

Sociological Perspectives for Australian Theologians

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Sociology is a discipline in continual need of definition. This is required not only to curb the pretensions of her more ardent partisans, who would make her the arbiter of the universe, but also to reply to her critics, who complain that she merely reiterates the obvious. We therefore began our workshop with a demarcation of territory especially with an eye to the other disciplines represented at the Conference — literature, the visual arts and history. We went on to state what we expected sociology might contribute to theological reflection, then tested our expectation by exploring the Australian context with the aid of sociological models.

Image, Model and Event

In staking out the frontiers, we remarked that literature and the fine arts mediated between the context of life and theology through theology's own basic instrument, the image. The other approaches, history and sociology, mediated through the event. History mediated through the event in its surprise and pulsating immediacy; it was therefore closest to the disciplines of the image. By contrast, sociology mediated only through the model, or mere spectre of the event, with its distilled memory of past instances and pale premonitions of the future. Indeed the sociologist really keeps company neither with the poet or artist nor the chronicler of things past, but with the scientist. So that he brings neither the mystery and passion of the image nor the drama of the enacted event, but only detached observation, a cautious prediction, and calculation of the odds against if he is prepared to take a chance on it. His discipline therefore marries rational calculation to detached

observation to beget not a cry of the heart or a dazzling perspective but an equation which, with a residual spark of imagination, he christens a model.

Even if the sociologist assumes the prestigious role of prophet — generally a dismal one — he is in the line of Jonah rather than Jeremiah; for he does not predict doom with the melancholy expectation of seeing it accomplished, but in order to avert it. Indeed he may be said to prophesy in order to be proved wrong.

But for all that, he does have his contribution to make to the perception, analysis, and evaluation of the human scene. His role is even legitimized by the divine Master, who praised the builder who desiring to erect a tower, sat down, looked ahead, and counted the cost; also the king who counted his troops and chances before taking on the enemy; and even the rascally steward whose rational calculations for the future were commended to the children of light.

In the present workshop three models were chosen for the analysis of the Australian scene. The first viewed *Australia in its place in the world*; the second *the inner processes of Australian society itself*; and the third *the individual members in their status and roles in the structure of the Australian community*. Finally a critique was instituted of the use and abuse of the models in preparing a basis for a contextual theology.

I. Australia the Dependent Nation

A preliminary survey of Australia's position in the world called for a simple *deterministic model* in the behaviourist tradition of John B. Watson. This is based upon the familiar S-O-R (or stimulus-organism response formula) with a mechanistic relationship between the stimulus, causal, or independent variable, and the response, outcome, or dependent variable. Hence the characterisation of Australia as a dependent nation.

This dependence is shared by Australia with other nations in an increasingly interdependent world summed up in the well-worn cliché of the global village. After millenia of divergence, isolation, and development of separate cultures, social arrangements, and even distinct physical characteristics, the human race is converging back to its primal unity. A public incident in London, Chicago, or Calcutta can now be viewed in Melbourne, as it is occurring, and usually from a better vantage point than that of the casual observer in the actual street. And there have been developments in transport to match. This development has been both enriching and impoverishing. It has pooled the cultural resources of the world, but at the same time reduced local initiative and control, and is producing a mass society without variety or character. Interdependence in a word has been attained at the price of independence.

Australia as a small and new nation is notably subject to this malaise. She achieved her nationhood as an outpost of the British Empire; she has attained full maturity only to move into the orbit of America; and with the rise of Eastern Asia and the Pacific, she will be passing into another sphere of

influence. Australia has not suffered in any manifest way from her connection with dominant powers. They have shown themselves in the past and may well continue to do so in the future more as patrons than as masters. But it is not good for a nation to depend upon a nation. There is at least a decline in morale. It is all the more serious because not only Australia but world society is at risk. The new world is as likely to blow itself up as to perish from boredom. Yet Australia knows in her heart that she could do nothing to alter the situation — any more than she can change the decision to begin or end, or the course of the First or Second World War or the Vietnamese War, though she has bled by all of them and consent to them was a moral issue. She will not be in a different situation if a similar decision is called for tomorrow. How can a nation in these circumstances achieve the moral stature that the claim to nationhood implies?

