

Trans-Tasman Missionary History Conference Paper

“Can these dry bones live?” Conversion and Worship on Aboriginal Missions and Protectorate Stations, 1830-1850

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During the 1830s and 1840s, the Indigenous people of New South Wales and Port Phillip experienced an onslaught of dispossession, disease, violence and depopulation. However, many also experienced a brief burst of evangelical Christian campaigning, sponsored by Protestant missionary societies, the Exeter Hall lobby and sympathetic members of government. My research looks at the London Missionary Society station at Lake Macquarie, the Anglican mission at Wellington Valley, the Methodist mission at Buntingdale near Geelong, and the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectors, who were employed by the state but were mostly devout Methodists who tried to run their stations along mission lines.

The conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity was the primary aim of the first missionaries and a major objective of the first protectors. Simultaneously arrogant in the surety of their own salvation and guilty at their failure of convert others, missionaries were passionate and persistent in their evangelising. They preached from tree stumps, inside barns, at Aboriginal camps and while working in the fields. And Aboriginal people listened – a small number embracing Christianity, some openly scoffing at it, and many more tolerating Christian rules and rituals as long as their own cultural life was not too badly disturbed. Yet by 1850 when these stations had closed, missionaries and protectors concluded that only tiny numbers of people had been saved. This has led many historians to focus largely on the question “Why did the missionaries fail?” I will address this question here, but I also wish to qualify it by pointing out some problems with the assumption of missionary failure. I will also focus on the importance and complexity of Christian worship, conversion and discussions in daily mission life.

Since this paper focuses on religious encounters between Aboriginal people and missionaries, I do not have time to discuss missionaries’ religious and political backgrounds in depth, but a few

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points should be noted. Firstly, while protectors and missionaries recognized that dispossession was harming Aboriginal people terribly, they remained in many respects pro-colonialism and came from an intellectual background where Christian conversion was seen as compensating Indigenous peoples for their loss of land and independence. Secondly, while officially supported by government and missionary societies, missionaries and protectors during the 1830s and 1840s frequently lacked strong economic, social or military power, at a time when Aboriginal people still retained considerable physical mobility and some economic autonomy. This somewhat more equitable power structure vitally shaped Aboriginal-missionary relations.

A couple of preliminary points about missionaries' religious opinions should also be noted. Most Australian protectors and missionaries of this period appeared to support the "Christianity first" doctrine, which taught that Christian conversion was an essential prerequisite for social and material civilization.¹ There was no question about the need for Christian civilization. While protectors and missionaries often took an interest in Aboriginal spirituality, they still concluded that Aboriginal people were horribly degraded and that their spiritual beliefs were "superstition". Unlike most colonists, though, missionaries did not claim that Aboriginal people were beyond improvement. At Wellington Valley, missionary William Watson, observing what he saw as Wiradjuri people's physical and moral degradation, was prompted to ask "can these dry bones live?" He answered himself "Thank God we know they can. O that the wind from Heaven might now come and breathe upon these slain that they might rise up an exceedingly great army to praise and glorify God."²

Aboriginal Christian life was seen by Protestant missionaries and protectors as beginning with participation in Christian rituals and public displays of religious conformity, preparing individuals for repentance and conversion. This was seen as taking a very particular and demanding form, which was individualist and focused on transforming one's inner being through

¹ James Dredge, *Brief Notes on the Aborigines of New South Wales*, Geelong, James Harrison, 1845, p.32; Benjamin Hurst to John McKenny, 28 April 1840, in *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (W.M.M.S.) Archive, Australasia 1812-1889*, Box 1, Mp2107, NLA; Edward Stone Parker in Edgar Morrison (ed.), *Early Days in the Loddon Valley: Memoirs of Edward Stone Parker, 1802-1865*, Daylesford, published by the editor, 1965, p.73; G. A. Robinson to C. J. LaTrobe, 23 October 1839, A.A.R. (A.A.R.), VPRS4467, Reel 1, Victorian Public Records Office

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a personal encounter with God. Conversion was often described as a profound revelation of one's sins, a realisation of the depth of God's love and mercy, and a deep sense of pious gratitude and obedience. This would be followed by ongoing soul-searching and the urge to convert others.³ L.M.S. missionary L.E. Threlkeld, Methodist missionary Joseph Orton and Methodist protector James Dredge described their own conversions very much in these terms.⁴ Similarly, the Methodist protector Edward Stone Parker claimed to teach Aborigines this doctrine – “the fall and universal corruption of human nature – redemption by the advent and death of our Lord Jesus Christ – the necessity of a change of heart or ‘new spirit’ and of conformity to the will of God”.⁵ Meanwhile, at Wellington Valley, missionary William Watson used descriptions of his conversion to illustrate to Wiradjuri the necessity of a “new heart”. When talking to a youth identified as J.M., who told Watson he felt miserable for his wicked heart, Watson replied

that all good people had been that way at first. That I was miserable once, and that all are born in sin, and that at first the mind was like midnight when there was no

² William Watson, *Journal*, 30 June 1833 p.18, *Wellington Valley Project (W.V.P.)*, <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/discipline/history/wv-project>

