REVIEW ARTICLE

SCENES FROM AN ACADEMIC LIFE: A REVIEW OF *ONE BLOOD* BY JOHN HARRIS¹

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A radical Aboriginal Christian, I shall call her Ruth, came to see me to discuss her postgraduate research. Almost immediately her eyes fell upon my copy of *One Blood* which was on my study table. This was not surprising as it is almost 1,000 pages long, 5½ centimetres thick, and has one of the most attractive covers I have seen, an original painting by the extraordinarily talented Sally Morgan. Ruth bristled at the sight of it and labelled it emphatically 'rubbish'.

Although I had not read it all at that time, I felt somewhat embarrassed that I had missed this unmistakable quality. Apparently, according to Ruth, John Harris was simply excusing the inexcusable actions of the early missionaries. He was letting them off too lightly.

After filing her response away in my mind for this future reference, we discussed her project. She wanted to come to an understanding of why the early missionaries had acted in such a racist, paternalistic way. She requested some direction to prime sources, so I suggested mission records, diaries, journals, reminiscences, newspapers etc., the various repositories I was aware of and the guides to their holdings. I began to think I was making it sound too daunting for someone just starting a research project. Then, it hit me. Surely, the first port of call would be *One Blood*, Part A, 'Nineteenth century: Aboriginal missions extend west, south and north'. The inescapable quality of rubbishness was again referred to.

'But, surely,' I said, 'whether you agree with him or not, he has narrated their exploits and described, discussed and copiously referenced the people you are interested in.'

Actually, I thought his analysis of racial attitudes of the missionaries and the culture that spawned them was one of the best and most thorough I had come across.

Ruth agreed that it might be useful after all, even if only to reveal where the treasure was buried.

I first discussed *One Blood* with a colleague who was also trying to understand 'what made them [nineteenth century missionaries] tick'. He also thought John Harris protested the case of the missionaries too much; that he was trying to excuse them for their cruel acts and past destructiveness of Aboriginal society, for the personal harshness and cruelty they sometimes exhibited. At that stage I hadn't opened my copy. Certainly, Harris doesn't emphasise those aspects of missionary life that fascinated my colleague. Nor, I think, does he ignore them. In fact, his analysis of missionary attitudes and the institutional responses reveal the historical dead weights the Christian churches had loaded on themselves.

It may be useful at this point to look at Harris' analysis of the Anglican Church's most

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¹ Harris 1990.

famous missionary to the Aborigines, Ernest Gribble. His conclusion is succinct and accurate: 'Ernest Gribble will always remain a paradox, both praised and criticised, revered and denounced'.² Harris emphasises how reluctant Ernest Gribble was to become a missionary to Aborigines when asked by his ill and dying father to take over the newly established Yarrabah Mission. He had accompanied his father, John Brown Gribble, to found the Warangesda Mission on the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales and another on the Gascoyne River in Western Australia. J.B. Gribble had exposed the settlers' callousness towards Western Australia's Aborigines, drawn down on himself the wrath of the colonial establishment and was eventually rejected by the Western Australian church.

While describing Gribble's work at Yarrabah, Harris notes: 'Like nearly all missionaries of his era, Gribble did not have a high regard for traditional Aboriginal culture'.³ He points out '[Gribble] was not afraid to use physical punishment ... that he resorted to the use of fists or stockwhip mostly in response to abuse of women'.⁴ Of Gribble's work at Forrest River Mission (now Oombulgurri), Harris remarked:

For fourteen years, Gribble administered the Forrest River Mission with autocratic paternalism. ... Believing, not without reason, that the mission provided the only hope for the Aboriginal people, Gribble insisted even more sternly upon adherence to the disciplined mission life. He used physical punishment more frequently than before, desperately trying to realise his dream for the people, to make the mission their refuge and their home ... Elkin found Gribble to be an angry despot ... 'Gribble thought his job was to turn them into British subjects and salute the flag every morning,' wrote Elkin, 'It was a sad picture. ... There is too much repression', Elkin wrote, 'and I regret to say, a little terrorising in the attitude taken up inside the mission towards the inmates'. ... Like his father, John Brown Gribble, Ernest Gribble was a complex and difficult man. He was most difficult, however, to those who sought to harm Aboriginal people, and his anger at their mistreatment drove him to his obsession with isolating and protecting them.⁵

Reading the above comments on Ernest Gribble in isolation from the rest of the text, you could hardly conclude that John Harris was trying to minimise the negative aspects of Gribble's personality and actions as Chaplain-Superintendent. I have included some examples in the above extract of Harris' putting Gribble's actions into an understanding context. Yet these are minor qualifications for the overall picture of Gribble that emerges is a very flattering one, with at times a tinge of the triumphalism that is so common in missionary literature:

In Christian terms, there was exceptionally sound and rapid spiritual progress in the first few years of Yarrabah mission ... Many were baptised in the first few years of the mission. As early as 1896, nine Yarrabah Aboriginal people ... were confirmed ... The nine confirmees were given responsibilities at Yarrabah. It was one of the strengths of Yarrabah that Christian leadership was encouraged much earlier than at most missions. Although their authority derived from Gribble's recognised authority, it was nevertheless real leadership.⁶

2 *ibid.*, p. 518.

