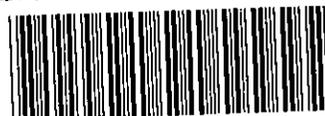


HOW LATE NIGHT THEOLOGY SPARKED A ROYAL COMMISSION ON INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN BELIEFS¹

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PREAMBLE

In June 1995, an Australian television reporter Chris Kenny interviewed one Doug Milera, and sent to air eighty seconds of the hour-long tape that, according to common attribution, triggered a South Australian Royal Commission inquiring into claims of sacredness for the waters surrounding Hindmarsh Island in South Australia.

A review of the interview recording shows that the 'grab' which went to air was far from representative. The interview does indeed offer a key to understanding the Royal Commission, and wider anxieties about Aboriginal rights and beliefs with which Australian society is currently grappling; but not in the way the reporter had suggested.

BACKGROUND

On 23 December 1993, the Lower Murray Aboriginal Heritage Committee filed an application for a declaration by the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra, Australia, under Section 10 of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act*, to protect Aboriginal sites by stopping construction of a bridge between the mainland and Hindmarsh Island, in the lower reaches of the River Murray. On 29 April, the Aboriginal

Heritage Branch's Senior Archaeologist, Dr Neale Draper, advised the Minister for State Aboriginal Affairs against the bridge, on Aboriginal heritage grounds. In May, the State Minister authorised destruction of Aboriginal sites in the bridge's path; but Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister Robert Tickner halted construction with an emergency declaration under Section 9 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984*.

The declaration was based on a report prepared by constitutional lawyer Professor Cheryl Saunders (of Law School in the University of Melbourne), with an appendix by an anthropologist, Dr Deane Fergie. Fergie's appendix documented sacred women's beliefs, in sealed envelopes marked 'Confidential - to be read by women only'. On 25 February 1995, after an appeal by developers of a marina which would have benefited commercially from the bridge, the ban was overturned. In May that year, media stories started to circulate that the women's tradition, which had formed one of the bases for the ban, might have been 'fabricated'.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE INTERVIEW

On 5 June 1995, Doug Milera phoned Kym Denver, Hindmarsh Island's largest landowner and leader of the pro-bridge movement, and said that he wanted to talk about aspects of the Hindmarsh Island bridge protests with which he was unhappy. They met at Middleton Tavern at half past two in the afternoon, where Denver phoned Tom Chapman, one of the marina developers, to join them. He arrived at half past three. They continued drinking there some time, after which Milera used Chapman's mobile phone to ring Kenny, and, while Chapman went home, Denver drove Milera to meet Kenny in the Apollon Motor Inn at neighbouring Victor Harbor, at around eight o'clock. There they talked for at least two and a half hours² and later recorded the interview. The

recording took at least an hour. It was thus half past eleven or later by the time they finished. By this time, Milera had, on the Royal Commission's times, been sitting in pubs for at least nine hours; on his own account, for close to twelve.

The Royal Commission declared, after viewing the uncut interview, that

What went to air...reflects the thrust of what Doug Milera had been anxious to tell the public concerning the fabrication of 'women's business'.³

A viewing of the tape or reading of the transcript shows a different 'thrust': Milera's belief in the women's tradition. The Royal Commission report explains the discrepancy by saying,

The ambiguous reference by Doug Milera to there being 'women's business' on the Island is clearly explicable as Doug Milera sought to make the point that there was a belief now that such business existed on the island.⁴

Yet the interview contains more references to a belief in women's a tradition than to its fabrication.

A more convincing explanation of the interview emerges from either viewing the tape or reading the transcript: it is a conversation with a man who has spent at least nine hours in the pub. Critics of the Kenny interview have consistently maintained that Milera was drunk when the tape was made⁵. The Royal Commission was at pains to protest his relative sobriety⁶. Milera himself, in a statement offered through his lawyers to the Royal Commission, said of the interview, 'I was drunk. I said a number of things in the interview which I did not believe. I spoke in anger.'⁷ Milera's struggle with alcoholism is no secret, but a major theme of his autobiography, *Walkabout to Nowhere*⁸. Whatever Milera's level of sobriety at the time of the interview, it is fair to say that the conversation itself has a rambling, 'late night at the pub' feel about it. The interviewee was clearly troubled, but not in the way Kenny and the Royal Commission implied.

THE REPORT

On 6th June 1995, Channel Ten's evening news announced that '[a] senior Aboriginal man at the heart of the [Hindmarsh Island Bridge] row says he helped fabricate the claims'. Milera, Kenny explained, had been a leading anti-bridge activist, but, 'Now, in a crucial development, Mr Milera has publicly defected from the anti-bridge cause, debunking the sacred claims.' Cut to Milera, saying, 'I think the whole issue of the woman's beliefs was fabricated.' Two other grabs from the interview show Milera declaring his earlier determination to stop the bridge, and recalling, 'I said to Dorrie, look at that map. That's .. er .. women's business.' Summing-up, Kenny tied Milera's claim in with other suggestions that the beliefs were 'fabricated', described what he believed to be the contents of secret envelopes appended to Saunders' report, and concluded, 'Despite mounting evidence that the Hindmarsh Island claims are a recent concoction neither Federal or State government has given in to calls for an independent inquiry.' On 8 June, the State Government announced a Royal Commission.

