

Rainbow Spirit Theology represent a landmark in Australian theology. This text has been prepared by a group of Aboriginal Christian leaders with the aim of integrating the traditions of Aboriginal culture with the traditions of Christianity.

The starting point for this theology is the land from which these Aboriginal Christian leaders believe their ancestors emerged and for which they still feel responsible as custodians of the sacred. Deep beneath the land is the Rainbow Spirit or Rainbow Snake, the eternal source of life and spiritual power. They identify God the Creator with the Rainbow Spirit and they see in Christ the incarnation of the Rainbow Spirit in human form, which for them is Aboriginal Australian.

Rainbow Spirit Theology provides a source of genuine dialogue between Aboriginal and immigrant Christians who enjoy a rich life on what was once Aboriginal land.

Authors include George Rosendale (the spiritual elder of the group), Nola Archie, Dennis Corowa, William Coolbura, Eddie Law, James Leftwich and Jasmine Corowa (artist), representing six Aboriginal peoples and ministry in four Christian traditions. Assisting the project were Robert Bos, Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst.

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This book
is dedicated to those Aboriginal women, men and
children who gave their lives for this land, and to those
who survived
but have lost their spiritual connection
with the land





PREFACE

STATUS

This text is a theology in process. It represents the reflections of a group of Aboriginal leaders in Queensland who felt the need to record their thinking and circulate it for discussion among Aboriginal people, and the wider Australian church community.

This theology does not claim to be complete or comprehensive. Rather, it is a stage in a process, an invitation to other Aboriginal groups to join the dialogue and explore their Aboriginal culture as a source of mystery, meaning and theology.

Nor does the group claim to speak for any official body or group within the Australian churches. The group itself included Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Church members. These connections, however, were secondary: the focus of the group was its Aboriginality. The main goal was to begin to develop an indigenous theology arising from the background and experience of this group of Aboriginal Christians.

The starting point for this theology is the land as a central spiritual reality for all the participants. The writers hope that the process of reflection begun here will continue with other groups, exploring their own spiritual realities. The hope is that this text will provide a stimulus for other Aboriginal Christians to rediscover for themselves the connections between their own Aboriginal spirituality and their Christian faith.



The initial impetus for this book came from George Rosendale, who is the true elder of the group. His personal struggle to redeem his own Aboriginal culture, and discern within it profound truths which point to the Gospel, has been an inspiration to many. When George described to me his vision of an indigenous Aboriginal theology early in 1994, I was fortunate to have the support of Robert Bos, who assisted me in organising our first workshop in November of that year. All the contributors to this text say a very special thanks to George.

PROCESS

This theology is the outcome of two workshops held at Crystal Creek near Townsville, far north Queensland, in November 1994 and November 1995. The Aboriginal leaders identified with this book requested Robert Bos and myself to function as facilitators and scribes to organise and record their emerging ideas about an indigenous theology. The ideas in this book are those of the Aboriginal participants at the workshops, though the explicit wording of the text is largely mine.

During the first workshop, the beliefs, ideas and stories of the participants were recorded and formulated as statements of faith. Working from notes, Robert Bos and I then prepared a more complete draft of the text, which was circulated to all participants for comment and correction in preparation for final editing at the second workshop. At the November 1995 workshop, the text of the draft was discussed in detail. Each paragraph was read and debated; the changes to the text were recorded at the workshop. Nothing has been included in the body of the text which has not been approved by the workshop participants. Nevertheless,





it must be recognised that this text represents the thinking-in-progress of the group and my wording as the editor.

At the second workshop, significant changes were made to the text prepared after the first workshop. The initial draft was tentatively called 'Kookaburra Theology', as the kookaburra was recognised as a strong symbol of good news by this Queensland group of Aboriginal people.

