The Heresy of Nicaea and the Jesus of Colony

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Introduction: The Jesus that Came to Australia

«How is it that Aboriginal people can conclude that Christianity is a greater enemy than introduced diseases, a greater enemy than infant mortality, than all the other things that have been introduced into this country?»[1] So asked Uncle Graham Paulson, a Walpiri theologian and the first Indigenous minister to be ordained by the Baptist church. While shocking, no contemporary theologian should be surprised by such a question; it corresponds to an oft-repeated lament from Indigenous peoples throughout the world touched by Christianity. This essay interrogates the *possibility* of that *reality*: How was and is Christianity experienced as the greatest of all enemies for local peoples – local *Christian* peoples?

One familiar answer locates the possibility within the liaison between Western culture and embodied forms of the Christian faith, based on the «assumption that Christianity is inextricable from its Western cultural frameworks». This identity between the faith and a dominant cultural framework «undermines the integrity of Aboriginal identity and cultural expression» both in itself and in the possibility of an Aboriginal embodiment of the gospel.[2]

To offer two illustrations of this reality: first, there is the denigration of Indigenous Australians, exemplified by an 1819 statement by Anglican clergyman and missionary, Samuel Marsden, an instrumental figure in the dissemination and

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1 Graham Paulson, "The Legacy of Mission: Australian Aboriginal Christians Searching for a Contextualised Theology," *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 10.

2 Graham Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006): 310.

institutional establishment of Christianity in the antipodean colonies: «The Aborigines are the most degraded of the human race. [...] [T]ime is not yet arrived for them to receive the great blessings of civilization and the knowledge of Christianity».[3] Evident here is the immediate relationship between narratives of inferiority and a normative hubris regarding Western culture, and the Christian faith that underlies both evaluations.

It follows, second, that the «foundational violence»[4] (physical, cultural, religious, white supremacy) permitted by that sentiment produced an account of salvation occupied with «turning the occupants of *terra nullius* from their heathen and barbarous ways».[5] This, in the words of Patrick Dodson, Jacinta Elston, and Brian McCoy, resulted in such «pressure to assimilate from the churches»[6] that Aboriginal people who entered into the life of Christian communities felt «compelled to leave their culture 'at the door'».[7] The very embodied forms of the faith, the norms of institution, order, and symbol, precluded Aboriginal peoples from entering the church as Aborigines, and often even as 'fully human'.

However, even with this explanatory framework of culture and the 'geopolitics of empire', and with a coordinated accounting of theological failure based in complicity with Empire, the safeguarding of the imagined 'acultural' and 'ahistorical'

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3 Cited in Ray Minniecon, "Indigenous Theology: The Australian Experience – Where is the Starting Point?" *Journal of NAIITS* 14 (2016): 24. On the ongoing proliferation of this view, see Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (London: William Collins, 2023). Also, Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia, Critically Appraised From an Aboriginal Historico-Theological Viewpoint* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998); Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins* (Melbourne: re.press, 2014); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

4 Sandra Wooltorton, Lauren Stephenson, Kathie Ardzejewska, and Len Collard, "Kaartdijin Bidi (Learning Journey): Place-based Cultural Regeneration at University," *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* (2025): 8. Cf. David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 360n120.

5 Lynne Hume, "Delivering the Word the Aboriginal Way: The Genesis of an Australian Aboriginal Theology," *Colloquium* 25, no. 2 (1994): 86.

6 Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston, and Brian F. McCoy, "Leaving Culture at the Door: Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006): 255.

7 Dodson, Elston, and McCoy, "Leaving Culture at the Door," 250. See also The Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Toward an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Adelaide: ATF, 2012), 61–62; Matt Cairns, "'Black Nobbie Neville': A Case Study into How the Early Salvation Army in Australia Regarded First Nations Peoples," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 421–35.

forms of the faith remains intact.[8] In other words, the Jesus of Nicaea, the Jesus of orthodoxy, continues to exist at some distance from the historic and ongoing experiences of genocide. The problem is that the 'distance' does not accord with stated experience: the Jesus Christ developed within ecumenical Christian orthodoxies, the Jesus Christ of the creeds and confessions, was and is experienced as the Jesus of colonisation – Jesus as enemy. This colonial Jesus appears as «the 'One', the axiomatic norm that defines racial 'differences', which maintains the status of a 'superior' race and yet, paradoxically, as unraced, human as such».[9] This Jesus naturalises «the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices».[10] In Australia, this is about 'whiteness': «the discursive practices that [...] privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and European worldviews»,[11] a scheme that «deploys strategic rhetoric to reinvent, re-secure, and reposition itself»[12] – one in which «differences are calculated and organized»[13] to maintain privilege or normalcy and leave undisturbed existing power relations.

One should not mistake this reference to critical whiteness studies as introducing a framework inherently opposed to Christian orthodoxy. To cite a voice from a neighbouring context, the Tongan-born Fijian and former Anglican Archbishop, Winston Halapua, questions:

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8 As an example, see the Namibia Statement jointly issued by the Council of Churches of Namibia, the All Africa Conference of Churches, the Council for World Mission, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches at the 2024 Global Consultation on Empire and Genocides. "We Charge Genocide – Again! Cry of the Earth's Peoples Against the Geopolitics of Empire," World Communion of Reformed Churches, accessed May 17, 2025, https://wcrc-webserver.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Empire-and-Genocide-Statement.pdf.

9 George Yancy, "When Heaven and Earth Are Shaken to Their Foundations," in *Unveiling Whiteness in the Twenty-First Century: Global Manifestations, Transdisciplinary Interventions*, ed. Veronica Watson, Deirdre Howard-Wagner, and Lisa Spanierman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 197.

10 Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54.

11 Raka Shome, "Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 108. See Phillip Falk and Gary Martin, "Misconstruing Indigenous Sovereignty: Maintaining the Fabric of Australian Law," in *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 33–46.

12 Dreama G. Moon and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Strategic Social Identities and Judgments: A Murder in Appalachia," *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 2 (2005): 91.

