

ARE WE A NATION IN SEARCH OF ITS SOUL?

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The recent regrettable saga over crowd treatment of Sydney Swans AFL champion Adam Goodes has thankfully passed. But it is interesting to contemplate why there was such strong feelings expressed, more in the media perhaps than on match day.

Did the pride that Goodes displayed in his on field dance hit a raw nerve in the Australian psyche?

Why, when we watch with admiration the Haka, a traditional ancestral war cry, before any Rugby game played by the All Blacks, is there no outcry about this apparently threatening and aggressive performance?

Adelaide based theologian Norman Habel in his book "Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul" says that as long as the relationship between Australia's indigenous and non-indigenous people remains unsolved, the nation is condemned to a 'search for its soul'.

It seems to me the Goodes saga and the Winmar saga some years ago, as well as the yawning gap between the living standards of white and black Australians, all point to this unresolved issue and raises fundamental spiritual questions for all Australians, including our Churches.

At the heart of our nation is an unresolved conflict. One that we are yet to face; one that leaves us uncertain about our place in our homeland. The arrival of Europeans in Australia was not a "settlement". It was a violent arrival that seized land forcibly and destroyed a culture and economy that had lived at one with nature for more than 40,000 years. The extraordinary story of how Aborigines managed the land with fire and created a landscape that served their needs is told in Bill Gammage's remarkable book "The Biggest Estate on Earth".

Historian Henry Reynolds, in the Preface to his book "Why weren't we told?" observed that Australians want to 'transcend the legacy of colonialism' and to "face up to our history, to embrace the past in all its aspects, to cease trying to hide the violence, the dispossession, the deprivation. People want to come to terms with it. They see this as an essential step along the way towards national maturity".

In Rainbow Spirit Theology, George Rosendale and friends observe "Our elders had a sacred responsibility as the caretakers of this land and its resources. Because they can no longer exercise this care, they lost their purpose in life. The core beliefs of our people were rejected. The self-esteem of our people was destroyed. And the spirit of our people was crushed."

Norman Habel says "The deeper dimension of social justice involves more than rights; it involves listening to stories; hearing the truth; joining in the struggle; acknowledging that in the past, justice has been offered on the terms of the oppressors. Indigenous people have not only been the victims of the injustice. As victims they have also been blamed for their own plight."

Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson declared at the Reconciliation Convention in 1997 that "individual Australians are not guilty for what happened to our families. But if you fail to respond to what you know that will be another thing. If you do not want to ease the pain, that will be your act for which you are responsible."

The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne recently launched a Reconciliation Action Plan for the diocese. It aims to change the culture of the diocese to better embrace reconciliation and provides practical advice and liturgical resources for parishes and other ministries. Perhaps our diocese should develop a reconciliation action plan and join the search for Australia's soul.

By **Russell Rollason**