II. Australia a Society at Risk

We next considered the inner processes of adjustment by Australia to her dependent role and to the many stresses within the social organism — the intervening variable between the world situation and her precarious future. For this analysis recourse was had to the *systemic model* of Talcott Parsons. It is an eclectic construct, that reflects the author's pragmatism, the typical American response of his generation to the immediate problem of survival in a new, raw, barely articulate society, sustained only by a common faith in a shared destiny. This is assured from above by a not too clearly defined Providence, under the non committal title of Ultimate Reality. It is challenged from below by the harsh battle for survival in a hostile, recalcitrant, and raucous environment. The social system is suspended in between, dependent for its very existence upon communication, consensus, and the equilibrium of all the tensions that at any instant could rend it asunder. Change the term 'equilibrium' to 'homeostasis', or steady state, and the biological inspiration of the model at once becomes apparent: the central nervous system of communication, the fundamental interdependence of all its structures, and the eventual wisdom of the body continually adjusting itself to the ever sustaining but ever changing, ever threatening environment.

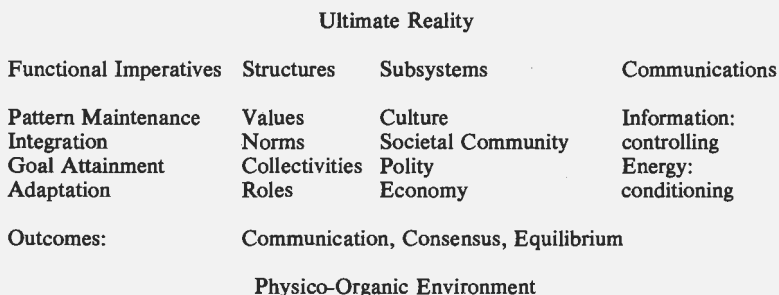
This is a model that suggests growth from within by a process of differentiation of functions to meet new demands, and pressures of change from without, to produce the slow inevitable process of evolution. A feature of the model is its systematic integration of all the established theory in the field. For all this is needed in order that it may ride the crises ever before it. And it is appropriate that it should be integrated under the rubric of the four fundamental imperatives necessary for survival.

First the social system is related to the upper environment of Ultimate Reality as its members perceive it, through its pattern maintenance function and the structural values that this creates and enshrines in the cultural subsystem. The cultural subsystem in turn supports the integration function in building the normative structures that guide the societal community. The societal community is further developed through the goal attainment function that creates the collectivity structures of the polity. Finally the polity facilitates the task of the adaptive function to build and maintain the role

structure of the economy, necessary to meet the demands of the physico-organic environment and to ensure the survival of the system.

It is possible to reverse this Weberian direction of development from culture to economy, by the Marxist, from economy to culture. Parsons allows for both directions of influence by his use of the two-way cybernetic communication system — with arrows pointing on one side downwards from the culture as primary source of information and control, and on the other side upwards from the economy as the primary source of energy and conditioning. Communication makes possible the consensus or cooperation of the members of the four subsystems, and of the subsystems between themselves, for the survival of the whole. The immediate postulate for such survival is the attainment of equilibrium between the forces within and without the society, now considered as an organism in symbiotic relationship with all its environments, while differentiating within to meet new needs, and adapting imperceptibly to the outside world in the cosmic process of evolution.

The whole scheme may be visualized in a diagram.



The Parsonian is not a precise predictive model in the manner of Watson's behavioural formula, though Parsons has applied it with Hegelian audacity to interpret the whole march of human history, and a number of disciples have developed more precise predictive models from it under Parson's inspiration. But its great service is that it brings so much established theory to bear. Moreover, it is so comprehensive in its scope and logical in its approach, that no major dimension can escape its relentless scrutiny. What above all determined the choice of the model for Australian society however is the latent anxiety that it suggests — the ever-present fear of a breakdown in communication, consensus, and equilibrium, that underlies the surface tranquility of the new community and is evident in the tempering down of ancient antagonisms and the assumption of an all too facile nonchalance — the symptoms of a society at risk.

Past, Present, and Ultimate Reality. For despite her latent fears and despite her turbulent origin, and despite her present dependence on an unstable world situation and her precarious future, Australia is not a gloomy society. In fact, she is offensively light-hearted. If we were going to single out a term to describe her prevailing mood, it would be 'easy-going'. This is indeed an achievement, though it may also be a mechanism to cover deeper anxieties.