3 *ibid.*, p. 509.

4 *ibid.*, p. 510.

5 *ibid.*, p. 513, p. 516, p. 517.

6 *ibid.*, p. 507, p. 508.

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The above facts are true but they raise a number of unexplored questions. For example, do baptisms and confirmations measure 'sound and rapid spiritual progress' especially when they have been achieved in such a short time? My sympathy goes out to John Harris for I have confronted, not very successfully, the same question. From the present historical perspective such spiritual progress looks like conforming to missionary expectations; yet some of these early converts would soon venture out to endure unknown hardships as missionary explorers in assisting Gribble and Bishop Gilbert White establish Mitchell River Mission on the other side of Cape York Peninsula. Is that a better measuring stick? There may be more than a little truth in Tariq Ali's recent assertion that conversions to religious faiths and to other ideologies result not from personal conviction but for more material reasons. In certain settings he believed it was difficult to oppose pressures that were exerted.⁷ Born again Christians will no doubt enthusiastically endorse this view. Yet the process of conversion Tariq Ali suggests as the norm may still result in sincere commitment and a way of life that is consistent with the teachings of that faith or ideology. Perhaps such behavioural changes can lead to the cognitive changes and the personal commitment Tariq Ali apparently saw as initially absent. Whiteman's study of 'people movement' using Barnett's model of innovation, as modified by Tippet, may have a lot to tell us of the conversion process, especially about the function of exposure to the new ideas and behaviour over time, the role of the missionary as advocate of change, and the role significant others in challenging the old gods and acting as innovating catalysts within their culture.⁸ In the Elcho Island Revival movement beginning in the late 1970s, Djinyini Gondarra himself, has, perhaps, quietly challenged the old gods by suggesting that Aboriginal Christians will modify or reject some old beliefs and practices they come to see as incompatible with Christianity.⁹

The tone of triumphalism derives also from extracts from Gribble's three books.¹⁰ He was no shrinking violet when it came to discussing his work with Aboriginal people.

The paradox of this dedicated, remarkable man remains. Paul Smith's honours thesis was on Gribble's Yarrabah years; Christine Halse is completing an autobiography of Ernest Gribble; Neville Green has written extensively of Gribble's Forrest River Mission years in his *Masters* and, I understand his doctoral thesis; I have written of Gribble's role in the Anglican Australian Board of Missions (ABM) which supported his work as Chaplain-Superintendent at Yarrabah and Forrest River, and as Chaplain at the Palm Island Queensland Government settlement. Daniel Craig also wrote extensively on Gribble in his doctoral study of Yarrabah. Finally, Randolph Stow used Gribble as the model for Heriot in his brilliant novel, *To the Islands*.¹¹ The image of Gribble that emerges from each study is different, sometimes remarkably so. All of us, with the possible exception of Stow, used the relevant ABM Archival material. We have all waded through the voluminous Gribble Papers.

It is of course trite today to point to the subjectivity of the historical process. The different responses I have indicated to the life of Ernest Gribble simply illustrate this. The historian takes into the task certain values and interests, focuses on data relevant to these,

7 ABC, 29 May 1992, 'Book Report', Interview with Tariq Ali.

8 Tippet 1987, pp. 175-78; Whiteman 1983, pp. 364-393.

9 Djinyini Gondarra 1986, p. v, p. 33; 1988, p. 3 unpaginated.

10 Harris 1990, p. 509, p. 511, p. 512, p. 515.

11 P. Smith 1980; D. Craig 1980, chapter 3; C. Halse (in progress); R. Stow 1958; N. Green 1986; N. Loos (forthcoming).

and develops his/her theme. Harris makes it very clear¹² that he is writing from a Christian perspective even when he is critical of the methods used:

My Christian belief is that it was the duty of the Christian church to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to Aboriginal people. Not only have I recorded how the church did that, but also, where necessary, I have criticised the manner in which it was brought - even, occasionally, questioned whether what was being brought was the Gospel at all.