³ Hilary Carey, *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religions*, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1996, pp.12, 14; Norman P. Goldhawk, “The Methodist People in the Early Victorian Age: Spirituality and Worship”, in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol.2, London, Epworth Press, 1978, p.122; Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas, 1797-1860*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp.47-54, 267-68; Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience and the Self in Early America*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p.79; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p.8; Lynn Hunt and Catherine Hall, “The Curtain Rises”, in Michelle Perot (ed.), *A History of Private Life*, vol.4, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1990, pp.51-53; Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.19-21; Heather McDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit: Aboriginal Christianity in an East Kimberley Town*, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 2001, pp.98-99

⁴ Essay on James Dredge, author and date not cited, *William Jackson Thomas Papers*, MS9658, MSB75, SLV; Joseph Orton, “Answers to Several Questions as to Experience – Call to the Ministry and Theology, 1830”, in Joseph Orton, *Letterbooks, 1822-1842*, MF303 Part 2, AIATSIS; Alex Tyrell, *A Sphere of Benevolence: The Life of Joseph Orton, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary (1795-1845)*, Melbourne, State Library of Victoria, 1993, pp.11-17; L. E. Threlkeld, quoted in Jean Woolmington, “Missionary Attitudes to the Baptism of Australian Aborigines Before 1850”, in *The Journal of Religious History*, vol.13, no.3, June 1985, p.292; L.E. Threlkeld, “Memoranda”, in Niel Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences & Papers of L.E. Threlkeld, Missionary to the Aborigines, 1824-1859*, vol.1, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974, p.144

⁵ Edward Stone Parker to G. A. Robinson, 7 January 1850, “Report of the Proceedings for the half year ending December 31 1849”, in A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

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moon or stars, all dark, very dark ... but when the spirit of God shone into the mind it was like the Sun at first rising.⁶

Thus, it is important to remember that when missionaries described their very small number of Aboriginal converts, they were talking about the people who had apparently been through this particular experience of revelation, repentance, desire to convert others, and ongoing religious self-examination. These people were usually children or young adults – the group most accessible to missionaries. Quite a few of these converts were traumatized or distanced from their own societies. A teenage girl living at Wellington Valley mission, Jane, was seen as a particular hopeful, after the missionaries found her sitting up at night wanting to pray and claiming to be “distressed about her soul, her sin, & her wicked heart.”⁷ Jean Woolmington suggests that Jane, who had been kept by a white man and already had a child, wished to please the missionaries who frequently reminded her of her supposed sin.⁸ However, while this is likely, Jane may have also sought genuine consolation in religious ritual after a disruptive and painful past, and indeed she remained in contact with Watson for many years afterwards. Missionaries also reported people showing Christian faith when seriously ill or dying. For instance, missionary William Watson grieved over the death of a pious ten year old boy, Billy Black, who had lived with various white people before being passed on to Watson. Billy, who died in great pain from tuberculosis, had been mocked by Watson’s companions, who “repeatedly said that a horsewhip was the best medicine for him”. Christianity, I think, gave Billy a refuge and a way of endearing himself to Watson.⁹ Similarly, in 1850 Protector Parker described one youth who had died at his station, after apparently showing Christian tendencies. When being nursed by Mrs Parker, he told her “he prayed to God to save him and take him to heaven when he died ... but he wished to get better than he might learn to read more.”¹⁰ In such cases, any religious feelings were probably heightened by desire to please the missionaries, whom these sick people were, to varying degrees, dependent on.

⁶ Watson, *Journal*, 16 January 1837 p.7. Also, Watson, *Journal*, 6 January 1835 p.2

⁷ James Günther, *Journal*, 10 September 1837 p.12, W.V.P., <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/discipline/history/wv-project>

⁸ Woolmington, “Missionary Attitudes to the Baptism of Australian Aborigines”, p.286

⁹ Watson, *Journal*, 30 October 1832 pp.29-32

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The most spectacular Aboriginal conversions from this period actually happened at the Wesleyan mission in Perth, run by John Smithies. Smithies was pleased with Aboriginal children's Christian progress, and in 1843 he told vivid conversion stories.¹¹ One night, two teenage girls, No-gyle and Wo-burt, described having profound religious dreams. No-gyle claimed the devil had visited her.

He say me your father, you pray to me. Then me look at him, me think he look so miserable, me saying you not my father. My father great and good father, heaven get down ... devil take me by my arm and lift me up and show me beautiful Garden and said give me all that if me would pray to him. Me then kneel down and God pray ... devil too much wicked.¹²

The clear Biblical references in this dream apparently further convinced the missionaries of No-gyle's truthfulness. On the same night, Wo-burt related a dream of seeing a missionary preaching to Aboriginal people in the bush, before the judgement day, when, she said, she saw the devil dragging sinful black and white people down to hell.¹³ Several days later, the missionaries met Wo-burt walking home through the rain from her domestic job in a white household. Soaked and crying, she told the missionaries "Me think last night God give me new heart." She said she had sat up all night, minding the white family's baby and feeling frightened and guilty for her sins until through long prayers God made her happy. The girls told these stories before the whole school and the delighted missionaries, until "the school was turned into a prayer meeting".¹⁴