13 Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 297.

> Does theological orthodoxy maintain to some degree a resemblance of imperialism? [...] How much of what we label theological orthodoxy is a form of mask for the inability of one part of the world to understand another way of life? [...] Are we in the Pacific participating in a process of doing theology which embodies dehumanisation of our own people?[14]

Halapua poses these as questions to defray the startling nature of the accusation: the processes aligned with theological orthodoxy lead to the dehumanisation and deracination of peoples deemed to be outside the history of that production, and who embody different values in the deployment of theology itself.

To recognise this complaint is to recognise the vast array of counter-narratives and theologies already produced by Indigenous theologians who «cannot waste time answering other people's questions».[15] Yet, the question of a primary christological violence remains. In considering this reality, the following sections argue that this experience of the Jesus of colony is an inevitable consequence of the *in nuce* mode of theological production initiated at the first ecumenical council of Nicaea and formalised at Chalcedon, and underlies the so-called 'ecumenical winter' of the contemporary period and the ongoing dehumanisation of Christians beyond the West. Beyond the challenges posed by the metaphysics,[16] the modes of production determined by «the threat of cultural difference» and the exclusion of

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[14] Winston Halapua, "Fakakakato: Symbols in a Pacific Context," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 2, no. 20 (1998): 22.

[15] Terry Djiniyini, "Aboriginal Christianity: Based on Indigenous Theology," *Nelen Yubu* 18 (1984): 34. See also National Commission for Justice and Peace, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern, Social Justice Sunday, 1978* (Surry Hills: E. J. Dwyer, 1978), 22; Martin J. Wilson, *New, Old and Timeless: Pointers Towards an Aboriginal Theology* (Moorabbin: Chevalier, 1979); Djiniyini Gondarra, *Let My People Go: Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology* (Darwin: Bethel Presbytery, 1986); George Rosendale, "Reflections on the Gospel and Aboriginal Spirituality," *The Occasional Bulletin* (Nungalinya College, Darwin) 42 (1989): 1–7; George Rosendale, "Aboriginal Myths and Customs: Matrix for Gospel Preaching," in *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (Blackburn: Harper Collins Religious, 1996), 100, 106; Gideon C. Goosen, "Christian and Aboriginal Interface in Australia," *Theological Studies* 60, no. 1 (1999): 72–94; Patricia R. Derrington, *The Serpent of Good and Evil: A Reconciliation in the Life and Art of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann* (Flemington: Hyland House, 2000); Vassilis Adrahtas, "Perceptions of Land in Indigenous Australian Christian Texts," *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 2 (2005): 200–14; Evelyn Parkin, "The Sources and Resources of Our Indigenous Theology: An Australian Aboriginal Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 4 (2010): 390–98; Garry W. Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawloolway Man Reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star, 2018); Garry W. Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[16] See Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, "Confessing the One Faith in Many Tongues: A Decolonial Reading of the Nicene Creed," *International Review of Mission* 113, no. 2 (2024): 341–54.

«marginal voices or minority discourse»[17] normalised the cultural homogenisation of Christian faith. The Jesus of colony cannot account for difference; difference is the enemy of Jesus, and so Jesus manifests as the enemy of difference.

Formalising Othering as the Process of Theology 'Proper': From Nicaea (AD 325) to Chalcedon (AD 451) – and Beyond

Other chapters in this volume examine the constitution, theology, metaphysics, and reception of the Council of Nicaea, the resulting Creed, and the twenty-seven articles of canon law. The interest here lies in who was excluded from Nicaea and what and how persons and theologies were distinguished from its formulation of Christian 'orthodoxy'.

An obvious starting point is Arianism, the named theology to be overcome, and Athanasius' work in opposing Arius' position. Such a framing posture leads directly to the mode of argument: heresiology. As defined by J. Rebecca Lyman, «[h]eresiology was the combative theological genre for asserting true Christian doctrine through hostile definition and ecclesiastical exclusion».[18] This approach included various rhetorical techniques, «such as labelling or genealogies and literary genres such as cultural histories or intellectual catalogues», indicating «not only social or religious attempts at expulsion, but also theological negotiation with contemporary cultural problems of multiplicity and difference in Roman society».[19] When mapping the consequences of this approach, four points might be noted.

First, upon Arius' death in AD 336, Athanasius attached Arius' name to any group that rejected Nicaea, regardless of their actual theological concerns: they became part of Arius' theological genealogy.[20] The import of this form of historiography (historiography as genealogy) throughout Western Christianity, especially in relation to colonisation, has been well noted.[21] Second, labelling permits mis-

[17] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 150.

[18] J. Rebecca Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 2: Constantine to c. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 296.

[19] Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," 297.

[20] Lyman, "The Invention of 'Heresy' and 'Schism'," 299.

[21] See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64. For an excellent development of this position for Christian theology, see Renie Chow Choy,

characterisation, manipulation, and falsification. For Richard Hanson, Athanasius would have '*maliciously*' misrepresented Arius, extending his words beyond their intended meaning.[22] In other words, rather than inviting discussion, this theological process relied on invective and dismissal. The potential of mischaracterisation to achieve theo-political ends became fully realised in the inevitable extension of Nicaea into Chalcedon, exemplified by the caricature of 'monophysite' to deride and dismiss the 'miaphysite' position. Third, this theological approach mapped onto Roman socio-cultural concerns regarding multiplicity and difference. Heresiology, as an approach of polemical definition and ecclesial exclusion, already represents a theological 'solution' to the 'problem' of difference. Fourth, Averil Cameron states that «one cost of the struggle to define orthodoxy was the *technologising* of the issue, which in the course of centuries of struggle made a narrowing of definitions inevitable».[23] It is not accidental that Christian communities under colonial rule and their associated critiques regarding 'missionary support' have long lamented the dominance of technocracy in the West's approach. In Cameron's example, participation in the tradition demands an increasingly finite skill set grounded in history, linguistics, theological method, rhetoric, and argument. Reflecting on the forms of Western Christian export, Emerito Nacpil notes that when Filipinos «see an expert, the symbol of Western technology and gadgetry», they see «a master, the mirror of their own servitude».[24]

A key component of Athanasius' anti-Arian polemic consisted of identifying Arius' position with that of 'the Jews'.[25] It was an expedient option given the further debate held at Nicaea regarding the liturgical calendar. Before Nicaea, there existed an emerging trend to cluster the Jews with «the Greeks and the pagans», including a prohibition instituted at the Synod of Elvira (c. AD 306) that no Christian may

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"'Religious Ancestry': The Postcolonial Critique of Christian Historiography," in *Ancestral Feeling: Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage* (London: SCM, 2021).