On 19 May, using embargoed information from (then) Federal Opposition MP Ian McLachlan, Kenny had produced a story suggesting the beliefs were a hoax. Interviewing Milera, Kenny worked hard to continue with the theme that the secret beliefs were a recent 'fabrication'. Kenny, the Royal Commissioner and numerous journalists and politicians took the interview to be an admission of 'fabrication'. After viewing the full tape and examining the transcript, it is hard to see how they did so; and they missed a much more interesting story.

'WOMEN'S BUSINESS' ON THE TAPE

During the hour, Kenny asks Milera twelve times, in different forms of words, questions which seem to be aimed at eliciting

whether he believes in an authentic secret women's tradition to do with Hindmarsh Island. The answers are not always direct; and certainly do not always support Kenny's eventual story. During the interview, Milera makes three statements which suggest the claims are 'fabricated', and a further three which could be interpreted that way but are not entirely clear. Against these, he makes nine statements which suggest he holds the beliefs to be genuine.

Tending to support the claim of fabrication are the statements 'Yes. Because I think the whole issue of the women's beliefs was fabricated'; 'Me. I am the sole fabricator of the whole issue'; and 'I instigated the lot'¹⁰. Three additional 'fabrication' statements, read in the context of surrounding material, are more equivocal. On p 6 of the Transcript, Milera says of the women's tradition, 'It [the 'women's business'] came from books. It did not come from people.' Kenny interprets this: 'So it's not true.' Milera's reply softens Kenny's interpretation and makes his own comment more ambivalent: 'Books written by people who were told. It can be true in the eyes of our own but it came from books.'^{11,12} Kenny says that no published Ngarrindjeri anthropology records secret women's business. Milera's reference to books could be an allusion to the field notes of amateur historian, Betty Fisher, whose 1960s and early 1970s notes have never been made public and which she says hold references to secret women's beliefs associated with Hindmarsh Island¹³; but I have chosen (for the sake of allowing Kenny's interpretation as strong a case as possible) to read this comment's emphasis in the line 'It did not come from people'.

Even this, however, is qualified later in the interview, when Milera says that his wife is convinced of the beliefs' authenticity. Kenny asks, 'But where do you think she got it from? Where do you ..' and Milera responds, 'Books. Except for one old woman who was the main er ..' But we never hear about the one old woman, because Kenny talks over him: 'But

what about your wife? You saying your wife got it from you? You told her after Victor Wilson told you.' Milera's reply is, 'Yes I did. But you ask her about that.'¹² This exchange tends to imply overall that Milera is pointing to at least a vestigial living tradition; consequently, these two references to the beliefs' origin in books seem to cancel one another out.

The earliest 'fabrication' comment is similarly ambivalent. Asked to elaborate on a comment that people on the anti-bridge side had 'used' him 'by talking about things which we do not fully understand', Milera specifies what they were saying: 'A bridge would kill them. A bridge won't kill them.'¹⁴ The statement 'A bridge won't kill them' is, at face-value, a refutation of the belief. Later in the interview, though, Milera draws a distinction between beliefs which are held as a part of a person's spiritual outlook, and beliefs which are to be respected even though one does not actually believe them oneself. After replying 'Yeah' to the question, 'Do you believe there is secret women's business?' Milera goes on, 'I believe it is er .. it's a story like Hansel and Gretel. Remember Jack and the Beanstalk?'¹⁵ 'A bridge won't kill them' could thus be taken as meaning that the beliefs in question, although part of an authentic, living tradition, are not ones to which the speaker personally subscribes. This gains support from another exchange. Kenny asks 'I mean, what do you think?' and Milera responds, 'Personally, myself, I think that there were myths and those myths should be respected. But myself I believe in what's going on today.'

Finally, in the class of statements which can be read as tending to deny the tradition's authenticity, is the comment 'All I know is that the women's ideas today concerning this whole issue is wrong, very very wrong'. This is also ambiguous, since it may refer to the women's spiritual beliefs, but may be a part of the continuing theme that Milera has decided that opposition to the bridge is wrong. The conviction that the bridge should go ahead appears in Milera's conversation as a

theme distinct from the authenticity or otherwise of the women's sacred beliefs.

These between three and six statements which can be read as tending to support the idea of fabrication must stand against nine direct statements that support the opposite view. Again, some appear straightforward: 'Secret women's business is secret women's business'; 'I respect secret women's business. I believe there was a secret women's business'; 'I believe. And a lot of Ngarrindjeris do believe'¹⁶. Others are illuminated by their context in the interview.

