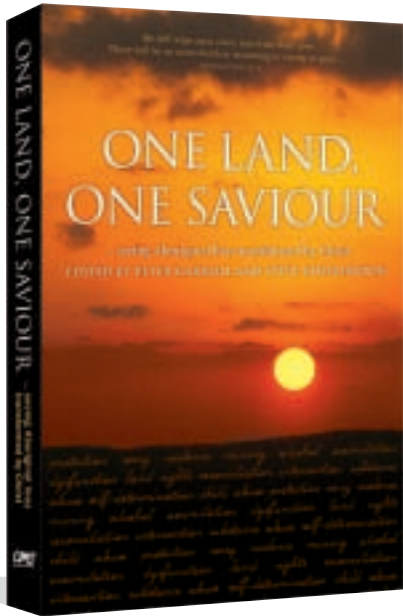


One Land, One Saviour

REVIEWER | ANDREW CAMERON



One Land, One Saviour: Seeing Aboriginal lives transformed by Christ
Peter Carroll and Steve Etherington (eds.)
Church Missionary Society,
(www.cms.org.au)
Sydney, 2008, 246 pp.

It's a miracle that anyone becomes or stays Christian. It really is. But into the wreckage of human affairs comes the voice of God: he forgives and changes his people, and brings them home. That is the message of *One Land, One Saviour*, a collection of essays about the Northern Territory indigenous church. I suppose I knew of the miracle before reading this book, but reading it helped me to see the miracle anew. For, humanly speaking, how or why *did* Aboriginal people become Christians, let alone stay that way? Yet they love their Lord, and continue to serve him faithfully and courageously in circumstances well beyond my feeble imagination.

A dozen contributors take us on a tour

through several decades of Christian ministry across the Territory's vastness. They help us glimpse Aboriginal complexity—from the intricacies of Aboriginal thinking about family relationships to the diversity of individual stories. They drag us through Kafkaesque and ever-shifting government policy. They show the passing parade of white missionary faces—some of whom stayed and built respectful, long-term relationships. Aboriginal people continue to navigate all this instability alongside the severe evils we hear snippets about in the news.

So why should this white, urban man, who is a complete ignoramus about all things indigenous, review a book as important as *One Land*? I was asked to do so precisely because of my ignorance. I am not close to the authors or the publisher CMS (Australia's Anglican Church

nize about how not to say, do or think anything wrong. So I am as good a test case as any to find out if the book has reached its goal—that is, to show Australian Christians the wisdom and needs of Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal Christians who minister among them.

And *One Land* is incredibly helpful. Its authors know and deal with the monkeys' chatter gently but firmly. They also know Aboriginal friends and colleagues well enough to lead us into serious engagement with real Aboriginal concerns. And, as long-term associates of CMS, they cast an honest eye over the Society's failures and successes. The bottom line? It is a miracle that anyone becomes Christian, let alone stays that way, so let us praise God and pray earnestly for Aboriginal Christians that his miracle will continue.

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Missionary Society), I only know one Aboriginal bloke, and I have never been to the top end of Australia. I typify the twitchy, clumsy anxiety that comes across urban Christians at the merest mention of Aboriginals. As I shift my weight nervously and begin to respond, the monkeys line up on my shoulders and chatter: "Don't be patronizing!" "The mission stations were imperialist!" "Assimilation! Integration! Self-determination! Which is the non-evil one?" "Say 'intervention' and 'apology' lots!" "Let Aboriginal Christians run their own lives!" "White people should help!" "Don't talk; you know nothing!" I am so exhausted before the conversation even begins, I cannot hear or learn anything much at all. I can only ago-

For example, I giggled ruefully when Meryl Rowe described how a new local word was needed to translate 'Holy Spirit', because the term they had been using sounded like the word for 'police' and meant something like 'taboo' (p. 226). The Kunwinjku Christians must have done well to trust God when the Spirit sounded a lot like a copper who shouldn't be mentioned! Yet trust him they did, and have now settled upon a new and better word to translate 'Holy Spirit'.