22 Richard P. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 10, 15.

23 Averil Cameron, "The Cost of Orthodoxy," *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, no. 3 (2013): 349. *Italics added*.

24 Emerito P. Nacpil, "Mission but Not Missionaries," *International Review of Mission* 60, no. 239 (1971): 359. See also R. F. Kuang, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (Sydney: Harper Voyager, 2022).

25 See, for example, Athanasius, "Epistle of Athanasius in Defence of the Nicene Definition of the Homousion," in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius, Volume 1: In Controversy With the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), 13, 48 (1.3; 6); Athanasius, "Three Discourses of Athanasius Against the Arians," in *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius, Volume 1: In Controversy With the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), 391–93, 424 (27.264–65, 30.300).

eat with a Jew.[26] However, a formal position on the Jews and their relationship to Christianity was not yet codified. Nicaea would change this: what existed prior as a theological concern, which may have been developed in other ways, became 'canon' at Nicaea.

Nicaea's concern with consolidating Christian identity, especially given its new political standing within the Roman Empire, included the desire to create liturgical unity by ratifying a fixed date for Easter. Drawing on the Gospel of John, the theological argument posits that the Last Supper took place a week after the Passover. With this, the established «practice of the Quartodecimani of observing Easter on the fourteenth day of Nisan, i.e., the day of the Jewish Passover, was declared heretical».[27] But the concern was not theological alone. In establishing a Christian identity, the Jews were viewed only as a clear 'rival of Christianity', with those gathered at Nicaea doubting the validity of Jewish conversion to Christianity and fearing their influence.[28] No distinction existed between Christian Jews and Jews; all Jews were the same and stood under the same charge. As Constantine wrote to «all those not present at the Council», the date change constituted a necessary departure from «the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin. [...] Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd [...] [due to] their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord».[29] While we may not want to read a twentieth-century experience back into this language, «the Nicene legacy remains essentially one of clear distinction between the two separated ways of Judaism and Christianity»,[30] and this anti-Judaism, «anchored in Nicaea»,[31] gave ample justification for later antisemitism.

Alongside the mode of heresiology and the rejection of the Jews, Nicaea lacked clear representation from theological voices beyond the Greek-speaking

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[26] Canon 50 of the Council of Elvira: «If any of the priests or believers eats his meal with a Jew, we decide that he does not participate in the communion so that he atones».

[27] Rina Talgam, "Constructing Identity through Art: Jewish Art as a Minority Culture in Byzantium," in *Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. Robert Bonfil, Oded Irshai, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Rina Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 450.

[28] Solomon Grayzel, "The Beginnings of Exclusion," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 61, no. 1 (1970): 19.

[29] See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.18.

[30] Michael Ipgrave, "Nicaea and Christian–Jewish Relations," *The Ecumenical Review* 75, no. 2 (2023): 236.

[31] Margriet Gosker, "Is There a Connection Between the Nicene Creed, Eusebius of Caesarea and Anti-Judaism?," in *Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau: Proceedings of the 22nd Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica in Warsaw Poland (5–20 September 2024)* (Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, forthcoming).

East, specifically those living under the governance of the Sasanian Empire.[32] It is often stated that Christian persecution came to an end with the conversion of Constantine; but this is not entirely true. While it ended in Rome, Constantine's veiled warning to Shapur II resulted in the persecution of Christians throughout Persia.[33] This persecution, along with Christian infighting over who held theological authority, undoubtedly worked against the Persian Christian presence at Nicaea. However, even with these qualifications, the absence of the Persian voice was not needed for one of Nicaea's key objectives: Christianity had become a major social force within an empire that sought unification and stabilisation, controlled through a common theological framework. The bishops in attendance were from regions under Roman control, and those who dissented from the Nicaean framework faced exile and the destruction of their works. Nicaea established an enforceable single 'orthodoxy,' marginalised diverse early Christian traditions and regional variations, and provided ecclesiastical and imperial authorities with a clear test of conformity. The Creed became a loyalty test for both religious and political authority. This shaped the legacy for later empires: the Byzantine Empire maintained Nicene orthodoxy as part of state identity; medieval European kingdoms used creeds to enforce religious uniformity; later colonial powers exported this model of religious standardisation.

This same mode of operation continued through the succeeding ecumenical councils, culminating in the great schism of Chalcedon in AD 451. Nicaea introduced a prioritisation and a subordination between Eastern and 'Oriental' Christians, those within and those beyond the control of the Roman Empire. With the Council of Ephesus (AD 431), this tension became overt; with the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), it became formalised. Again, though the reception of Chalcedon within the West reads its formulation primarily in theological terms and against the clear other of the 'monophysites', the 'Orientals' read Chalcedon as «less theological and more political-economic and sociocultural»: «it was not the Christological controversy that led to the post-Chalcedonian schism, as much as

[32] David M. Gwynn, "Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 93.

[33] There has been recent debate regarding the extent of such persecution, but for a balanced approach see Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sasanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5, no. 3 (2021): 361–402.

the revolt of Asia–Africa against a domineering Graeco–Roman civilisation».[34] Chalcedon constituted a precise moment of political and cultural colonisation, as Marcian, through the use of military force, «actively persecuted the Syrians and Egyptians and sought to impose Hellenism on them» by attempting to force the acceptance of the Chalcedon formula.[35] In short, the Orientals read Chalcedon as a prime example of 'colonisation', one propagated under the guise of normative theology and embodied in a murderous reality.