Conversion brought the girls admiring attention, but their religious convictions seem to have been genuinely felt. Shortly afterwards, No-gyle died of tuberculosis, praying and listening to hymns and imploring the missionaries to convert her mother.¹⁵ What happened to Wo-burt is

¹⁰ Edward Stone Parker to G. A. Robinson, 7 January 1850, "Report of the Proceedings for the half year ending December 31 1849" in *A.A.R.*, VPRS4467, Reel 2

¹¹ John Smithies to General Secretaries, 1 May 1842, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; John Smithies to General Secretaries, 10 January 1843, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; John Smithies to General Secretaries, 25 October 1843, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

¹² John Smithies to General Secretaries, 25 October 1843, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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unclear, but two years later a girl her age, identified as Mary Wobart, married the white overseer John Stokes. They lived happily together and had three children, but after four years Mary Wobart died of influenza. According to Smithies, she impressed everyone with her faith and farewelled her family saying “God loves me.”¹⁶ If this was the same young woman, her Christian beliefs seem to have sustained her to the end.

It’s interesting to speculate why Smithies’ mission experienced quite large numbers of youthful conversions,¹⁷ when, as I’ll discuss, the eastern missions and protectorate stations did not. Smithies’ mission was distinguished by a dormitory system and the children’s employment in white households, which distanced them from their own families. Also, a large number of children died during the 1840s, which may have encouraged the survivors to seek religious solace. Furthermore, Smithies seems to have been more hopeful than other missionaries about the Christianity of surrounding settlers, some of whom he described as going through a “revival”.¹⁸ It’s possible that on this mission (unlike the others) Christian conversion appeared to Aboriginal youths as an asset in colonial society.

However, on most early missions and protectorate stations, dramatic conversions were very rare. Perhaps the greatest reason for this was that economically and politically, Aboriginal people had relatively little to gain from Christianity at this time. They knew that missionaries and protectors could offer only minimal supplies and protection. They also knew missionaries’ standing amongst their fellow Europeans was less than impressive. Protector Parker had difficulty answering pointed questions from Djadjawurrong elders about why so few Europeans lived by Christian rules.¹⁹ Wellington Valley resident John Maughan reported that the local Europeans

¹⁶ William McNair and Hilary Rumley, *Pioneer Aboriginal Mission: The Work of Wesleyan Missionary John Smithies in the Swan River Colony 1840-1855*, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1981, pp.104-6; John Smithies to General Secretaries, 21 September 1845, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

¹⁷ For instance, John Smithies to General Secretaries, 26 October 1844, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Morrison, *Early Days in the Loddon Valley*, p.69; Edward Stone Parker, “The Aborigines of Australia, 10 May 1854”, in Edgar Morrison (ed.), *Frontier Life in the Loddon Protectorate: Episodes from Early Days, 1837-1842*, Melbourne, no publisher cited, 1967, pp.27-28

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encouraged Wiradjuri to “turn their prayers into ridicule”.²⁰ Similar comments were made at Buntingdale, where resident G.T. Lloyd recalled settlers giving Aboriginal people tobacco in return for funny imitations of the missionaries singing hymns. The missionaries blamed these “Godless Europeans” for turning Aborigines against them.²¹ This claim may have been simplistic, but the contempt many Europeans showed towards the missionaries could not have impressed Aboriginal people with the benefits of being Christian in colonial society. Thus, while I am not suggesting that religious conversion simply comes down to material or pragmatic causes, I do think these factors have to be considered.

There were also cultural factors behind the apparent lack of conversions. One reason was the language gap; while all missionaries and protectors tried to learn local languages, few fully succeeded, and many commented on the difficulties of preaching to people who may or may not have understood them.²² The language gap was also a conceptual gap. Buntingdale missionaries Tuckfield, Orton and Hurst and protectors Parker and Robinson repeatedly claimed that Aboriginal people had no words for spiritual concepts, including “holiness, justice, righteousness, sin, guilt, repentance, redemption, pardon, peace”.²³ The question of whether the English language was adequate for expressing Aboriginal concepts did not seem to occur to missionaries, nor did they seem to wonder whether true fluency might require seeing another culture’s world view. Their assertion that Aboriginal languages were bereft of metaphysical terms helped to rationalise the lack of conversions, but also contributed to a general image of

²⁰ John Maughan, examined before Executive Council, 19 April 1839, contained in Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 7 May 1840, in *Historical Records of Australia*, series 1, vol.XX, February 1839 – September 1840, Sydney, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1924, p.620

²¹ Peter Corris, *Aborigines and Europeans in Western Victoria*, Canberra, Australasian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1968, p.78; Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 23 June 1842, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

²² Günther, *Journal*, 8 November 1837 p.23, 13 April 1838 p.4; Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 22 September 1840, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 8 September 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; William Thomas, *Journal*, 13 October 1839 and 20 October 1839, in *William Thomas Papers (W.T.P.)*, MF323, Reel 1, AIATSIS; Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 20 February 1839, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 1; Watson, *Journal*, 27 November 1832 p.14

