

Art, Amway and the Australian Religious Consciousness

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Rather than comment on the contribution of one particular religion on Australian literary and artistic culture, this paper will focus on one literary and one artistic work in order to illustrate the influence of various religions upon Australian literature and the arts. These pieces will be approached as a microcosmic reflection the multicultural and pluralistic macrocosm that is Australia. In order to engage in commentary regarding the contribution of religion to Australian literary and artistic culture, however, it is necessary to first adopt a clear understanding of what is meant by religion, culture, literature, art and 'Australian-ness'. For the purposes of this paper, 'religion' will be broadly defined as 'organised systems which hold people together.'¹ This definition avoids debate regarding the necessity of a God or gods, while being broad enough to allow one to include discussion of new age religions and cult movements. Similarly, literature will be considered to be any piece of verse or prose with 'artistic value or expression'² and art to be 'works produced using skill and creative imagination.'³ These works may be created using any of a number of media - including (but not limited to) sculpture, poetry, dance, music and song, film, theatre, painting and photography.

In order to define the notion of culture, an assessment must be made relative to each individual piece in question, accounting for geographical, historical and religious context. It is very difficult to reduce Australian culture to one dominant set of features through which people 'perceive, make intelligible and organise their being'⁴ and, due to the subjective nature of reality, it is likely that individuals will vary in their interpretation of Australian culture. It is likely, however, that each interpretation would include some reference to the multicultural nature of Australia.

¹ J Bowker: *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, New York, 1997, xvi.

² R. Allen: *The New Penguin English Dictionary*, Victoria, 2000, 815.

³ *Ibid*, 73.

⁴ *Ibid*, 339.

Built on a base of British colonialism and heavily influenced by worldwide immigration, Australia is well known for its cultural diversity. Indeed Australia can be seen as 'increasingly...a mosaic of different ethnicities, religions, incomes and ages, in which it is becoming harder to define anything as typically Australian.'⁵ This amalgamation of different cultural influences, beliefs and sub-cultures, is enveloped in an overarching democratic structure and value system inherited from Britain. The British legal system is based in the British established Church of England, meaning that Australian life is still under covert religious influence – despite secularist claims. Such a strong Christian undercurrent to the society, coupled with the rising number of non-Christians religions make it unrealistic to expect artistic and literary culture in Australia to be unaffected by religion. As Charlesworth says, 'There is nothing that happens in a culture that may not be explained...in terms of that culture.'⁶

When considering the contribution that various religions have made to Australian artistic and literary culture, it is important to consider both the possible religious themes within a work and also the impact of religion upon the artist. Due to increasing immigration and the rising number of non-Australian born residents however, one must also question when one can be considered a justified contributor to 'Australian literary and artistic culture'. In this regard, debates may extend to birthrights, the impact of one's native culture upon worldview, citizenship, length of time living in Australia and personal identification with a particular country. In terms of Australian legislation, however, an individual is only considered a formal member of the 'Australian community' when they have received Australian citizenship.⁷ This legalistic division is overly limiting in a scholarly context. It does not consider those who would like to become Australian citizens but are not extended this privilege – nor does it take into account the degree of contribution one may have already made to their Australian community, or the degree to which they perceive themselves to be Australian. For the purposes of this paper, Australian status will be extended to include anyone who feels they are Australian in any sense – be it due to birth, naturalization, residency, heritage or purely to an emotional connection.

⁵ <http://www.migrationexpert.com/>

⁶ M Charlesworth: 'Religion and Ethics in a Multicultural Society' edited by N C Habel, *Religion and Multiculturalism in Australia*, Adelaide, 1992, 271.

⁷ <http://www.citizenship.gov.au/faq.htm#2>

For example, the music of American-Australian Jay Bishoff (of Australian band The Houseprouds), only just eligible for citizenship, should be considered as contributing to Australian culture. 'St Vincent De Paul' is a musical piece by Bishoff (music composition) and lyricist Robert Bruce.⁸ The Houseprouds have played at numerous music festivals – regular events in the artistic cultural calendar of Australia. As they accommodate a particular subculture, these music festivals can be seen as surrogate religions. Music festivals are highly organised celebrations in which people come together to listen to and venerate favourite musicians, develop social bonds with others and engage in ritualistic practices such as communal dancing. Such festivals are often annual (similar to religious celebrations like Christmas) and a wide range of festivals exist to cater for a variety of musical tastes (as do numerous denominations of major religions like Christianity.) In defining himself as a part of 'the ever-increasing multi-culturalism around the edges of this vast desert continent,'⁹ Bishoff and, by association The Houseprouds, illustrate not only the contribution of religion to an artistic piece, but also the depth to which religion in its many forms is imbedded in Australian culture.