Some time into the tape, before Milera has mentioned fabrication, Kenny says, 'I want to get to the crux of the matter of the .. Tell me, I want you to an ..answer a very direct question. Do you believe the secret women's business is true or is it something that's been fabricated in the past year or so?' He gets a direct answer: palm towards the camera, Milera says, 'I believe that the women's story is true.' Kenny asks (contradicting what he has taken to be the story – that Milera was the sole fabricator), 'How can it be true if Victor Wilson [a Ngarrindjeri man] told you about it?', and Milera says, 'Eh .. Now all I'm saying .. I'm saying I believe it is true.' Kenny perseveres: 'Do you believe there is secret women's business? Do you believe there is secret women's business?' Milera perseveres as well: 'Yeah.'¹⁷

Trying another tack, Kenny asks how long Milera's wife, Sarah, has known about the women's beliefs, taking Milera's ambiguous reply to fit the story:

Milera: She knew the secret women's business, I think, until I told her.

Kenny: You told her the secret women's business.

Milera: Well I gave her an [inaudible] and I believe that she don't. Well I don't know, you talk to her. I'll give you her address.

There follows a discussion of ancestry and the account of

Sarah Milera's adoption, after which Kenny says, 'Your wife says she is now a custodian of the secret women's business.' Milera replies, 'Which she is'¹⁸.

By this stage, Kenny is beginning to sound harassed, and gathers himself for a concentrated effort to elicit the expected story:

Kenny: I need .. I need to get straight with you see .. I think .. I don't think, I don't think you're opening up with me. You know .. I think. I don't .. I .. Right. Alright. I think, I think that you think that the women's business isn't true but you don't want to say so because um .. because you know that some people have become caught up in it now. I mean, what do you think?

Milera: Personally, myself, I think that there were myths and those myths should be respected.¹⁹

By this point, Kenny has asked four direct questions, each receiving an unequivocal reply that Milera believes that the women's beliefs are part of an authentic tradition. In addition, Milera has made five other comments, such as the interrupted one about the old woman, which tend to indicate support for the beliefs' authenticity.

The whole transcript of the interview is twenty-one pages long, twenty-three including 'cutaways'. The first camera tape ran out and a new one was loaded²⁰ at the point in the interview which, in the transcript, comes a third of the way down page 11. All the statements which tend to imply authenticity come before the change of tape, while all but the two most problematic of the statements which tend to deny authenticity come on the second tape. Without explaining such a dramatic change, both parts of the interview hold a great deal of material with significance for those who study religion.

The contradictory statements about Milera's opinion of women's business form only one of the strand in the interview. Other themes are Milera's account of the political processes surrounding the building of the bridge, his conviction that the

bridge should be built, and, most frequently, ruminations about the relationship between traditional beliefs and Christianity. The discussion of traditional and Christian beliefs gives a context to the perplexing and contradictory material which Kenny took to be the crux of his interview. It suggests, further, that a major theme in the broader controversy surrounding Hindmarsh Island has been missed by the general media and academic commentary.

RELIGION AND HINDMARSH ISLAND

When dissension split the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities over the authenticity of the women's tradition, the three largest Christian denominations in South Australia opposed the Royal Commission. This led to claims that the churches were abandoning the so-called 'dissident women', practising Christians (like many of the beliefs' proponents) but who denied knowledge of the beliefs.

Perhaps the strongest statement of the view that Christian churches took a biased stand is found in an article by Chris Kenny in *The Adelaide Review*. He claimed the churches, 'like guards at a concentration camp',

have been pivotal in stifling sensible debate here...fuelling racial divisions and argued that we should turn a blind eye rather than seek the truth.²¹

Retired Flinders University educationist Geoffrey Partington wrote in B. A. Santamaria's conservative Catholic *News Weekly* that 'Fear of being politically incorrect has paralysed the moral sensitivities of many Anglicans and Roman Catholics', while '[t]he worst part has certainly been played by the Uniting Church of South Australia'. Further, churches 'concerned with charismatic powers' should have challenged 'the anti-Christian doctrines that iron and wood construction could adversely affect childbirth among distant women'²².

Most fundamentally, the controversy is tied to questions of religion by the fact that it erupted at a point in Australian legal and political discourse at which traditional Aboriginal beliefs intersect with secular state procedures.²³

Media and academic commentary on the religious issues involved in the Royal Commission has generally fallen into three positions. A common response points out that the so-called dissident women are Christian, including a Salvation Army lay preacher, Dulcie Wilson, and many members of the Uniting Church. Such commentary which takes up this point tends to portray the 'dissident' women as taking a stand either of Christian orthodoxy against pagan beliefs, or of Christian integrity against lies, depending on the commentator's point of view. The former is echoed in Kenny's question to Milera whether the controversy is all about 'Christian versus traditional', and Milera's 'Yes, that's what it's all about.' However, while Milera seems to be thinking through an internal debate of 'Christian versus traditional' within himself, and puzzling about the conjunction of the two in the lives of other believers, Kenny, in common with other commentators, draws the opposition as between 'Christian' dissident women versus 'traditional' proponents who (the comparison implies) are not Christian.

