

Australian Historical Studies as Resources for Theological Reflection

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When John Barrett published that *Better Country: The Religious Aspect of Life in Eastern Australia 1835-1850* (Melbourne, 1966), he declared that he wrote the book 'to remind readers that there is a religious aspect of Australian history, and to invite others to look squarely at that aspect for themselves'. He was thinking chiefly of 'European' readers and at times seemed no more certain than some of his 19th century characters that proper respect *was* being rendered to God. Indeed it was not uncommon to hear the opinion that Australians were an irreligious people. Sir Paul Hasluck, in his 1970 Australia Day message, asked: 'What are the real human, social and political values of our land? And where the starved and barren places of our life?' (q. in R. Conway, *The Great Australian Stupor: an Interpretation of the Australian Way of Life*, Melbourne 1971). Even among the white inhabitants, however, there had always been enthusiasts, optimists and visionaries. Professor Ken Inglis had remarked some years earlier on the air of 'festive celebration' about some Catholic historiography (*Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Melbourne, November 1958). Nowadays, with the contemporary Australian horizon vastly extended in one direction by a popular consciousness of the ancient, aboriginal past and in the other by a need to come to terms with a conceivably apocalyptic future, few Australian historians would disagree with John Barrett that 'he who would rightly interpret Australian history must remember the religious aspect'. Nor can Australian theologians afford, in their turn, to inhabit a cultural void or be satisfied with a colonial isolation even if, as is the human lot, they are

journeying as a pilgrim people towards 'that better country'. Unless they wish their work of understanding, teaching and *praxis* concerning the eternal themes of suffering, death, work, joy and holiness to become unsubstantial, impoverished or irrelevant, Australian theologians must ground their visions more firmly in their own historical present with all its rich genesis and complexity. They will find in the 1980s, as the bi-centenary of white settlement of the continent approaches, some very useful and mature perceptions, for their 'dreaming' and their apostolic mission, in the research and writing of the historians.

There has in fact been a real boom in studies which can and should form the background for any truly contextual reflection in an Australian setting: historical, anthropological, and social — as well as literary and cultural. The quickening of interest in hitherto undeveloped fields of historical endeavour — aboriginal, womens' studies, sporting and recreation, administrative, urban and local — has greatly enriched Australian perspectives. The white community may have brought traditional religion as part of its cultural baggage, but as Erikson has remarked: 'Man is not organised like an archaeological mound, in layers; as he grows he makes the past part of all future, and every environment as he once experienced it, part of the present environment.' There may have been times when historians have balked at opening some Pandora's box of the Spirit, but no sane social or political or educational or cultural interpretation of Australia's past would now neglect the role and influence of religion — or its obverse secular manifestations — in either basic research or mature assessment. It is encouraging to discover that the professional theologians for their part, having conceivably leant too far in an essentialist, platonic direction only to swing too rapidly to an 'existentialist', radicalized and often imported 'liberation' view of the world, may now be forced by common sense to take a more careful and considered account of that particular past which has given birth to the real movements and passions of the community in which they live and worship and exercise their specific spiritual discernment of the Word of God and His Life among men.

Doubtless there will be as many moods in Australian theological reflection as there are fashions among Australian historians, for Clio is not Procrustes; but it is imperative for those engaged in religious studies to appreciate the immense amount of germane material uncovered by historical research in recent years and the highly competent quality of the ongoing input. There are no themes of contemporary Australian life which have not been examined in at least some scholarly way, be they concerned with aboriginal land rights, ethnic attitudes, class conflict, racial prejudice, social justice, international relations, family affairs, educational ideology, cricket or the common law. Theologians should take note and be prepared to do their homework humbly, often being prepared to revise their emotionally held views or to question conventional wisdom based on insufficient or unsatisfactory evidence. Any interdisciplinary enterprise must be prepared to become an intelligent dialogue, respectful at once of the method and the contribution of each discipline. Thus it would be inappropriate for a subtle contextual theology to be constructed from a historical background of vulgar myth or popular but inaccurate perceptions of the historical forces which have given rise at any one time to spiritual crises, advances, movements or disasters: and a properly