By employing the mode of heresiology, rejecting the Jews, and absenting theological voices beyond immediate Roman imperial control, Nicaea demonstrated the *possibility* of exclusion: the 'we' of the 'we believe' could produce a normative (i.e., orthodox) theological position via the constriction of voice. And, if Nicaea permitted the *possibility*, then Chalcedon embodied its *normalisation*. Exclusion became basic to producing theology 'proper', and its dissemination took form as colonial export via legislative (criminalisation, state-sanctioned oppression, murder, military force), cultural (Hellenism), and religious (anathema) violence.

Andrew Walls describes Chalcedon as the most fundamental schism in Christian history: At Chalcedon,

> the rupture of the church took place along linguistic and cultural lines. The division has been permanent, with two long-term effects. One was that the Christians of Europe became cut off from the Christians of Asia and Africa. A second was that further divisions of the church along linguistic and cultural lines became easier and easier, until by our own times, they could be taken for granted.[36]

This represented a clear shift from the early church's cohesiveness and sense of 'mutual belonging' alongside «its geographical range, its linguistic profusion, [and] its cultural diversity».[37] In short, the general theological judgments which regard the early church councils as constitutive movements of the church itself, definitive of Christian unity and the processes by which it is to be achieved, are correct: unity occurs through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference and the identification with imperial forms of control and dissemination.

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[34] Paulos Mar Gregorios, "Who Do You Say That I Am? Elements for an Ecumenical Christology Today," in *Orthodox Identity in India: Essays in Honour of V. C. Samuel*, ed. M. K. Kuriakose (Bangalore: Rev. Dr. V. C. Samuel 75th Birthday Celebration Committee, 1988), 121.

[35] Mar Gregorios, "Who Do You Say That I Am?," 121.

[36] Andrew F. Walls, "The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure," *Studies in World Christianity* 28, no. 2 (2022): 166–67.

[37] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 18.

Creating the 'Non-theological' as the Necessary Other to a 'Theology from Nowhere'

The imperial structures offered in support of the church never remained external to it – they nurtured both the processes by which 'orthodox' formulations were produced and distributed and established normative theological frameworks and postures. A couple of examples must here suffice.

The first concerns the creation of borderlands, spaces beyond the empire that exist only in opposition to it. This is the place of difference, the unknown, threat, pagan immorality, and cunning ritual. Such is the home of the 'barbarian'. In Peter Brown's estimation, before AD 400, no frontier, either in terms of mindset or material border, existed between the 'Romans' and the 'barbarians'.[38] But, due to the same forces of multiplicity and difference within Roman society which Nicaea played a part in addressing, it became necessary to «invent an absolute frontier where, in fact, no such frontier [...] existed. [The Romans] treated all societies outside the political frontier of Rome as 'barbarians'».[39] With a clear 'other' in place, the empire could present itself as the hero standing before the hordes and levy taxes as a consequence. Christianity could likewise construe itself as the beacon of truth besieged by the world of darkness on all sides. The later expansion of the Christian gospel across this barrier, into the barbarian hinterland, came to represent a great drama, an overcoming of the real enemy, and an indicator of the power and truth of the faith. The problem is, when viewed from the perspective of «the older, more deeply rooted Christian populations of North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia, what we call Western Christendom was out on a limb. It was the Christianity of a peripheral zone».[40] In other words, the power of the imaginary embedded within the Western tradition that the early church councils were themselves formational for the development of Europe as a 'Christian' civilisation remains a 'self-congratulatory myth', one grounded precisely in the imperial need for a defined enemy and executed through the processes of exclusion.[41] Nor need one read much Western mission theory to find identical patterns of othering practised against the 'pagans' of the newly 'discovered' lands,

[38] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xiv.
[39] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xiv.
[40] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvi.
[41] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvi. The problem is far from benign. For a clear indicator of its impact, see Jason A. Goroncy, "Race and Christianity in Australia," *Post-Christendom Studies* 4 (2019): 43–48.

especially those found in New Holland (a historical European name for mainland Australia) and Aotearoa/New Zealand.[42]

This leads to a second concern: history. The history of the 'body of Christ' becomes identified with the passage of the Western church and the embodiment of its faith. The story told is of a contingent journey from Jerusalem to Rome, to the northern barbarians and the 'Holy Roman Empire', to the Reformation, to the rediscovery of the 'pagans' in the Americas, and, finally, to the blossoming of the faith through 'the rest of the world'.[43] The legacy of this historiography and its deployment of genealogy resides in the periodisation of Christianity – and the coordinated reformulation of 'mission' from the eschatological and the refusal of every premature closing of history to a flat movement from centre (Rome) to periphery (Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Pasifik). Mission reduces to a question of 'reception' and is «simultaneous with the act of enforced domination based on political, economic, technological, military or ideological superiority».[44] The 'history', in other words, necessitates processes of simplification and purification, stripping away the «imaginative and intellectual 'roughage'» necessary for theological production.[45] Or, this history refuses to grant the processes of cultural negotiation to peoples beyond the West because the now 'universalised' (read: purified) theological history cannot permit the ongoing validity of such processes – to do so is to relativise the 'contingent' embodied forms associated with the orthodox tradition (creeds, hierarchies, doctrines).[46] The resulting assumption, as Christo-

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[42] See, for example, William Carey's use of James Cook's judgement concerning the Māori in Aotearoa. Carey affirmed with gusto the «great brutality and eagerness» with which «cannibals» fed «upon the flesh of their slain enemies», the truth of which was «ascertained, beyond a doubt, by the late eminent navigator, Cooke [sic], of the New Zealanders. [...] Human sacrifices are also very frequently offered, so that scarce a week elapses without instances of this kind. They are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilization, as they are of true religion». William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, Are Considered* (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792), 63.

[43] See, as one example of this complaint, Justo L. González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 7–32.

