

Book Reviews

Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason

John Milbank, 1990 (1993pb), Blackwell, Oxford, ix + 443p. \$49.95

The relationship between social theory and theology is interesting and problematic. With the demise of hard-line empiricism in the social sciences and the willingness to re-address metaphysical issues in philosophy, questions can now be addressed seriously which would not have gotten a moment's air-time a few decades ago. Milbank makes a major contribution to this new/revitalised postmodern discussion.

This is a very major project and represents a careful reading of social philosophy from Plato to Luhmann with particular reference to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods during which Milbank argues subtle (or if not subtle, major but covert) shifts occurred in social philosophy resulting in the creation of a secular sphere of analysis and an appropriate theology (metaphysics) to enable social philosophy to continue and social science to emerge. The outcome of this period was a set of supposedly secular disciplines which needed no reference to the supernatural to proceed with their studies. Milbank discloses the theologies of such figures as Mill, St Simon, Comte and others which not only gave rise to the social sciences as we know them but were

seen by such figures as essential to the project of the social sciences.

The style of the book and project is that of debunking - disclosing the unsuspected intellectual skeleton. Milbank describes his goal (:1) as 'a sceptical demolition of modern, secular social theory' from the perspective of Christianity. He seeks to 'overcome the pathos of modern theology, and to restore in postmodern terms, the possibility of theology as a metadiscourse' (:1). His style is thorough, clear and very tersely dense as he pursues this end.

I do not believe he demolishes modern, secular social theory except to point out that it rests on metaphysical assumptions which are not entirely clearly expressed by contemporary social theorists. He does knock about that straw image of social science which was current within social science particularly in the 1940s and 1950s which can be best termed 'naive empiricism'. However, that image has little currency among social scientists at this point. Perhaps when he says 'modern, secular' he means that which was current before postmodernity and is not deeming to speak about contemporary social theory or social science.

Having pointed out that current social thought rests on metaphysical assumptions he further debunks his prey by noting certain parallels with and retentions of elements of Christian theology. However

these are usually got wrong by social theory and so are labelled either heretical or pagan, without a careful delineation of the orthodoxy from which these judgements are made, nor the admission that there is and has been no small debate about orthodoxy. This really quite modern intellectual imperialism does not promote either of Milbank's projects.

Elsewhere having discovered similarities between the images (concepts) used by social theory and theology he argues for the primacy of theology. This is not necessary to establish his second goal, the rehabilitation of theology. The fact that theology and social theory may use similar concepts resides not necessarily in one borrowing from the other but has some grounding in the similarity of the entities studied - God and Society. While Milbank makes much of Durkheim's usually misunderstood and frequently misquoted and deliberately provocative statement 'Society is God', he misses the point that Durkheim was making about the similarity of the two subjects of study - invisibility, moral power, greater temporal extensity (each comes from before and continues beyond the individual), and providing both comfort and challenge. Given the similarity, no wonder imagery suitable for one is found usefully expressive of the other.

For example, Milbank is highly critical of the way sociology deals with the relationship between the individual and society. After "demolishing" the possibility of a social science because neither the individual nor society can be treated as ultimately given (without reference to some supernatural) and are mutually 'contingent, and constantly being modified, each by the other' he concludes that 'The relation society/individual is not that of scheme to content, nor whole to atomic

parts' (:71). The problems involved in describing the relation society/individual are very like those characteristic of attempts to describe the relation God/person.

Hence, not only does every social theory presuppose a metaphysics including a theology, even if only that of denial; so too every theology presupposes a social theory, however explicit or implicit. Milbank is not as thorough in his delineation of the sociological assumptions of theology as he is of the theological presuppositions of sociology.

Fortunately, Milbank is as thorough in his critique of current theology as he is of social theory. This is no one-sided demolition of the enemy in order to leave only one's own house standing unscathed. He sees theology as having abandoned its calling, retiring to the noetic sphere and using (or being used by) social science to express itself outside the noetic sphere. Milbank shows how theology has adopted this cringing posture and demonstrates how many of the perverted social structures (tyrannies, authoritarian regimes, totalitarian repression both within and without the church) can be traced to 'heretical' or pagan social theory. He calls theology to new maturity, indeed to reassert itself as the rightful Queen of the Sciences (:380).

Moreover, he begins this project himself writing in what could be described as Christian Holism using concepts from both theology and social theory. He admits that it is just a beginning. It is impressive. It is certainly Christian and theological in that the theological categories of sin and salvation play a dominant role. For example, the Christian concept of the Trinity is used to overcome unresolvable problems in Ancient Greek philosophy between the virtues of heroism and peace (:376). Rather than borrow

from others, Christian theology, itself a social science, according to Milbank, should speak with confidence in the now more open arena of the search for understanding human life given the reality of postmodernity. In all of this his fundamental argument is that it is no less reasonable to do so than to pursue other social sciences, especially when their metaphysical (theological) presuppositions are exposed.

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Religion. A First Encounter.

Douglas Pratt. Longman Paul, Auckland. 1993.

