

State of the Art

Mysterious Ways Some Reflections on the “Religion, Literature and the Arts Project”, 1994-6.

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*“Sydney is cruel to the arts....”
Associate Professor Jim Tulip*

The city of Sydney has been variously characterised, but the substance of Jim Tulip’s observation is not generally acknowledged in the resulting portraits of Australia’s biggest and brashest city. Sydney is vital, colourful, multicultural, busy, progressive, tourist-friendly - but “cruel to the arts”? Surely not. This is the city where the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Australian Opera, the Australian Ballet, the Sydney Theatre Company, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and a myriad of small, community based, independent artistic and theatrical groups thrive. Yet perhaps Jim’s comment could be applied to the whole country - “Australia is cruel to the arts...”, in that the “Australian” character has traditionally neglected artistic (and intellectual) pursuits in favour of athletic and practical achievements.

While I am aware of the perils of generalisation, the lack of affection for

the arts in the Australian character is very probably linked to the Australian’s traditional “irreligiousness”. If Sydney is cruel to the arts, then Australia has traditionally been cruel to religion¹. It is in this secular setting that the remarkable achievement of the Religion, Literature and the Arts project needs to be celebrated, in that it has so successfully brought together these three closely related components of human culture in a community setting which promises much for the future.

The Religion, Literature and the Arts Project had a number of possible predecessors and points of origin. In talking with Jim Tulip, Head of the School of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, and with Michael Griffith of the Department of Literature and Languages, Australian Catholic University, these different threads emerged. There were three Easter

conferences organised by Professor Eric Sharpe (Studies in Religion, University of Sydney) and David Rumsey (Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney) with a particular focus on religion and music, in which local and visiting choirs and organists participated and settings such as the chapel of St Scholastica's, Glebe Point and Christ Church St Laurence, Broadway were utilised to great effect. There was the lay-oriented conference held at University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury) in 1992 which grew out of Jean Skuse's desire for Australia to have the equivalent of the German Kirchentag, an annual lay festival which draws crowds of 80,000. Jim Tulip had been at the University of Durham, UK, in 1989-90 and had experienced the conferences organised by David Jasper of the University of Glasgow, editor of the journal *Literature and Theology*, and a key figure for more than a decade in the bringing together of postmodern methodologies and theology. However, Jim's focus moved more towards a popular festival of Religion and the Arts when he began realising how many of the cultural attractions visiting Sydney were religious in orientation themselves (for example the dervish dancers receiving so much publicity at the 1996 Adelaide Festival and the Tibetan monks whose chanting enthralled Sydney in 1995).

Add to this already enticing mix the Rev'd Rod Pattenden's Institute for Theology and the Arts and its involvement with the Blake Prize for Religious Art, and it seemed almost inevitable that the first Australian International Conference on Religion, Literature and the Arts would debut at the Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, in January 1994. This academic

setting provoked Jim to observe that "Sydney is the home of individualists -but you don't go far without the help of the institutions!" An array of plenary speakers opened vast areas for fresh research and immediate encounters: Dr David Jasper, Director of the Centre for the Study of Literature and Theology, University of Glasgow spoke on "Art and the Biblical Canon"; Doug Adams, Professor of Christianity and the Arts, Pacific School of Religion, California, spoke on "Transcendence and the Visual: Seeing Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Contemporary Art"; Associate Professors Veronica Brady and Kevin Hart, both from Australia spoke on "Aboriginal Spirituality" and "Australian Religious Poetry"².

These addresses and the papers from the First Conference were gathered for publication and enthusiastic plans made for the Second Conference. The Blake Prize Exhibition formed the setting for the opening of the 1995 Conference, and the emphasis on the visual arts intensified. Jim Tulip commented that the "style" of the Conferences was still fluid, the organisers were "discovering the style of the community through trial and error". This Conference benefited from the discovery of Elizabeth Boothby, a local sculptor in steel. However, the keynote address which created the greatest uproar was John Carroll's "The Wreck of Art"³. The Conferences had thus far shown themselves as favourably inclined toward the cultural production of the twentieth century and postmodern methodology: with one superb flourish Carroll dismissed twentieth century visual arts - "the revolution Duchamp achieved was to prove total. Since his urinal, what the Western art galleries have put on is an endless series of variations of his credo,

usually ponderous, banal, humourless and, over the decades, showing a marked increase in technical ineptitude"⁴.