[44] Enrique Dussel, "Towards a History of the Church in the World Periphery: Some Hypotheses," in *Towards a History of the Church in the Third World: Papers and Report of a Consultation on "The Issue of Periodisation" Convened by the Working Commission on Church History of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (July 17–21, 1983, Geneva),* ed. Lukas Vischer (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1985), 112.

[45] Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, xvii.

[46] See "On Intercultural Hermeneutics: Report of a WCC Consultation, Jerusalem, 5–12 December 1995," *International Review of Mission* 85 (1996): 241–52.

pher Duraisingh avers, is that only «European history [...] shares the same horizon as Christian history», and that the «plurality of cultures and traditions that make up the Christian faith have place only as they are amalgamated into a monolithic history or tradition».[47] This results in several fundamental problems concerning Christian mission as primarily a movement of territorial expansion (rather than an eschatological disruption) and the resulting denial of pre-Christian heritages (religious, cultural, legal) and histories. Alternatively, the 'body of Christ' becomes so identified with the arrangement between the faith and the invented course of 'Western civilisation' that becoming Christian necessitates either adopting imagined acultural and ahistorical (i.e., Western) forms of embodiment and the history within which these forms were sacralised, or theological moves such as detaching the 'Spirit' or the 'Christ' from Jesus of Nazareth.[48]

Nor has the contemporary ecumenical movement proven capable of shedding this mode of othering or its reliance on a 'universal history'. Following a Tolkienesque citation from Brian Stanley which depicts Edinburgh 1910 as the preparation of «missionary armies to launch a concerted and final onslaught on the dark forces of heathendom that still ruled supreme beyond the frontiers of western Christendom», Raimundo Barreto regards that conference as «one of the final and decisive events of an era of western Christian expansionism».[49] Following in train with the Nicaean heresy, Barreto charges that the envisioned form of unity of the contemporary ecumenical movement is «culturally and epistemologically exclusionary, and [...] shaped by the Christendom ecumenical project».[50] So embedded are the processes of exclusion present *in nuce* at Nicaea for questions of Christian orthodoxy, tradition, and unity, that the Western cultural, linguistic, and epistemic

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47 Christopher Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (2000): 681–82. For an identical argument, see Dale T. Irvin, "From One Story to Many: An Ecumenical Reappraisal of Church History," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28, no. 4 (1991): 537–54.

48 Any number of examples might be given, but see Choan-Seng Song, "From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap," *Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 3 (1976): 252–65; Edmond Tang, "The Cosmic Christ – The Search for a Chinese Theology," *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (1995): 131–42; Steve Charleston, "The Old Testament of Native America," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies From the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 69–81; Gerald O. West, "African Culture as *Praeparatio Evangelica*: The Old Testament as Preparation of the African Post-Colonial," in *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step*, ed. Roland Boer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 193–220.

49 Raimundo C. Barreto, "How World Christianity Saved the Ecumenical Movement," *Protestantismo em Revista* 46, no. 2 (2020): 224.

50 Barreto, "How World Christianity Saved the Ecumenical Movement," 224.

project constitutes the necessary framing of ecumenical discourse. This inevitably results in the key problem driving the 'ecumenical winter' – treating difference as a threat and subject to expulsion.

Without question, the ecumenical movement has sought to address the complex issues of 'context' and 'diversity' in various ways. Whether one turns to the Faith and Order's Montreal conference (1963) and its attempt to distinguish the Tradition with a capital 'T' (referring to the revelation of God in scripture) from traditions (cultural and conditioned forms of Christian embodiment), or to the 1977 WCC paper, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, which developed the idea of 'translation' before cautioning that it «may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life» (§27), or to the WCC's official 1999 instrument for reflection on hermeneutics, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, wherein the Tradition is retained as the necessary authority over contextuality and catholicity, the identical problem remains: a tradition transcending time and place overrides every theology located in time and place.[51]

Such a binary is already evident in a 1937 Faith and Order statement titled 'The Non-theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union', which must be read as the original, decisive, and ongoing ecumenical position. It first defines theology as the «direct reflection upon immediate spiritual experience, and the formulation of these reflections as a system of thought, which interprets the prior experience and which elicits from the particular forms of that experience its universal truths».[52] Theology, so defined, relies on an 'immediate' (or, unmediated) 'spiritual experience', and essentialises 'universal truths' from that experience, irrespective of any historical or cultural location. The non-theological, by contrast, is the mediate and the local, a conglomerate of «factors which have their origin in the environing culture rather than within the direct Christian tradition».[53] This concerns the 'interpretation' of the theological via the 'use of analogies', 'mental

[51] The singular (non-)definition of 'diversity' within WCC documentation resulted from Chung Kyung-Hyung's dance at the WCC's Seventh Assembly held in Canberra (1991). This reads: «Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8)». Michael Kinnamon, ed. *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7–20 February 1991* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 173.

[52] Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors in the Making and Unmaking of Church Union* (London: Harper, 1937), 9.

[53] Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 11.

apparatus' for the gospel's missionary communication to non-Christians (pagans).[54] The non-theological indicates «ideas and modes of thought originating in the first instance outside the direct Christian tradition, but eventually employed in the formal elaboration of Christian thought».[55] This is the fundamental pretence that originated at Nicaea and is perfected through the legacies of imperialism to the present day. Difference becomes enshrined within the communication of the faith (hence all complaints vis-à-vis mission as the 'mediating' reality, i.e., colonisation, contextual theologies, and interpretation), while truth is its purified opposite, an unmediated view from nowhere.