Douglas Pratt is faced with a task which is only too familiar to tertiary educators in the field of religion. How do you introduce complete novices to a variety of world religions within a limited teaching time span? Such novices bring little in the way of knowledge of world religions other than the one into which they may have been inducted but they do bring a considerable baggage of bias, suspicion, and misunderstanding.

Pratt has adapted lecture notes from a real life course at Waikato University in Hamilton NZ into a publishable text. He writes:

The single criterion for judging the worth of this book is simply whether or not it gives the novice student - either pursuing formal studies or just reading for self interest - an adequate and appropriate introduction to the subject.

In judging the book by such a criterion I would say he is eminently successful. The book reads well; it is interesting; it is comprehensive. I would be happy to use

it for the introductory tertiary course in which I am involved.

Further, Pratt makes another statement:

So far as I am aware I have not committed any major blunders of presentation, nor stumbled into fundamental errors of fact. But certainly there are nuances of interpretation that have been necessarily glossed over and areas of scholarly discussion that would be inappropriate to include.

I have not noted any 'major blunders' (which is not an absolute guarantee that they do not exist) but there are perhaps some nuances I would like to discuss.

The book is divided into five major sections: The Study of Religion; Foundation Phenomena; Development Phenomena; Expression Phenomena; Comparative Review. As Pratt makes clear his work is based upon a phenomenology of religion approach. While recognising the difficulty in coming up with an adequate division of material it seems to me that the present breakdown allows far too much overlap. For instance, in the case of Judaism there is considerable repetition in regard to the description of early origins.

To come more to detail, Part II deals with "how they began - their antecedents and/or founders - together with their continuing 'foundational' elements". 'How they began' takes the form of an amalgam of narrative from the religion's own sources together with extraneous material such as archaeology. To take Judaism as an example once more, this means the 'exodus' is presented as the historically verified founding event. While belief in the exodus was and is foundational in Judaism there is more and more doubt as to its quality as an historical event. Modern historians are reticent to speak of the exodus as 'historical'. To some extent the

same reticence is applicable to other religious traditions. Certainly, the origins of Christianity are shrouded in deepening uncertainty. To what extent can the origins of Buddhism be described as 'historical'? It would seem that something of this uncertainty should be injected into Part II and I would think that tertiary students should be enabled to cope with the uncertainty. In fact, no religion has a clear-cut version of its origins and this is true of Judaism and Christianity as well as other religions. The claim to historicity has been at the basis of religious exclusivism for too long. It is time that we educators came more into the open and expressed our doubts that any religion can verify 'foundations' as against any other religion.

As an aside on Part II, I must say that I found the section on Rabbinic Judaism a little confusing. Why the material on the Exile and the Diaspora should dominate the section under the heading of 'Rabbinic Judaism' does not appear to me to be justified. Also, the section on Qumran (:92) needs some revision. The student would go away with the notion that the Essene community was founded precisely to wait for the Teacher of Righteousness and that the entire community was translated to the literal city of Damascus after the Teacher clashed with the Wicked Priest. While all opinions are possible, a more mainline interpretation should be given in a brief version of the Qumran phenomenon.

I must say that I felt sympathy for Pratt in his endeavour to tread warily as regards the foundation phenomena of Christianity. No doubt the majority of his students will be Christian by persuasion or background. One sentence made me smile:

From out of the legendary accounts of an encounter with a 'risen Christ' there arose the 'myth' of his being raised.

I presume each student could make of that what she or he wants.

Part V is called a 'Comparative Review' and covers commonalities and distinctives (my Spellcheck rejects it, is it acceptable as a noun?). John Hick and Paul Knitter are given fair coverage. I would have liked the relative positions of the pluralist as against the exclusivist to have been made more clear. This could then have formed the basis for understanding some of the interesting religious phenomena of fundamentalism and religious resurgence.

The endeavour to present religion and religion to novices in a restricted time span is, of course, impossible if any depth is required. Pratt's book is as adequate as any on the market. Together with some stimulating and supportive lectures and open-minded tutorials it would function very well for the purpose.

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Religious Studies in Dialogue. Essays in Honour of Albert C Moore.

Maurice Andrew, Paul Matheson & Simon Rae (eds). 1991. Faculty of Theology, Otago University, Dunedin.
xxvi+204pp, pbk.

This book, which begins with a tribute to Albert Moore's pioneering work in the Phenomenology of Religion in the University of Otago, contains twenty-one brief essays by scholars from Theological Faculties or departments of Religion in New Zealand.

The general headings under which the essays are grouped are: The Academic Study of Religion; Religion and Art; Re-

ligion and Society; History and Religious Studies; and, Christian Theology and Religious Studies.

Inevitably the essays are of varying quality. Outstanding, in my view, is the piece by Elizabeth Isichei (of which a longer version exists) on the painter Colin McCahon. Arising out of an avowed sympathy with and knowledge of McCahon's work, this study manages to keep a proper academic distance from its subject and, equally, to ask some genuinely interesting questions. McCahon's ambivalence about Christianity was perhaps that of the culture; and he, like the poet James Baxter, was to die an alcoholic.

