

Reid, Duncan: Time We Started Listening: Theological Questions Put to Us by Recent Indigenous Writing. 114 pp. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1925679809. AUD 26.98

Daniel Kisliakov¹, Nikolai Kostin²

¹Trinity College, University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia

²Faculty of Philosophy, The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow, Poland

Email: dkisliakov2@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Kisliakov, D., & Kostin, N. (2025). Reid, Duncan: Time We Started Listening: Theological Questions Put to Us by Recent Indigenous Writing. 114 pp. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1925679809. AUD 26.98. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 265-269.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2025.152016>

Received: January 22, 2025

Accepted: March 15, 2025

Published: March 18, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Duncan Reid's book is a timely piece on the developing field of Australian Indigenous theology. The key is listening to uncover what is unspoken, inasmuch as it is a path to uncovering implicit meaning. Reid derives this meaning theologically. It can help "save Australia". The approach noted by Reid is helpful in looking beyond analytic approaches to thought. This requires balance: as a reduction to identity politics, but as an ontological belonging, an opening into new knowledge, such as with fire management practice. Reid considers the possible correlation with Eastern Christianity and its reverence for the sense of place, which lends itself to John Chryssavgis's approach to the desert, metanoia, and a fundamental anthropology. The result is an expansion of insight that contributes to ontological and anthropological discourse.

Keywords

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australian Indigenous, Cartesian Dualism, Yarning

1. Introduction

Duncan Reid's book "Time We Started Listening: Theological Questions Put to Us by Indigenous Writing" is a timely piece with a unique perspective on the developing field of Australian Indigenous theology. Authored by a non-Indigenous man, the book seriously contributes to a dialogue that helps to resolve complex scholarly problems. We would like to stress its anthropological significance, in a

multidisciplinary and philosophical light. From an Australian perspective, it helps the difficult challenge of confronting the past; internationally, it contributes to theological, anthropological and philosophical inquiry, providing insight into the contribution of indigenous cultures to the cognisance of a fundamental anthropology.

It follows biblical commentary by Normal Habel from an Australian Indigenous perspective (Habel, 1995) and Anne Pattel-Gray, which speaks of the influx of Europeans at the expense of Indigenous culture (Pattel-Gray, 1998). Garry Deverell, a *Trawlolway* man, has attempted an Australian Indigenous theology (Deverell, 2018). Reid's book acknowledges these contributions (pp. 54-60), but makes a substantial original contribution.

The centrepiece of the book is its stress on listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, whose cultural heritage diverges from Anglocentrism, which continues to dominate Australia's social, cultural, educational and legislative institutions. Listening becomes the key to acquiring knowledge, and challenging established thought: it uncovers what is unheard and introduces into the conversation what escapes analysis and understanding. The second chapter brings to life and features indigenous Australians from many "walks of life", in order to hear what the prevailing *milieu* does not. It also establishes a reference-point for knowledge that escapes the institutional purview, thus helping to restore balance from the long-standing impact of colonisation and its effects.

2. Listening and Thought

Listening is key, because, as Stuart Muir relates, for many Australians the Indigenous Australian experience offers "the possibility of learning from a people who embodied a time before modern disenchantment." (Muir, 2014) This is not uncommon to indigenous cultures. Listening hints at the unspoken; it evokes implicit axioms (Ritschl, 1991). In this, "yarning" is the conversation that suggests what is mostly unspoken (Barlo et al., 2020).

Reid skilfully derives this understanding in theological terms, reflecting firstly on the New Testament (Revised Standard Version Bible, 1901: Mark. 7: pp. 24-30; Matt 15: pp. 21-28) and then on the Old Testament in Ruth. An existentialist phenomenology of dialogue is suggested in accord with "yarning". This is a well-established philosophy (Buber, 1958); Reid frames this in a theological light:

...Jesus displays the typical prejudices of his day (about women, and indigenous people), but is persuaded to change his mind. He had to speak the language of his own place and people, in his *own mother-tongue*, and live - most of the time - by the same cultural norms. (p. 7)

Listening therefore helps derive what might be referred to as "full meaning". However, the strength of the cultural heritage implied here also belies another challenge: Muir continues, that in modernity, "although many alternative spiritualists claimed to want to emulate this utterly Other yet apparently obtainable state

of being, I never encountered anyone who claimed to have exactly replicated any part of it.” (Muir, 2014)

Reid’s book makes a strong attempt to navigate this balance. He cites for example, the perspective of journalist Stan Grant, a *Wiradjuri* man. Grant emphatically rejects identity politics, describing identity as a “prison house”. (p. 40) He refuses to “put a mark in a box that somebody else has decided contains me”, and continues: “I choose another definition... It is so simple that I can say it in plain English and in one sentence: ‘I will not be anything that does not include my grandmother.’” (p. 40) He concludes: “totalitarians hate love, but they love identity” (p. 40)

To this however, Reid adds: “Instead of a one-dimensional (in this case, indigenous), Grant chooses the way of love – something he learnt from his indigenous family... Stan Grant here speaks of love that negates all conventional markers of identity.” (p. 40) Reid further refers to Deverell, who notes that Aboriginal identity is “embedded in a(n) ontological sense of belonging to kin and country”, (p. 40) is challenged by the West’s “linear, analytical and systematising ways of thinking” (p. 65), concluding that:

Aboriginality is most often preserved in the form of a memory and a deep-down sorrow pertaining to what has been lost or stolen, land, kin, dreaming, a sorrow manifested in various forms of grief and mourning, but also in the search for a justice in which these things might be returned or, at least, partially recovered. (p. 56)

Understanding Aboriginal identity is a difficult process, to be sure, but listening suggests the beginning of a resolution. Reid is sober but unequivocal: listening is difficult, and good intentions have pitfalls. Nevertheless, his comment on Victor Steffensen’s book *Fire Country* is an example of a balanced approach. Reid notes Steffensen’s call to “save Australia” with indigenous fire management techniques suggests salvation because that salvation “is a theological concept”. (p. 54) Listening thus opens dialogical processes.

