

The Violence of Silencing The Voiceless: A Theological Perspective on ATSIC's Demise

By Peter Lewis

Our part in God's history of liberation is to cease being the oppressors of the oppressed. And that means that we should see ourselves as persons who must ourselves be liberated.¹

When you place a hand over someone's mouth, particularly when they are trying to speak, you do violence not only physically but also to their soul. You inhibit their desire to express, their need to shout, scream or speak. To make a people mute is to oppress in such away that their very being, their very sense of who they are is imprisoned.

In the great revelatory scene in *The Matrix*, when Neo is unplugged and discovers the reality of the world where human beings are being used as batteries for the machine masters of the world his first reaction is that of pure terror.² Everything he has known up to then, everything he believes he is, has been a lie. When non-indigenous people begin to get deep into their understanding of the reality of Australia from the perspective of Indigenous people there can be moments of similar revelation.

To unplug from the violence of the colonial matrix in Australia we must start by listening to the stories and perspective of the first victims of colonisation, Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples and other marginalised communities tell stories as dangerous or subversive remembrance to survive, to keep living. This was certainly the experience of the Israelites and the early Christians.

What stories do we live by as Christians in Australia? There is the old story from our Christendom days which saw the Indigenous peoples as subjects (victims?) of our desire to convert the world.³ We, the non-indigenous, thought we brought civilisation, but all we brought a series of plagues for the Indigenous peoples of Australia – the plagues of introduced livestock, of germs, of bullets, of missions and reserves, of child removal and laws of discrimination. To overcome the violence that is colonisation our task is to seek justice and decolonise the colonisers. Our privilege and our self-understanding as non-indigenous people are based on an inheritance of the spoils of violent dispossession. It is the non-indigenous who are in Australia without foundation. But it is the message and method of Jesus' mission, not just the wisdom of hindsight, which raises questions about much of the activity of the Christendom missionary movement. Proclamation of the 'Kingdom of God' largely became a promulgation of the kingdom of Western power.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann with M. Douglas Meeks, "The Liberation of Oppressors", *Christianity and Crisis*, 38.20 (1978), p. 310.

² *The Matrix*, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1996.

³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 303.

The message of liberation was mostly buried beneath the messages and methodology of Western domination.

If Indigenous Voice is silenced we are in danger of not only silencing yet again a marginalised community we are also in danger of being deaf to the voice of Christ amongst the voiceless, deaf to the voices of the crucified in our community. Repentance and relocation from the empire-driven mind-set of Christendom is required if we are to find our liberation and no longer be the oppressors of those whom God loves.

Theological perspective

Our theological understanding begins at the table of the Last Supper where Jesus speaks of the blood of the covenant (Mark 14:22-25).⁴ The Last Supper links the new ‘Jesus covenant’ with the renewing the past Exodus covenant, the solidarity with the poor (cf. the crowd feeding stories), the *via crucis* that Jesus is walks and the invitation to the *via crucis* discipleship journey.⁵ For Christians, the Last Supper Covenant becomes the epistemological basis for our faith and our living and provides an alternative to a Christendom epistemology.

Liberation theologians contend that God has a preferential option for the poor.⁶ From this principle they define the key task for theology as reflecting on God's action and grace amongst the victims, the marginalised and the forgotten ones of history.⁷ Christian theological reflection on God is therefore grounded in the experience of the poor. Sobrino and Gutierrez base this perspective on a theology of the suffering God revealed on the cross, the crucified God. To discern the presence of the crucified God in the world one needs to listen to the crucified peoples of the world. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 attests to the belief in the presence of Christ in those who are suffering from the world's unjust situations.

In dealing with its object, Jesus Christ, Christology has to take account of two fundamental things. The first is the data the past has given us about Christ, that is, texts in which revelation has been expressed. The second, which receives less attention, is the reality of Christ in the present, that is, his presence now in history, which is the correlative of real faith in Christ.⁸

⁴ I chose the Last Supper rather than the cross of Christ as our beginning point as disciples because the disciples went missing at the time of the crucifixion, only the women disciples were witnesses to the cross. The church always begins at the point of remembering the last meal with Jesus and the invitation to the *via crucis* discipleship journey. In some respects, understanding from the actuality of the cross is an event which is beyond us and ahead of us.