Careful research into the particular texts in question is evident in Ian Breward's study of Luther's attitude to Islam and particularly in Peter Matheson's rhetorical analysis of the early lutheran polemicist Andreas Karlstadt. The same could be said of Douglas Campbell's misleadingly titled essay on *pistis* in Paul. Campbell argues strongly that *pistis* should not be translated *faith* - implying propositions or an attitude - but *faithfulness* to mean the reciprocal faithfulness of God/Christ and the believer, especially in times of persecution.

Two of the essays (Greschat and Turner) focus on Rudolf Otto who is seen as the father of modern Religious Studies. Otto was an inveterate traveller who got to observe religions other than his own at first hand. This, broadly, is the relatively unsophisticated notion of phenomenology that informs this book. I say 'unsophisticated' because it never confronts the obvious objection as to whether a person in one religion or world-view - even if this is labelled 'academic neutrality' - can ever understand another religion or world-view in any real depth. To return to the image of the traveller, the modern west-

ern academic, wearing perhaps the dark glasses of the tourist, may think he sees clearly and objectively. But looked at from the point of view of the reality being studied, what assumptions and ways lurk behind those opaque lenses, assumptions and practices that may be worlds away from the traditions, rites, beliefs, spiritual disciplines of the religion in question, and that must inevitably falsify the picture presented? However, I feel, the idea of *Religious Studies in Dialogue* ought to include the right of reply for religions so studied.

I felt, moreover, that the concepts of 'culture' and 'religion' often presupposed by some of the essayists are still in need of clarification. Culture seems to be the master concept that subsumes religion. But I wondered, for instance, whether all cultures are 'cultures' in the same sense; or whether all religions are 'religions' in the same sense. Even to ask such questions seems to me to underline the need not only for greater methodological clarity in Religious Studies but for some sort of rule about studying other religions via their primary sources. This in turn highlights the danger of RS Departments in effect giving rise to an academic culture of superficiality. In grubby day to day reality, scholars are often put in the position of teaching courses on matters of which they have little real knowledge. That is understandable; but to publish a reconstruction of early Christianity (Veitch) or a study of 'World' in no less than five world religions (Pratt) that only refer to secondary sources is surely not.

The two explicit pieces of Christian theology come from Frank Nichol and Alan Torrance. Nichol's 'The Christian hope in a secular world' can be read as a sustained commentary on Bultmann's famous remark that "Jesus died on the cross and rose again in the kerygma". In seeing

hope (like faith and love) as a perspective on the whole of life in time, Nichol pre-scinds from the question of its possible reference to the destiny of creation in eternity. Alan Torrance, who perhaps doesn't take sufficiently seriously the need to communicate with a wider public entailed in the notion of a publication, is worried about a genuine problem: how Liberation and Apartheid theologies respectively manage to come to diametrically opposed positions through ethical arguments that proceed similarly from 'is' to 'ought'. The one is the mirror image of the other. Torrance's solution comes philosophically from John Searle's way of qualifying is-statements as 'institutional facts' ie ones that pre-suppose or include 'constitutive rules involving obligations'. Torrance then translates this into the biblical notion of covenant and sees all facts in the world as qualified by the nature of God as 'being in communion'. This, he argues, makes impossible both Apartheid's claim that separate development is written into some alleged order of creation and the tendency of Liberation Theology to make suffering and oppression into an ethical justification of a different kind of separate development. Positively it allows an ethical interpretation (oughts) of the 'signs of the times' (ises) that pay due regard to the God who is constructive in the world - makes it the kind of place that it is. There is the germ of an idea here that needs further clarification and elaboration.

Finally Lloyd Geering, from a stance 'beyond' God, recommends that Tillich's concept of 'Ultimate Concern' do duty for god for practitioners of religious Studies for whom the word has become meaningless. The frankness of this proposal is admirable. My only doubt is as to whether on Geering's own subjectivist epistemology there can be such a thing as

an ultimate concern. Must not concerns once loosed from any referential notion of ultimacy inevitably degenerate into tribalisms more limited than any Geering discerns in existing religions?

The dialogue continues!

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Catholic Schools. Creating a New Culture

B Dwyer. 1993. E J Dwyer, Sydney. pp121, pbk. RRP \$16.95

Barry Dwyer is well known to many in the Australian educational field, particularly in the Catholic sector, through his writing, addresses to conference, and input in staff development days. This book is a timely contribution to the ongoing debates in Catholic education at a time when the implications of the changes in staffing from religious to lay and the changes in educational approaches are beginning to bite in serious ways.

What does the book cover? Well, quite a range of topics. The five "C;s" one could say: culture, context, community, curriculum, and challenges. But a better way to see it is to say that the book tries to elucidate the dimensions that make a school Catholic rather than anything else, which is one of the focus questions contemporary catholic schools (and parents and bishops!) are asking themselves in this transitional period in their history in Australia (and hence the appropriateness of the subtitle, *Creating a New Culture*). *With this go the pivotal issues about the mission of Catholic schools, vision statements, the spirituality of teachers, the role of the school to affirm some aspects of popular culture and challenge others. All this has to be worked through*

in the context of changes in education and in the Catholic Church in the last three decades. Not an easy task!