I was not at the 1995 Conference, but the thrill of horror that raced up my spine as I read the volume of proceedings made me wish I had been. Interestingly, Carroll's analysis of the Raphael "Sistine Madonna", as a morally coercive projection of truth⁵, brought to my mind the statement of Kandinsky: "...art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul -to, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle"⁶. Carroll may not feel sympathy for Kandinsky's art but there is a strong resemblance between their theoretical positions and their insistence on the spiritually uplifting quality of art. Michael Griffith's reflections on the conferences so far reinforce this position: he is concerned to point out that excessive concentration on theology and dogma remove the immediacy of religion, and that art offers ways of rekindling this immediacy.

The "ways of unknowing" advocated by the mystical representatives of religious traditions is, in Griffith's opinion, akin to the way of knowing found in imaginative literature, particularly poetry. It is an intuitive model rather than a cognitive model, and hence even quite secular poetry can ignite a sense of wonder and adventure. This sentiment is expressed in Robert Gray's poem "Testimony":

*What is most needed is...the
work of art that can restore us to our senses.
Our only paradise is the ordinary:
to be fed by what is really here.*

Perhaps the best way to bring the 1994 and 1995 Conferences alive for those who were not there is to review the volumes of proceedings which have been published⁸. These are both very surprising books, and in the best sense of "a surprise". Of course, I had quibbles (for example, it is not really good sense to print papers in order of the authors' surnames, and both volumes would gain from being organised thematically) but the overwhelming impression gained by the reader is of a very lively and stimulating community of scholars and practitioners producing work with appeal to a much wider audience than attendances at the conferences (healthy though they were) would indicate.

**M. Griffith and R. Keating (eds),
*Religion Literature and the Arts,
Australian International Conference
1994*, Sydney, 1994, RRP \$25.00, pp. v,
465.**

Editorial policy for the first volume was that all papers presented were welcomed for publication: there was no pruning, and abstracts were included where no paper was ready in time. Therefore there is a very broad spectrum of work, and papers often only address "religion" or "literature" or "the arts" - it is quite rare to find the nexus between all three being explored. The papers are generally very brief, and often leave the reader clamouring for a more in-depth examination. In the 1994 volume the principal themes of a substantial number of the papers were prefigured in the plenary sessions (Australian spirituality - Hart, Aboriginal spirituality - Brady, contemporary visual art - Adams, art and the Bible - Jasper).

Papers I thought worthy of special mention include: Elaine Lindsay's "Not the Desert Experience: Spirituality in

Australian Women's Fiction" (pp. 239-51) and Robert Lumsden "Poets, Poststructuralists, and the Numinous" (pp. 252-71) - though it is a very odd experience to read them sequentially!! As a medievalist I enjoyed Noelene Kidd's "Theology and Character in the Quest for Salvation in Piers Plowman and The Pilgrim's Progress" (pp. 195-200). Other important themes and tropes which emerged were multiculturalism, represented by V R N Prasad's "The Incredible Godmen and the Indian Literary Renaissance" (pp. 318-33) and Annalisa Orselli-Dickson "Vocation and Evocation: Faith and Poetry in Father David Maria Turoldo, Italy's Foremost Religious Poet" (pp. 289-97); the role of music, seen in Diane Gome's "19th Century Australian Hymn Publications as a Source for Religious and Cultural History" (pp. 136-45) and Tony Way's "Music and the Eucharistic Prayer: Differing Musical Responses" (pp. 439-47); religious architecture, with Geoffrey Sykes' "(Re)deeming the Modern: The Enigma of Henry Moore and St Stephen Walbrook" (pp. 386-94); and contemporary theoretical approaches, including feminist theory, with Carol Brewer's "Where is She?" (pp. 69-77).