Between the two workshops, it became apparent to some of these Aboriginal leaders that the kookaburra was a local symbol and without parallel widespread significance throughout Australia. After considerable discussion, the Rainbow Spirit was identified as a more profound and universal symbol for an indigenous Aboriginal theology. The group was aware that this symbol might initially be rather controversial but also believed that eventually its power and significance, as well as its mystery, would give this theology greater depth and value to Aboriginal people. The introduction of the Rainbow Spirit led to a major reorientation of aspects of this indigenous theology.

The present text reflects some differences that exist between the workshop participants about the relative significance of the Rainbow Spirit. All those present at the workshop believe, however, that this is a powerful symbol, and each agreed that it was important to explore the meaning of the Rainbow Spirit stories in their respective home countries.

The artwork included in the text was also developed as part of the process of the second workshop. It reflects the working models and diagrams used by the group to help explore and develop its thinking. These models are the first phase of a possible course or teaching package we hope will be developed, based on the material in this text.



The appendices are summaries of topics developed at the first workshop, written up by the facilitators at the request of the workshop participants. They reflect an effort on the part of the two facilitators to interpret key passages of Scripture from the Aboriginal theological perspective being developed at the workshop and encapsulated in this Rainbow Spirit Theology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the financial support of several bodies in the development and publication of this book:

- the University of South Australia for research funds to cover the costs of the initial workshop, held in November 1994;
- World Vision for funds to cover the costs of the second workshop, held in November 1995;
- Wontulp Bi Buya for facilitating the distribution of these funds and supporting the project;
- the Charles Strong Trust for funds to assist with the editing and publishing of the manuscript.

PARTICIPANTS

The core group of Aboriginal leaders at the first workshop were Pastor William Coolburra, Rev. Dennis Corowa, Rev. Eddie Law, Rev. James Leftwich and Rev. George Rosendale. These leaders were joined by Elder Nola J. Archie for the second workshop. The artist, Miss Jasmine Corowa, joined the group during the second workshop. A thumbnail sketch of these Aboriginal participants is included in the appendices.

The facilitators, Robert Bos and I, were assisted by Shirley Wurst, who functioned as scribe at both workshops



to ensure that all the ideas were preserved and all the changes recorded.

Norman Habel
Facilitator

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There was considerable discussion at both workshops about the use of the terms 'Dreaming', 'Dreamtime' and 'totem'. Members of the group had quite different understandings of the meaning and the appropriateness of these terms. We were aware that the term 'Dreamtime' probably arose from Spencer and Gillan's use of the Aranda word Alcheringa. The term 'the Dreaming' is an alternative term used by other scholars to express the same concept. The term 'totem' is also a complex concept, derived from studies focusing on the Native American peoples.



The problem for us is that these terms have been appropriated and used in different ways by Aboriginal people in Queensland, let alone people in the rest of Australia.



Some members of our group, like many Aboriginal Australians, are not happy with the term 'the Dreaming' because in the English language it seems to refer to something vague and dreamlike, something that is not real. The Aboriginal concept that the term 'the Dreaming' attempts to convey refers to an essential part of reality, a spiritual dimension of reality that has existed from the beginning.

We avoided the term 'Dreamtime' because it suggests that this reality only existed at the time of creation; we Aboriginal people know that this reality continues to exist in the present. Furthermore, to refer to our creation stories as



'Dreamtime stories' is to suggest to many English speakers that they are not true stories, that they are fairy stories.

In spite of these difficulties, we sometimes use the term 'Dreaming' as a word to convey that powerful spiritual reality which was active in the creation time, in the beginning, and continues as a reality that gives spiritual life to our present reality.

Some members of our group spoke of 'my Dreaming' when referring to the story and symbol of their identity as individuals within the Aboriginal world. Other workshop participants used the expression 'my totem' to express the same reality. At other times, some of us used the term 'my story' as the most appropriate way of expressing all these aspects of our world.





Preface to second edition

The Impact of Rainbow Spirit Theology Comments from Indigenous Christians

Rev. George Rosendale OAM (Hopevale):

I am happy about the printing of Rainbow Spirit Theology. It has fulfilled my goal in life to awake the Churches to understand and accept that we Aborigines are a unique part of the Churches in Australia. We have our own culture and our own religion and understanding of God and creation.