A glance at her history, even her most recent history, reveals how little reason Australia has for any lightheartedness. Her population has grown up over the two hundred years of her existence from wave upon wave of the alienated — the exiled convict, the restless digger, the working man escaping exploitation. Each wave has pillaged, raped, and destroyed the aboriginal people together with their timeless land. In our own day, she has become the last shore for refugee people from the devastation of War — first the hot War and then the cold War of Europe and now of Asia and the Pacific. It would be untrue to pretend that any of these people were received or succoured with love. But they were not hated. They were tolerated because the others too had been strangers or at least their fathers and mothers before them. If older inhabitants regarded the newcomers as a 'weird mob', it was not because they resented or despised them, but because they found them puzzling and amusing.

Their unwillingness to comprehend or even listen to the tragedy of the newcomer was perhaps at heart a rough and not unkindly therapy for persons who could not and should not try to utter what was beyond speech. Every generation of Australians has learned that healing lies in a cynical shrug, getting on top of life, and not letting it get on top of you, and being around when you are really needed without smothering the other bloke. This is not of course the mood that creates a great culture or a great literature. But these are commodities for which the world market can wait. Her achievement — her stupendous achievement — is that she has survived sane and entire. If the present will do, mate, it is because she knows the small dream is safer and in the dungeons of the mind she has not forgotten that she once wrestled with despair.

Communication and Language. Because Australia is so preoccupied with the problem of existence, of very survival, she has not fully discovered her identity, her essence, or her image, and is careless of the very medium through which this could be attained. She enjoys the unrivalled advantage for a new nation of a noble and civilized language, the most viable in the modern world, that is spoken from end to end of the continent with such ease of communication that a West Australian finds it easier to understand a Queenslander than many a Southern Englishman to decode a Scot. And this is despite the ceaseless inflow of migrants from every part of the British Isles and beyond, from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, from America to Vietnam. But there is so little effort to develop its potential that the Australian is prepared to listen on radio, TV, and film not only to some of the best but an increasing proportion of the worst that emanates from Britain or America. It has seen on the media scarcely a programme that is not planned to an overseas blueprint — not from a desire to compete with the best, but from sheer inertia. For it is always easier and a good deal cheaper to copy than to experiment. This is what makes for good ratings, and the adventurous lose their jobs. The creativity is there — one has only to think of the miracle of the sudden emergence of the Australian film. But the regime that made it possible has passed — too giddy perhaps for this tired land.

Culture and Taboo. The most surprising aspect of the debauchery of language has been in the content of the communication rather than the syntax. It is notorious that the three taboo subjects are sex, religion, and politics.

Where the first is broken (except on issues of public morality — such as abortion, homosexuality, or prostitution — or of public rights — such as liberation of women) it is too frequently without wit or sensitivity. Politics are a real risk — they make for good ratings but low job expectancy. One has only to think of a recent controversy, in which it was alleged that a popular commentator, courteous and moderate but with a political and social edge, was drafted into the religious sector, not because religion, especially when mixed with sex and politics, is not explosive, but because, when prudently insulated by choice of slot and setting, it may be expected to be safely soporific. In fact, religion, which should be at the heart of the nation's culture, has been toned down by popular consensus often to the point of non-existence. Indeed, if one were to thumb through the brochures prepared to make Australia attractive to the potential tourist, one would suspect an Orwell-type plot to pretend it never existed.

No doubt there are some who would say that Australians at heart are religious, but that they reject its institutional form. This is as sensible as saying that Charlie is incurably romantic but can't stand the company of girls. For religion, if it means anything, is a sharing of experience through symbol in community. It is difficult to imagine a profound experience of the numinous — the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* — as one about which a person would be likely to remain silent, or wish to explore entirely alone. The desire to speak of such experience with tract bred of reverence is not to be deprecated, but decency can amount to denial, and it is not an accident that many of the younger generation are turning to the less reticent sects.