To bind these threads together in relation to colonisation, 'difference' is an enduring problem today because it is an enduring problem through pre-modern positions.[56] Space precludes an exhaustive treatment, but the work of Bibhuti Yadav proves instructive. To begin, «the uniqueness of Euro-Christian West is self-referential. It recognizes itself only in relation to the different».[57] Othering is constitutive of 'Euro-Christian subjectivity' because in discovering the other, the West «reiterates its uniqueness» and the «ontological autonomy» in which it «constitutes the boundary of thought».[58] This drive for a unique identity, ontological shuttering, the closure of history, and prescriptive boundary-making resides within fundamental theological commitments. The creation of the 'barbarian' is the necessary first step: located in «the West, is the Euro-Christian light and redemption», whereas in the East exists the embodiment of «dark and bloody superstitions».[59] As difference (monolithic othering) is constitutive of the West's liberative identity, so other (difference) exists only in contrast to this identity. On this site, the West is «to impose itself».[60] All difference is without «cognitive and ethical agency» and reduced to «a knowable object that can then be represented in discourse».[61] Difference is empty because it serves the «project of 'completion'».[62] This is the universal history promised by Jesus Christ. For Yadav, colonisation is

54 Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 10.
55 Commission on the Church's Unity in Life and Worship, *The Non-Theological Factors*, 10.
56 For a helpful summary, see Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 57–78.
57 Bibhuti S. Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," *Sophia* 39, no. 1 (2000): 101.
58 Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 78.
59 Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.
60 Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.
61 Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 78.
62 Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 101.

«as pre-modern as the theology of creation *ex nihilo*. The mission of this theology is twofold: a) to reduce history to a clean slate by erasing all signs of a pre-Christian past and non-Christian present from consciousness; and b) to remember salvation as a future that implies christological identity is universal in scope».[63] Or, to contend «with absolute difference» would be to «undermine the christological promise of history».[64] So formulated, Jesus Christ precludes all difference, resolving the faith within theological processes basic to Western civilisation and the mode of colonisation, the Jesus of colony, the Jesus experienced as enemy.

The Contemporary Reality

No doubt, some readers will find the direct link drawn here between the processes of Nicaea and a christology of colonisation surprising and perhaps even preposterous – but it is not new. As one illustration, Duraisingh states that to identify Christianity with «the ancient and the medieval past of Latin and Greek Europe is not only to *deny the non-Western sociocultural realities* their proper and distinct place within the global communion of churches, [...] it is also to deny the possibility of *genuinely new insights of faith and witness* being brought into the stream of the *traditioning process* of the global Church».[65] These concerns also underlie Halapua's lament regarding the dehumanisation of fellow Christians, those 'late' to the historic tradition, through the recognition achieved by the reception of an imperialist orthodoxy and the absence of recognition of difference by that same tradition.

Or, to follow another neighbour in the Pasifik, while some might identify the etymological origins of 'colonisation' with such Latin forms as *colere* (to cultivate/till), *colonia* (a farm) and *colonus* (tiller of the soil/a farmer) leading to a general idea of 'inhabiting', Upolu Vaai, a Samoan-born theologian now serving as Principal of the Pasifika Communities University, Fiji, more rightly observes that colonisation «comes from the word *colon* meaning *to digest*. Theology in the Pacific has been a slave to this *colon narrative* where only one culture, one way, one dance, or one destination digests all others in the name of an ultimate truth».[66] He describes this as 'oneification': the imposition of a singular, uniform truth or approach, derived

[63] Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 79.
[64] Yadav, "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse," 102.
[65] Duraisingh, "Contextual and Catholic" 682. *Italics added*.
[66] Upolu Lumā Vaai, "Relational Theologising: Why Pacific Islanders Think and Theologise Differently," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 58 (2020): 43.

from and controlled by dominant centres of knowledge and which marginalises, at best, Indigenous ways of thinking, living, and theologising:

> Onefication is not about truth, but rather the control of truth. It is lazy energy. [...] It dismisses multiple stories and makes one story the only story. It strives to make visible the face of the one by making invisible the face of the many.[67]

The drive to oneness, the incapacity to recognise difference, is the excrement of empire.

Thus stated, the question of processes may sound more familiar, a repetition of the complaints about uniformity and homogeneity that have long been rejected by ecumenical discourse concerned with the nature of Christian unity.[68] But to reiterate the point, the issue lies not in abstract qualifications guiding the refinement of orthodoxy ('lazy energy'), but in the processes themselves, their hiddenness, their establishment of the necessary framework for discourse and recognition, and their slippery capacity – and propensity – to direct and reject difference.

One example must suffice.[69] *Nelen Yubu*, or the 'good way' in the Ngan'gikurungurr language of the Daly River, was a Roman Catholic missions journal that ran from 1978 to 2002. From its inception, *Nelen Yubu* was committed to theological inculturation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of what is now known as Australia. It opposed the approach of 'assimilation' and was intentional in learning from previous missionary errors. This included support for Aboriginal self-determination because, to cite Laura Rademaker, «[w]hereas assimilation meant cultural destruction, self-determination was to be its opposite: cultural revival».[70] Without qualification, *Nelen Yubu* represented the most well-positioned authentic attempt by white missionaries to listen to, encourage, and promote Indigenous theological positions, along with a coordinated apparent willingness to translate these into the institutions and structures of the church.

Writing at the close of the journal, however, Martin Wilson MSC, the editor throughout *Nelen Yubu*'s life, lamented its originating direction: «the program of ‹inculturation› is falsely conceived» – «there is no grand single super-culture into

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67 Vaai, "Relational Theologising," 43.

68 As a classic example, see Sehon Goodridge, "Unity: Present and Future," *New Blackfriars* 62, no. 727 (1981): 38–44.

69 What follows is indebted to Laura Rademaker, "'Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies': Inculturation, Self-Determination and the Authority of First Nations," *Journal of Religious History* 47, no. 4 (2023): 516–36.

