

State of the Art

A Reflection on Recent Trends in Australian Religious History

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I am a firm believer in comparative studies - only by stepping outside our own setting can we begin to see its outline. This belief gained some gratifying support recently while I was reading several works on Canadian religious history: their thrust and achievements continuously reflected on my understanding of Australian religious historiography. Two instances. The first is Michael Gauvreau's *Evangelical Century*, a study of Presbyterian and Methodist colleges of higher education from 1820 into the early twentieth century. It is a stunning work, not because it is without fault, but because of the maturity of its achievement. Taking an 'agnostic' view about the interplay of theology and truth, Gauvreau delicately chronicles changes in the thinking of these Canadian protestant Christians and the contribution this made to the creation of a Canadian culture. Of course, he suffers the problems of intellectual historians generally, such as confusing repetition for clarity and 'proof'. Yet the remarkable thing is that he takes theology seriously,

and sets it convincingly into an intellectual and cultural context which is not static in any Hartzian sense, but dynamic. As the second piece to which I will refer points out (Mark Noll's review of a number of recent publications on Canadian religious history, *Fides et Historia*, December 1991) Canadian religious historiography is only just emerging, yet it produces intellectual, religious history of a high order, as well as sophisticated overviews like that recently seen in John Grant Webster's *A Profusion of Spires* on religious life in Ontario. In comparison, where are we in Australia?

It strikes me that Australia is probably five to ten years behind Canada in terms of maturity of scholarship. We are just producing now, in works such as William Lawton's *A Better Time to Be* and Sue Emilsen's *A Whiff of Heresy*, the monographs which will act as the basis for the big works.

By 'big works', I do not mean to suggest that there have been no important works of religious history written in Aus-

tralia. The efforts of the *Journal of Religious History* people, slice works by people such as Paul Barrett and Richard Ely, and the foundational effects of Patrick O'Farrell's *The Catholic Church in Australia* are not to be underestimated. Emilsen, Lawton and Hugh Jackson (among others) are an encouraging sign that what the groundbreakers began in the 1960s has moved on to a new generation of fine minds, while O'Farrell, for example, has moved into fascinating studies of personality, literature and culture. Yet it can be said without much fear of being contradicted, that Australia has yet to produce its Ahlstrom, or his later Canadian equivalent, J.W. Grant. Moreover, the number of new works is not sufficient to cover Australian religion adequately.

In a recent interview, O'Farrell suggested that

The younger writers are not attracted towards religious subjects, at least in the Catholic field. That means that the older writers are left to do the job - that I think is a very bad thing, and it is one of the things that I have been saying about those developments. So far as the future is concerned in Catholic history, I am, let us say, not entirely confident that the future is very rosy. It seems to me that a lot of what we are getting now is old stuff, the methodology is ancient, the attitudes are proprietorial - as I've said in another context, its like the police writing about the police!

Why?

There are a number of reasons. Denominationally, some churches are simply not historically minded - the fastest growing churches in Australia are conservative evangelical churches, some of which have an inbuilt anti-historicism

which (as Edith Blumhofer indicates about the Assemblies of God in America) flows from a restorationist viewpoint - they are too busy making the history of a new Book of Acts to write about it. The Catholic Church, O'Farrell has suggested, is also in a non-historical phase. Secondly - as Gauvreau points out - religion in Canada has formed part of a mainstream, meliorist culture, and so contrasts with Australia where it has traditionally been marginalised in public life (though prominent in private lives). Perhaps Canadians aren't as nervous as Australians of what the rest of their colleagues will think if they dabble in the suspect area of human feeling, belief and thought. As Paul Bourke pointed out long ago, intellectual history in Australia has been a fairly barren field, something that flows from our culture - a fine situation where even the academics are anti-intellectual! Instead, we write labour history, or political history, or biography for the remainder shelves.

A second reason lies in the nature of the beast - there is plenty of religious history written in Australia, but it rarely finds publication. Most of it lies gathering dust in departmental thesis cupboards and libraries - the young turks are squeezed out of denominational literary positions by clergy and by poor occupational prospects in academia, and they never come back. Even if they should stick around, publishers in Australia shy away from big books unless they are attached to big names, and so academic studies per se are now practically a thing of the past.

Even Albatross's extraordinary success with John Harris' *One Blood* is a case in point - Albatross is a small special purpose publisher which takes on one big project per year. In a sense Harris' success meant less room in a crowded mar-

ket for others, a situation that would not arise in a larger market such as the United States. What little we can expect in print, in a country where a publisher of books about religion can expect (unless added by public controversy) to sell between 200-500 copies of a print run, will necessarily be popular and not more than 240 pages. This would not be a bad thing, in itself, if these were acting as a balance to the larger works. This appears to be unlikely. One suspects that in the Canadian case, as Reginald Bibby suggests in *Fragmented Gods*, Canadians have been kick-started on some current trends by the proximity of their great neighbour and now free-trade partner - they are trying to 'out-American the Americans' (Noll). Such influences (both positive and baneful) only reach Australia in diluted form, and there certainly is not the same cross-over effect of American money and markets which the Canadians have been able to tap into.

This would all appear to be grim news. Historians like myself are always whingeing about something or another, however, and it is one of the oldest tricks in the book to save the best for last. There are signs of life in Australian religious historiography - there are the works recently out (eg., Jackson, Hogan, Lawton, Emilsen), and those which are planned (Stuart Piggin's on Australian Evangelicalism, David Hilliard's on a survey of Australia

religion, Ed Campion's on post-Vatican II Australian Catholicism, among others). Moreover, there are signs of organisation within the craft - new Centres, not always tied to Universities, have emerged (such as the Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity at Robert Menzies College and the New College Institute, University of New South Wales), and there is a thriving industry in often ephemeral little magazines and journals dedicated to particular issues and themes. There is plenty of work being done in the archives, in the university, in the cloisters. There is growing acceptance that the study of religion should be integrated into our school syllabuses. Admittedly, this is survival-level stuff, but at least it is that. What is needed now is a sense of direction, and sufficient organisation to get the work out of the theses and into print. This means money, and time, which even in these recessionary times are not impossible goals if historians begin to look above furthering their own careers in order to coordinate and channel the work of others. The strengths of Australian religious historians lie in the institutional networks of the denominations and universities, and the ability to think broadly and with invention. If one cannot hope for effective use of these from Australian intellectuals, one cannot hold much hope for anything good coming out of the Nazareth of Australian religious history.