I'm also grateful to the Churches that they have stopped to listen and spend time in researching and talking about it. I am hoping and praying that in the future there will be a new way of preaching, teaching and showing of the Gospel to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation of mankind.

Mrs Gertrude Massey (Palm Island):

I used to feel good and free as a Christian, just like the roots of this tree. But there were many problems I came across and I was tangled in them. As I grew older my faith became stronger. I believe my roots have gotten stronger through Aboriginal Theology. It has made me stand very strong and tall for who I am and what I am. And as time passed, I felt free through my Christian belief and my Aboriginal spirituality.

Mrs Lala Leftwich (Cairns & Yam Island)

I see God and culture as one and they go together. Just as Jesus himself belonged to the Jewish culture, I believe that there are those of our own people who have been well



trained by Western tradition and that there's got to be a whole new way of teaching all over again for our people.

I know that that is why a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find it hard to accept cultural movement in our worship, e.g. some say it is acceptable to dance outside but never to do it in the church.

Mrs Evelyn Parkin (Moranbah):

Rainbow Spirit Theology has been a major stepping stone in my spiritual growth. What it has done for me is that it has helped me to embrace my Aboriginal spirituality along with my Christian spirituality. It has also helped me to read the Scriptures from my Aboriginal identity. So I bring my Aboriginal spirituality and Christian spirituality together in the same understanding as the Old and the New Testament.

Therefore Jesus came to set me free me and draw me close to our Father, but not to take me away from my culture. I must take the goodness from my culture and bring it into my life, to worship him as the whole person who God has created in his image. This I claim.

Rainbow Spirit Theology had such an impact on me that I felt I had been baptised once again into God's plan and found a deeper relationship with my Lord. I give thanks to Pastor George Rosendale for passing on his knowledge and wisdom of his love for our Lord and his Aboriginal spirituality.

Mr Peter Smith (Mount Isa):

The publication of Rainbow Spirit Theology was a moment of joy for me. To think that fellow Aborigines that I knew personally had made a major contribution to a



new way of thinking about God; his relationship with him gave me a sense of pride in their achievements. I became aware within a short period of time that there were matters expressed in the book with which others did not necessarily agree. These were Indigenous people and other Australians of the varying Christian traditions.

I took note of the concerns expressed by others and thought about them. In some cases I could understand these concerns, but some were less valid. One comment was "... I and others know these men simply do not write in this way." This statement is true, however, this is explained by the Norman Habel who states in the Preface that "... this text represents the thinking in progress of the group and my wording as the editor. So while the thoughts are those of the authors, the wording is not necessarily as they would have written it themselves.

This being the case, perhaps this could provide us with an opportunity to remove this misunderstanding and have the Indigenous people write the future books of this nature.

I am impressed with the depth of spirituality of the authors and their respect for the missionaries past and present who have brought us the Word. They expressed their appreciation that while the gospel message was among the most important things Europeans brought to us, the manner in which it was brought was lacking in understanding, love and respect for us, our beliefs and our culture.

The more I read Rainbow Spirit Theology, the more I come to appreciate how the authors have expressed their understanding of God and their knowledge of God prior to the arrival of Europeans and how that knowledge has manifested itself through the Gospel message brought by these dedicated missionaries – men and women.





I also appreciate the fact that the authors, while being truthful about the hurts that our people have suffered, they have been able to do this without malice towards those who caused so much suffering, physical and spiritual to our ancestors and consequently to us today.

On page 50/51 they spoke of the Rainbow Spirit crying because ... “the bonds which linked people to the land and sustained family structures have also been broken.” Their understanding expressed here is so real for many of us. Separated men, women and children are still crying. This is an experience of so many of us. It felt like they (the authors) knew my story and were talking about me.

As explained in the preface, “this text is a theology in process”. It is not the final definitive expression of theology by the authors, but “the reflections of a group of Aboriginal leaders in Queensland who felt the need to record their thinking and circulate it for discussion among Aboriginal people, and the wider Australian church community.”