Harris' parents, like Gribble's, were missionaries to the Aborigines and he grew up as a child on Aboriginal missions. The first words in the book are: 'I have been writing this book for most of my life'.¹³ It is not surprising that Harris focuses on what he perceives as the positive contributions the various Christian churches have made to Aboriginal people.

Of the growing number of books dealing with Aboriginal mission history, there are three, I think, which deserve special comment: *One Blood; Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, edited by Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose; and *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, by Djiniyini Gondarra.¹⁴ Harris provides a two hundred year sweep of Christian missions from the ethnocentric, inadequately conceived and resourced efforts of the early nineteenth century to the more enlightened attempts in recent years to work in partnership with Aboriginal Christians. Swain and Rose solicited contributions from writers in the field interested in making an analysis of the missionary situation from ethnographic or historical perspectives. Consequently there are articles from such disciplines as history, anthropology, linguistics, and religious studies, some from Christians who have worked on missions or been associated with them. The Christian contributors are understandably, like Harris in *One Blood*, often quite critical of past mission practices. The focus of the contributions varies greatly of course, but the quality is remarkably high throughout. I will choose three as examples. Kenelm Burridge's 'Aborigines and Christianity: An Overview'¹⁵ is a sophisticated global study of the subject which I found especially valuable. Bob Tonkinson revisits Jigalong, the scene of his earlier triumph, to review his analysis with admirable, academic integrity;¹⁶ and John Taylor walks confidently in the footsteps of Lauriston Sharp in his analysis of the Aboriginal response at Edward River to recent (post 1938) missionary activity.¹⁷ It really can't be called intrusion here as Wik-Munkan and Thaiore people asked the Anglicans at nearby Mitchell River for a mission to be established in their country. They were fortunate to get Joseph William (Chappie) Chapman, one of the most endearing characters in Australian mission history. I found especially fascinating Taylor's analysis of how the first generation of Aboriginal Christians came to understand the Christian faith, values, personalities and practices, a process he explores at greater length in his fine doctoral thesis.¹⁸ The new wine was not being poured into empty wineskins. It mixed with the grand old wine of Aboriginal religious belief. Understandably the new ideology was fitted into the existing Aboriginal world picture and conceptualised in terms that made it meaningful to the first generation of Aboriginal Christians, some of whom are still living at Pormpuraaw, as Edward River Mission is now called. These are just three examples of the 33 articles in this valuable book.

12 Harris 1990, pp. 9-10.

13 *ibid.*, p. 9.

14 Djiniyini Gondarra 1986; Swain & Rose 1988.

15 Swain & Rose 1988, pp. 18-29.

16 *ibid.*, pp. 60-73.

17 *ibid.*, pp. 438-51.

18 Taylor 1984.

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Djiniyina Gondarra's book has 'Let My People Go' emblazoned on the cover and I think this would have been a much better title. It is really a 35 page pamphlet containing four theological reflections on Aboriginal theology. Yet, in many ways, it is the most surprising of the three. Djiniyini was for seven years an ordained Uniting Church minister to his own people at Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) and for two years a lecturer at Nungalinga College in Darwin before being appointed the first Aboriginal Moderator in the Uniting Church. Inevitably, for Djiniyini with his zeal for holistic evangelism, Aboriginal theology reflects on mission history, the place of Aborigines in Australian society and the issues confronting Aborigines today, such as 'housing, employment, training, community development, land rights, health and youth work'.¹⁹ Djiniyini studied theology in Papua New Guinea and has been influenced by third world theologians such as the African, Charles Nyamites.²⁰ His holistic evangelism demands an identification with the poor and oppressed. He likens the Noonkanbah oil explorations in sacred Aboriginal sites to a bulldozer's crushing of the Ark of the Covenant in Old Testament times in the holiest of holy places in the temple in Jerusalem.²¹ And he quotes enthusiastically²² Kath Walker's poem, 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights', which contains the lines:

Give us Christ, not crucifixion.
Though baptised and blessed and Bibled
We are still tabooed and libelled.
You devout Salvation-sellers,
Make us neighbours, not fringe dwellers;
Make us mates, not poor relations,
Citizens not serfs on stations.

He notes:²³

As Aboriginal Christians in Australia, we have adopted nearly all of the customs and ways of life of the early missionaries. This is very sad indeed, but the early missionaries in North Australia have been very successful in convincing the people that our ways of life, our culture and beliefs were seen as pagan, bad to be linked with the Christian faith. This is very damaging ...