Partington, in *News Weekly*, offers a second common line of interpretation: a version of the 'white man's burden' in which it is the task of enlightened Christians to disabuse Aborigines of their superstition.

At a more sophisticated level, some academic critics have addressed the issue of secret women's beliefs through the lens of anthropological debates about the 'invention of tradition'.²⁴

None of these analyses picks up on the diversity of theological emphasis between Ngarrindjeri Christians on the different sides of the debate. To demonstrate this, and the significant ground which Milera's interview traverses within a wider discussion of traditional and Christian beliefs, I shall first con-

sider some studies of relationships between Aboriginal theology, history and political perspective, and then return to Milera's ruminations, comparing them with the theological reflections of two other Ngarrindjeri participants in the Hindmarsh Island story.

INDIGENISATION AND MISSION HISTORY

Anne Pattel-Gray and Garry Trompf outline various styles of Aboriginal theology, 'ranging from the traditional (or non-western) to the 'Aboriginal' (or post-western)'²⁵. Between these positions they identify conservative and liberal forms of 'missionized Christianity' imposed by non-Aboriginal evangelists, and 'story-telling theology' in which Dreaming stories and images are interwoven with Christian theology so as to offer a 'non-conservative, non-evangelical' hermeneutics grounded in Aboriginal tradition.

In the Hindmarsh Island story, each of these styles is evident. The Royal Commission was about a belief which its bearers identified as a non-western survival of traditional religion. A different view came from the 'dissidents', whose articulations of Christian faith place strong emphasis on personal salvation with no room for syncretism – what Pattel-Gray and Trompf call the 'conservative' end of 'missionized Christianity', connected to a wider political outlook, and a history of forced assimilation:

Most – if not all – adherents reject their own Aboriginal identity, culture and languages. Most are concerned with sin and salvation and individual conversion and piety, as opposed to institutionalized or corporate sins (for example, white racism, greed).²⁶

At the opposite end of Pattel-Gray and Trompf's scale from conservative evangelicalism is 'Aboriginal theology' which draws on indigenous traditions and leans 'heavily towards biblical justice'. This strand, according to Pattel-Gray

and Trompf, 'treasures traditional Aboriginal religion as the divine grounding for contemporary faith and identity. And, it holds the Dreaming as a timeless guide for active engagement.'²⁷

Pattel-Gray and Trompf's two labels, of conservative 'missionized Christianity' and an 'Aboriginal theology' which appeals to principles of 'biblical justice', can usefully describe two contrasting Ngarrindjeri voices in the Hindmarsh Island story, those of Dulcie Wilson and Victor Wilson. Pattel-Gray and Trompf's description, together with observations like Robert Tonkinson's²⁸, is helpful in understanding the dynamics of the theological debate which has played a formative (but so far largely unnoticed) role in this apparently secular legal and political controversy.

DULCIE WILSON, VICTOR WILSON AND DOUG MILERA'S THEOLOGY

Dulcie Wilson is an elderly and respected Ngarrindjeri woman and Salvation Army lay preacher, who, in a speech to the Rotary Intercity Meeting at Murray Bridge on 7 November 1994, said that she had never heard of any secret women's business associated with Hindmarsh Island (this was six months before the media story of 'fabrication'). The text of that speech, and a letter to the *Adelaide Review*, set out her theological position in relation to the question of women's beliefs.

The Rotary speech is about her experiences of growing up Aboriginal, and the need for tolerance and respect between different peoples: clearly, Dulcie Wilson does not (in Pattel-Gray and Trompf's terms) reject her Aboriginal identity. Yet it is difficult for readers to see in what that identity consists, since she seems to find its fullest expression in personal, evangelical Christian faith and full participation in non-Aboriginal society.

Indeed, her personal history fits very closely with the kind of mission background which Pattel-Gray and Trompf associate with an evangelical theological position: brought up at Point McLeay mission, her family moved out in the 1950s, under federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs assimilation policies. They settled in the country town of Millicent, where the tiny Aboriginal community has created a world of social acceptance for itself through church and sporting endeavours²⁹. According to a Member of the Legislative Council who grew up in the area, Aboriginal people in Millicent gain the respect of the non-Aboriginal community to the extent that they are able to 'live as white'³⁰.

Dulcie Wilson has gained respect. She was Millicent's Citizen of the Year in 1985³⁰ and is claimed as a friend by leading local non-Aboriginal business and political figures³¹. The *Southern Argus* newspaper report³² of her speech to the Rotary Intercity meeting bears witness to the esteem in which she is held in the area.