²³ Edward Stone Parker, quoted in George Augustus Robinson, “1844 Annual Report”, in Ian D. Clark (ed.), *The Papers of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, vol.4, Clarendon, Heritage Matters, 2001, p.82. Also, Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 22 September 1840, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 8 September 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Edward Stone Parker, “Quarterly Journal 1 June – 31 August 1842”, in *A.A.R.*, VPRS4467, Reel 2; Parker, “The Aborigines of Australia, 10 May 1854”, p.20; Robinson, “1844 Annual Report”, p.82; Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 20 February 1839, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 1, Mp2107

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Aboriginal people as primarily concerned with the mundane and sinful physical world, rather than the spiritual realm – a peculiarly European distinction which may have made little sense to Aboriginal people at the time. Thus, Parker claimed that Djadjawurrong was much richer than English in describing bodily parts, food, war, animals and plants but was “miserably deficient in psychological or metaphysical designations”.²⁴

This conceptual distance presumably effected Aboriginal understandings of Christianity. Heather McDonald and Jean Woolmington argue that the missionary version of Christian revelation – a sudden understanding of one’s individual sins, fear of damnation, and establishment of an intense, private relationship with God – was quite alien to Aboriginal spiritual systems. These tended to be less obsessed with individual perfection, emphasising the collective over the personal, and seeing transgression of the law more as a social crime to be punished than a private sin that threatened eternal damnation.²⁵

If these conceptual differences made conversion less likely, missionaries’ methods sometimes caused offence. For Evangelical Protestants, conversion was intimately related to concern for a pious death and fears about the afterlife. However, at Wellington Valley, Handt, Günther and Watson found that their lectures on death and eternity were received with fear and anger. Handt said of Wiradjuri “Their fear of death is very great, and they are loath to hear anything on the subject; and yet it is difficult to speak on religious matters without touching this point.”²⁶ Watson, similarly, found that when he lectured young men preparing for battle on death and repentance, they cried out “Do not say any more”.²⁷

The missionaries did not always record what they had said to offend people, but sometimes they tried to use recent Aboriginal deaths to illustrate the necessity of conversion. Speaking of recently deceased people was and is considered distressing and offensive in many Aboriginal

²⁴ Parker, “The Aborigines of Australia, 10 May 1854”, p.20

²⁵ McDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit*, p.100-1, 120; Jean Woolmington, “ ‘Writing in the Sand’: The First Missions to Aborigines in Eastern Australia”, in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, Adelaide, Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988, pp.86-87

²⁶ J.C.S. Handt, “1835 Report”, p.2, W.V.P., <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/discipline/history/wv-project>

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societies, and protector Thomas and missionary Günther caused anger when they interrupted elders' funerals to warn people about the afterlife.²⁸ Three days after a man called Wesley died, Watson asked his relatives "where was he now?" They refused to answer.²⁹ Similarly, after the death of a young man named Billy of Ngannima, the missionaries took aside Billy's kinsman Tommy, seeing this is a great opportunity to lecture him. The resulting scene was unpleasant.

When Mr W. pointed out hell fire, Tommy grew angry & called out: 'Don't you talk that way! you were in fire. Where that fire come from in your house? [Referring to a recent fire in Watson's study.] ... Godder (God) made it; he badly with you (angry), he make fire.'³⁰

The missionaries, taken aback, reflected "the Natives understand & know more of what the missionaries tell them than we are sometimes led to suppose."³¹ However, such scenes were unlikely to endear missionaries to their Aboriginal congregations.

Some Aboriginal people were also offended by missionary attempts to admonish them for what Günther called "the ignorance of the Natives, & their ridiculous notions".³² Protector Parker noted that Aboriginal women did not like being condemned for their supposed sexual immorality.³³ At Wellington Valley, missionary lectures on "superstition" annoyed some young men who were closest to the missionaries. One youth, Jemmy Buckley, was furious when Günther and Watson interrupted his dancing at ceremony to warn him about sin. He burst out "You always always come & tell us this! What you always come to the Camp for & tell us we should go to hell[?]... Don't you go to hell?" Günther noted "The poor fellow appeared almost ready to beat us".³⁴ The missionaries were undeterred, however, considering anger a more encouraging sign than indifference. Once, when Mr and Mrs Günther were giving the young men

²⁷ Watson, *Journal*, 13 December 1834 p.11

²⁸ Günther, *Journal*, 25 June 1838 p.19; Thomas, *Journal*, 10 August 1846, Reel 3

²⁹ Watson, *Journal*, 25 April 1833 p.4

³⁰ Günther, *Journal*, 10 July 1838 p.4. The amendments are Günther's.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Günther, *Journal*, 9 July 1838 p.3

³³ Edward Stone Parker to G. A. Robinson, 16 January 1849, "Report for the Loddon Aboriginal Station and North Western District for the half of the year ending 31 December 1848", A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

³⁴ Günther, *Journal*, 3 March 1838 p.17

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“a long & severe lesson about their ill conduct”, comparing them unfavourably to the Maori, Jemmy finally scoffed “Very well, go to New Zealand; there are the good Natives!”³⁵