Let me take a point of change: the role of parents in the school. There are still many parents who can only visualise their role as helping in the school canteen, rolling up for Saturday working bees or selling raffle tickets to raise money for the school. Those days are gone - or should be according to all the documents presented! Parents as prime educators of their children are invited today to take their rightful place as co-educators with teachers in the school environment; to be involved with the discussion and decision-making processes of the school. This requires adjustment from both parents and teachers. There are still some teachers who think they are the prime educators of the children in their classrooms! Dwyer lists the main things that parents want from their school (:64). The first is that it should be a good school. The second caught my eye: greater access to the school. Parents want to find out what's happening in the school and how their child is progressing. It seems to me that many schools have not heard this point or, if they have, have not done sufficient about it.

Another point of change which we have all noticed, and which Barry Dwyer mentions more than once, is the way the language of economic rationalism has invaded the educational field and with that the threat that a utilitarian approach to education poses to our educational system. Why do we send our children to school? Is it to help them develop as persons or to prepare them for a job?

The book is presented in a thoughtful way. There are boxed case studies for quick identification and easy access to topics guaranteed to trigger lively discus-

sion; there is mention of relevant books or documents (government and church) for the reader to pursue. There is also a useful bibliography at the end of the book. And last but not least, there are amusing cartoons by Graham English of the half-jocular, whole-ermost type which should get the reader thinking. The one of the rugby player being blessed with holy water as an example of the synthesis of faith and culture is my favourite. A lot could be said about that!

Because of the relevant issues that the book raises and the plain language used in presenting them, this book is ideal for staff development days, for teachers (or parents) who want to update themselves with regard to the educational scene, or for tertiary students looking for an introduction to Catholic schools today.

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Sound the Trumpet: Planning and Teaching Religion in the Catholic Primary School

Patricia Malore and Maurice Ryan. 1994.
Social Science Press, Wentworth Falls.
ISBN 0949218 05 7

This is a book that is overdue. It is remarkable to think that with the resources devoted to Catholic primary schooling in Australia it has taken until now for someone to provide an analysis such as this. Several studies exist at the secondary level but to my knowledge this is the first at the primary level.

The authors are well placed for such a study. Each has majored in religious education at a doctoral level. Their extensive experience with teachers, plus their ongoing study and research provide a formidable backdrop to the book.

Not everyone will like this book because it challenges many assumptions about teaching religion that have been operative for some time. The book deals with the real world of the contemporary Catholic primary school and the daily realities which teachers and parents face. For example:

Few Australian children, particularly in the cities, have not heard of a Big Mac, or fail to recognise the golden arches symbol. On the other hand, the majority of these children have little, if any, Church experience. Many may have never attended a Eucharistic liturgy and may never have learnt or prayed at home the basic prayers of the Catholic tradition.

The authors write out of a concern that the teaching of religion not only requires good teaching methodology but clear content that can be assessed and evaluated. They analyse Church Documents and the Religious Education Guidelines of respective Catholic dioceses around Australia. Their thesis is that the guideline, largely developed in the late 1970s and 1980s, are dependent on a catechetical framework and not an educational one. They argue that guidelines were not written in a language that is useful to the classroom realities and the educational methodologies of the 1990s. They challenge some of the processes incorporated into guidelines and the assumptions upon which they have been formed. They express a genuine interest in quality teaching of religion in the primary school and argue for realistic expectations to be placed upon what is achievable in the primary classroom. Many will find this analysis helpful to planning future development in the primary teaching of religion.

No doubt several writers of guidelines may challenge some of the observations made by Malone and Ryan. An interest-

ing fact is that Malone was heavily involved in the production of guidelines in their infancy. The comments in this book are more interesting because of this. The book provides an overview of respective diocesan guidelines rather than an in depth analysis. For my part I found this simple overview useful for it described the various influences that helped to form these invaluable resources. It is simply a fact that different approaches are now required. Indeed those in diocesan offices around the country who are reappraising their current guideline will find this book to be a useful resource.

Teachers will find this book covers many things which they talk about in their discussions about teaching religion today. There are helpful chapters on planning the program, assessment and reporting, evaluation, and the catholic school context of the religion program. Each of the ten chapters is broken up with useful questions and practical suggestions. As a parent I would have liked to have seen more examples of reporting practices than the one provided for analysis and discussion. It is not the best example from the range of options available. It is however better than the ones many of us receive about our child's progress! The final chapter provides ten assumptions upon which the authors base their work. I found this to be most enlightening, especially their description of the relationship of the classroom religion program to the Catholic school. They suggest that the goal of the religion program is religious literacy, whereas the goal of the Catholic primary school is the religious formation of the child as part of total human development. They argue consistently for distinctions like this to be implemented.