Victor Wilson is Milera's friend mentioned in the interview, and works at the rehabilitation farm which Milera co-founded in the late 1970s³³. Wilson spoke at a public meeting called by the Uniting Church's Solidarity and Justice Unit in July 1995, and the South Australian Uniting Church newspaper, *New Times*, reported his speech, in which he discussed the relationship between traditional Aboriginal beliefs and biblical requirements of justice. Victor Wilson, unlike Dulcie Wilson, belongs to one of the Point McLeay families who remained at the former mission site close to their traditional lands. The position he took at the Uniting Church forum closely matches Pattel-Gray and Trompf's category of post-denominational, post-Western 'Aboriginal theology'³⁴.

These two participants in the Hindmarsh Island saga reflect not only of two sides in a political and religious debate, but also of two sets of circumstances engendered by changing government policies. Their respective comments 'flesh out' the

links between political and historical experience and theological orientation which Pattel-Gray and Trompf suggest.

Milera's reflections in the interview repeatedly raise themes which both Wilsons deal with, in different ways. Although his comments often sound disorganised, this is exacerbated by Kenny single-mindedly pursuing a line of questioning which has little to do with the points Milera is trying to elucidate. Throughout, Milera ties his reflections on the relationship between traditional Aboriginal belief and Christianity to the idea of having to make a choice between the past and the future, which he sees as the critical issue in deciding whether Ngarrindjeri traditional beliefs should stop a bridge from being built.

Asked whether he believes in secret women's business, Milera says,

I believe. And a lot of Ngarrindjeris do believe. Now don't jump the gun. Those people have a right in democracy to believe what they want to believe. I believe and you believe that there was a Jesus Christ and there was a God. I was born into religion and so was everyone on that secret women's business believed and born into that. Now they have a choice between the past and the future.³⁵

Choice between past and future is a key theological theme in much Aboriginal (as well as non-Aboriginal) evangelical theology³⁶. It emerges, together with the idea of growing into religious faith, in an exchange which follows directly from the Hansel and Gretel allusion, where Milera distinguishes between authentic tradition and personal belief:

Kenny: I mean .. You say it might be a story but...it doesn't matter who believes in it if it's a story that...does go back a long way. I want to know whether it goes back a long way or whether it's something that Victor Wilson or someone else might have made up. Or got from another tribe.

Milera: Victor Wilson is a Christian and so is his wife.

They believe in now and the hereafter. I believe in now and the hereafter. My brothers and my sisters believe in now and the hereafter. And this all concerns God, Christianity, Jesus Christ.

Kenny: Is that what it's about? Christians versus traditional?

Milera: Yes. This is what it's all about.³⁷

Milera seems to be reflecting on the fact that some people, like Victor Wilson and his wife, can sustain Christian and traditional beliefs side by side, while others feel the need to choose between the two.

When Milera has announced, at the end of tape one and again at the beginning of tape two, that he thinks the bridge should be built, Kenny asks him why he has abandoned his former anti-bridge stance. Milera replies:

I have a conscience. My conscience in my heart, in my heart tells me up here when I'm doing right and when I'm doing wrong. I have a brother and I have a sister. They have proved beyond doubt that they can carry on their lives in the belief of having one God, not two.³⁸

This tension is still in Milera's mind at the end of the interview, to such an extent that it overshadows the supposed 'fabrication' of the women's tradition. Kenny wants to get straight whether the story was made up by Milera or Victor Wilson. Milera apparently wants to get straight how the Christian Wilson can sustain traditional beliefs – so that he completely overlooks Kenny's question about the contradiction in his story. Asked how government archaeologist Dr Neale Draper came to know of the beliefs, Milera says, 'Neale Draper was coerced into saying what he had to say by my wife.' Kenny says, 'So you told your wife about this business and she told Neale Draper.'

Milera: No. This was something different. This was when they were trying er .. to get sites to stop the bridge....My friend told me in Goolwa that there are issues concerning

the women on the bridge. I said what do you mean? He showed me the map and in the map and he outlined the drawing of a woman and he said, 'there and there'..

Kenny: Who was that friend?

Milera: Victor Wilson.

Kenny: So he made it up, not you. You then ..

Milera: Where he got it from I don't know. And I said well if that's the truth. And him being a Christian. I said what's happening? He said, 'Well that's the creation of our Ngarrindjeris.'

Kenny: You don't know where he got it from?

Milera: Well maybe he would have spoken to Doreen ..and .. before .. I don't know.³⁹

Although the story sent to air was Milera saying 'I am the sole fabricator,' Kenny chose in the interview to interpret this exchange as meaning that Victor Wilson was the 'fabricator'. Milera never actually accepts Kenny's interpretation that Wilson made the story up – his responses tend to indicate that he trusts Wilson's word about Ngarrindjeri tradition. If anything, Wilson's Christianity is a credential which makes his statements about traditional beliefs all the more credible. In contrast to Kenny's conviction that the story was that Milera (or perhaps Wilson) 'fabricated' the women's business, it seems from these exchanges that Milera was interested in saying that the bridge should be built and that he himself felt betrayed by people on the anti-bridge side; the 'fabrication' story was peripheral.