However, while particular remarks and actions by missionaries offended some people, Aboriginal rejections of Christianity as an entire spiritual system were voiced only occasionally. The Wellington Valley missionaries reported several arguments with young men about this. Jemmy Buckley, for instance, responded to Günther’s lectures on native superstition by saying “Black fellows knew a great deal”. Günther described him speaking “with feelings of veneration, & with a great degree of self sufficiency”.³⁶ Another man, Kabbarin, was unimpressed by Watson’s attempts to compare Baiami with God. He said “I believe white man made the Bible and then put down God in it”, adding “O Baiami is a great Doctor, parson is no Doctor”.³⁷

However, despite these tantalising fragments of arguments that have been preserved, Aboriginal people in general rarely seemed interested in arguing the validity of their spiritual beliefs against those of the missionaries. This silence could be interpreted in several ways. The language gap was, again, relevant here. Many people may have also avoided antagonising the missionaries, whom they were to some extent economically dependent on, and others may have had little interest in doing so. Contrasting indigenous spiritual knowledge, which was restricted and privileged, with the more egalitarian missionary approach to religion was problematic too. Furthermore, while arguing the exclusive validity of one spiritual system over another was an essential tenet of missionary Christianity, it may have had little meaning for Aboriginal people at the time, to whom Western ideas of monotheism, heathenism and evangelising were largely alien. The question of whether Aboriginal approaches to religion were more accommodating or adaptive has been discussed by anthropologists including Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Erich Kolig and Heather McDonald, but their works have focused on later periods of history and different Aboriginal communities to those mentioned here.³⁸

³⁵ Günther, *Journal*, 15 May 1838 p.10

³⁶ Günther, *Journal*, 9 July 1838 p.3

³⁷ Watson, *Journal*, 19 December 1835 p.9

³⁸ Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians: Aboriginal Traditional Life: Past and Present*, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988; Erich Kolig, “Mission Not Accomplished: Christianity in the

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I think historians should be cautious about accepting missionary claims that Aboriginal people were hostile towards Christianity, which often seemed to be based on the assumption that the survival of indigenous spiritual life automatically meant a conscious rebellion against Christianity and colonialism. A number of historians have, I think, implied this to varying degrees, including Henry Reynolds, Peter Read, Barry John Bridges and Michael Christie, and while in some ways I agree, I would qualify it a little.³⁹ In later decades, when missionaries assumed greater power over Aboriginal communities, maintenance of many aspects of indigenous life presumably did require deliberate resistance. However, the first missionaries and protectors generally lacked strong military or economic power and it is questionable whether Aboriginal people at this time saw their continuing spiritual life in terms of strong rebellion, or whether missionary restrictions were merely an annoying but largely peripheral factor, or perhaps something that could be negotiated without major conflict. Histories of the first missions also need to go beyond the assumption that Aboriginal people were divided into a small number of converts and a large number of hostile or indifferent non-Christians.

Missionaries' strict, culturally specific understanding of faith meant that some Aboriginal people who were keenly involved in Christian ritual life were still dismissed as heathens. At Threlkeld's Lake Macquarie mission, for example, an Awabakal man called Biraban or M'Gill worked as a translator and guide to Threlkeld for many years. In 1838, Biraban was working as a translator in court and Judge Burton, impressed by Biraban's Christian knowledge, asked if he had been baptised. Threlkeld said no. Although Biraban knew a lot about Christianity, Threlkeld maintained that his behaviour, particularly his drinking, was incompatible with Christian

Kimberleys", in Swain and Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, pp.377-90; MacDonald, *Blood, Bones and Spirit*

³⁹ Barry John Bridges, *The Church of England and the Aborigines of New South Wales, 1788-1855*, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 1978, pp.xi, 4, 344, 394, 546; Barry John Bridges, "James Dredge in Australia", in *Descent*, vol.5, no.1, 1970, pp.2, 8; Michael Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria, 1835-86*, Sydney, University of Sydney Press, 1979, pp.102-3, 122-25; Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*, Sydney, Australian National University Press, 1988, pp.1-2, 14-21; Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Townsville, James Cook University, 1981, pp.??; Henry Reynolds, *With the White People*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1990, p.90

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character.⁴⁰ Threlkeld may have also been put off by the fact Biraban continued to lead his people in Indigenous ceremonies.⁴¹ Similarly, at Wellington Valley in 1835, missionary JCS Handt reported that while the children's scriptural knowledge was good and they claimed to believe in Christianity, he could not call them converts – “no real spiritual mindedness has yet manifested”.⁴² For instance, one girl, Nancy, was described as intelligent and knowledgeable about religion but was still judged as “wicked” and unChristian because she stole food.⁴³ Even people who requested baptism were not necessarily welcomed. One man, Frederick, who had lived at Wellington Valley mission for some time, asked to be baptised (possibly because he wanted to marry one of the mission girls). Günther refused and lectured him “that he did not truly believe as yet, that he was too wicked still”.⁴⁴ Such requests were rare and their sincerity questionable. Nonetheless, the fact that these people were able and willing to participate in Christian life but were still dismissed by the missionaries as hopeless suggests that Aboriginal people's relationship to Christianity warrants further attention.