sensitive spiritual discernment will not be able to ignore significant areas or break-throughs or revisions of secular history as somehow alien, irrelevant or unacceptable. Many recent considerable reappraisals have been made of the Australian past — or original discoveries and re-discoveries — in many fields, most of which can and should provide an imaginative theologian with fruitful raw material for his own research, contemplation or prayer, whether he be concerned with moral, systematic, pastoral, liturgical or some other branch of the science. Phenomena which seem at a shallow glance to be easily transferable from place to place, continent to continent, town to town (even within the Australian context), turn out to be anchored firmly and ineluctably to their own local moorings. Many strongly and emotionally held opinions may well in the process of historical 'verification' turn out to be prejudices rather than valid hypotheses on which theological conclusions or pastoral strategies may legitimately be based. Nevertheless, narrowness of vision or lack of deep horizons must not be allowed to blunt theological acuity, nor can generalizations be safely made concerning human or divine affairs without a rigorous checking at least against the already considerable body of historical knowledge which has been accumulated and tested for its relevance to any spiritual dimension, posture, tradition, habit, attitude, crisis, or dilemma of the Australian community.

Historians, along with the practitioners of other arts and sciences, have their problems of selection, methodology and organisation. 'Religion', while it is rarely ignored or omitted altogether, has sometimes been relegated to a 'special category' — often somewhat downgraded, along with other 'hyphenated' histories such as 'aborigines, culture and women'. More often and more legitimately, secular historians have simply not focussed on or alluded to specifically religious themes which do not or do not appear to them to loom large in their work. Some historical research and writing however is of course more directly relevant to the theologian than, e.g., studies which either deliberately or unconsciously abstract from or exclude an explicitly religious dimension. There is space here only to mention a few examples of directly religious history which cannot be comfortably ignored by any theologian working in the Australian context. A surprisingly large proportion of graduate historical research in Australia has some direct bearing on the subject of religion, whether understood as a significant influence in a wide variety of cultural, social and broadly human experiences, or more strictly interpreted (cf. Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia*, Melbourne, 1977, p. 431f. in 'A note on Sources' for some excellent examples). The very emergence and maintenance of such periodicals as the *Journal of Religious History*, *St. Mark's Review*, *The Australasian Catholic Record* and the *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, give witness to direct interest in religious history as such, although very important articles have been and are published in the 'secular' journals such as *Historical Studies*, the *Journal of Politics and History*, *Meanjin*, the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Association*, and elsewhere. Most universities and many other learned groups publish books and serials where religious material is acceptable and welcome.

There has in fact been a boom in directly religious historical research, widely dispersed over many areas of interest: biography, memoirs, denominational and institutional history, social and cultural revisions of Australia's

past, and even some early full-scale attempts, such as Hans Mol's *Religion in Australia*, (Melbourne, 1971), to assess the overall influence and role of religion in Australia. Some classics have emerged, notably Professor O'Farrell's *corpus* of writings and especially his splendid *Catholic Church and Community in Australia*; but also Douglas Pike's *Paradise of Dissent* (Melbourne, 1957), e.g., and Michael Roe's *Quest for Authority* (Melbourne, 1965): and there have been solid and useful statements about certain periods or aspects of 'Church' history, e.g., J. S. Gregory's *Church and State* (Melbourne, 1973), James Walderssee's *Catholic Society in New South Wales 1788-1860* (Sydney, 1974), Ross Border's *Church and State in Australia 1788-1872* (London, 1962), T. L. Suttor's *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia 1788-1870* (Melbourne, 1965), Naomi Turner's *Sinews of Sectarian Warfare* (Canberra, 1971), J. N. Molony's *The Roman Mould of the Australian Catholic Church* (Melbourne, 1969), P. Ford's *Cardinal Moran and the A.L.P.* (Melbourne, 1966), and the steady series emanating from the Catholic Theological Faculty of Sydney — G. Haines' *Lay Catholics and the Education Question in 19th Century N.S.W.* (1976), K. T. Livingston's *The Emergence of an Australian Catholic Priesthood 1855-1950* (1977) and M. C. Hogan's *The Catholic Campaign for State Aid 1850-72* (1978).

