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BOOK REVIEW - *Aborigines : A Statement of Concern* -
a document prepared by the Catholic Commission
for Justice and Peace for the Catholic Bishops
of Australia.

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This slim (22 page) and inexpensive (45 cents) pamphlet, distributed by the Catholic Church on Social Justice Sunday, 1978, is an important document for educators for two reasons. Firstly, it offers a succinct, rational, intelligent, indeed perspicacious statement of the current Aboriginal predicament; a statement inspired by a desire for social justice. In this capacity the document would serve as an excellent information source for all students and all teachers. Secondly, the document has some important (if not original) things to say specifically about Aboriginal education in Australia. In this review both aspects will be dealt with.

The document was produced in 1978 following the centenary of the death of Archbishop Polding who, in 1869, was the driving force behind the last Pastoral Letter of the Australian Bishops on Aborigines. In that 'letter' Archbishop Polding pointed out that Europeans were responsible for the destruction of Aboriginal society and were also responsible for dispossessing Aborigines of their land. Polding believed that, in natural justice, compensation was due to Aboriginal people.

In 1978, the Catholic Church felt that it was once again time to make a statement on social justice as it relates to Aboriginal people. In the early 1970's there was something of a renewed optimism amongst Aborigines concerning the possibility of self-determination. This optimism was largely articulated by Aboriginal people themselves. In the late seventies, after a few years of social policies under-pinned by an acceptance of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination, economic recession has dimmed much of this optimism. Further, there has been something of a white backlash against social policies involving positive discrimination for Aboriginal people. This backlash is fuelled by a lack of understanding and a failure to perceive that the Aboriginal present has grown out of the Aboriginal past.

It is within this context that the document *Aborigines : A Statement of Concern* was produced for the Catholic Bishops of Australia. The specific Catholic context of the document is that of Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where the church was exhorted to be involved in the liberation of any oppressed groups.

The document is divided into four sections. The first, entitled "Perspectives for Change", deals with such perspectives under three sub-headings - "Culture", "History", and "The Destruction of Aboriginal Society". "Land Rights" is the subject of part two. Part three deals with the right of the Aboriginal people to self-determination under the heading - "Beyond Assimilation". Part four - "The Catholic Church" - deals with the new role facing the Church contingent upon the acceptance of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination.

In part one, "Perspectives for Change", the very important point is made that valid community and government attitudes towards Aborigines are dependent upon an accurate and full understanding of how Aboriginal people have come to their present condition. A further point is made that we must learn to respect cultural diversity¹. All present day Aboriginal cultures must be seen as having authentic roots in the Aboriginal past. This is as applicable to the culture of the rural Aborigines as to the cultures of the city and town dwellers. Aboriginal sub-cultures must be recognized as "a proper and essential means of coping with a hostile environment" (p.5). There is still a unique Aboriginal identity even if there are many disparate Aboriginal groups.

In the "History" sub-section of part one the point is made that the history taught in schools is usually the history of the dominant group, written by and for them. Much history taught in Australian schools 'forgets' that the Aborigines have lived in Australia for at least 30,000 years.²

Sensitivity to the destruction of Aboriginal society and its effect on individual Aborigines and Aboriginal communities is essential to any full understanding of the present day Aboriginal condition. Thus, "Perspectives for Change" argues that valid community and Government attitudes to, and treatment of, Aboriginal people are absolutely contingent upon a respect for cultural diversity and a knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, including a knowledge and understanding of the destruction of Aboriginal society which resulted from European settlement.

Part two on 'Land Rights' states that the destruction of

Aboriginal society has resulted directly from the taking of land from the Aboriginal people. The spirituality of the Aboriginal people is manifested in a special relationship with the land. Thus, land dispossession has assaulted the spirituality of these people as well as denying them property rights. It is suggested that the mining of Aboriginal lands without full Aboriginal consent could be as destructive of present day Aboriginal society as was the original dispossession. In this respect it is claimed that "silence on the part of the Christian Community in the face of these threats is not neutrality : it is acquiescence in injustice." (p.11).