⁵ Ched Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 150.

⁶ Coined at the 1979 Latin American Bishops Conference in Puebla. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 435.

⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, p. 21. Also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, Part 1. New York, NY: Scribner's, 1957, p. 387.

⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus The Liberator*, p. 23.

As I've mentioned in my previous paper for the Theology and Culture project, there is much to be learned from the radical discipleship school on allowing our discipleship journeying to inform and be informed by our theology. Ched Myers, in *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* contends that following Christ in a post-Christendom world requires a process of literacy (understanding the Biblical text and the context of the world and its power structures),⁹ 'dis-illusionment' (rejecting the dominant myths of power which privilege and possess us),¹⁰ revisioning,¹¹ repentance¹² and relocation.¹³ For Myers 'dis-illusionment' means facing our denial concerning the state of the world,¹⁴ asking the critical questions of the powers and authorities¹⁵ and living a prayerful and missional life in solidarity with the poor and crucified of the world.¹⁶ Relocation begins with the call from our 'homes' to journey with Christ and be touched by the reality of the oppressed.¹⁷ Relocation exposes us to the reality of the crucified in the world and therefore the presence of Christ in the world. It is this relocation which is required if we are to decolonise from Empire.

Athol Gill, one of the prime movers in the radical discipleship movement, looks at the question of discipleship for First World Christians with constant reference to Bonhoeffer's work and asks the critical question: what does it mean to live as disciples of Christ in a world of poverty and injustice?¹⁸

Gill talks about Jesus' radical call to discipleship:

If you say simply 'grace demands a response' you are in danger of legalism and if you say simply 'grace evokes a response' you are in danger of libertinism. So we have to say: 'grace evokes, demands, and makes possible a radical response to the call of Jesus'.¹⁹

For Gill, discipleship means being called into Christian community,²⁰ into mission²¹ and into a mission defined by the Jubilee.²² The task for disciples is to listen and be challenged by the biblical text and the call of Christ. Gill contends that the Bible is best understood from the perspective of the poor, a perspective Gill takes up in Chapter Ten of *The Fringes of Freedom* as he surveys the Bible and brings out the social justice tradition in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Gill uses his exegesis of Mark as a basis for

⁹ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 45-47.

¹⁰ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 76f.

¹¹ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 111f.

¹² Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 161f.

¹³ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 200f.

¹⁴ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 6-8.

¹⁵ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 22-29.

¹⁶ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* pp. 100-108.

¹⁷ Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone?* p. 206.

¹⁸ Athol Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom*, p. 18.

¹⁹ Athol Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working For Justice*, Homebush West, Australia: Lancer Books, 1990, p. 25.

²⁰ Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom*, p. 64.

²¹ Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom*, p. 136.

²² Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom*, p. 142.

understanding the critical discipleship and missiological challenges for First World Christians.

The notion of ‘Empire’ refers to the systems of domination that have existed and continue to exist in this world.²³ In the Biblical story, Empire takes the form of Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome.²⁴ According to prophets such as Amos and Jeremiah, Judah/Israel was driven into exile because she became like Empire and forgot the marginalised and the stranger. In the context of First Century Jerusalem, Empire is particularly represented as Rome and the collaborating Judean authorities.²⁵ Jesus’ mission to Israel can be seen as a response to the hierarchy’s following the way of Empire instead of the way of the prophets and the Jubilee. In a similar way, the church in the Christendom era began to follow the way of Empire. Instead of being with the poor and excluded, the church walked alongside and under the protection of the Empires of the West. The Church’s collaboration with Empire represents a breaking of its covenant with Christ along parallel lines to the prophetic understanding of Israel’s pre-exilic breaking of its covenant with YHWH.

Terra Nullius - colonisation as infection

In my previous essay I posited *terra nullius* as an overarching worldview which defines our self-awareness as non-indigenous people in Australia. *Terra nullius* is present in the crown law’s understanding of the land which does not recognise indigenous traditional ownership or rule. The doctrine of *terra nullius* meant that questions of prior indigenous ownership and sovereignty were ignored. The epistemology of *terra nullius* can also be seen in our cultural products, our ‘disremembering’, our one-colour view of history, our naming Indigenous spirituality and connection with the land as pagan and our colonial stories.

