

Commentary

Bleeker, O'Farrell and the Agenda for Scholarship in Australia

Congratulations on the publication of the *REVIEW*! It is a welcome innovation in the Association's publishing program.

I was most interested in the *REVIEW*'s debate over Professor O'Farrell's address on the future of Australian religion. I had missed the address in the *Bulletin*, but a belated reading identified some concerns which chimed in with the themes of two extended studies I undertook last year for the Master of Literary Studies degree at the University of Queensland. I would like to offer here a few remarks on their relevance to the debate.

The first study described C.J. Bleeker's contribution to the phenomenology of religion. Professor Bleeker was the influential Secretary-General of the International Association for the History of Religions from 1950 to 1970; the AASR joined the organisation after his term of office but inherited orientations which Bleeker helped to define. Halfway through his incumbency Bleeker attempted to introduce a functional charter into the academic study of religion. The 1958 Tokyo Congress of the IAHR provided the spur, for it included a UNESCO symposium on the religious dimensions of the mutual appreciation of Eastern and Western cultural values. In his closing address, Bleeker was moved to advocate the 'reconception of religion' as a way to mutual understanding between East and West: at the same time, however, he acknowledged that this was a task which partly lay outside the scope of scientific deliberation and investigation. He continued to pursue the functional side of religious studies at the 1960 Marburg Congress. In his address on "The Future Task of the History of Religions", Bleeker upheld the ideal of a fully

disinterested pursuit of knowledge, but he questioned "whether the history of religions is not obliged to supply its contribution to the reconstruction of present cultural and religious life". He argued that the historian of religions has "a duty to spread the light of his knowledge and insight" although he should keep in mind that his task is "not conversion to faith whatsoever, but simply enlightening". This was Bleeker's response to the question: to what end are we studying the history of religions? Revealingly, Bleeker's purpose partly stemmed from his concern that "at present a fierce struggle for the preservation of the moral and religious values of humanity is going on". While Bleeker's address is better known for stimulating the methodological debate in the IAHR, in these respects it also challenged the circumscribed role of its membership.

Professor O'Farrell has activated a similar challenge within the AASR, although in a different guise. His concern is reminiscent of Bleeker's for he perceives that Australia's unique cultural life in which religion has a place is under threat. He has not only encouraged the Association to address this situation — much as Bleeker promoted a wider role for the history of religions — but also asserted that the Association has a national role and responsibility to do so — much as Bleeker imposed an obligation on his profession and a duty on its practitioners. The difference is that Bleeker's mission was educational, while O'Farrell's is more directive — shifting Australian scholarly interests to addressing national concerns. O'Farrell has made a passionate case, but his proposed role for the Association would be

too inhibiting for some. While Bleeker's challenge also provoked dissent, it did not compromise his organisation's charter as O'Farrell's seems to do.

In progressing his proposed redirection of studies, Professor O'Farrell exhorts the Association to assume social responsibility in dealing with the problems of social and religious pluralism, to turn more of its attention to the decreasing cultural impact of religion in Australia, and to engage in the study of irreligion and anti-religion. I think there would be agreement that these areas of investigation are appropriate to the study of religion. I was so convinced when I was drawn to irreligion and anti-religion in my second study on modern secularism and irreligion. I endeavoured in the study both to avoid an Eliadean agenda and to work outside the secularisation thesis. My reading took in Martin Marty's typology of unbelief, Paul Pruyser's psychology of unbelief, and

Colin Campbell's sociology of irreligion. In the event, my case study of British Secularism which drew on these ideas scarcely began to evoke the experience of secularism in the lives of the late Victorians. I suspect that the study of Australian irreligion and anti-religion may likewise not only be hampered by a lack of data but also by the limited usefulness of the available descriptive and analytical concepts for approaching these phenomena without diminishing or degrading them. This constitutes a methodological hurdle for taking on O'Farrell's commission.

Professor O'Farrell's insistence on the value of Australian studies and the need for the study of irreligion and anti-religion is salutary. His address warranted the responses which highlighted the first issue of the *REVIEW*.

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