70 Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 524.

which Christian belief can be fitted».[71] Rademaker's summary judgement is worth citing in full:

> Wilson came to recognise that the idea of a culture-less gospel was a vessel for a white supremacist gospel by which white missionaries alone held a view from nowhere. This meant that the idea that missionaries might transcend their culture and guide the inculturation of Aboriginal worship was more than ill conceived, it was a reimagined form of cultural imperialism. By this missiology Aboriginal people's intellectual authority was always culturally bound. They could be Aboriginal theologians, but not theologians. Their authority was limited to matters of cultural knowledge and always vulnerable to suggestions that their cultural expression might be inauthentic. More importantly, the question of sovereignty and of stolen Country was side-stepped altogether.[72]

Rademaker attributes this to a process of consolidation basic to Western knowledge forms: appropriating and commodifying Indigenous ways of viewing and participating in the world, resulting in a form of self-congratulatory validation, and using that to elide any challenge to the concerns and power structures resisted by Indigenous knowledge structures.[73] One might even go further: ignoring the key issues of sovereignty and stolen Country, establishing set parameters for forms of production, including a necessary 'assent to these ideas' for Aboriginal voices to be heard, is a contemporary manifestation of the exact same theological processes in place since Nicaea. Indigenous peoples' deep connection to and custodianship of the land are reduced to merely 'cultural' elements that can be selectively borrowed, or not. This creates a paradoxical situation where «Blackfullas are forced to embody an illusory double-consciousness between existing and non-existing, human and non-human, real and unreal, traditional and modern. It is more than a peculiar sensation; it is a dispossessing location».[74] It is the process of making visible the one faith by making invisible the faces of the many.

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71 Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 535–56, citing Martin Wilson, "Editorial," *Nelen Yubu* 80 (2002): 3.

72 Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 536. For an example of how this same challenge persists in other contexts, see Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

73 Rademaker, "Where the Spirit of Wisdom Lies," 534, referring to Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwentinepineslik Stark, "Towards a Relational Paradigm – Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land, and Modernity," in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous–Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 180.

74 Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2021), 46.

The example of *Nelen Yubu* illustrates how even the most generous attempts at theological construction using the processes of orthodoxy fail at the fundamental point – the processes cannot admit that local socio-cultural realities hold a proper and distinct place within the church ecumenical. They cannot grant further forms to the traditioning processes by which these embodied forms and insights belong to the Christian faith as such and not to some limited form of 'cultural knowledge'. They cannot do so because the basic method of constructing 'orthodoxy' occurs through the elimination of cultural and linguistic difference, difference as such.

Indigenising Traditioning Processes

Given this reality, a few nameable commitments must determine a revised traditioning process. In direct contravention of the Nicaean heresy, the first recognises cultural and linguistic differences as basic to the telling of who Jesus Christ is. It is antithetical for the Resurrected One to be consolidated within a single cultural or historical articulation. World Christianity reveals quite the opposite – the gospel is only ever embodied difference, and unity lies in the negotiation and reception of that difference. In other words, christology witnesses to a process of embodiment that rejects an assumed universal 'empirical' mode of culture – a way of perceiving reality according to a vision of a 'universal human being' and a program of educating people toward this (civilising) vision.[75] The opposite is the case: it belongs to Jesus Christ that «the interpretation of reality is plural, and that such plurality is true».[76] This is not to assert a relativism that denies truth; it is, instead, to understand truth not as «a condition or a situation, but as a process».[77] This commitment assumes that the fullness of Christ can only be revealed through the irreducible plurality of cultural and linguistic differences, including processes of theologising (i.e., witness), each illuminating aspects that others might obscure.

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[75] Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro, "Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology," in *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, ed. Maria Pilar Aquini and Maria Jose Rosado-Nunes (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 249. See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 32: «With respect to cultural chauvinism, pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but in respect of God pluralism is the cornerstone of the universal human family».

[76] Vélez Caro, "Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology," 250.

[77] Raúl Fornet Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía: Ejercicios Teóricos y Prácticos de Filosofía Intercultural desde Latinoamérica en el Contexto de la Globalización* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 48. Cited in Vélez Caro, "Toward a Feminist Intercultural Theology," 251.

Second, the necessary reversal of the Nicaean heresy involves recognising relational and polyvalent frameworks as pre-existent divine gifts rather than recent cultural adaptations.[78] While the Western-located ecumenical movement struggles with the idea that World Christianity produces new insights of faith and witness that are also constitutive of the processes of traditioning, the local telling of the gospel demonstrates that «meanings are not rigid», that «a single story always has multiple meanings», and that «each receiver of the story must deal with the fact that all meanings and versions of the same story are truth-bearing».[79] An Indigenous Australian account of Country and of how one crosses Country illustrates the point. Drawing on his anthropological fieldwork with Aboriginal peoples in Central Australia, Sam Gill outlines a notion of territory as defined by ancestral pathways across the landscape. Rather than conceiving territory as demarcated boundaries, this understanding centres on an interconnected network of tracks linking locations visited by ancestors. As Gill notes: «For aborigines, identity is inseparable from territory and [...] ontology is strongly spatial, rather than temporal, in character».[80] This spatial understanding allows multiple track networks to coexist within the same physical space. These pathways serve not as boundaries of division but as connections to ancestral heritage – notably, these different routes can overlap without conflict.

Developing an Australian theological paradigm emancipated from the constraints of Nicaean methodological presuppositions promotes a fundamental re-conceptualisation of Christianity's historiographical narratives imposed upon the Australian context. Such a theology privileges geo-cultural particularity over abstract constructs of universalism, repositioning theological discourse within specific landscapes and cultural matrices, and opposes disembodied (transcendent) conceptual systems. This prioritises Country, which includes community, as the primary locus of theological meaning-making and recognises ancestral wisdom as an authoritative theological source. Critically, such theology valorises narrative traditions and oral transmission as proper modes of theological articulation, resisting the tendency to reduce theological complexity to propositional doctrinal

[78] See Vaai, "Relational Theologising," 40–56; Anne Pattel-Gray, "Australia's First Nations Theology," in *Emerging Theologies from the Global South*, ed. Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), 384–94.

[79] Upolu Lumā Vaai, "A Theology of Talalasi: Challenging the 'One Truth' Ideology of the Empire," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 55 (2016): 53.