The book is a "must read" for those charged with the responsible task of teach-

ing in Catholic primary schools, and for those in Catholic Education Offices. It would be a useful text in pre-service or postgraduate courses for teachers. I would like to think that clergy may read it to realise that much of what they are expecting from religious teaching in the Catholic primary school classroom is unrealistic and impossible to attain. School classroom religion programs cannot solve the pastoral inadequacies of the Church of the nineties. They can be better educational tools for the Catholic community if there are more realistic and achievable teaching goals. The book would be of benefit to parents who are interested in their child's education. It provides a framework to examine developments in education. The style of writing is simple and clear. I detect little jargon. It will be a book which will promote much useful discussion and debate.

However, it is difficult to classify a book such as this as a "great" or "poor" book. In the primary school religion setting it has no peer for comparison. It is well written, well produced, and addresses the contemporary issues of teaching religion in the Catholic primary school. If this book is an example of the practical scholarship that we can expect from the Australian Catholic University then we have a University of the real world. We should welcome such a development.

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Pastoral Care: the First Ten Years of Chaplaincy in Western Australian Government Secondary Schools

Richard G Berlach and Brian E R Thornber (eds), Department of Religious Stud-

ies, Edith Cowan University, Perth 1993.
\$29.95

In 144 readable pages, sixteen people who are or have been Christian chaplains in WA high schools speak of their roles. Most of the chaplains choose to provide anecdotal vignettes, though Horsley adopts a more theorising approach and Scott discusses the findings of a survey he conducted into students' beliefs and attitudes in his school. Lawn's thoughtful contribution on a very part-time experience of primary school chaplaincy sits a little oddly in relation to the main focus.

The book begins with the editors briefly setting the chaplaincy program in its historical context. Berlach lectures at Edith Cowan University, and Thornber is the Executive Officer of the Churches' Commission on Education, a body which represents all the major Christian denominations. The chaplaincy program in WA was begun in 1982 by the CCE, partly in reaction to the disappointment with the poor provision of religious education in high schools, but also as a response to the mounting evidence of an increasing number of students needing more pastoral care than schools were generally staffed to provide. Now, after ten years, 44 such people are supported by 'District Christian Councils' in full or part-time chaplaincy roles! The level of commitment - financial and pastoral - is extraordinary.

The first state to develop a chaplaincy program was, of course, Victoria, saddled, as it was, with the most draconian Education Act of any state, excluding religious studies from the secular curriculum. Chaplains were raised up there to render the denominational RI program more educationally effective, while also developing a pastoral role. WA, however, has diverged markedly from this model in the light of the CCE's firm resolve to

avoid any suggestion of the chaplains belonging to the authority structure of the school, as, for example, by becoming regular teachers in a RE program. Potentially, one might expect this to place a big burden on chaplains to achieve adequate credibility and role perceptions, and it does, but the present book is testimony to the freedom they have had, and the creativity they have shown, in earning their places in their schools.

The book makes heart-warming reading, and throws up many images that stay in memory, none more so, perhaps, than the finish of the 'chaplain's fun run' at Drysdale's school, where having passed and been passed by a Year 11 student several times, Drysdale found the boy at his elbow puffing "I give up - let's make it a draw!" The two instinctively put their arms across each other's shoulders and ran in step over the last stretch to finish fourth. As Drysdale said, it typified the goal of chaplaincy, not to be seen as preaching and directing, but as "getting alongside and being with students".

The book is not a text-book on the concept of chaplaincy. Such a book still needs to be written, and some of the contributions to this volume implicitly pose the problem of being Christian-sponsored but serving the whole school. Indeed, the editors have wisely inserted reflective questions after each contribution to invite consideration of just such issues. But when the other book is written, this one will still be an indispensable complement to it, providing vivid eye-witness testimony to the possibilities inherent in the role.

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The Methodists. A History of Methodism in NSW.

Don Wright and Eric Clancy. Allen and Unwin, Sydney. 1993. Rrp \$19.95. pp276

Why write a history of the Methodists in NSW now? After all they disappeared into history heaven nearly one generation ago. Well, the people may have become part of the Uniting Church but their wider influence has remained. This book can also be read as a telling of the story in order that future generations may come to an understanding of their "roots" - their church heritage. There is some concern in the Uniting Church today that many people have little understanding of the traditions of the union churches, almost like people in some new church denominations who actually believe they have arisen without a past.

It should be stated that this book is not a lament for Methodism, though it concentrates more on the overall contribution of Methodism, than the controversies. Of course one volume cannot provide a detailed account of the development and influence of Methodism. Instead this book highlights many of the significant elements of Methodism. It gives the broad picture of the church in the community in NSW from 1812 - 1977.

The 19th century material examines the different forms of Methodism in NSW, including the Primitive Methodists and the Wesleyans, although the context is the Wesleyan picture, because the Wesleyans were by far the dominant group. The moves to organic union in 1901-2 are also covered.

The Methodists were noted for their active involvement in social and evangelistic circles. In NSW many of the great social institutions arose through the initiative of Methodist people, including LifeLine, the Wayside Chapel (founded

by Ted Noffs) and the various parish mission structures, including the largest complex, the Central Methodist Mission, Sydney (now known as Wesley Mission). One person in particular had a part to play in many ventures, Alan Walker, who also has maintained a strong reputation as an evangelist.