Unfortunately, this taboo on religion and suspicion of its institutional forms were once functional. In a country of convicts, adventurers, and refugees, it was remembered as part of the triad of discrimination — class, politics, and religion — from which they were escaping and which they did not wish to see perpetuated here. Nor were the newcomers wholly successful in breaking the alliance. The core of the problem lay in education. The effort to establish a system of public education that was neutral without being irreligious resulted in a tripartite system: the schools of the reformed churches which economic necessity made expensive and so associated religion with class; the catholic schools that were made economically viable without respect to class but became a public issue for twice taxed parents of slender means and so associated religion with politics; and a public system that failed to resolve the rivalries of the churches and in the end declared a plague on both their houses and fell back upon the secular principle that life could go on without public reference to religion and in fact much better. This was because of its inevitable association by now with class and political divisions. Inevitably the tensions resolved themselves through taboo; taboo inculcated indifference; and indifference became the normal pose of society.

It is to the credit of the churches that they saw and suffered from the divisions that they had inherited and the indifference that was its final outcome. It can be no accident that the ecumenical movement made such remarkable progress in a country not notable for theological innovation; that it culminated in such an inspiring achievement as the Uniting Church in Australia and such incredible institutions as the Melbourne College of

Divinity with its associated ecumenical teaching institutions; and that it brought about such meeting, sharing, and fellowship among church leaders and teachers as in the present Conference. The concern that these express is not just for lost membership of their churches, but even more for a lost dimension in our culture.

The writer recalled the comment of a young French theologian meeting our own seminarians on his way back from a long grim year at the South Pole. He liked them very well, but felt they had no sense of tragedy. At one level he was right. Australians — even seminarians — have been conditioned to keep issues at the level of religion or tragedy out of ordinary discourse. Our typical pose is rather satirical — easy but without love or dread. One thinks of books for a wide public — Donald Horne's *Lucky Country* for instance, or Ronald Conway's *Great Australian Stupor* and their sequels; or if one goes to the theatre, of the *Getting of Wisdom* or the *Devil's Playground*; and on the TV of that paragon of suburban taste and good sense Mrs. Edna Everage, and the engaging Barry Crocker. Even when the theme rises to tragedy as in the *Picnic at Hanging Rock* or the *Last Wave*, it is a haunting remorse for a lost past, or concern for a hero with whom we cannot identify and the terror is not redemptive.

Community and Way of Life. This silence on values by consensus extends to the norms of the community. It is significant that our suburban community lacks a poet of the suburbs comparable to the poets of the bush or even of the inner city. Where are the peers of Clancy of the Overflow or the Sentimental Bloke? Yet the suburbs do represent the effort of the city population to create a human dimension beyond the office or the work-bench. One may laugh or wail over those rows and rows of assembly line, hygienically isolated boxes, extending miles without end from the city, offering a snatch of family, a snatch of love, and a snatch of breakfast, between the serious task of getting and spending, and climbing the job or professional ladder. No wonder the brood of these tired parents are critical of the human condition as they present it. No wonder they are impatient to escape the family nest as soon as they can fly and leave the parents to the loneliness of middle life, and the culminating futility of retirement — until, with unconscious irony, the pastor or his surrogate who reads the service in the funeral parlour pronounces eternal rest over a soul that has never been awake. In a word, how may one speak of integration to a living community, whose forum is the supermarket, whose religion and politics are the footy, and whose peer group is everywhere but around the corner. This is not all that there is to be said of the Australian way of life — even the suburban way — but this is how it is expressed even in the bricks and mortar within which it is lived.

Politics and Cynicism. The suburbs do not breed politics. Indeed politics, at least as presented in the media, are not a response to the burgeoning spirit of the nation, but the preserve of the odd person who is an obsessive talker, who doesn't mind too much what others think or say about him, or possess too much scruple about making money on the side. The assumption is that we can't get on without them, because someone has to make decisions and set targets. So the government is sensible in making everyone vote to ensure that its officers can't get away with everything all the time. However, if

Australians are generally cynical about politics, they are not wholly indifferent to abuses of public power. There have been some threatening incidents in their history. There was the convict revolt at Castle Hill suppressed with the righteous sadism of the time. There was the less desperate stand of the diggers at Eureka more prudently defused. Conscription has twice been a lively issue, climaxed by a well placed egg on the first round, and anticlimaxed with a shrewdly diverted procession on the next. But street politics have never been serious in Australia — at least not to the point of bloodshed. Australians have shed their blood for the nation in each of the great wars of this century, but war as such has never contributed to the national legend, with one notable exception. That was the defeat of their men, who knew how to die, at Anzac Cove.