M. Griffith and J Tulip (eds), *Religion, Literature and the Arts, 2nd Australian International Conference 1995, Sydney, 1996, RRP \$25.00 pp. iv, 362.*

The first volume showed the steps necessary for the development of a "house style" for the conferences, and showcased a remarkable array of talents, some more and some less disciplined. The second volume displayed the maturation of the project to advantage. Editorial policy tightened, with papers being scrutinised before being accepted

for publication. This volume has a strongly methodological and particularly post-modernist ambience, although it retains the reader-friendly quality of the first volume. Again the six plenary papers set the themes for the sessions: Australian literature and women - Veronica Brady; postmodernism (in an unusually clear exposition, which is comprehensible even to a novice in the field) - Mark C. Taylor; visual arts - John Carroll; idolatry and messianic Judaism - Rachael Kohn; literary critical New Testament interpretation Francis J. Moloney; and the heritage of romanticism - Stephen Prickett.

Papers continued to be organised by authors' surnames, recreating the queer sensation of reading two very good papers sequentially, such as John Godfrey's "And the School Dog is not the School Dog" (pp. 179-87) which explores the dilemmas of writing religious biography in the context of Adventism, and Gerard Goggin's "Imagoclasms: Iconologies Between the Body Corporate and the Machine Incarnate" (pp. 188-99) which discusses Esa Saarinen and Mark C Taylor's work on the virtual university and communications technologies, where the leap from one area to another is enormous, and strains the concentration. In this volume the literary critical papers were particularly strong: Michael Giffin's "Fanny and Epi-phany: Renewing the Drifting Church in Mansfield Park" (pp. 171-8) and Chris Watson's "Maps and Voyages in John Donne's Poetry"; and I also enjoyed Albert Moore's witty and learned "Not Just A Pretty Face: Saint Sebastian in Religious Iconography and Magical Transformation" (pp.249-57).

After reading these volumes avidly I became convinced that I must participate

in the 1996 Conference and accordingly I found myself in the beautiful and tranquil atmosphere of Sancta Sophia College at the University of Sydney (to which venue the conference had moved after two years with the Australian Catholic University) during January 18 to 21. The determinedly all-embracing and deliberately “non-academic” feel of the Conference was palpable - there was a feeling of fun and the desire to enjoy themselves among the nearly two hundred delegates. The opening plenary on the evening of Thursday 18 was Karen Armstrong questioning “Is God a Product of the Imagination?” I was unfamiliar with Armstrong’s work at the time, but it was obvious that we were in the presence of a star -and if one didn’t notice at the time, Friday’s Sydney Morning Herald article by Peter Fray “Bestselling Ex-Nun Preaches Atheism for God’s Sake”, complete with photograph, made it clear.

Armstrong’s assertions that imagination is the primary religious faculty and that Western Christendom has suffered as a result of its concentration on dogma (all in the head, with little room for the emotions) found a receptive audience. Michael Griffith congratulates her for her emergence from a religious order, and her ability to critique Western Christianity in an informed fashion, making it possible for Western Christians to be more critical about their religion and theology. He sees her emphasis on the imagination as a possibility for Western Christianity to re-connect with the body and experience, rather than stagnate in the head.

Armstrong’s concluding plenary “Jerusalem: the Problems and Responsibilities of Holiness for Jews, Christians and Muslims” discussed the roles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as

custodians of the holy city, and extended her earlier exposition of these three faiths, not least in her emphasis on the ways Muslims perceive Christian history (especially the Crusades) as barbaric and irreligious. She describes herself as a “freelance monotheist”⁹, but stresses that atheism is a religious position, and not just negatively (as it is frequently understood). Atheism, if it is “passionate” may be spiritually more satisfying and productive than “lazy and inadequate” theism¹⁰. Armstrong’s confidence was diminished when she considered religious traditions other than the three great monotheistic faiths (as was evidenced by her fielding of questions from the floor), but her vigorous and iconoclastic lectures gave the conference a lot to talk about.