In a similar way, the argument can be made that the title of Reid’s book is able to be read in two ways, the phrase “time we started listening” could be read as an exhortation, but it is also possible to read it in the past tense: “the time (that) we started listening”. The phraseology is also apt given indigenous concepts of time, and points to the possibility of the time when contrasting understandings might be reconciled.

On the whole, an important aspect to emerge from Reid’s book is the contrasting of modes of thought. As an example of past eurocentrism, Reid references Steffensen’s criticism of excessive reliance on analytic thought. Reid notes: “It is this that gives rise to a divided mindset. It leads to people being disconnected from land, and from place.” (p. 53) It is, moreover, a contrast between connected and disconnected people. (p. 53) One might surmise that the prominence of analytic approaches to thought in a broader sense has not helped to integrate perspectives.

3. Eastern Christian Approaches

Nevertheless, approaches that differ from analytic thought are not absent from the European Christian tradition. This is clear in an ecumenical context. Reid cites the example of the Australian theologian Davis McCaughey, who accompanied a group of the Russian Student Christian Movement to Iona. McCaughey was inspired by their “reverence for the *place*”. (p. 53) Place suggests stillness; this suggests listening.

Place is, to be sure, inherent to the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition. In this regard Reid builds on and makes a new contribution to established approaches. In the Australian context, John Chryssavgis compares the prevalence of land to the ancient experience of the Egyptian desert. The harsh situation and landscape is a call for “repentance” - not to be understood as a chastisement for the past, but as a “*metanoia*... a complete change of mind and profound respect for the land in the Australian religious consciousness.” (Chryssavgis, 1990a: p. 52) Australia, moreover, is privileged in this regard in that “The desert is a given reality” (Chryssavgis, 1990b: p. 99).

Chryssavgis concludes, that:

People who choose the desert are not seeking to preserve silence but primarily to protest violently against the sin of urbanisation that reduces the meaning of creation to a cycle of production and consumption, ultimately destruction. The harshness of the desert comes as provocation: it stands as a searing yet liberating haven between the sterility of a lukewarm religion and the tyranny of fundamentalism... the desert unveils weakness and strives for transcendence (Chryssavgis, 1990b: p. 106).

Thus, in accord with Reid’s analysis, listening suggests a deeper understanding of Australian indigeneity and its lived reality; on the other hand, it suggests convergence with phenomena that challenge the reliance on analytical methodologies. Chryssavgis reinforces in the Australian experience the chance to challenge these tendencies. The result is an ontological transformation, at odds with established thought. Thus, Reid’s book makes a substantial contribution as a segue into complex multidisciplinary study, insight into a fundamental anthropology and the manner in which indigenous culture might inform it.

4. Conclusion

The result is deep anthropological insight; in a similar way, a theological perspective suggests a knowledge of the human condition that transcends the superficial understanding. From an Australian perspective and an international point of view, Reid’s book begins a discussion that segues into and benefits from further interdisciplinary engagement. In this sense, Reid makes a substantial contribution to an emerging scholarly field, building on established approaches and exploring new paths of engagement. One of these is Eastern Christianity. Another important contribution is the observation that the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in particular,

its reflection on the desert, is also able to provide insight into the questions raised in Reid's work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- (1901). *Revised Standard Version Bible*. National Council of the Churches of Christ.
- Barlo, S, Boyd, W. E., & Wilson, S. (2020) Yarning as a Protected Space: Principles and Protocols. *Alter Native: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 16, 90-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120917480>
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou*. Scribners.
- Chryssavgis, J. (1990a). Mere History or Mystery: The Story of the Desert. In G. Ferguson, & J. Chryssavgis (Eds.), *The Desert Is Alive* (pp. 52-62). Joint Board for Christian Education.
- Chryssavgis, J. (1990b). Sinai and Uluru: The Desert in Christian Thought. In G. Ferguson, & J. Chryssavgis (Eds.), *The Desert Is Alive* (pp. 99-108). Joint Board for Christian Education.
- Deverell, W. D. (2018). *Gondwana Theology: A Trawlolway Man Reflects on Christian Faith*. Morning Star.
- Habel, N. (1995). *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*. Fortress.
- Muir, S. (2014). Real People: Authenticity and Aboriginality in the Australian Holistic Milieu. *Ethnos*, 79, 473-495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2013.770411>
- Pattel-Gray, A. (1998). *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia*. Scholars Press.
- Ritschl, D. (1991). The Search for Implicit Axioms behind Doctrinal Texts. *Gregorianum*, 72, 207-224.