Other areas highlighted in the book include the Methodist Sunday School movement, the establishment of church schools like Newington College, the strong lay emphasis, particularly with local (lay) preachers, and the number of internal organisations for fellowship, activity and worship. It seems that there were organisations for all people in the church, including children, but there is special mention of the variety of areas of activity for women who for most of the history were not able to contribute as ordained ministers. (It should be noted that the technical requirements for the ordination of women in the Methodist Church were allowed some ten years before union).

The book also provides a link with other works in the brief comments on the influence of Samuel Angus in theological education via the Joint Faculty, a period of considerable interest to people studying theological formulation in Australia, particularly the nature of church and society between the wars.

Often Methodists are stereotyped as "wowers" - people who spend all their time opposing the selling and consumption of alcohol and styles of dancing, but as this book shows, many Methodists campaigned on wider issues long before they became popular. There was a pacifist tradition, even during World War II, but opposition to military force escalated during Vietnam, especially promoted by Alan Walker. Other key areas of concern

to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s were racism and land rights.

Methodism as a whole became part of the Uniting Church in 1977, after a twenty year move toward union. One point worth noting for future study of the nature of the Uniting Church in NSW after Union, is that the number of continuing Presbyterians in NSW was very high: 186 congregations remained compared to 156 which joined in union. It is also worth noting that though the majority of members have a membership link with one of the previous churches, over 75% of ministers in NSW have been ordained since Union. Perhaps for the younger ministers in particular a history such as this would be helpful as they seek to understand the local church culture.

This is a much needed book for Australian religious historiography. Few church denominations have published their history on a state basis. Though such histories are perhaps episodic, they provide a reference point for further study and also provide an overview for society of the role and relationship of one distinct religious expression in the Australian religious experience.

Peter Bentley

Christian Research Association

Messengers Of The Gods

James G. Cowan. 1993 Bell Tower

It is not the first time I have called Australian writer James Cowan's works travelogues, nor I imagine will it be the last. *Messengers of the Gods* is Cowan's latest record of his travels. It follows *Mysteries of the Dreamland* (Prism, 1989), *Sacred Places* (Simon & Schuster, 1991) and *Letters From A Wild State* (Bell Tower, 1992). As usual, the account is less of a geographical experience than it

is the recounting of metaphysical experience. As usual, the more obscure and far away the place visited, the more obscure and far-fetched the 'language' of that place. The language of a place - the medium in which a place reveals and understands itself with respect to its world - comes shaped and coded and this we call 'myth'. As usual, Cowan is deeply intrigued by this concept. One could venture to say that all his journeys are attempts to make that one mythic journey, whichever it might be, myths being manifold.

Messengers in fact recounts three journeys. The first to a people of the sea in the Torres Straits, the second to a forest people in Borneo, and the last to the Kimberley Aborigines, a people of the land. Sea, sky (for the forest people converse with the birds) and earth: it could hardly be more elemental; and this is appropriate, for what is elemental prompts Cowan to set out in the first place. Cowan's journeys are not prompted by an anthropological curiosity, nor, as in the case of Bruce Chatwin, by a desire to expand his eurocentric horizons by a brush with the exotic, but rather Cowan is motivated by a personal quest. *Messengers* is very much - if we are to speak of genre - a 'Quest' book, Cowan a Parsival in search of the Grail. Here the quest is less for the exotic than for the essential. For the sake of the essential Cowan is drawn out of his own element, expelled from the shapes and codes of language he is most familiar with and exposed to *l'Autrui* (the Other). What he wants to bring home is this Grail he has gone in search of. The Grail is, as I said, what is most essential to life, and Cowan wants to present it in the shape of a book, in our language, to us. *Messengers* is essentially a deeply heart-felt book, its author something of a modern

troubadour, and like a troubadour he celebrates *l'élan vital* of life.

I just spoke of a quest for what is essential. What is essential, Cowan figures, is a right relation to the world. This right relation to the world, Cowan believes, has been lost. The right relation to 'the world,' or what we are inclined to call, somewhat subjectivistically, 'the environment,' or what Cowan, in perhaps a more Wordsworthian spirit calls 'nature,' is a matter of balancing and harmonising society's values.

The societies Cowan visits are exemplars of this balancing. The people of these societies, 'traditional' people as we are wont to call them, do not live 'on' the land or sea, as we in our alienation do, they live 'in' it; just as we must once have done when in the Lord's Prayer we used to say, "*in* earth, as it is in heaven". Nowadays, if we say it at all, we say "on" earth instead. Why? Because we have cast earth 'out there', objectified, a resource, capable of being exploited by miners or conserved by Greenies. Among the three peoples Cowan visits and becomes involved with, in each case their 'environment' can hardly be said to environ them; for their environment is *in them*, rather than is the case with us where we think of ourselves in an environment. In the three societies Cowan enters (for it is more than a mere encounter) there is not so much a 'natural order' which is balanced, but rather order is natural and as a consequence there is no need to worry about balance and harmony! Or there is now. For contact with Western culture has, for these peoples brought the possibility of permanent disruption into their midst.