The argument in part three "Beyond Assimilation" is that while the policy of assimilation - which effectively denied the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination - has been rejected at the official policy level, many institutions (perhaps the school is one of these) still assert assimilationist pressures.³ Further, it is argued that assimilationist attitudes are virtually universal amongst white Australians. It is to be hoped that this document may go some way to challenging such attitudes.

In part three, "The Law and the Police", "Health", "Education" and "Employment" are all considered. On education the document states:

The schooling to which most Aboriginal children have been subjected has been assimilationist, designed to fit them into dominant Australian society, as indeed it seeks to do for all children (p.16).⁴

We know that there have been some worthwhile changes in some areas of Aboriginal education with the introduction of bilingual programs, Aboriginal community schools and so on. However, it is probably true to say that many schools still act as assimilationist agencies with respect to Aborigines.

In the "Education" section of part three a comment is made on the content of education. It is pointed out that often the content of education is not only alien to Aboriginal children but openly hostile to them.⁵ This is not to deny that much overt racism has been eliminated from school text books.

The question is asked - "To what extent does schooling challenge the prejudices of many white children?" Further, "Does schooling encourage the development of Aboriginal self-esteem? Aborigines who offered resistance to the destruction of their

society are often castigated in school history courses. "Instead, attention is focused on the achievements of explorers and settlers who participated in the destruction of Aboriginal society, and exemplified far less worthy ideals." (p.17) The overt and the hidden curriculum teach attitudes to white children and to Aboriginal children. Teachers must be sensitive to this.

Part four of the document on "The Catholic Church" points out the tensions between the Church and Aboriginal society which will result from an acceptance of the right to self-determination of Aboriginal people. The Catholic Church accepts the validity of Aboriginal culture and is thus strongly opposed to the cultural imperialism inherent in an assimilationist policy. As Pope Paul VI said in his address to the Aborigines of Australia (2.12.1970) :

...We know that you have a lifestyle proper to your own ethnic genus or culture - a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce." (p.19)

The responsibility of Catholic educational institutions (I would add all educational institutions) with respect to social justice for Aboriginal people is emphasized in the conclusion :

These institutions have the potential and responsibility to counter the ignorance, prejudice and indifference which are so typical of the Australian community. (p.22)

Hopefully, a wide distribution of this document may go some way to counter such ignorance, prejudice and indifference.

Aborigines : A Statement of Concern offers a succinct statement on the current Aboriginal predicament while pointing out that any positive change in the future will be dependent upon a rational understanding of white/Aboriginal contact of the past. Without any consideration of the ecumenical movement, the document is an important one for all Australians. It would be invaluable reading for all Australian teachers, with particular pertinence to those who teach Aboriginal children or to those who teach about Aboriginal society. Further, the document could quite easily be used as source material for upper secondary students. Each section in the document is followed by a series of questions which could serve as the basis of classroom discussion with secondary students.

There are twenty-two valuable pages. The document is available from the Catholic Church.

REFERENCES

1. Havighurst, R.J.: Cultural pluralism and education.
The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol.2, No.4, September 1974.

It seems important to me that an accurate account of white/ Aboriginal contact be taught in Australian history courses in the schools. As well, it seems essential that all school children be taught about the viability of Aboriginal society prior to European settlement. For those intending to be teachers, a knowledge of the education offered Aboriginal people in the past is important. See :

2. Walker, K.: An Aboriginal View of Australian history.
The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol.5, No.4, August 1977.

Harris, J.W.: The education of Aboriginal children in New South Wales public schools since 1788. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.6, No.4, August, 1978, Vol.6., No.5, Oct-Nov., 1978.

3. Fitzgerald, R.T.: *Poverty and Education in Australia*, A.G.P.S., Canberra, 1976, pp. 183-185.

(A succinct statement on changes in Aboriginal education policy from the establishment of a school for Aborigines by Governor Macquarie until the present.)

4. Smolicz, J.J.: Is the Australian school an assimilationist agency? *Education News*, 13, 1971, pp. 4-8.

(This article deals specifically with the education of migrants. However, it is relevant to a consideration of the relationship between cultural pluralism and education.)

5. Cotterell, J.E.: The image of the Aboriginal in modern Australian fiction. A survey of the writing in the last ten years.
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