Certainly, large numbers of supposedly “non-Christian” people took part in Christian ceremonial life. Church services seem to have been held on all missions and protectorate stations, although these varied in frequency and Aboriginal numbers fluctuated considerably. Religious life was also integrated into daily routines, particularly on the missions. At Buntingdale, for instance, breakfast rations were handed out along with hymns and prayers, and school classes began with services.⁴⁵ The missionaries at Wellington Valley, particularly Watson, spoke informally about religion at all opportunities, frequently preaching to people in the bush and at the camp,⁴⁶ and

⁴⁰ L.E. Threlkeld, “Correspondence and Early Reports Relating to the Aboriginal Mission 1825-1841”, in Gunson (ed.), *Australian Reminiscences*, vol.2, p.271

⁴¹ L.E. Threlkeld, *An Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal, the People of Awaba or Lake Macquarie*, John Fraser (ed.), Sydney, Government Printer, 1892 (first published 1834), p.88

⁴² Handt, “1835 Report”, p.1

⁴³ Günther, *Journal*, 3 September 1837 p.10, and 22 April 1838 p.5

⁴⁴ Günther, *Journal*, 13 August 1838 p.12

⁴⁵ Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

⁴⁶ Günther, *Journal*, 7 November 1837 p.23; J.C.S. Handt and William Watson, 31 December 1834, “Church Missionary Society Report: The Missionaries at Wellington Valley, To His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales”, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Handt, “Report: 1835”, p.2; Handt, *Journal*, 27 August 1837 p.8; Watson, *Journal*, 16 October 1834 p.3, 19 October 1834 p.3, 4 January 1835 p.1

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reading Biblical stories and singing hymns with the children.⁴⁷ All this was partly necessary because some people refused to attend church, but it can also be seen as an attempt to implement a comprehensively Christian life.

Missionaries and protectors considered the physical appearance of civilisation important, particularly in church. They eagerly recorded signs of their congregations washing, shaving, wearing European clothes, listening to sermons and participating in hymns and religious discussions. Protector Thomas was particularly pleased with the children's demeanour during his sermons; they sang beautifully and conducted themselves as well as English "charity children".⁴⁸ A European visitor was impressed, commenting "What would the people of England say to hear this from a race that has been designated as not but a link from the brute creation [?]"⁴⁹ Protector Parker was similarly happy to see Aboriginal people apparently listening closely to his sermons and putting up with "the reproofs which I find necessary frequently to give them".⁵⁰ "Their deportment [in church] was serious and orderly; they spontaneously followed the example of the whites in standing up, kneeling etc."⁵¹ While doubtful of their religious sincerity, Parker was nonetheless encouraged.⁵²

Missionaries were also encouraged. The Wellington Valley missionaries doubted whether true Christian impressions had been made,⁵³ but nonetheless noted with pleasure that Wiradjuri adopted the correct Sunday appearance and behaved politely in church, although some fell

⁴⁷ For example, Günther, *Journal*, 8 November 1837 p.23, 17 August 1838 p.12, 18 August 1838 p.13, 5 March 1839 p.5, 10 March 1839 p.5, 14 March 1839 p.6; Watson, *Journal*, 6 December 1832 p.23

⁴⁸ William Thomas to G. A. Robinson, 1 December 1843, "Journal of Proceedings, September 1843 – December 1843", in A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Journal*, 22 August 1841, Reel 2. Also, Thomas, *Journal*, 1 November 1840, 21 March 1841, 28 March 1841, 4 April 1841, 11 April 1841, 2 May 1841, Reel 2.

⁵⁰ Rosalind Jane Lewis, *Edward Stone Parker: Protector of Aborigines, Missionary and Visionary*, Thesis for Bachelor of Arts Honours, Deakin University, 1987, p.39; Morrison, *Early Days in the Loddon Valley*, p.37

⁵¹ Edward Stone Parker, "Quarterly Journal, December 1840 – February 1841", in A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

⁵² Parker, quoted in Morrison, *Early Days in the Loddon Valley*, p.37; Edward Stone Parker, "Quarterly Journal, December 1840 – February 1841", in A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

⁵³ Günther, *Journal*, 8 November 1837 p.23, 26 November 1837 p.27, 1 April 1838 p.1; Handt, *Journal*, 3 November 1833 p.5; William Porter, *Journal*, 21-22 July 1838 p.3, 31 August 1838 p.8, W.V.P., <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/discipline/history/wv-project>; Watson, *Journal*, 3 January 1835 p.1