Essentially Djiniyini sees Christianity as the fulfilment of Aboriginal religion which he regards as equivalent to the Old Testament. In this book he explores with profound simplicity the Aboriginal Christianity of sacred sites, totemism, Aboriginal spirituality, and the Aboriginal contextualisation of religious expression. To his Aboriginal readers he stresses the defects not only of mission Christianity but also of contemporary western society and values, including its theology with its emphasis on individualism and rationalism. This is a development in Christian theology which will challenge white Australian Christians, something which Djiniyini believes is long overdue.²⁴ He states with confident faith:²⁵

Black preachers and evangelists have preached many years to convert the white church - that Christ's power of resurrection is a power to set man free from the power of sin and death, and from the sin of domination over other people.

¹⁹ Djiniyini Gondarra 1986, p. 12.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 16.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 29.

²² *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

²³ *ibid.*, p. iv.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10, p. 11.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 26.

After reading this I would like to believe that a heavenly host of long gone missionaries will rejoice that they haven't been totally counter-productive; that, with all their limitations which we academics take pains to point out, the Galiwin'ku revival movement could still take place.²⁶ It was and is an autonomous Aboriginal response.

It is also important for white academics to understand this development within Aboriginal culture for, to many Aborigines, Christianity is now as central to their lives as the Dreaming. Indeed, another of Djiniyini's essays is entitled: *Father You Gave Us the Dreaming*.²⁷ Consequently, understanding the role of the missionary as an advocate of culture change becomes more, not less important. Where the change has been anything more than superficial window dressing, the innovators, of course, have always been Aboriginal people.²⁸ Djiniyini overtly and John Taylor indirectly have demonstrated this.

Whenever my students express interest in undertaking an individual project exploring some aspect of the topic, Aborigines and Christianity, I tell them to start with Swain and Rose, John Harris, and Djiniyini Gondarra. Not unexpectedly it is Djiniyini who surprises them most, Christians and non-Christians.

It is not only writers who bring their own experiences to a book. So do readers, especially when the subject is religion, in this case, Christianity. At my Australian History Association paper on the Aboriginal Christian Co-operative Movement, one participant congratulated me and added, 'Actually, I thought I would give it a miss when I saw it was about missions'. An author who had spent years researching a famous missionary was told by one publisher that it would not be acceptable because the picture of the missionary was too positive and favourable and would offend Aboriginal activists. One of my publishers told me, when I informed him of my plan to write a mission history, that it sounded exciting, but it would never sell.

John Harris may have exploded the myth that very few people are interested in mission history. My students surprised me by showing more interest in purchasing a copy of *One Blood* than in all of the other new books I introduced them to during 1991. It was awarded the Australian Christian Book of the Year at the 1991 Christian Booksellers' Convention, but we did not know that at the time.

The size of the book leads you to expect an encyclopaedic thoroughness although Harris denies that this was his aim. He deals chronologically with his subject but emphasises a theme he considers appropriate to the time and the place. Chapter 1, subtitled 'Early New South Wales and Aboriginal Missions' is titled, 'The shock of the new'; Chapter 2, subtitled 'Civilisation and mission permeate north and south' is titled 'The destruction of the old'; chapter 3, subtitled 'Protectorates, reserves and missions', is titled, 'The hobbling of the remnant'. There is of course thematic overlap. Indeed, the chronological approach used to analyse different geographical areas highlights the fact that each mission was a new beginning in a unique socio-historical situation. The book is divided into four parts to reflect this chronological analysis of different areas. Each of the two parts dealing with the nineteenth century is rounded off by a chapter analysing an important relevant theme that transcends to some extent the time/place approach. Thus chapter 4 concludes Part A by looking at 'Key nineteenth century missionaries in eastern Australia' under the title 'The cries of the compassionate'; Part B concludes with an analysis of 'Missionaries and Aboriginal culture in the Nineteenth century'.

For the twentieth century, Harris devotes Part C to 'Aborigines and the church in settled Australia' and Part D to what he terms 'traditional Aboriginal communities'; that is,

²⁶ *ibid.*, 1986, pp. 1-12.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 1988.

²⁸ Whiteman 1983, pp. 364-93.

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those living in the more remote areas where they were allowed to retain, or determinedly retained, more of their pre-contact culture.

Harris deals very thoroughly with the material on the nineteenth century when the missions and missionary personalities were comparatively few compared with the explosion of missionary activity in the twentieth century. He used a case study approach to deal with the missions in remote areas in the first half of the twentieth century, choosing as his example the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missions in the Northern Territory. While I found this chapter very interesting, I do not think it does justice to this period which was 'the golden age' of missionary expansion, the period when so many existing Aboriginal communities came into being. For much of Aboriginal Australia, it was more important than the nineteenth century.