'St Vincent De Paul' merges both expressive, emotive lyrics and Latin American inspired rhythm and melody¹⁰ in order to create a warm response in the listener. The main religious influence in this piece stems from the Catholic charity St Vincent De Paul, well known in Australia for providing welfare assistance to those in need. The Catholic contribution was inspired not only by Australian experiences but also Bruce's experience of living as an anthropologist in South America.¹¹ This does not, however, negate its direct relevance to Australian culture. Named after the patron saint of charity, the charity of St Vincent De Paul came to Australia from the founding nation of France in 1854 and was first established at Melbourne's St Francis Church. Set up by Parisian student Fredric Ozanam in 1833, the aim of the charity was for Ozanam and his fellow students to practically

⁸ E Sulman, G Ward M Paltridge and J Bishoff, The Houseprouds, *Open House*, Its All Good Productions, 2002.

⁹ Personal communication with Jay Bishoff (rhythm, lead guitar and vocals), The Houseprouds – Friday 9 May 2003.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

apply their religious beliefs by providing assistance to others.¹² In Australia today the members of the Charity of St Vincent De Paul aim to strengthen their Catholicism by sharing resources with people who are living in poverty. In order to do this they rely considerably upon the donations and the goodwill of the broader public.¹³ Indeed, St Vincent De Paul clothing collection bins are a familiar feature of the Australian suburban landscape.

It is perhaps quite fitting that the charity of St Vincent De Paul was begun by a student, as the Australian welfare system often means that students are forced to live below the poverty line. 'St Vincent De Paul' evokes in Australian listeners a sense of recognition, as people are able to identify with its central message. Another reference in 'St Vincent De Paul' with which most Australians would be familiar is that of the Nativity story. This is the story of the birth of Jesus - the Christian 'incarnation of god'¹⁴ - and of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. Most well known in Australia through Christmas carols such as *We Three Kings* and *Away in a Manger* and kitsch shopping mall Christmas dioramas, 'St Vincent De Paul' mentions the 'lucky star above us,'¹⁵ a feature of the nativity story. Mary and Joseph are lead into Bethlehem by following a bright star in the western sky.¹⁶ In the case of 'St Vincent De Paul,' this line is also used as a reference to good luck charms. Bishoff has expressed the view that the confines of institutionalised religion are too restrictive;¹⁷ however this does not preclude him from having personal spiritual beliefs. He believes that 'spiritual and religious are two different kettles of soulfish,'¹⁸ but the reference to good luck charms does illustrate a belief in something other than the material universe. Belief in good luck charms requires one to have an '...inner trust and knowing that we are cared for and will be looked out for by a higher force or will'¹⁹ The spiritual attitude Bishoff has developed is akin to recent New Age religions and is a seismic shift away from the American Southern Baptist teachings with which he was raised.²⁰

¹² www.vinnies.com.au

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bowker: op cit, 496.

¹⁵ Sulman: op cit.

¹⁶ 'We Three Kings' - traditional Christmas carol.

¹⁷ Personal communication with The Houseprouds, op cit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

The final overt religious reference within the piece is Catholic in origin, being a translation from Spanish. Catholicism was brought to Latin America by the Spanish Conquistadors and it is in Latin America that Bruce encountered an articulation of traditional Catholicism that incorporated elements of shamanism.²¹ The music of 'St Vincent De Paul' incorporates Mexican influences from Bishoff's Californian upbringing that led him to associate Mexico with Spanish. This blending of cultures and experiences illustrates clearly the nature of Australia, and of the myriad of cultural influences that contribute to it. The translated Spanish phrase is 'God gives money to them rich for without it they'd die.'²² The religious message within this lyric is one of thankfulness and appreciation for the provisions and the grace of God in nature and in others. At a time when Easter in Australia has become a retailers opportunity to 'cash in'²³ and petrol prices rise in the chase for more money,²⁴ Bishoff recognises that often 'the only thing holding sickly rich people from blowing away like released balloons is money.'²⁵ 'St Vincent De Paul' proffers a form of wealth that depends on acceptance, appreciation and love – treasures that money cannot buy.