The Economy and Footing the Bill. There is one area of politics however that never fails to alert the Australian. That is where politics impinges on economics. He sees this as an occasion for inevitable mismanagement with national disaster staved off only by a run of lucky finds — wool and gold in the past and the minerals of technology today, including the lethal discovery of uranium. Where economics hurts the Australian at the present time is in the draconian measures of recovery that have followed the spending spree of the previous era. The nation is faced with the choice between unemployment or inflation or whether the have-nots or the haves must foot the bill — and for the moment the haves have it their way. Meanwhile a deep sense of injustice is increasing as sullen observers watch the growing ranks of the losers. These are first the old, the sick, and the destitute, whom an easy hearted community prefers to forget unless it is to debate the final solution of euthanasia. Then there are the school leavers, whom successive generations of teachers have crammed for jobs for which there are now no vacancies and whom society has then dismissed as 'dole bludgers'. And now there is the threat of serfdom to a bureaucracy, that will decide who may and who may not work and when the working life must terminate, in a community where man's identity is defined by his work-role and to threaten it is to touch the very nerve of his being.

Environment, Distance and the Future. Which brings us to the whimsical source of this country's fortunes — her environment. First it separated her early colonies as far as physically possible from the homeland, ostensibly for the homeland's good, but in the end for her own as well. For distance compelled this most servile of colonies to exercise increasing initiative, until Churchill told her bluntly during the war that from now on she was on her own. This might have been too much to ask of her at the time, if she had not had the good fortune to find another protector in America. But eventually her location must make her play the power game with only New Zealand for partner as sole Western outpost in the larger Asia and Pacific world.

Distance however was experienced from the start within the country too, as a major determinant in all her development. Distance that stretched her communications to the breaking point made her turn for power and supply to the six capitals, to which she may now add Darwin. This increased her sense of dependence from within as well as from without. 'They oughter . . .' referred first no doubt to the distant homeland, then to the distant capitals, and later to

the psychological distance between the inhabitants of those long lines of red-tiled roofs that stretched like spokes in a great wheel to the rim of the suburbs and those who manned the gigantic boxes at the hub, in order to determine their destinies and file away the records.

But distance was not wholly a tyrant. There was a time when it made the new arrivals break with the European categories and forms that they sought to impose upon the recalcitrant bush and desert, so that our proudest bird was contemptuously labelled magpie, and soft protective veils were imported into our paintings to guard the eye against the shock of horizons as immediate as they were distant. And so today the suburbanite dreams, as he lazes on the beach, or shares the mass hysteria of the footy, or shelters in the twilight world of the movies, that he is still the rough, tanned, laconic stockman, who has discovered the vision splendid of the sunlit plain extended and the everlasting beauty of the stars.

Vision, however, was never less at a premium than when the Australian, yesterday as today, refused to accept responsibility for the land — the earth beneath his feet — for the waters, trees, and shrubs, and their mysterious denizens. Surely this has been the land of the great rip-off. Yesterday it was the greedy or ignorant farmer stripping the land and scoring the waste with the parched jagged trenches of erosion. Then it was the miner irreverently invading the sacred preserves of its oldest people, first to minister to the world's vanity, then pillaging in order to prepare the weapons of ultimate destruction. And today it is the free-ways carving the countryside and city, with respect neither for contour nor community, in order to enslave both to the machine.

Dare a country, so little capable of coping with its present resources, speak of a future? There is of course nothing more certain to be wrong than long-term forecasts. But it is a different matter to define issues that we must tackle now, though the outcome of our decisions must lie in the future and be subject to many vicissitudes, if we are not to surrender all to chance. These decisions must all be associated with the fact that Australia is a part of a converging interdependent world, that calls as never before for sharing. She must share resources at once; she must increasingly share living space; and most abhorrent of all to many Australians, she must some day share her blood. That is, she must face the prospect of intermarriage with new peoples of her region. She has learned to accept intermarriage among all migrants from the British Isles, then with Continental peoples from the North to South, West to East, and tomorrow she may well cross the colour line, to breed a new race, that is neither Western nor Eastern but something entirely new — Australian. This suggestion is not proposed as a moral issue — for this lies outside the sociological frame of reference. But it is made in cool assessment of the conditions for survival. It is also made with some hope. For despite all the reservations that a review of the national record requires, the Australian's most enduring quality is tolerance of peoples. It is hoped that to this he may add the will and resources to accept and achieve this new identity. When one comes of course to theological reflection one hopes that it will be love and not just the instinct to survive that will usher in the new Australian.

