s understanding of society – and, indeed, of the cosmos – is the kinship system. W.E.H. Stanner, in his 1953 article, “The Dreaming”, writes of the great complexity of the Aboriginal social system, and declares:

...there has been an unusually rich development of what the anthropologist calls ‘social structure’, the network of enduring relations recognised between people. This very intricate system is an intellectual and social achievement of a high order.¹

Ronald and Catherine Berndt write:

In Aboriginal Australia kinship is the articulating force for all social interaction. The kinship system of a particular tribe or language unit is in effect a shorthand statement about the network of interpersonal relationships within that unit – a blueprint to guide its members.²

This system enabled each person to know his or her place in society, and how he or she was expected to behave. It made possible harmonious living together.

A question that has prompted much discussion and disagreement among European observers concerns the presence or absence of political structures in traditional Aboriginal society.³ Perhaps one should ask the larger question; how were cohesion and order maintained in these relatively small groups of nomadic people? There were significant factors that promoted such cohesion and order. One was the elaborate kinship system, which has already been mentioned. Another was the fundamental importance of the Dreaming, and of the Law reflected in the myths of the Ancestral Beings. What had been established in the Dreaming was permanently determinative for human life. This meant that for Aboriginal people there was considerable emphasis on the maintenance of the status quo. These, then, were two important factors that helped to hold Aboriginal society together and preserve order.

The stories of the Dreaming were, of course, central to the religious beliefs of the people. Religious ceremonies played a big part in their lives, and those who were acknowledged as having leadership roles in various aspects of these ceremonies were persons of some authority. But it is disputed how far this authority extended outside the religious sphere into the secular realm. A further complication is that, for people with such a deeply religious world-view, it is not easy to separate the secular from the sacred.

As to whether or not there were political structures in traditional Aboriginal society, W.H. Edwards considers that in the latter half of the twentieth century there were conflicting views, typified in the writings of M.J. Meggitt and R.M. Berndt.⁴ According to Meggitt, who worked among the Walbiri people of Central Australia, there was no group of political leaders who exercised power within the society. Other factors were sufficient to maintain order and cohesion. Berndt, on the other hand, considered that religious leaders could also exercise some authority in everyday affairs. According to Berndt, important men would meet together to form some kind of council. Thus, in his view, some form of political structure was present. Whatever may have been the truth of the situation – and of course there could well have been differences in diverse parts of the continent – the ways in which Aboriginal societies were
organised differed enormously from those with which Europeans were familiar. There was no monarchy, no parliament, no elections, no system of appointing officials with administrative authority in secular affairs.

Religious ceremonies played an extremely important part in Aboriginal life. They might involve, each year, some weeks or months of full-time activity. The liturgies were carefully prepared, and were undertaken with the utmost seriousness. They were carried out with great artistic skill. The ceremonies were earthy and human, and yet at the same time richly symbolic. A strongly mystical element was present. The performances were also expressions of exuberance and joy. They were a source of life for the people.5

How did people become leaders in religious ceremonies? Meggitt, in his description of the Gadjari ritual among the Walbiri, says that this question is not easily answered. He notes that the leaders are of mature age and have considerable ceremonial knowledge. There is no formal process of selection of new leaders. However, the present leaders look out for younger men who seem to have the appropriate qualifications, and some kind of informal selection is made. A young man chosen in this way ‘is not told of his selection but he soon recognises his changing status when he notices that, unasked, the leaders and other older men at ceremonial gatherings spend time explaining religious dogma to him…’6 The young man needs to give his consent to this process. Also, he must continue to conduct himself in such a way as to retain the confidence of the present leaders – otherwise his ‘candidacy’, so to speak, is dropped.7

The mystical element in the ceremonies has been mentioned. W.E.H. Stanner, in his discussion of the ceremony of Punj among the Murinbata, says that the purpose of the rite is ‘to make a man into a man of mystical understanding’.8

Finally, there is the role in Aboriginal society of what Europeans have called ‘medicine men’. Despite the remarkable powers that such men are acknowledged to have, A.P. Elkin, in his book, Aboriginal Men of High Degree, affirms strongly that these men are not ‘scoundrels and impostors’, nor ‘abnormal and neurotic’, but are ‘a very normal group’. Elkin continues: The point to be stressed is that while the medicine man is considered to possess great power and specially developed faculties, none of his power is regarded as extraordinary or abnormal. It is possessed and exercised against an accepted background of belief, and in some degree, though usually in a very slight degree, it is possessed by all.9 I quote this to illustrate the mystical background against which Aboriginal life was lived. One could say that there was a universal call to some degree of mystical experience.

An Impossible Question?