Another artist who draws on the increasingly consumerist nature of our society while using overt religious references is performance poet Tug Dumbly. An Australian born, Presbyterian raised literary craftsman who has only been overseas once in his life,²⁶ there is no doubt that Dumbly can be considered an Australian. Contributing to Australian literary culture by way of weekly performance poetry nights at Glebe's Friend in Hand Hotel and the ABC's JJJ, Dumbly is well known for his 'sociopolitical satire.'²⁷ He has even been called 'the rock god of stand-up poetry.'²⁸ It is clear that Dumbly has grown up in

²¹ K G McIntire: *Latin America and the Carribean*, 1987, chapter 24 and from personal communication with The Houseprouds, op cit.

²² Sulman: op cit.

²³ L Glendinning: 'Retailers hope for rush of shoppers over Easter,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (Easter Weekend Edition, April 13-15 2001), www.smh.com.au

²⁴ G. Copeland: 'Fuelling Easter's Cost,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, www.smh.com.au

²⁵ Personal communication, op cit.

²⁶ J Minus: 'The Face,' *The Weekend Australian*, 3-4 May 2003, R3

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ A Spencer: in T Dumbly, 'Junk Culture Lullabies,' *Australian Broadcasting Association*, Australia, 2001.

a multi-religious culture, as 14 tracks on the 18 track CD *Junk Culture Lullabies* contain overt religious themes. In 'Jesus Sells Amway,' Dumbly satirises the increase in consumerism and focus on monetary wealth that the Houseprouds refer to in 'St Vincent De Paul.' Religion has become important not only for the spiritual gains it may afford, but also the possibility of economic benefit. An American door-to-door multi-million dollar pyramid organisation, Amway has been likened to a religious cult.²⁹ Amway's hierarchical, structured system³⁰ does resemble some conversion religions and has elements that appear quite cult-like.³¹ The whole aim of corporations like Amway is to make as much money as is possible. Dumbly delivers 'Jesus Sells Amway' as an almost-Pentecostal hymn, playing on the emphasis on worship; the religiosity of the Amway Corporation and the centrality of 'Jesus' Christ.³² The expurgatory nature of repentance in the Catholic tradition is parodied in the first verse of 'Jesus Sells Amway:' 'Jesus sells Amway cleansing products for the soul/spotless stain removers, putty for them holes/honey quit your moaning, get up off the floor/jesus [sic] sells amway [sic] from door to door.'³³

Dumbly satirises evangelism, making reference to proselytising religions like the Jehovah's Witnesses who are well known in Australia for their door to door attempts at religious conversion. Dumbly also reflects the degree to which consumerism has become a surrogate religion in Australia. Among its many contributions to society, religion provides people with ritual practices through which they can create structure and meaning in their lives. Weekly church services, prayers and feast days all act to give purpose to daily life and to create community. Consumerism has become an essential part of Christian religious holidays in Australia, so that they appear to have become '...symbolic stuff...nothing more than mass marketing...nothing more than another occasion for splurging on presents, taking holidays and getting killed on the roads.'³⁴ Dumbly plays on the dominance of consumerism in Australian culture, and the extent to which religion has been engulfed by it - offering products to

²⁹ www.cocs.com/jhoagland/amcult.html. This website is just one of the many anti-Amway sites that exist – many of them written by ex-Amway participants.

³⁰ www.amway.com

³¹ www.cocs.com/jhoagland/amcult.html

³² Bowker: op cit, 844.

³³ See Appendix 1.

³⁴ P P McGuinness: 'Why a holy day shouldn't be a holiday,' 'News Review,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Easter Weekend Edition, 13-15 April 2001, 29.

cleanse the soul and fill the emptiness in one's life that would once have been filled by religious devotion. That these products are now available 'door to door' comments on an 'instant' society where people expect instant satisfaction, something which religion (and the dedication it requires) does not necessarily provide. Jesus has become instead 'the Amway, the truth and the life.'³⁵ Through his lyrics, Dumbly clearly illustrates the impact that religion has had on the Australian culture - while also illustrating the impact of cultural change upon religion.

The second verse of 'Jesus Sells Amway' emphasises the focus within Christianity on the power of God and 'miracles.' Fatima, a shrine in Portugal is mentioned as the site of a miracle.³⁶ Fatima is however also a figure in the religion of Islam. Youngest daughter of the prophet Muhammad, Fatima is the wife of Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam. She is a significant figure in the history of the Shi'a Muslims and a ritual cult exists dedicated to her.³⁷ The second site of miracles, Lourdes, has a feast day dedicated to 'Our Lady of Lourdes,'³⁸ and is another Catholic site dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Biblical references are juxtaposed with references to commercialism and economics throughout 'Jesus Sells Amway.'