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asleep.⁵⁴ Some also prayed around the house, sang hymns beautifully, assured Watson they worshipped by themselves in the bush, and showed an interest in his Wiradjuri translations of scripture.⁵⁵ The Buntingdale missionaries Orton, Tuckfield and Hurst were delighted by their congregation's sedate behaviour in church, although they knew many did not speak English well. Tuckfield wrote "Everything we say on such occasions is to them in an unknown tongue yet they appear to be struck with silent admiration and they invariably listen with breathless attention."⁵⁶ Orton was also pleased when he met a group of people in the bush who greeted him by singing hymns.⁵⁷ While participation in religious rituals did not guarantee salvation, missionaries nonetheless took pleasure in the outward signs of worship, partly because these seemed to signify adoption of European manners, but also because they offered hope of future religious impressions. Günther, while doubting whether his sermons were understood, wrote "Still it always gives me pleasure, to see a number of them at Church: they may at least get some notion & impression of sacred & divine ordinances".⁵⁸

From such comments, it might be assumed that most Aboriginal people had no idea what was going on in church and just joined in out of politeness and necessity. This, however, was not entirely true. Quite a few people – mostly young people – actively took part in religious discussions. The discussions that were recorded were, of course, those that involved missionaries; what Aboriginal people said to each other about Christianity (if anything) is unknown. Threlkeld did note, though, that people 40 miles from his mission recognised his sermons because they had heard it already from Biraban on his travels.⁵⁹ Threlkeld also noted a trend amongst some youths on his station to refuse to say the name of Jesus Christ, protesting

⁵⁴ Günther, *Journal*, 26 November 1837 p.27, 1 April 1838 p.1; J.C.S. Handt and William Watson, 31 December 1834, "Church Missionary Society Report: The Missionaries at Wellington Valley, To His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales", in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Watson, *Journal*, 3 January 1835 p.1, 10 May 1835 pp.6-7

⁵⁵ For example, Günther, *Journal*, 17 July 1838 p.6, 15 August 1838 p.12, 5 March 1839 p.5, 10 March 1839 p.5; Watson, *Journal*, 21 April 1833 p.3, 15 October 1834 p.2, 25 December 1834 p.13

⁵⁶ Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 12 August 1838, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 1, Mp2107. Also, Benjamin Hurst to Sir George Gipps, "Report of the Wesleyan Missionary Society's Mission at Buntingdale, Port Phillip, 28 April to 23 November 1840, in *A.A.R.*, VPRS4467, Reel 1; Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 13 May 1839, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Joseph Orton, *Journal 1832-1839 and 1840-1841*, 24 April 1836, 27 April 1839 and 12 May 1839, MF302, AIATSIS

⁵⁷ Orton, *Journal*, 27 November 1840

⁵⁸ Günther, *Journal*, 26 November 1837 p.27

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that it was sacred and forbidden.⁶⁰ Some Aboriginal comments are difficult to interpret, but offer tantalizing clues to the discussions taking place. Watson, for instance, recorded without comment a dream that a Wiradjuri man called Wirrimbildwally claimed to have had, where he was pulled by a curryjong cord into God's house and saw God and Jesus in a long white coats, and thousands of people reading books.⁶¹ What Wirrimbildwally's intentions were in relating this story is unclear, but the elements of his dream – God's house, the thousands of followers, the emphasis on reading – reflect aspects of Christianity stressed by the missionaries.

Indeed, when missionaries complained about communication difficulties, they sometimes referred to Aboriginal people's tricky and perceptive questions. Orton, for instance, was both happy and embarrassed to note that many questions he received were so original and complex that he had trouble answering them.⁶² At Buntingdale, Tuckfield was also quizzed extensively by the young men about heaven; they asked what it was made of, what they would eat there, whether they would have to dig the earth like white men, whether they would grow old, and whether there would be any distinction between black and white. On hearing Tuckfield's answers (which he did not record), "they seemed to be enraptured with a contrast between their present state and that in which it is their privilege to be".⁶³ Meanwhile, at Wellington Valley, J.C.S. Handt was not too troubled when asked whether God "was a black fellow", responding that "he was neither black nor white, but bright as the sun".⁶⁴ Günther was more baffled when the young man Cochrane asked him "What the devil say to them when they come to hell?"⁶⁵ Cochrane also asked why, if unconverted people were damned, did "not God give Blackfellows Bible long ago?" Günther could only respond that there were so many sinners in the world that

⁵⁹ L. E. Threlkeld to E. Deas Thomson, 31 December 1838, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

⁶⁰ L.E. Threlkeld to E. Deas Thomson, "Annual Report of the Mission to the Aborigines, Lake Macquarie 1840", p.3, in L.E. Threlkeld, *Papers 1815-1862*, MLA382, MF329, AIATSIS

⁶¹ Watson, *Journal*, 20 May 1833 p.14

⁶² Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 8 September 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107. Also, Joseph Orton to General Secretaries, 2 September 1841, in Orton, *Letterbooks 1822-1842*, MF303 Part 2; Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 September 1840, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107; Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

⁶³ Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

⁶⁴ Handt, *Journal*, 4 December 1832 p.17

⁶⁵ Günther, *Journal*, 5 August 1838 p.9

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Christianity took a long time to reach Australia.⁶⁶ Perhaps the most difficult questions missionaries and protectors faced, however, related to the contrast between their idealistic preaching and the behaviour of European settlers. As one Aboriginal man told protector Thomas “he believed there was a God but did not believe there was a hell or else they [Europeans] would be afraid of going there.”⁶⁷

