

From soup kitchen to a fight for land rights

THE radicalisation of Father Ted Kennedy began in his soup kitchen. That was the first link in a chain of pastoral care that led him to join a street demonstration on land rights, writes Paul Knight.

Father Kennedy's concern is with the rootless aborigines of Australia.

He began to work among them, in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, 11 years ago. And it dawned on him that his political stand on their behalf was consistent with the teachings of the gospel.

His critics do not see it that way: they think that he has strayed from the correct role of a Catholic priest.

His welfare work among the aborigines – ministering to both their souls and their social needs (housing, food, and so on) – is accepted.

But when he walks out into the street to campaign for the return of land rights to the original colonisers of the continent, the priest, it seems, is stepping beyond the pale.

FATHER Kennedy's work among the blacks has led him to a deep understanding of their attitudes and alienation.

Aborigines are not lazy – the white man's perception of thousands of people who live seemingly listless lives, many of them seeking solace out of bottles of methylated spirits.

Rather, they have adopted "intuitive dissent", explains Father Kennedy on a BBC-TV documentary.*

They have seen the white man's world, and they do not like it: so they refuse to be assimilated.

Getting drunk, explain the aborigines, is a means of "getting away from the stupidity of reality... of European society".

Receiving unemployment and sickness benefits is not evidence of "sponging" off white men: rather, it is the government paying its dues to the indigenous peoples whose land was confiscated by the white settlers.

Father Kennedy, working among the dispossessed who wander the streets of Sydney, has evolved his own "theology of liberation".

He feels that the white man has betrayed his covenant with God.

"The invasion should never have occurred," says the priest. Rather, the white man should have come to Australia to discover the presence of Jesus among the local tribes.

"We are the ones who are more de-tribalised, de-cultured," says Father Kennedy.

WITH THE help of people like the priest, articulate aborigines are working to develop a new consciousness of identity.

They see their plight as intimately linked with the dispossession of land.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Says Maureen Watson, who lectures to school children: "When we have land rights, it means we are recognised as people who have been here for 50,000 years and who have been wrongfully treated."

With that recognition, she claims, there would be a dramatic drop in alcoholism and other social problems, "because we would be people who are recognised. If you are treated as somebody, you start to put your head up."

The white man, she explains to children, have had "the power of definition" for 200 years since Captain Cook dropped anchor and staked a claim for Britain.

That power has defined the nature and role of the blacks, and ensured the supremacy of the whites. And the white man's church played a role in this process of colonisation.

There was no real contest in the conflict between stone age culture and Christianity.

Father Kennedy points out the truth in the saying that "when the white man came, he had the Bible and we had the land; now we have the Bible and they have the land."

THAT IS a piece of historical analysis that applies to many of the European colonies, but in Father Kennedy's view, the results are inconsistent with the Gospels.

At the heart of his theology is the code that declares: "Let there be no poor among you."

He soon learned – as he witnessed the official treatment of the aborigines – that "the God of the Christian is the God of the oppressed", a view that required more than an artificial altruism towards the poor.

Says Father Kennedy: "My liberation is bound up with theirs, and the liberation of the rest of Australian society is bound up intimately with their liberation."

Which is why he is taking a political stand on the right of aborigines to enjoy a direct access to land – a stand which, in the white man's eyes, must be subversive.

For the history of Australia has been the appropriation of natural resources from the indigenous users, and the exploitation of those resources by the new settlers.

There has been no equal division of resources among everyone on the continent, as one would have expected from a Christian society that was intent on practising what it preached.

That is why Father Kennedy stands exposed to execration from the white members of his society. But he stands

his ground:

"I am willing to be cut off from Christ, as Paul said, rather than be cut off from these, my brothers and sisters in the flesh."

THE ABORIGINES know what went wrong with their tribal societies: the white men "came and stole our country, raped our country, mutilated it."

They also know what needs to be done: "They owe us the whole country."

Liberation from oppression is what they want – liberation as they would define it, not as the white man wants it.

Will the gospels be used to help them? Yes, if Father Ted Kennedy has his way.

*Everyman profile, BBC1, London 23 September, 1984.

BOOK LIST

THE POWER IN THE LAND by Fred Harrison. The author has re-examined the tenets of industrial society and maintains that the present impasse is the result of a distortion in our understanding of how the industrial economy works – a distortion he traces back to Adam Smith.

He explains how the land factor produces the boom-slump cycle and impinges on almost every aspect of the modern economy: declining profits in industry, mass unemployment, inner city decay, urban sprawl, the high cost of providing public transport or other public amenities, and the tax system.

The economies of the UK, USA, Japan and Australia are singled out as case studies.

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