[80] Sam Gill, "Territory," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 299.

statements. This methodological shift recognises that theology embedded in story, ritual, and communal practice carries greater epistemological validity than 'abstract' dogmatic pronouncements that pretend to be disconnected from located lived experience and place-based knowledge, i.e., from Western embodied forms.

Third, theologians within the Western (normative) tradition must acknowledge and grapple with the political substrate that informs all theological production. During periods of sociopolitical precarity, the tendency toward theological retrenchment and tribal insularity represents an understandable, if problematic, response to existential uncertainty. However, such reactionary postures fail to apprehend the fundamental imbrication of imperial theological modalities with the sociopolitical and economic apparatuses of colonisation. As Nicaea also embodied political production, so the deconstruction of hegemonic modalities must incorporate substantive political dimensions – specifically, «the right of self-determination or political empowerment».[81]

A common temptation within Western (normative) discourse is to recognise (and so dismiss) such theologising as local, as something that occurs upon receipt of the Tradition. But this, again, relies on the theological/non-theological binary at the heart of the Nicaean heresy. In other words, the oft-heard call that Aboriginal peoples must construct theological frameworks that speak «within our own particular context for the sake of obedience that comes through faith and to the glory of God»[82] refers not simply to contextual framings of received theologies. The theological path beyond this heresy lies within and through the communities subjected to it; those with eyes to see. It means working through the realities of Indigenous liberation. The political call is not extraneous to theological inquiry – as embodied at Nicaea, it is constitutive of all 'proper' theological work. To again cite Paulson: «to the extent that we live in the spirit of Christ, the church will seek in every place to overcome the distortions of colonial power».[83] Nicaea's inherited theological methodologies have functioned as intellectual frameworks *and* as regulatory mechanisms for colonial power relations, rendering their dismantling inherently political and necessary.

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[81] Anne Pattel-Gray, "Methodology in an Aboriginal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 278. But, again, heed Paulson's warning: «One of the meanings of repentance in Australia must surely be a turning away from cultural superiority [...] not to mention the use of 'self-determination' to mean its opposite». Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," 311.

[82] Djiniyini Gondarra, "Overcoming the Captivities of the Western Church Context," *Nelen Yubu* 25 (1986): 12.

[83] Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," 317.

This political and theological reorientation aligns with exegetical commitments vis-à-vis God's character – «God shows no partiality» (Rom 2.11; cf. 2 Chr 19.7; Acts 10.34; Gal 3.28; Eph 6.9; passim). Indeed, those who «show partiality [...] are committing sin» (Jas 2.9). Theological modes that privilege collective empowerment over subordination more faithfully reflect this divine impartiality than do theological systems that have sanctioned hierarchical stratification or perpetuated the othering of those called by God. Theological renewal or reform requires a conceptual reconfiguration and political transformation, recognising that all theological work necessitates an interrogation of power relations embedded within hermeneutical traditions and institutional structures – along with deliberate, sustained, prayerful efforts to overcome them.

Conclusion: Repenting the Imperial Unity Agreement

Writing as settler-theologians, we do not pretend that all might view this as a necessary *christological* task. Nor do we believe that there is a clear and straight way forward.[84] But the reform of theological processes lies in recognising/hearing the experience of dehumanisation in the production of theology, and in a corresponding attempt to address those processes via the negotiation of complex and polyvalent frameworks within communities of difference. As non-Indigenous, part of our theological responsibility includes developing the necessary sensitivity to know when we theologise with 'lazy energy' and slip back into Nicaean heresies. This means rejecting the possibility of conceiving the deracination of Indigenous peoples, and the application of dehumanising theological processes, as «insensitivity to Indigenous cultures».[85] Or, bracketing the acknowledgement of «the complicity of the Church in these genocides against Indigenous» with empty self-congratulatory commendations for our «repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius».[86] We must, in other words, develop critical guidelines to address the othering of Indigenous theological concerns and developments, and

[84] As a truly grotesque example, see Biggar, *Colonialism*.

[85] World Council of Churches, "Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding," accessed May 7, 2025, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/pb-14-religiousplurality.pdf.

[86] See World Council of Churches, "Statement on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples," accessed May 8, 2025, https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-reconciliation-with-indigenous-peoples.

reject wholesale the categorisation of that 'mediated' work as 'non-theological'. The concern, in other words, is the repeated, casual, unrecognised shift to theological processes that maintain a dominant body's 'integrity', even as its express intention is toward 'reconciliation'.

How ought we appraise a creed like that produced at Nicaea? If the creeds are judged to be the contingent work of the Spirit, then that same trust must be laid in the contemporary work of the Spirit across the difference of God's creation. In 1966, the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared that the Reformed «cannot treat as absolute any of the structures and confessions which we inherit; in our very loyalty, we must be ready to go wherever the Spirit leads, even if it be through that death which leads to new life».[87] Based on this pneumatological commitment, Reformed confessions are, in principle, marked by regional and temporal particularity, limited in insight, revisable, and surpassable.[88] In other words, they aspire to be explicit about their own context and time, and about their role as interpreters of scripture as empowered by the Spirit in light of new learnings and challenges. Clearly, this has proven to be difficult for the Reformed, with many confessions mandated as static theological productions or 'standards'. In other words, the development of such confessions has assumed and benefited from the processes established at Nicaea and has employed them to establish fixed identities through the mode of confessing. To again cite Paulson, this perpetuation of the Nicaean heresy has, in the case of Australia, and much farther afield, led to genocide and worse – 'Christianity'.

In the spirit of confession: we reject the theological processes by which the Jesus of orthodoxy becomes embodied as the Jesus of colony, an enemy worse than imported disease and infant mortality, the bearer of genocide; we affirm that God shows no partiality, that our christologies must liberate and make whole, and that theology is known by its fruit (Gal 5.22–23; Col 3.12–13).

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87 Alan P. F. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology: The Contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 78.

88 For a more detailed exploration of this subject, see Jason A. Goroncy, "*Semper Reformanda* as a Confession of Crisis," in *Always Being Reformed: Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology*, ed. David H. Jensen (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 43–73.

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