The significance of the women's tradition for Milera seems to be not whether or not it supports the anti-bridge position, but whether or not belief in it precludes belief in Christianity and vice versa. This is no abstract theological conundrum, but relates to the whole orientation of his community:

I was born into religion and so was everyone on that

secret women's business believed and born into that. Now they have a choice between the past and the future.⁴⁰

In short, the picture which emerges from these exchanges is that Milera believes that the women's beliefs are genuine, and that they have potency; but that it is necessary for Aboriginal people to choose between the competing belief systems of the past and the future.

This reading gains unexpected support from Kym Denver, the landowner who brokered the Kenny-Milera interview. Denver is unequivocally pro-bridge – so much so that, when giving evidence in the Royal Commission, he had to be admonished by the Commissioner to stop dwelling on his 'pre-occupation'⁴¹. He shows a consistent concern to discredit the anti-bridge movement, whom he calls 'bastards', 'whackers', 'loonies' and 'full of bull', as against his own group who 'are the good guys in all of this'⁴². Yet his evidence supports the interpretation that Milera accepts the women's beliefs and highlights the issue of choosing between traditional past and Christian future. Describing his conversation with Milera before calling Kenny to come and record the interview, Denver told the Commission,

Yes. Virtually once he settled down and we talked about, you know, the general weather and the pub, or whatever, I wanted to get going, get home again, and he started to tell me that he has beliefs as an Aborigine, he has beliefs as a Christian and he's got to decide whether to use his beliefs to back up what his friends, the Aborigines, are saying is stronger than his beliefs as a Christian.⁴³

Choice between past and future, tied to a choice between traditional beliefs and Christianity, or 'one God not two' (as Milera put it), is a strong theme in Dulcie Wilson's comments on the debate. In her letter to the *Adelaide Review*, she said,

Whilst living on Point McLeay for 26 years it was my understanding that the Christian missionaries' main pur-

pose was to bring the gospel message of Christ's love and salvation to the Aborigines. I am therefore bewildered as to why some of the churches have come out in support of so-called Aboriginal spirituality. Again, scripture clearly tells us that we cannot serve God and Mammon'.⁴⁴

Commenting on the major churches' opposition to the Royal Commission, she went on,

I find such a stand counter to Christ's teachings, for the New Testament clearly tells us that the way to eternal life is through Christ Jesus our Lord.⁴⁵

This was foreshadowed in less theological terms in her Rotary speech. In a passage which can be read as an example of Pattel-Gray and Trompf's point about putting away the past, Dulcie Wilson mentioned history as giving an evolutionary frame to lives concentrated on the present:

Many people today, be they black or white, tend to forget that it is now over 200 years since the first settlers came to this country, and that not only white Australians have made progress over the years, but black Australians too... Wherever I speak I tell people like yourselves who live in this present day and age that you're not guilty for what happened then, neither would I want you to blame you [us?] for what happened to your forbearers when they arrived in this country.⁴⁶

She draws a sharp distinction between past and future, urging Aborigines to look to the future, and sees looking to the future as entailing closer assimilation into non-Aboriginal society. For example, special programs for Aboriginal people are deleterious to a healthy society:

I get angry today with certain aboriginal groups and that the powers that be who want to set up special schools or classrooms for aboriginal students and teachers. I personally believe that this is a step backwards... and is causing a wider rift between the races...

...it is now time for people who live in this country and of whatever race or colour they might be that they should

all be treated on an equal basis, for we are not two different countries and there shouldn't be one law for aboriginal people and another for other Australians, and aboriginal people should be made to understand that they can't have their cake and eat it too.⁴⁷

Just before the change of tape, Milera expresses a similar desire for closer integration of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal through the image of the bridge, which he has come to believe should be built:

I pledge myself now to...undo the wrong that was done to people who have been battling for a true reconciliation of Aboriginal and white people in building the Hindmarsh bridge.⁴⁸

For Milera the issue of past and future is symbolised by the local question of building a bridge; for Dulcie Wilson it is epitomised in social integration and an achievement ethic. They agree in seeing a vote for the future in the choice for 'one God not two'.