This story highlights the way in which Aboriginal people are becoming the main translators of the Bible. *One Land* follows a landmark moment in Aboriginal Christianity: the 2007 publication of the Kriol Bible.¹ This Bible was an Australian

first, and peppered throughout *One Land* are instances of sheer joy as people who had been Christians for many years stood to hear the word of God in their own language for the first time. When 1 Corinthians was read to a group of young men around a campfire in Kriol, “they didn’t sleep, expecting that the trumpet might be heard that night” (pp. 52-53). I never really understood how hard it must have been for these people; try to imagine all you know about Jesus coming to you via Bibles written in a difficult third language, such as Arabic or Japanese.

That the Kriol Bible has taken over 200 years to appear raises the question of what the missionaries were doing all that time. *One Land* presents several excellent cameos of their work. There’s the detailed account of failure as two young men

recent experiences as an ‘outsider’ struggling to learn Kriol. And there are all the twists and turns in the missionary story, which has, at times, become entangled in the folly and dead ends of white man thinking (e.g. that the gospel entails ‘civilizing’ Aboriginals), or has suffered from culture clash:

People would call out from their houses “Come and drink!” The cultural courtesy ... was to do just that. Anyone in a hurry, foreigner or local, anyone who was too busy to stop and chat, could be chided with the retort “*Mitinari!*”—“Missionary!” (p. 78).

However, excellent lessons have been learned. With passion and clarity, Greg Anderson, Steve Etherington and John Harris lay out priorities, strategies, and proposals for strengthening and affirming Aboriginal Christian leadership. The wisdom of these chapters, which were hammered out in careful partnership with Aboriginal leaders, silenced the monkeys on my shoulders. This wisdom deserves close study by anyone interested in Aboriginal Christianity.

My only wish was that we could hear the

cated rules of social and family interaction—an interesting area further explored by Meryl Rowe, who lived among the group concerned. At these points, it’s obvious that Aboriginals are the ones who make best sense of the gospel to other Aboriginals. They need our support and prayer.

My other criticism is that the book is a bit eclectic and untidy. Some essays are a tad odd in their choice of topic or in the way they are written. As a frontispiece demurely notes, “[T]here is considerable variation in approach, theology and style”. But I also find this ‘untidiness’ a strength because it means we are hearing something of the extent, variability and complexity of the ministry. A sense of nervous excitement about the possibilities is woven through with genuine sadness about some really intractable problems faced by Aboriginal Christians.

In addition, we are given only the briefest orientation to the geography of the Territory, with no sustained description of its current society and culture. (As it stands, we have to make do with the contributors’ impressions, although these are very helpful in their own way.) A summary of Territorial history would also have been helpful to the reader, as would some suggestions on how to pronounce the Aboriginal words used throughout. The book also drifts at times toward a CMS in-house-ism, with people and place names tossed about with abandon and without explanation.

Now that I’ve finished the book, I have not become an expert. However, the monkeys have been silenced, so now I can actually listen to what Aboriginal Christians say they need, and pray for them accordingly.

So buy *One Land, One Saviour*, and read it, even if it’s not something you’d usually read. It will inform, amaze, sadden and delight you. Your knowledge and respect for Aboriginal brothers and sisters will grow. You may even come to love God a little more as you see his voice of miracle coming into Aboriginal affairs, forgiving and changing Aboriginal people and bringing them home. **B**

ENDNOTE

1. Kriol is a kind of general Aboriginal language.



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struggled to plant a mission station in 1903. (While Lutherans poured over £100,000 into a similar enterprise, Anglicans only donated £105, which included £21 from the missionaries’ own pockets [p. 176].) There’s the extraordinary story of Lance and Gwen Tremlett, whose wedding took place at the Roper River Mission. Gwen’s parents graciously said that the Aboriginal people had more ‘right’ to it than they did, but in 1964 it was too expensive to travel to Roper, so none of the family attended. Instead, on the day, Gwen’s parents went to a Gosford church, and prayed for Gwen and Lance (p. 187). We also hear Kerry McLean’s very

Aboriginal voice more directly. We may charitably assume that indigenous writers were not available, and so the editors have been careful to include the next best alternative. Murray Seiffert describes the leadership of the Rev Canon Michael Gumbuli Wurramara, and as he outlines Gumbuli’s thought and ministry practice, we begin to see how faithful gospel ministry navigates Aboriginal conceptions of family, respect and the spirit world. Similarly, Peter Carroll analyzes a (taped) 1973 talk by Rachel Maralngurra (an incisive and gifted Christian leader who has since died). She contextualized the gospel in reference to some compli-