III. Australia the Fractured Vision

Passing from world setting and social process to the structure and location of members in their status and roles within the structure, we needed a more personalist model to replace the behaviourist and systemic that we had used up to the present. It would have been possible to carry the Parsonian systemic model into the personalist perspective by means of his pattern variables. But the introduction of the personal equation into the basically tense situation of Australian Society called for a more thoroughly person-centred and even conflictual model than Parsons' social centred consensus model. So we turned instead to what Silverman has described as the action model, with some piracy of a term that Parsons has long used for his own. The 'action' response is opposed to the 'behavioural' and a fortiori 'mechanistic' because it emphasises the personal perspective and voluntary decision of the human agent, which in turn imply an individual even conflictual stance against the collective pressures towards consensus.

With this more atomistic approach to social action, we were even further from the simple behavioural equation. But we were not reduced simply to individualism. We might at least consider types defined by variables, such as age — to provide the framework for the person's psycho-social development; status in the community, determined by a cluster of factors, such as urban or rural background, racial, ethnic, and religious origins, and occupations; and sex role. It was felt that the types as described by combinations of these variables would make predictable definitions of the situations and that these in turn would make possible some prediction of personal and group responses.

As time was running out, there was no question of exploring the many types of persons in roles that could be built from combinations of these factors. Instead we were content to explore the distance that separated the most from the least favoured member of the community. We agreed that Australia had so far been observed from the point of view of the middle-aged, urban, white, British, practising Christian, professional class, and if we were honest enough to admit it, male. We asked therefore if anyone would have the courage to describe from the point of view of a young person on the threshold of adult life and asking what it had to offer, who was from a poor country settlement, black, without education, training, or good repute, and a woman. At this point the workshop broke down. There was no one who dared to assume the role.

IV. Under Judgment

When the sociologist has completed his analysis of society, he may be expected to hand over to the theologian and his auxiliaries, the poet, artist, and historian, for criticism, development, and decision. But before he does so, there is still an area to which he may bring his expertise. For the practitioner who issues a technique should be the first to be aware of its abuse. In general the sociologist will wish to warn against drawing out more implications from his model than it can ground.

For instance the behaviourist equation rightly makes explicit Australia's dependent status and her limited power to change the world, but it does not absolve her any more than the prophets absolved Israel from taking a moral stand and bearing witness in whatever action was possible to the righteousness of God.

So too the focus upon order, peace, or consensus in the systemic model must not be allowed to emasculate the gospel: 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' For the 'peace of God, which passes all understanding' was proclaimed not from a pastoral retreat, but a city prison. And Christ's own legacy of peace — 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you' — was bestowed upon his disciples as he went to his passion.

Moreover the readiness to give the other bloke a hearing, that is implicit in the ideal of mateship, must not be reserved for the circle of nice guys, but must be extended to all who have a right to be let in, and not least to those whom we have wronged and whose eyes we fear to meet let alone to use in order to see ourselves and our world as they see it. These must include the cocky farmer, whom we have allowed to be driven from the land, the aborigines, whom we have seen pillaged and degraded, and the women whose devoted love and labour we have accepted without admitting them to the club. That we did not find it easy to confess our failure in justice and love was evident in our unwillingness to stand for a moment in the other's shoes. But that does not absolve us from the effort.

Still it would be unfair to conclude this workshop with a scolding. For Australia has paid heavily for the world's sins, that in one way or another have driven so many of its inhabitants to these furthest shores. If there are still scars and deep insecurity beneath her brave front; if she has no event to her credit that the world will not lightly forget, no institution that is known to mankind by her name, no poem, no work of art, no theological insight; if she has not even a notable record of how oppressed treated oppressed — one thing at least she has achieved. After all that long chronicle of anguish, exile, and injustice, she has created a place where a man and woman may live and enjoy as full a measure of freedom as is given to our race and some measure of content with the gifts of life. If that freedom has not found expression in an heroic gesture, a unique institution, or a notable creation, she has at least survived with a faith that is cordial if not profound, a love that is tolerant and cheerful if somewhat narrow in the range of those to whom it extends its tolerance, and a will to live with courage and not without hope.