In addition to Christian and Islamic influences, the piece demonstrates Australian multiculturalism and consumerism by referring to Buddhism, one of the fastest growing religions in Australia. Affiliation with Buddhism rose by 79% in the 5 years between 1996 and 2001³⁹ and Dumbly's statement that 'buddha [sic] flogs beer,'⁴⁰ satirises the commercial popularity of religious figures such as the Dalai Lama. It is now possible to purchase pocket sized gift books full of the Tibetan spiritual leader's inspiration and wisdom,⁴¹ another reflection of an increasing desire for instant gratification. With products such as these on the market in Australia, consumers have access to inexpensive, time efficient, 'instant' enlightenment. Another religious figure to whom Dumbly refers in

³⁵ Dumbly, op cit.

³⁶ Bowker: op cit, 337.

³⁷ Ibid, 296, 301.

³⁸ Ibid, 588.

³⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics: 'Population – Religion,' *Year Book Australia*, 2001.

⁴⁰ Dumbly: op cit.

⁴¹ Dalai Lama: *The Dalai Lama's Book of Wisdom*, London, 1999.

'Jesus Sells Amway' is Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu⁴² and the chief focus of devotees from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).⁴³ The 'Hare Krishnas', like members of the St Vincent De Paul Society, have played a prominent role in the welfare of Australians, performing services within the community as a part of their religious dedication.⁴⁴ In the Sydney suburb of Newtown, ISKCON provides free meals five nights a week. This sort of welfare-based contact is the way in which most Australians will have had any experience of ISKCON. As a local member of the Newtown community⁴⁵ it is likely that Dumbly is familiar with such practices.

'Jesus Sells Amway' and 'St Vincent De Paul' illustrate clearly the influence of religion upon thematic content in Australian literary and artistic culture. They also reflect on a microcosmic level the multicultural and pluralistic nature of Australia and the degree to which religion is embedded in Australian culture. A history of immigration has contributed greatly to the variety of religious influences that can be seen in Australian art and literary works such as those of Tug Dumbly and The Houseprouds.

⁴² C Richards: editor *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Australia, 1997, 30.

⁴³ Bowker, op cit, 99.

⁴⁴ R Ireland: 'Religious Diversity in a New Australian Democracy,' *Australian Religion Studies Review*, 1999, Vol 12 No. 2, 101.

⁴⁵ Minus: op cit, R3.

APPENDIX 1

St Vincent De Paul [R. Bruce/J Bishoff © 2000]

Well, it don't cost nothing to look at the moon,
and your food tastes the same on a wooden as a silver spoon. Don't cry now,
babe, don't you worry at all.
We'll grow our own food and get all our clothes from St. Vincent De Paul.
Well, the sun shines the same for the rich as it does for you and I.
God gives money to them rich for without it they'd die.
Don't fear now, lover, don't you worry at all.
There's a lucky star above us and a saint looking over us –
St. Vincent De Paul.
The best things in life, well you know, they're all still free.
The mountains, the sunshine, the beach and the wild blue sea. Don't cry now
babe, don't you worry at all.
When that winter wind blows, there'll be food on the table and warm clothes
to wear –
St. Vincent De Paul

Jesus Sells Amway [Tug Dumbly ©2001]

I have sinned, I have sinned
satan stabbed me through the heart with a steak knife
made me embellish the fact
commit a natural act
I was in the grip of delusion
but friends, you must all remember
that the gospel of forgiveness is no illusion
friends, I have been down through the bowels of hell
I have slithered through St Nicks small intestine
and I have returned with a message of salvation
Do you want salvation?
I said do you want to be salivated?
Well friends, listen up and listen good,
did our good lord not say:
'I am the Amway, the truth and the life'.
jesus sells amway cleansing products for the soul
spotless stain removers, putty for them holes
honey quit your moaning, get up off the floor
jesus sells amway from door to door
miracle at fatima, miracle at Lourdes
raining loaves and fishes on the hungry hordes
walk on the water, throw away the staff

Buddha of Suburbia

but miracle of miracles no ring around around the bath
shine shine that lovelight on me
shine shine that lovelight on me
I got that glory glory corporation
krishna's on commission,
buddha flogs beer
mohammed is the used-car salesman of the year
but used and recommended by the bleeding virgin
is that stuff to get the stain from the shroud of turin
now lying on my death bed, what do I see?
I see a band of amway angels
coming forward to me
coming forward with halos shining
through the fog
coming forward with amway funeral catalogues