The other chapters on the twentieth century go a long way towards atoning for this. His analysis of the role of the churches in 'settled Australia', especially that of the non-denomination missionary organisations, the United Aborigines Mission and the Aborigines. As Harris²⁹ noted:

By 1944, UAM, with eighty-three missionaries had the largest number of missionaries of any organisation working with Aborigines. With AIM's sixty-two missionaries, the two organisations accounted for nearly half the missionaries of all denominations in the whole of Aboriginal Australia and ninety per cent of those working in settled areas.

Harris is quite critical of the missionaries of these two organisations. They had a 'very strict, conservative evangelical doctrinal stance ... accepted the system which kept the Aborigines oppressed' and did not clearly separate 'the gospel from a Western world view and way of life'. But, as is shown throughout this book, this is true of many of the other missionaries to Aborigines. The same could be said of the criticism of UAM's narrow-minded and regimented institutions.³⁰ Indeed, for all institutions the happiness and welfare of the Aborigines depended greatly on the personality of the individual missionary.

Harris has discussed thoroughly the broader historical context which his religious history fits into. His discussion of the assimilation policy and the evolution of self-determination in chapters 10, 12, and 13 will be rewarding for general readers as well as for those interested in religious history. This provokes the question: for whom has this book been written?

It seems to me that Harris hopes to catch the interest of readers who have little knowledge of the Aboriginal historical experience since colonisation. He fleshes out the kind of detail you find in such introductory texts as Broome's *Aboriginal Australians* and Yarwood and Knowling's *Race Relations in Australia*.³¹ Indeed, often he adds new perspective and detail to a well-worn topic, as in the section on the land rights struggle.³² Harris is also aiming squarely at two specific groups: committed Christians and mission knockers. It becomes clear from reading his book that support of the Aboriginal struggle for justice is an inescapable Christian responsibility, not an optional extra. He informs his Christian readers of the struggles and achievements of previous generations of Christians. He also brings out the negative aspects of the missionary movement and the failings and mistakes of individuals. Many of his Christian readers will be surprised, some shocked and offended, because most are ignorant of the history and have only a warm, comfortable

²⁹ Harris 1990, p. 555.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 555-58.

³¹ Broome 1982; Yarwood & Knowling 1982.

³² Harris 1990, pp. 800-29.

feeling that missionaries were out there doing good to Aboriginal people, whatever that might mean. Harris obviously believes that Christians have to know the truth.

He also addresses the knockers, people he considers unreasonable in their criticism of missionaries. He attempts to put the missionaries into their historical context and obviously thinks much of the criticism is based on present values and insight. This book, then, is part of the Christian apologetic tradition. It attempts to tell the true story, to correct anti-Christian misconceptions, and in doing so to arouse the faithful to a greater Christian commitment. It comes at a time of growing academic interest in the Aboriginal mission experience as Swain and Rose's *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* indicates.³³ All will have to confront *One Blood*. I suspect John Harris meant this from the beginning.

Harris is certainly not going to convince everyone. Many see Christians as hypocrites because their practice was often sharply in conflict with the message they brought. They are expected to be better than they were - better than it is reasonable to expect most of them to have been, at that time, Harris might respond. Some Aborigines feel too bitter to accept that the missionaries' past actions can ever be put into a reasonable perspective. Determined secular humanists, contemplative agnostics and born-again atheists will probably see Harris' explanations as irrelevant special pleadings. Finally, however, it is perhaps Aboriginal Christians, like Bishop Arthur Malcolm and Djiniyini Gondarra, who will test the worth of Harris' explanations. John Harris has certainly had extensive contact with Aboriginal Christians throughout Australia and brings their perspectives frequently into his work. He asserts that, since the 1930s, the percentage of Aboriginal Christians has been greater than that of the rest of the community.³⁴ I am not sure how this can be validated although I suspect he is right. What is clear is that Christianity is now at least as much part of Aboriginal culture as it is of white Australian culture. As such it is deserving of serious academic study. This book is an important contribution to this debate.

One Blood is well-written and always interesting to read, even when Harris climbs into his pulpit to rouse his fellow Christians to a greater commitment or to speak seriously to the ungodly. The book has been extremely well served by its publisher, Albatross Books, who have not only allowed him a length that would make many writers green with envy but also used an astonishing number of excellent photographs. And then there's Sally Morgan's cover.

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³³ Swain & Rose 1988.

³⁴ Harris 1990, p. 659.

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