An odd question may come to mind: suppose God had decided not to call Abram, the wandering Aramaean, but rather a member of a nomadic Aboriginal
group in the land that came to be known as Australia. Suppose that, after centuries of preparation, the Word became flesh in a descendant of this nomadic Aborigine. Presumably, after the earthly life of this Word made flesh had come to an end, a community of believers would have arisen, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What, then, would this Church have looked like, and how would it have developed? Given the cultural and religious setting in which it came into being, it would have been strikingly different from the Church that did in fact develop in first century Palestine, and in the world of the Roman Empire. Is it legitimate to ask such a question? God’s decision has in fact been made, and we are presumably meant to live with the reasonable consequences of that decision. But the very fact that such a question can come to mind draws attention to the culturally conditioned nature of the Church that we know, and suggests that we should be cautious about imposing on other cultural traditions the ecclesiastical institutions which we take for granted. That is, it reminds us of what Vatican II understood to be the catholicity of the Church.10

An Aboriginal Church

Let us now ask a more realistic question: what might an Aboriginal Church look like, i.e. one fully united to the world-wide Roman Catholic communion, yet true to its Aboriginal cultural roots? This may seem to be an impertinent question to ask. After all, many people have for some time been working towards the development of a genuinely Aboriginal Christianity; and, anyway, the task is ultimately one for Aboriginal people themselves. Yet, it seems clear that there is still much to be done, and part of the problem may be the difficulty European Christians have in imagining and envisioning a local Church very different in form and style from their own. Let me, then, try to describe some features of the Aboriginal Church which may develop in the future – and, no doubt, is already developing in the present.

An important question to ask first is: what is meant by the term ‘Aboriginal Church’? Would it be in some way separate from the European-style Church? In fact, that does seem often to be the case at present, even though it is true that there are some non-Indigenous Christians who like to be present at Indigenous liturgies. If one were to say that Aboriginal people should simply become part of European-style parishes, perhaps bringing with them some elements of their own traditions, the result would probably be little more than assimilation to the dominant culture. For the present, at least, some separation from European-style Christianity is needed if a genuinely Indigenous Church is to emerge. This Indigenous Church would be in varying degrees in contact with Europeans: in city areas, there would be a great deal of contact, in remote areas there would be much less. No doubt one would see a variety of Aboriginal local church communities, some emphasising Indigenous culture more than others; for example, some might use an Indigenous language for the liturgy, some might not. In general, there would be a special emphasis on the local community, which would develop its own particular ways of managing its affairs. Kinship relationships would be important. Those who were especially committed in their Christian lives, who had the appropriate gifts, and who perhaps had received some special training, would have a leadership role.
Liturgy would be of particular importance, and many elements of Indigenous culture would be incorporated. The skills of the people in dance, painting, music, poetry, mime and drama would be drawn upon, so that the ceremonies would be a rich expression of Christian Aboriginal life.

In these communities, the sacraments, adapted to Indigenous ways, would be especially significant. The mysticism of the Christian tradition would also be richly expressed, in ways appropriate to traditional Aboriginal life.

Finally, whereas the early Christians under the Roman empire, with their strongly eschatological way of thinking, emphasised celibacy, and often did not have a very positive view of human sexuality, this would not be the case in Aboriginal Christian communities. Hence a law which required celibacy for those ordained to the priesthood would not be appropriate. Those who emerged as Christian leaders would probably be already married, and it would seem that this should not be a barrier to ordination.

Here, then, is a very brief sketch of a future Aboriginal Church. The main point I wish to make is in fact a plea: that those of us in the European tradition of Christianity, and especially those in a position to make decisions affecting the future of the church in Australia – that we all recall the importance of the catholicity of the church, and hence be open to the emergence of a genuinely Aboriginal Christianity.

**Addendum**

After completing this paper I became aware of a significant discussion of leadership, both male and female, among the Warlpiri (or Walbiri) people, by Francoise Dussart, in her book, *The Politics of Ritual in an Aboriginal Settlement* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000). See especially chapter 3, which has the interesting title: ‘On Becoming a “Big” Businesswoman. Trajectories of Egalitarian Leadership’. Dussart carried out her field work at Yuendumu Settlement, and focussed particularly on women’s leadership. She affirms that leadership in the ritual area does indeed extend into the secular realm, and she provides a long account of the career of a significant woman leader: Judy Nampijinpa. In discussing the organisation of Aboriginal societies it is certainly necessary to take into account the part played by women leaders. Such leadership is of particular importance for the present and future Aboriginal Church.


6 Meggitt, *Gadjari among the Walbiri*, 36.

7 This process is not so very different from the way priests and ministers are chosen in the European Christian traditions; however it is informal, rather than formal.; also the initiative seems to lie with the present religious leaders rather than with the young ‘candidate’.


10 See Constitution on the Church, nos 13 and 17.