I would suggest that as Christians attempting to recover from Empire our epistemology must run counter to *terra nullius*. Our covenantal relationship with the liberating God of Exodus and the suffering God of the Gospel demands that we see history and reality from the perspective of the marginalised.²⁶ The radical solidarity of God, which the scriptural covenants assert, necessitates a solidarity response by the church. Our remembering of

²³ Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 6. Carrington, ‘Theologians Struggling to Cope at the End of an Era: Theological Educators Confronting a Multicultural World’ in Jim Houston (ed.) *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission*, (Melbourne: JBCE, 1988), pp. 12-14. Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther use this concept as the basis for their commentary on the Book of Revelation in *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 236.

²⁴ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, p. xxiii.

²⁵ Myers, *Binding The Strong Man*, pp. 40-42.

²⁶ For examples of this view. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. II, Part I*, (New York: Scribner’s, 1957), p. 386. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years” in John De Gruchy (ed), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, (London: Collins Publishers, 1988), p. 268; Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 3-22.

God's covenant with us should lead us to a resonance with the remembering of the victims of empire and not a cooption to the ways of empire.²⁷

I see *terra nullius* epistemology as the particular Australian articulation of what bell hooks refers to as *whiteness*.²⁸ This theme of 'whiteness' has been adapted by Indigenous scholars such as Lillian Holt and Aileen Moreton-Robinson to the Australian context.²⁹

In general terms *whiteness* can be defined thus:

For those in power in the West ... whiteness is felt to be the human condition ... it alone defines normality and fully inhabits it ... white people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't see that they construct the world in their own image; white people set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. ... White power ... reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal.³⁰

Let's look at the reality for us as those privileged by the dominant culture. The following list is from feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh.

- I can arrange to be in the company of my race most of the time
- If I need to move to rent or buy or if I need credit my skin colour will not be an obstruction to getting the property
- I can turn on the telly and see my race widely represented
- I can swear, get drunk, dress in second hand clothes, not answer letters without people saying how typical of my race
- I can do well without being called a credit to my race
- I am never asked to speak for all people of my race

Further to this Peggy McIntosh suggests

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of

²⁷ As Walter Brueggemann suggests, 'Israel as an intentional counter community practiced relentless, dense memory as an alternative to the co-opting amnesia of the empire.' Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 61

²⁸ bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 31ff.

²⁹ For example Lillian Holt in John Rickard and Vince Ross (eds.) *Unfinished Business: Texts and addresses from the Unfinished Business Conference*, (Melbourne, Desbooks, 2002), pp. 123 – 131, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Takin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

³⁰ Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 9f.

special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.³¹

We, the non-indigenous, are sick because of our addiction to white privilege. White privilege is part of the on-going violence of colonisation. We need to interrogate our whiteness and challenge our terra nullius epistemology. Decolonising begins with asking the questions and conscientising the colonisers. Myers suggests that this is a process of exorcism.³² In the case of non-indigenous Australians, exorcising terra nullius from our political bodies and our body politic.

This non-indigenous interrogation involves understanding personal stories and backgrounds. Donna Awatere in her analysis of colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand believes that for European immigrants an original trauma lies in the disconnection from their roots. She contends that only a people so severed from their own land and culture could turn around and systematically disinherit Indigenous people.

This wrench from the land did not come easy, but once done, spirituality in white culture died. From the rural-urban shift, and the intra-urban shifts demanded by industrialisation, the ... urban-colony step was easy.

Separated from the land, separated from tribal and clan lion bonds, the now individual person or family is free to disperse to the colonies. Rooted now in mechanical materialism and convinced now of its superiority over land-based living, the settler is ready to destroy ‘barbaric’ savages to give them the benefit of the ‘civilisation’ ... that has disrupted their own spiritual immersion in their homeland. White culture is thus critical for colonialism because it is nomadic.³³

Whether we agree with this analysis of white colonial psychosis or not, the questions it raises must at least be addressed. We need to feel honour and shame about who we are as a people and interrogate our backgrounds for its buried treasure and skeletons in the cupboard.

Decolonisation in this context is about defining relationships as peoples before God in this place. The church’s involvement in reconciliation can be a witness to a post-colonial, culturally appropriate, non-domination based journeying which is built on mutuality and trust.