It is very different to read a set of plenary and conference papers and re-create what the conference must have been like than it is to attend and be caught in the maelstrom of activities. With this article in mind, I searched for themes and meanings, and found instead a living process, one which was unable to be pinned down, classified and tidied. The visual content of several papers I attended was so vital that I realised the inadequacy of the traditional, picture-free published format. Elizabeth Isichei’s marvellous plenary “Religious Identity in the Poetry of James Baxter and the Art of Colin McCahon”, which brought the work of these two New Zealanders to my attention for the first time, will read adequately as a printed paper, but the inspirational journey through McCahon’s paintings will be lost in the transition.

The Conference thronged with literary and visual artists, musicians and dancers. Filmmakers Jill Carter-Hansen (“Messenger” and “Songs of the Immigrant Bride”) and Stephen Cross (“The Secret World of Odilon Redon”),

musicians and composers Gordon Monro and Nigel Butterley, writers Fay Zwicky, Noel Rowe and Sara Dowse, dancers Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter (whose Wing-It Performance Ensemble presented "The Power of Dance") created an atmosphere which differed vastly from the traditional "academic" conference¹¹.

My own presentation (on the satyr-play in ancient Greek drama) was in the opening session of participants' papers at 8.45 AM on Friday 19 January. Despite the early hour, it went well and I was delighted by the other participants in that session, Carolyn Muir, Head of Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong and John Fisher, from Visual and Performing Arts at the Australian Catholic University. Both their presentations relied heavily on visual material and again emphasised for me the difference between the written paper and the experienced presentation. Carolyn's "A Study in Iconography: St Catherine of Alexandria" presented versions of the saint's life, both textual and visual, from the Late Antique period to the Counter-Reformation. John analysed in detail the panels of the shutters of the reliquary of a local Sieneese "saint", Andrea Gallerani, in his "Image, Message, Viewer: Images of Sanctity in Thirteenth Century Italy".

Both Michael Griffith and Jim Tulip seem confident that the Religion, Literature and the Arts Project has another two conferences in it. Jim had planned all along for five, but now hopes that an annual event may result from the considerable momentum already gathered. In late 1996 and early 1997 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney is host to a large exhibition of contemporary religious art, which could provide a focal point for the 1997 Conference. The 1996 papers will be edited and published later in the year. Both Griffith and Tulip feel that the project is at a delicate stage - holding together the academic and the

artistic contributions requires thought, and the increased participation of the artistic community which both the organisers desire is another challenge. Yet, whatever direction the Project next moves in and however mysterious the course it charts, the Religion, Literature and the Arts Project is a triumph of energy, creativity and vision, and deserves our respect and admiration (and continued participation).

Notes

1. See Ian Gillman, *Many Faiths One Nation*, Sydney, 1988, Part 1 "Religion in Australian Life - An Exploration", pp. 3-58.
2. Michael Griffith, "The Religion, Literature and the Arts Nexus in Australia in the Nineties", *The Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol. LXXII, No. 4, October, 1995, p. 436.
3. M. Griffith and J. Tulip (eds), *Religion Literature and the Arts, Conference Proceedings, 2nd International Conference 1995*, Sydney, 1996, pp. 11-15.
4. *ibid*, p. 11.
5. *ibid*, pp. 13-4.
6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler, New York, 1977, p. 54.
7. Quoted in Griffith, "The Religion, Literature and the Arts Nexus", *op cit*, p. 441.
8. These are on sale for \$25.00 per volume or \$40.00 for the two from the School of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney, 2006, telephone 02-351 3650.
9. Peter Fray, "Bestselling Ex-Nun Preaches Atheism for God's Sake", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 19 January, p. 4.
10. *loc cit*
11. I mention only a selection of a huge range of artists, writers, musicians, dancers and academic presenters who were present at the conference, with no disparagement meant to anyone not mentioned.