Though a number of distinguished Australian biographies have omitted much reference to important religious ideas and activities of their subjects, e.g. J. A. La Nauze's *Alfred Deakin* (Melbourne, 1965) and Francis West's *Hubert Murray* (Melbourne, 1968), and others have attempted with more or less success to integrate religion in their work, e.g. Gerald O'Collins' *Patrick MacMahon Glynn* (Melbourne, 1965), M. Kiddle's *Caroline Chisholm* (Melbourne, 1950), Bruce Mansfield's *Australian Democrat, the Career of Edward William O'Sullivan 1846-1910* (Sydney, 1965), D. Watson's *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life* (Sydney, 1979), C. Kiernan's *Calwell* (Melbourne, 1978), and J. N. Molony's *An Architect of Freedom: John Hubert Plunkett in N.S.W.* (Canberra, 1973), it has now become more usual for those writing large-scale works to declare the limits of their focus, e.g. J. Robertson's *J. H. Scullin: A Political Biography* (Perth, 1974), Denis Murphy's *T. J. Ryan: A Political Biography* (Brisbane, 1977) or Lloyd Ross' *John Curtin* (Sydney, 1977). A number of fine ecclesiastical biographies have become available, based to a great extent on original primary sources; A. Yarwood's *Samuel Marsden* (Melbourne, 1977), G. P. Shaw's *Patriarch and Patriot: W. S. Broughton 1788-1853* (Melbourne, 1978), E. J. Stormon's *The Salvado Memoirs* (Perth, 1978), M. O'Donoghue's *Mother Vincent Whitty: Women and Education in a Masculine Society* (Melbourne, 1972) and a number of others, men and women, native-born and 'migrant'. Whatever may have proved satisfactory in the past, any study in depth of an Australian individual, family or group now seems thin and two-dimensional without at least some attempt to place and assess his, her or their private or public religious opinions.

The multi-volumed *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra, 1966 & ff.) is itself a great national enterprise of historical awareness and 'commemoration'. Its pages offer a movable feast for those seeking enlightenment about Australia's religious past and present human condition: and the

first editor had no hesitation in declaring that 'the holy men who invented and long monopolized the craft of written language, if only to hallow the memory of warrior patrons, are the true progenitors of biography' (D. Pike in *Scholarly Publishing*, July 1970, p.332). It is devoutly to be hoped that the planned collaborative volumes of the *Bicentenary History* will not omit Australia's life of the spirit — from the first volumes edited by Geoffrey Blainey and D. J. Mulvaney on the aboriginal past to the *1988 and Beyond* finale.

While most professional historians may not be attracted to the specific field of 'religious history', the interpenetration of religion, culture and society is accepted as a commonplace. The visionary works of Manning Clark (*A History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1962 f. etc.), have long accustomed Australians to expect at least a modicum of express 'theological' reflection and resonance in the interpretation of their past: and theologians would do well in turn to cast their net widely to include the sensitive writings of authors whose work at first sight seems functional or narrowly specialist. Most of the 'general histories', from Archbishop Eric O'Brien's pioneering *Foundation of Australia 1786-1800* (London, 1937), contain rich lode for the theological understanding not only of episodes and eras in Australian history but also of the contemporary spiritual context of everyday community attitudes, habits, sins and virtues, as well as hints towards a vision of eschatological reality in its metamorphosis of 'Antipodean Man'. Even the more 'secularist' alternative visions of Australian life have much to offer to the theological enquirer, e.g. D. Pike's *The Quiet Continent* (London, 1962), D. Horne's *The Lucky Country* (Sydney, 1964), J. D. Pringle's *Australian Accent* (London, 1958), Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958), Geoffrey Serle's *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (Melbourne, 1973), *The Golden Age* (Melbourne, 1963) and *The Rush to be Rich* (Melbourne, 1971); and F. G. Clarke's *The Land of Contrarities* (Melbourne, 1977).