Protection of rights for Indigenous Peoples through the principle of self-determination.

Concerning the dismantling of ATSIC without replacement it is important to reflect on how the UCA has addressed its relationship to Indigenous peoples. As historical

³¹ Peggy McIntosh, ‘White Privilege: Unmaking the Invisible Knapsack’, *Peace and Freedom*, July-August 1989, p. 10.

³² Myers, *Who Will Roll Away The Stone*, pp.76ff.

³³ Donna Awatere, *Maori Sovereignty*, (Auckland: Broadsheet Magazine, 1984), p. 62.

participants in the process of colonisation, the Uniting Church recognises the mistakes of the past in ignoring the rights of Indigenous communities and not allowing for those communities to determine their affairs and their future. In 1985 the Assembly of the Uniting Church established the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) to enable Indigenous members, many of who lived in former mission/reserve areas of the previous denominations which made up the Uniting Church, to have a measure of self-determination. The then Chair of the UAICC, Charles Harris, said at the Galiwinku Conference:

We have to break free of the system that has left us at the bottom. The system has left us dependent and robbed us of our dignity.³⁴

The UAICC is now the Indigenous association within the Uniting Church which determines ministry by, to and with Indigenous communities. While this attempt at decolonisation has not been perfect, there are still issues around the appropriate level of human and financial resourcing required for the UAICC to effectively self-determine, the establishing of the UAICC signifies the Uniting Church's commitment to self-determination as the most effective way to address past unjust practices and provide for the betterment of Indigenous communities.

Self-determination is best described as a process, not an end. In Christian terms it is not unlike Moses request to "let my people go". Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Dr Bill Jonas suggests that self-determination

is a process of negotiation, accommodation and participation. Importantly, it is also about Indigenous peoples accepting responsibility and governments removing the controlling hand in order to ensure that such acceptance is meaningful and has consequences.

Fundamental for self-determination and fundamental for successful service delivery is the principle that Indigenous peoples must be able to have a say and a voice in Indigenous policy, program and funding in any and all areas that impact on their lives. Various reports by the Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission have demonstrated the need for self-determination as a principle for Indigenous rights and advancement. The Federal Government has demonstrated opposition to the concept of self-determination and even opposes the use of the term in the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights Of Indigenous Peoples. In relation to the Kill ATSIC Bill, significant self-determining rights of Indigenous peoples are negatively affected. The bill does not provide Indigenous peoples with the right to choose their own representatives or to any meaningful involvement in decision-making affecting Indigenous communities including the provision of services.

It is not just a matter of principle and human rights. Self-determining rights for Indigenous communities are central to addressing the severe disadvantage and systemic

³⁴ Charles Harris as quoted in Djiniyini Gondarra, *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, Darwin: Northern synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1988, p. 22.

discrimination faced by Indigenous Australians. Without self-determination, Indigenous peoples will become passive subjects to policies of assimilation. Self-determination and community control are critical to any process of addressing poverty for Indigenous people. The historical and current-day context for Indigenous disadvantage is that of the colonial process of dispossession, relocation and racism which meant that Indigenous communities had no rights and were not allowed to determine their lives. Government intervention or 'service delivery' in the past was basically a means of controlling the Indigenous population. Self-determination and community control restores rights and responsibilities to the Indigenous community and enables the needs of Indigenous people to be met in a culturally appropriate manner. Much harm has been committed in the name of acting in "their best interests". Indigenous disadvantage is best addressed through processes that empower communities to control their own futures and develop a sound economic base. This is in contrast to policies and practices that promote and maintain a situation of welfare dependency and posit service delivery as an adequate response to addressing Indigenous poverty.

Without effective national and regional representative Indigenous bodies speaking out on matters of policy Indigenous Australians will easily become vulnerable to the vagaries of government policy. Self-determination enables a more effective way for issues of cross-cultural misunderstanding to be dealt with in an appropriate way.

Following from the principle of Indigenous self-determination, it is essential that any replacement for ATSIC at national and regional levels must be determined by and in consultation with the Indigenous peoples of Australia. One of the issues ATSIC faced was the fact that it was a Western model imposed on the Indigenous peoples of Australia, rather than a model which arose from a process of consultation. In order for Indigenous communities to be self-determining they must be able to determine who represents them locally, regionally, nationally and internationally and they must also determine *how* they are to be represented.