It is hard to know what conclusions Aboriginal people drew from these discussions, but it seems that they were often willing to participate to degrees in Christian life, but Indigenous practices often had to be accommodated. Thomas was cross when people held ceremonies on Sunday instead of coming to church, but the elders assured him “that it was not like their Corrobories [sic] but like our Sunday, the purpose was to make Black fellows friends.”⁶⁸ Missionaries’ and protectors’ attempts to ban fighting on Sundays also had mixed results. At Buntingdale, people debated with Tuckfield about whether it was acceptable to attack their enemies on Sunday.⁶⁹ At Wellington Valley, people attended church services before leaving for battle, and at Thomas’s station after a fierce fight, the camp surprised Thomas by voluntarily assembling for church and singing a hymn in their own language for the first time.⁷⁰ While missionaries found such behaviour strange, their congregations apparently did not.

Kinship avoidance rules also effected Christian worship. At Buntingdale mission, Orton noted crossly that some women refused to enter the church when certain relatives were in there, staying outside and “peeping and watching every movement of others”.⁷¹ Thomas also mentioned kinship avoidance as a problem in church. He struggled, largely in vain, to make women sit with men, who reproved him “why so stupid you, you know we do not sit together”.⁷² Usually the church problem was resolved by letting the women stand outside,⁷³ but sometimes they were put

⁶⁶ Günther, *Journal*, 15 March 1839 p.6

⁶⁷ Beverley A. Blaskett, *The Aboriginal Response to White Settlement in the Port Phillip District, 1835-1850*, Master of Arts thesis, University of Melbourne, 1979, p.234

⁶⁸ William Thomas to G. A. Robinson, 2 March 1844, “Journal of Proceedings, 1 December 1843 – 1 March 1844”, in *A.A.R.*, VPRS4467, Reel 2

⁶⁹ Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, in *W.M.M.S. Archive*, Box 2, Mp2107

⁷⁰ Günther, *Journal*, 25 February 1838 p.15; Thomas, *Journal*, 5 November 1843, Reel 3

⁷¹ Orton, *Journal*, 4 May 1841 and 6 May 1841

⁷² Thomas, *Journal*, 28 May 1841, Reel 2

⁷³ Thomas, *Journal*, 15 November 1840, 22 November 1840, 29 November 1840, 11 April 1841, Reel 2

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off attending; “they say they don’t like to hide their faces”.⁷⁴ Thomas, not especially patient with the custom, was so irritated when some women insisted on sitting with their backs to the men (and to him) that he grabbed some of them and forcibly turned them around.⁷⁵ His colleague, Parker, also had trouble reconciling church services with the rule forbidding Djadjawurrong women to look upon their future sons-in-law.⁷⁶ At Wellington Valley, young male initiates sometimes stayed away from church, explaining “too much yeener [women] sit down there”.⁷⁷ Missionaries tried to solve this by holding separate services, often with the men’s service in the chapel in English and the women’s service at the camp in Wiradjuri.⁷⁸

All of this indicates that religious encounters on the first missions were more complex and varied than a simple statement of missionary failure would suggest. The mass individual conversions missionaries had hoped to inspire were generally not forthcoming, but to unquestioningly accept missionaries’ division of the world into believers and non-believers is to neglect alternative indigenous understandings of mission life. A further point, of course, is that many people present on the first missions and protectorate stations ended up – or their descendents ended up – on subsequent missions like Lake Condah and Warangesda or Christian-oriented government stations like Coranderrk and Framlingham. Once there, many people tolerated or embraced Christianity, sometimes incorporating it into political campaigns for Aboriginal autonomy and land rights. It is intriguing to try and reconcile the supposed stubborn heathenism that missionaries complained about in the 1840s with the Christian enthusiasm of later decades. I would suggest that changing colonial circumstances were crucial here – the consolidation of state power and Aboriginal dispossession, and people’s growing need for safe, secure living spaces after decades of traumatic dispossession. Thus, without wishing to discount the emotional and spiritual qualities of mission life and Christian conversion, I would stress that these were vitally shaped by colonial power relations. In the 1830s and 1840s, this meant that the Aboriginal reception of Christianity was influenced by both their economic poverty and continued physical

⁷⁴ Thomas, *Journal*, 1 January 1844, Reel 3

⁷⁵ Thomas, *Journal*, 30 May 1841, Reel 2

⁷⁶ Edward Stone Parker, “Quarterly Journal, 1 March – 31 May 1841”, A.A.R., VPRS4467, Reel 2

⁷⁷ Watson, *Journal*, 10 March 1833 p.11. Also, Günther, *Journal*, 10 September 1837 p.12

⁷⁸ Günther, *Journal*, 25 January 1838 p.8, 26 January 1838 p.8, 18 February 1838 p.13, 19 February 1838 p.13, 21 February 1838 p.13, 4 March 1838 p.17, 18 March 1838 p.20

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mobility, and by missionaries' frequent lack of social or economic strength. Such comparative Aboriginal autonomy made their participation in Christian life varied, fluid and ambiguous.