Dulcie Wilson's *Adelaide Review* letter reflects on another point which also concerns Milera. She discusses the importance of truth telling and a clear conscience, and connects truth-telling with personal faith in Jesus:

As one of the dissident women I am not ashamed to bear witness to Christ's teachings, nor have I anything to gain by speaking the truth, other than a clear conscience which was guided by God in the face of strong opposition.⁴⁹

For Milera, concern with the importance of a clear conscience and truth takes on an added piquancy in the light of his impression of impending mortality. After saying that 'all this concerns God, Christianity and Jesus Christ' and comparing his learning about traditional beliefs with Christians' learning about their faith, Milera goes on, 'But I feel that this is wrong that what's going on today concerning an Island and people's future. No way. Not when I believe in something that I know that soon I'm going to die over...'⁵⁰ Speaking at the

Royal Commission, Denver recalled Milera similarly linking Christian faith with speaking out: 'He indicated to me that he was a Christian, but not much of one, but he thought that he needed to get this out for him to sleep at night.'⁵¹

This link remains strong in Milera's conversation even when other concerns press more urgently. In a tape-recorded phone call between Milera and Denver after the Kenny interview, Milera hints, interspersed with nine requests for beer and cigarettes, that he knows something which has the beliefs' proponents 'shakin' in their boots'⁵². After repeated urging from Denver to say what this is, Milera reveals: 'If they are Christians they will come clean. That is what my whole plan is. If they are Christians they will speak the truth in the talk [court?]. This is the ace in my sleeve. I have just smoked my last cigarette.'⁵³

Truth is also a theme in Victor Wilson's address to the Uniting Church forum, but in a theological context which ties the personal morality of individual acts of truth-telling to a broader conception of 'the truth' which incorporates a political and historical dimension, including traditional beliefs.

'Since the Lord saved me he has given me a job to do...to fight his way with the truth.

'A brother said the other night, it's like the second conquest of the Ngarrindjeri.'

'If we love the Lord we can't turn a blind eye to bad things that are happening. If you love the Lord you love the truth. We've got to stand up for the truth.'⁵⁴

Victor Wilson's conviction that turning a blind eye to 'the truth' amounts to a 'second conquest of the Ngarrindjeri' also suggests a different relation between past and present from that advocated by Dulcie Wilson. Fighting the Lord's way for the truth implies a defence of tradition, rather than rejecting it in favour of a Christian future conceived in terms of a rupture from the past.

Milera shares this commitment to protecting

Ngarrindjeri tradition, and remarks on the need for more than token recognition by the wider community. This emerges not only in the statements in support of the secret women's tradition, but also in discussing his role as secretary of the Lower Murray Aboriginal Heritage Committee, and forms the theme of his first speech in the interview⁵⁵.

Later, on the second tape, after Kenny has finally extracted the admission of fabrication, the theme recurs:

Milera: I'm securing our people's beliefs when I made those stories.

Kenny: Are you worried now that someone could sue you or even charge you for telling lies?

Milera: I can be sued, I can be charged, I can go to gaol, but...what I was trying to do was something for the government to recognise the...Aboriginal Heritage Committee.⁵⁶

Dulcie Wilson and Victor Wilson each express a consistent and considered position; by contrast, Milera appears in the Kenny interview to be testing a view like Dulcie Wilson's against one closer to Victor Wilson's; indeed, he seems to refer to Victor Wilson as a role model or mentor for the position which can hold traditional beliefs together with Christian ones.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical analyses like Pattel-Gray and Trompf's offer a way to understand the dynamics of the interview which puts an entirely different construction on it from that which was taken by the Royal Commission. The recorded comments of the two Wilsons illustrate two possible positions for Aboriginal theological reflection, faced with a tension between traditional belief, Christianity and a secular legal system.

Between these two positions sits Doug Milera, late at night after many hours in the pub, thinking through questions

of religious belief, and of his own theological orientation. Having decided to tell the world that he has concluded that the bridge should be built, he does this thinking-through under a blaze of light and in the lens of a television camera, with a journalist across the table aching for a story.

The story of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission is about political intrigue, dubious media ethics⁵⁷, and a breakdown in the political system for protecting Aboriginal heritage. It is also a story about Australian media and political institutions' difficulties in comprehending issues of religious belief.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I thank Michael Symons and Dr Paul Rule for comments on this paper; and Channel 10's Chris Kenny and Grant Heading for access to the uncut tape of Mr Kenny's interview with Mr Milera.
- 2 Times from Stevens, Iris E. *Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission* Adelaide: State Print December 1995, pp 186-188. In a statement to the Royal Commission, released on 27 July 1995, Milera placed the starting time at midday and the taped interview 'late at night'.
- 3 Stevens, *Op. Cit.*, p 194
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 eg Littlemore, Stewart *Mediawatch* 7 August 1995; Chance, Ian 'Be ashamed, Be very ashamed', *The Adelaide Ray*, No 17 March/April, 1996: 6
- 6 Stevens *Op. Cit.*, pp 187-188
- 7 *Statement of Doug Milera Re: Royal Commission*, issued on letterhead of Stanley and Partners Barristers and Solicitors, 27 July 1995.
- 8 Australian Foundation on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency and Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1980
- 9 In fact, the federal 'Mathews' inquiry had already been organised.
- 10 Transcript, Royal Commission Exhibit 149A, pp 11, 13, 18