There is hope for the future through these Aboriginal Christians expressing their beliefs in this way, sending it forth for further and wide ranging discussion.

As they express their understanding of God who lives in our midst, I believe that the Holy Spirit must surely be working through them.

Rt Rev. Jim Leftwich (Cairns):

Being a participant at the Rainbow Spirit Theology workshop enabled me to learn about Aboriginal Culture and Spirituality, where as an Aboriginal person growing up in a white society, would not have had.

In my priestly training in the Anglican Church, I did Education For Ministry (EFM); a study that went on for





three years and one which came from a college in America. Bishop George Tug Yep, the rector of St John's Cairns, conducted the study with myself and four or five other priests. This was totally a white man's study which didn't mean a great deal to me. At times during the study and discussions I didn't know who to believe in. I became very frustrated with having to understand this study.

However, when I was introduced to Nungalinya and Wontulp-Bi-Buya studies I felt much more comfortable than later participating in Rainbow Spirit Theology workshops I began to feel the Scriptures take on real meaning in my life. I found it to be fulfilling to know that God and Christ and the Spirit was and is in my Aboriginal Culture, and that I didn't have to become a white man to know Jesus Christ.



The wonderful aspect of it all was to know about God in Creation and the identical stories to the Aborigines in the old testament. The many stories in the Rainbow Spirit Theology book identifies with Christ and what He means to us and the Power directions which includes the White Culture coming in from the North. It helps me to understand that being close to nature is being close to God. It helped me to understand the misconception of the ministries by the missionaries to Aboriginal people in the way that which they brought the Gospel which was not Good News for a lot of Aboriginal people. Early missionaries deemed all Aboriginal Culture as demonic and took away language and other cultural practices where they could, and in turn handed out severe punishment when their rules were broken.



In the book Rainbow Spirit Theology, it gives frank details of what happened with Aboriginal and White contact over the last 200 years. The Spiritual and Physical



separation from language, land, culture and siblings. Now I believe if we can help our people by culturally appropriate ministries and to help our people in salvation in Christ in the church, I believe White people will begin to recognise Aboriginal Spirituality and recognise the high contributions Aboriginal people can make to the Church of God.

Through culturally appropriate Bible teaching by Nungalinya/ Wontulp-Bi-Buya Theological Colleges Aboriginal people have become the Mission force and not the mission field. Aboriginal ordained men and women are now taking the Gospel to our own people.

There is still a long road to travel but I believe with all my heart that this is the right direction for us if true reconciliation is to be a way of life for all Australians.

I would like to see this book continue and expand into present day ministry of the Indigenous Church.



Mrs Joan Hendriks (Brisbane)

Today many Christians are ready to listen to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and learn about the Spirituality and Culture of these indigenous peoples of Australia.

Rainbow Spirit Theology offers the opportunity to begin such a journey. Whilst this has been an opportunity for the Rainbow Spirit elders to share their theology of the Indigenous way of life, it is also a new beginning for many, and a revival of the old way for others. These elders have related the importance of land as life and the theology of these connections of peoples and places, and the interrelation of land as life. The spiritual connectedness of Creator God and the whole Creation is embedded in the whole approach to living in relationships with family,





community and God.

Reading Rainbow Spirit Theology has been a learning curve that has caused me to reflect more deeply on my own Spirituality. Further study of the text allows me to understand more clearly the parallels of theology of our way of life and Christian values. This deepens my understanding of who I am, where I belong and what I must do. It also strengthens my commitment to continue a search for the balance of the two way theology of Christian Scripture and our Creation and Life stories.

One only has to listen to the words on the –

Rainbow Spirit Theology

- Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology –

to hear a message that this book is the foundation text for the vision of an Australian Spirituality. One that can be based on the theology of the first peoples of this land.

Rainbow Spirit Theology can influence a new beginning for all Christian peoples journeying together as One in Christ.