The reasons for poverty amongst Indigenous people and communities relate to the historical and on-going effects of colonisation and the fundamental racism inherent in our imposed political and social structures which arise from the lack of respect and rights given to Indigenous people. The history of colonisation and dispossession has left Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples significantly worse off than other Australians on virtually every measure of well-being. The implications of past and current policies toward Aboriginal people have meant that they enter modern Australian life from a position of extreme disadvantage.

The best method for addressing Indigenous poverty will be to further develop targeted strategies aimed at increasing the ability of Indigenous people to build a greater economic base and achieve education and employment outcomes on a par with the rest of Australian society. But this should go hand in hand with a coordinated human rights approach, which respects and adheres to the principle of self-determination, responds to resource deficiencies, community health, reducing interactions with the criminal justice system and gives consideration to Indigenous attachment to the land.

Mainstreaming Indigenous specific services will create cross-cultural inefficiencies and a mistrust of service providers by the Indigenous communities they are supposed to service. Given the current difficulties faced by mainstream service providers to engage and effectively service Indigenous people, it is unrealistic to expect anything other than a continuance of this nation's appalling record in Indigenous poverty.

Governments, mainstream departments and agencies must be publicly accountable for the provision of services to Indigenous people. Such accountability must include rigorous monitoring frameworks and the ability for Indigenous people to exercise such accountability. The co-ordination of the delivery of services to Indigenous peoples in the regions is a critical issue. There must be effective means through which various government agencies can be co-ordinate so that Indigenous communities are not in the position where they are dealing with a myriad of government agencies. This is where regional councils can play a critical brokering role enabling service delivery in communities.

Evidence from Australia and overseas demonstrates that effective Indigenous involvement in decision-making and the existence of capable and culturally appropriate Indigenous institutions of governance is required to address Indigenous disadvantage. In Canada, where Indigenous communities have a self-determining role in service delivery to their communities, outcomes in areas such as health and education have been positive. Self-determination and self-management through appropriate Indigenous controlled bodies have achieved positive outcomes and should be the model upon which Australia bases its policies if we are to be serious about improving the situation of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

Conclusion

To leave the future of Indigenous communities in Australia in the hands of the dominant culture and its colonially derived systems of law and care will maintain disadvantage and continue to marginalize those communities. Without Indigenous Voice and Indigenous Say in Indigenous affairs, the first peoples of this country will continue to be subject to the ongoing violence of colonization.

The cry of the black leaders in Australia has been this simple challenge, 'Let my people go' or 'you give me freedom to decide for myself'. God, in the Old Testament, acted for deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the calling of victims who were no people, unto whom He would be their God. This event was interpreted by the prophets as the saving work of the Creator God. In creation God saw everything was good. The creation was in total unity for the good of man. But that unity and goodness is destroyed by the selfishness of man. The relationship with his creator was broken and destroyed. And each one of us, whether we are black or white, have suffered with that nature. We need restoration. But the Creator God already had acts in salvation or restoration toward His creation. His

salvation act is focused in mercy on the victims of his broken creation. ‘Let the broken victims go free’.³⁵

Self-determination is not only about the liberation of the captives, it is also about the liberation of the oppressors. For non-indigenous Christians in Australia, it is liberation from being the violators of Indigenous peoples. We all need to awake from the nightmare of terra nullius. Allowing the silenced to speak is a critical task for Christian post-Christendom mission. This is what Jesus is doing when he is confronted by the haemorrhaging woman (Mark 5: 21-43), the Syrophenician woman (Mark7: 24-30), blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52) and others. We should not “sternly order” them “to be quiet” (Mark 10:48) but allow these victims of marginalisation to speak. Our ministry is to listen the silenced into speak and affirm that their “faith has made [them] well”. While we, and the Indigenous peoples of Australia, may want ATSIC reformed and even replaced, we must affirm the principles of Indigenous Voice and Indigenous Say as the starting point of decolonisation and reconciliation. I believe Jesus life and ministry calls us into solidarity with the crucified. To covenant with them gives us the potential of renewing our covenant with God, relocating us from the courtyard of Empire and be witnesses to Christ’s saving grace.

³⁵ Gondarra, *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, p.25.