- 11 *ibid.*, p 6
- 12 A claim ignored in the report of the Royal Commission, but vindicated by the Federal enquirer, Justice Jane Mathews. See Mathews, Jane *Commonwealth Hindmarsh Island Report*, 27 June 1996, p 49 & Appendix 12.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 10
- 14 *ibid.*, p 4
- 15 *ibid.*, p 8. The transcripts use two suspension dots to indicate pauses. I reproduce these in quotations, always using two (..), and use three dots (...) in the conventional way, to indicate ellipsis.
- 16 *ibid.*, p 10
- 17 Exhibit 149A, pp 4, 5
- 18 *ibid.*, pp 7-8
- 19 *ibid.*, p 10
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 evident in the wild footage held at Channel Ten, but not in the copy lodged with the Royal Commission
- 22 Kenny, Chris 'Churches Conspire to Stifle Debate' *The Adelaide Review* November 1995, pp 6-7.
- 23 Partington, Geoffrey 'Hindmarsh Island: The Inside Story' *News Weekly* February 24, 1996, pp 11-14
- 24 See my forthcoming 'Religion in the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission' in George Couvalis, Cheryl Simpson and Helen Macdonald (eds), *Cultural Heritage: Values and Rights* on related theological and political questions.
- 25 *Royal Commission Transcript*, p 4273 ff; Ron Brunton, 'The False Culture Syndrome: The Howard Government and the Commonwealth Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission', *IPA Backgrounder* 8(2), March 1996.
- 26 Pattel-Gray, Anne and Garry W. Trompf 'Styles of Australian Aboriginal and Melanesian Theology', *International Review of Mission* Vol. 82 No 326 April 1993, pp 167-188.
- 27 *ibid.*, p 174. Similar comments are made by other observers of conservative evangelicalism in Aboriginal communities eg Robert Tonkinson's 'Reflections on a Failed Crusade' in Swain, Tony and Deborah Bird Rose, *Aboriginal Australians and*

- Christian Missions*, Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions 1988, pp 60-73.
- 28 *Op. Cit.*, pp 176-177. Compare Harris, Charles 'Guidelines for So-Called Western Civilization and Western Christianity' in Pattel-Gray, Anne (ed) *Aboriginal Spirituality* Melbourne: Harper Collins 1996
 - 29 See note 27 above.
 - 30 This biographical information comes from the transcript of Dulcie Wilson's speech to the Rotary Club, Royal Commission Exhibit 200, supplemented by interviews with a number of people familiar with the Millicent community.
 - 31 Terry Roberts, MLC, personal communication, 20 May 1996
 - 32 Stevens *Op. Cit.*, p 265
 - 33 Confirmed by two local politicians, one speaking to me and another speaking to Michael Symons.
 - 34 *Southern Argus*, 9 November 1994
 - 35 Milera 1980 *Op. Cit.*, pp 21-22
 - 36 Theology which holds Christian and traditional beliefs side-by-side is shared by many members of the Point McLeay community, according to social historian Steve Hemming (personal communication). The prevalence of such syncretism around the world – and indeed throughout European Christian history – suggests that it is likely to be much more common in Aboriginal communities than is often noted.
 - 37 Exhibit 149A *Op. Cit.*, p 5
 - 38 By contrast, the papers in Pattel-Gray 1996 *Op. Cit.*, which emphasise the 'biblical justice' orientation, stress a continuity between the spiritualities of past and present.
 - 39 Exhibit 149A *Op. Cit.*, pp 7-9
 - 40 *ibid.*, p 13
 - 41 *ibid.*, p-20
 - 42 *ibid.*, p 5
 - 43 *Royal Commission Transcript* pp 1474-1475
 - 44 *ibid.*, pp 1463, 1465, 1467 & 1475
 - 45 *ibid.*, p 1481
 - 46 Wilson, Dulcie 'Appalled by the Churches' Stance' (Letter to the Editor) *The Adelaide Review* January 1996 p 2

- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 Exhibit 200, p 1
- 49 *ibid.*, pp 3, 5
- 50 Exhibit 149A *Op. Cit.*, p 11. The final word, omitted in the transcript, is audible on the tape.
- 51 *Op. Cit.*
- 52 Exhibit 149A *Op. Cit.* p 9
- 53 *Royal Commission Transcript* p 1481
- 54 Royal Commission Exhibit 68, p 12
- 55 *ibid.*, p 13
- 56 'Please Join Us In This Fight', *New Times* August 1995, p 12
- 57 Exhibit 149A., p 1
- 58 *ibid.*, pp 14-15
- 59 The Recommended Revised Journalist Code of Ethics point 1 says, 'Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, nor give distorting emphasis'. I believe that my analysis in this article has demonstrated a distorting emphasis in reporting of the Milera interview.