Cowan travels as an emissary from the West, and his courteous, keen, and receptive manner - to judge by the dialogue - is a credit to what our disruptive and de-

structive Western culture can also produce: depths of understanding and tolerance no less unknown to these peoples than the dragnets which fish their seas or the chainsaws which 'deforest' them. This irony is at the heart of *Messengers*. That while continued encroachments of Western culture toll the death knoll for the traditional way of life, at the same time, special individuals (or groups) of that same deadly culture may be the saving grace of the traditional way of life. Thus, in the book, Cowan makes a suggestion to the last living sage of the traditional way of life on Mer island which has the potential to usher in a new era. In Borneo his respect for the wisdom of the Iban religion rubs off on those around him. With the Aborigines of the Kimberley, again, his presence among them "had given these men new enthusiasm for the old ways" (:178). He cuts a deal with them and before he leaves, because they have given him so much, he types out their stories for them (:164 & :200). The stories Cowan does tell in *Messengers* he tells not out of bad faith but because he has won the people's trust and they enjoin him: "You're a writer-man. You got to tell the world about us...How our land has been taken from us. How we've lost our stories because we've lost our land.":(163). *Messengers* recounts stories of intimacy with traditional life, as well as stories which mark that life's intimacy with itself, yet it is far from an 'exposé'. We will never know the stories Cowan types out for the elders. *Messengers* sensibly, and authentically keeps this unknown *corpus* of what will not and cannot be said in sight all the while.

I speak of James Cowan himself rather than his literary alter-ego, but I think it is appropriate to do so. The author directly and personally addresses the reader in his

Introduction, and a letter from an elder given in the epilogue (even if actually the letter is only fictional) is addressed to "Jim" ie. to the author. I would say, rather than putting himself at a distance from his literary alter-ego, in the romantic tradition Cowan is strongly associating, for literary and living purposes, with his literary persona. He wants his mask as transparent as his truth.

Messengers recounts a journey of understanding. As such, the three societies which are visited are three 'turning points' on the road back to Sydney, where the book will be written in which we, the reader, in our turn, may follow, so that we may understand. What we are to understand is of course this right relation with nature. The message of the gods is for us ultimately, to jolt us out of our modern mind-set, our economic 'woes', our self-seeking and ambition, to turn us to a right relation to the world. If it is possible. Cowan wonders: "Could a means be found whereby these realities [traditional and modern] might learn to accommodate one another?" (:203). Insofar as it is possible for one - the author himself - it is not impossible. This right relation, one gathers, is less a matter of recycling or 'doing the right thing' keeping Australia tidy, than it seems it is a matter of *coming to language*.

This may sound odd. It is odd. Coming to language means to lose ourselves in it in the way the traditional peoples Cowan meets are 'lost' in their myths and stories. These myths and stories are only so to us, but to those who recount them - and *Messengers* retells many a myth - they are no less 'mythical' and just as real as the cost of petrol or the Dow-Jones index is to us. Coming to language then, means on one hand breaking-out of the myths which keep us 'on' the earth, pil-

grims in a barren land, and on the other hand breaking-into thought structures which we have denuded of their 'truth' status by the designation 'myth'. Putting the matter this way highlights the equivocal nature of the concept 'myth': it is a concept beyond empirical strictures about 'true' and 'false'. These strictures are the dichotomy of the empirical. Myth is what holds them in that dichotomy. Coming to language, in the context of *Messengers*, means wondering how to achieve a new reverence for words. Words, that is, not as the medium of communication across the space between 'me' and 'you,' but words as sources of life, as (in a word) 'gods'.

When Cowan is among the Iban, the messengers of the gods are the omen birds. The people listen to the birds for the birds tell them what to do and when to do it, and incredible as it may seem, the people act in accordance with what they believe the birds have ordered. This is neither quaint nor primitive. At least, not as Cowan tells it. This listening to the birds and acting at their behest is an exemplification of people being **in language**. Such a way of being is one in which the parts of language, along with those who substantiate the language in their speech, harmonise with the whole. In this way 'I' am one of those parts. This is radically different to our culture in which 'I' am first person singular, and in which the parts never harmonise, nor can they, for 'I' command language, it is always already at 'my' disposal. It is hard to imagine a life in which 'I' am neither first, nor (as we presently conceptualise it as rational animal) a person, nor singular. This is the point of *Messengers*: it tries to bring such a life into view.

Messengers is not so much one man's search for knowledge of myth or tribal

esoterica. It is every reader's initiation into the experience of the clash of worlds - 'modern' and 'traditional' worlds. Can these realities accommodate one another? In what language? For our poverty is this: to have all language at our disposal, is to be **outside** language. *Messengers* is one man's search for reconciliation between those who are cast-out from language and the earth, and those who are 'in' it. No answers are proffered, but one feels that this value, that of reconciliation, is in our age, a key-word. It is unfashionable to say this, but in a book concerned with a right relation to nature there has to be a right relation to it. Any or every interpretation will not do. There must be a right relation to the book which speaks of a right relation to nature. The key-word in this respect is reconciliation. This is not a word Cowan uses, but one I would take the liberty and risk of interpolating between his book and his reader. The right relation to the book is one which carries the same attitude to it as Cowan has in his meetings with traditional people.