If the salvific will of God is universal, then his theologians cannot ignore urban, regional, economic, social, cultural, literary, artistic, architectural, industrial, labour, business, ethnic, political or indeed any other form of analysis of human endeavour, agony or achievement; and Australian historians are quarrying with mixed success but with professional zeal on all these fronts and more: e.g. Weston Bate's *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat 1851-1901* (Melbourne, 1978), G. Davison's *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* (Melbourne, 1978), ed. G. Greenwood, *Australia: a Political and Social History* (Sydney, 1955), ed. F. K. Crowley, *A New History of Australia* (Melbourne, 1974), Bede Nairn's *Civilizing Capitalism* (Canberra, 1973), Neville Hicks' *This Sin and Scandal: Australia's Population Debate 1891-1911* (Canberra, 1978), Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific 1788-1850* (Oxford, 1960); A. Austin's *Australian Education 1788-1900* (Melbourne, 1961), R. Fogarty's *Catholic Education in Australia 1801-1950* (Melbourne, 1959), eds. C. B. Schedvin and J. W. McCarty, *Urbanization in Australia: the 19th Century* (Sydney, 1974), D. Walker's *Dream and Disillusion: a search for Australian Cultural Identity* (Canberra, 1976). A very great deal has been written at a number of levels and in various details and quality about the ordinary life of Australians at various stages of national experience.

It may be true that each generation must re-write its own history, and of course there are many fascinating new questions which continually confront the imaginative historical enquirer. But it is also surely true that religious reflection based on outdated or exploded historical myths or misconceptions makes bad theology. Theology grounded thoroughly in context will not emerge as mere historical relativism, however, and even if some kind of Hegelian alienation — or a more Christian kind of 'exile from the Kingdom' — turns out to be a necessary feature of the human condition, the Australian experience will have its own uniqueness which the theologian can ignore only to his own impoverishment as a saved, believing, hoping and loving human being. Certainly there is no excuse for basing important theoretical structures nor launching significant pastoral or moral initiatives from untenable, unresearched or inept historical generalizations or errors. Paradoxes and apparent contradictions there may well be in plenty as the theologians gradually digest the historical insights rapidly becoming available to them, and many possible interpretations will doubtless prove to be sustainable about the *Salvation History* of the Australian community, unique and individual in its specific epiphany even though never quite isolated by the 'tyranny of distance'. In many ways, simply because Australia is a 'derived' society, theologians must strive harder to note the subtly creative and innovative features of the community in which they live. A mere cursory glance at current journalism which simplifies the often confused and misunderstood past is unworthy of a professional theologian engaged in discourse with fellow professionals, and it can give rise to facile, stereotyped, misleading or often — worse — imported 'cargo' generalizations which, as they are not based on truth, do not lead to enlightenment or virtuous action.

Australian history provides theologians with no excuse for ignorant or barren religious reflection, based on a shallow understanding or a lack of industry, which can give birth only to emotional slogans of left, right or 'centre' — whether about land rights, 'White Australia', the role of the Colonial Office in imperialism, the woes of the convicts and of minority groups, the place of sectarianism in Australia, militarism, secularism, nationalism and so forth. Flexibility and readiness for spiritual change are one thing: a sanctimonious Whig interpretation or bigoted Marxist-progressivist analysis is quite another. In many respects Australian historians have provided theologians over recent years with an extraordinarily varied and substantial amount of first-rate material. There can be little doubt that those whose task it is to engage in professional theology need to understand and digest that material as much and as urgently as the historians, in their turn, need a sense of spiritual perspective and direction in their own work.