It is clear that there is no going back to a traditional way of being, nor - unless 'economically sustainable growth' is to become less of a euphemism, which is highly unlikely - is there much hope in going forward in the hungry and power-mad spirit of the Industrial Revolution. The key to the right relation with nature, Cowan would seem to suggest - and here his journey ends - is in reconciling ourselves to traditional peoples and learning to learn from them. The disjunction between the ways we are and the ways they are, is too great for learning to be straightforward and direct. *Messengers* exemplifies, in this respect, the process of learning to learn from traditional peoples. This is why, I think, the first person singular throughout the book, Cowan's per-

sona, is of remarkable importance. The 'I' whom in this instance we are prone as readers to associate with the author himself, keeps us on track, this is the path of learning: the courtesy, the humility, the patience, the openness. And he never looks back. This is not Orpheus bringing Eurydice out of the darkness. Cowan is too innocent for Orphic mysteries. But this is perhaps his saving grace.

Thus it is a faithful travelogue. Not in the sense of faithfully recording empirical impressions; but faithful in the sense that the journey has an end, that reconciliation has a reason beyond the need for our survival. As the last line of the book has it: "In the end all human values rest in nature's desire to be at one with itself." (:209).

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Disturbing the War: Melbourne Catholics and Vietnam

Val Noone,

Spectrum Publications, Richmond, 1993.

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Disturbing the War is a refreshing blast from the past. Just when the revisionists - largely a group of gung-ho historians who compensate for never having fired a shot in anger by writing 'tough' about war - seemed to have grabbed control of the continuing Vietnam debate, along comes a study which reaffirms both the moral disgrace of Australia's involvement in the conflict and the constructive, pluralising social force of the anti-war movement which mounted in opposition to it.

This 'history from the home front through the eyes of Melbourne Catholics'

builds upon Humphrey McQueen's observation (cited by Noone) that knowledge of divisions among Catholics is essential to an understanding of Australian culture. To outsiders the internecine warfare of Melbourne Catholics sometimes appears a fraction self-indulgent, and this book does suffer from a sort of tribalistic excess. Nevertheless it is hard to deny the impact of Catholic politics (and politicking) on the course of twentieth-century Australian life, from Archbishop Mannix's anti-conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917 to the indefatigable anti-Communism of some Catholics in the Labor movement in the 1940s and 1950s, the ensuing Labor split, the formation of the DLP and its subsequent influence on the course of Australian history.

Now an academic, Val Noone was a priest in the Melbourne diocese for ten years who (*en route* to leaving the priesthood) became active in Melbourne Catholic peace work during the late sixties, particularly in the Moratorium and anti-conscription campaigns and in helping found the anti-war newsletter *Retrieval*. This book, then, is to some degree an 'insider's study', though Noone hopes it is 'objective' and 'an honest appraisal of history'. *Disturbing the War* is indeed an honest book, though given the strength of Noone's convictions it is inevitably partisan. While Noone is convincing in showing how Catholic leaders and spokespeople 'demonised' the Communists as Evil Incarnate, he himself runs the risk of demonising people like Mannix and the obsessive B.A. Santamaria.

Mind you, Noone has plenty of diabolical source material at his disposal to impugn the behaviour of the Catholic Establishment over Vietnam, which he produces both assiduously and cogently in building his argument - evidence such

as its belief in military force as the answer to Communism and the identification of national survival with continued Western hegemony in Asia, the fusing of US interests around the globe with 'an attitude to good, and God', Santamaria's subtle use and abuse of Papal utterances (notably John XXIII's famous 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*) to justify his pro-war position, indeed the 'passion for war' of Santamaria and the National Civic Council leadership, which included support for the 'ruthless crushing' of Buddhist dissidents in Vietnam itself.

For those who follow the anti-war creed, at least, Noone's thesis looks pretty conclusive. He is not a moraliser or a distributor of blame, however. *Disturbing the War*, he says, 'is an attempt to see the evil done as a collective problem, as a social sin'. Noone quotes Fowler's description of the US agent Alden Pyle in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* to illustrate the malign 'good intentions' of the warmongers: 'I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused ... Innocence is like a

dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.'

Disturbing the War, for all its passion, is soberly and almost overwhelmingly thoroughly researched, skipping (for example) from the circulation figures of the Catholic newspaper the *Advocate* through the thoughts and ideas of Thomas Aquinas, Max Weber and Ho Chi Minh in the course of a few pages. Sometimes the burden of quotation and reference becomes too much, and the reader wishes for more of the relaxed authorial opinion and the personal references that crop up in the text. Theological speculation, social history, political documentary, personal memoir, post-colonial critique - this book is a bit of everything. Does Noone try to do too much? Possibly. But this is a forgivable sin in a book which should disturb those seduced by the presently fashionable view that the Vietnam War was a Good Thing after all.

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