

# Features

## Religion in Australia Responses to Patrick O'Farrell

In this first issue of the *Australian Religion Studies REVIEW*, continuity is affirmed with its predecessor the *AASR Bulletin*, with the following Responses to Professor Patrick O'Farrell's Keynote Address to the 1986 AASR Conference, published in the *AASR Bulletin* in March 1987.

### The Future of Australian Religion — A Response to Patrick O'Farrell

Ian Gillman  
University of Queensland

Patrick O'Farrell makes 'no apology for casting' the issues he raises 'in the form of a challenge to Christianity'. His paper is replete with issues to be taken seriously by the representatives of that faith in our midst — including me. But more to the immediate point for this response are the challenges he presents —

- to the AASR
- to scholars of religion in general in Australia, and
- to the self-understanding of Australians

O'Farrell considers that the AASR 'has not served me well', insofar as it has seemed to shy away from grappling with the 'many things about religion in this country I desperately wish and need to know'. He cites, in particular, the absence of any substantial attention in conferences to 'the study of irreligion and anti-religion' in Australia. On that he has a point. It is true that the emphasis on the non-Judaeo-Christian traditions has been predominant at conferences. The study of those other traditions has been left in the main to such bodies as the Australian Association for Theological Studies. The AASR has taken as its charter the non-

Judaeo-Christian traditions, as if not to do so was to call into question its *raison d'être*. In part this emphasis may have been seen as one way of establishing that the AASR was not just another learned theological society with but a side interest in the wider field of the history of religions. It may also be that links with the Charles Strong Foundation have encouraged this tendency, in that the Foundation's Lecturers are, by definition, required to focus on the non-Judaeo-Christian traditions.

I, for one, do not want to be as critical of this as is O'Farrell. The AASR is not the only forum within which the Judaeo-Christian tradition may be examined. However, he is right to alert us to the fact that we may well convey the impression that we have at best a peripheral concern with that tradition, and would not be all that worried if it had no representation at all on conference programmes. In other words the impression may be conveyed that we are actually the Australian Association for the Study of non-Judaeo-Christian Religions — and that would deny what our name claims.

On the other hand some of the publications of the AASR, or those inspired by it, like Alan Black and Peter Glasner's *Belief & Practice*, (Allen & Unwin, 1983), show substantial concerns for the place of Christianity in our national life. The membership list shows a considerable number with major interests in Judaism, Christianity, Biblical Studies,

Theology, Aboriginal and Australian Religion, and related fields. It may be that more sustained effort is needed by those with such interests to see that the results of their research are more adequately aired at conferences and in print.

But in itself this may well leave largely untouched the fact that little attention has been paid to the appearance and nature of irreligion and anti-religion in Australia. This phenomenon has a long history in our midst — indeed it was there from the outset of white settlement. That it needs documentation is very clear, and it may well be a theme taken up in a section or a plenary session at a future conference — in fact why not at this Bicentennial year conference in Brisbane?

Allied to criticism of the AASR is that of those who teach the various 'religious' subjects on offer at the tertiary level in Australia. Faced not infrequently with the on-campus suspicion that they are 'evangelists in drag' they respond quite naturally with a heavy stress on objective scholarship. While religious commitment, where it exists, is not denied, neither is it flagrantly displayed. (Much of this may well have had its roots in that secular tradition epitomised by the ban of the University of Melbourne from teaching or granting degrees in divinity or theology — fortunately a singular provision in Australia). However, my experience does not support the claim that those involved in such teaching are to be characterised generally as 'remote clinicians', caught up in a 'cult pursuit' in 'a small sub-culture ... totally irrelevant to the wider affairs of Australian life and culture'. I suspect that in this Professor O'Farrell relies on hearsay evidence rather than on first hand contact on a wide scale. This I say in spite of a degree of agreement that frequently curricula in such departments are set by concerns traditional in Europe and North America where many of the staff had at least their postgraduate training.

As for the roots of the attitude which regards religion as 'a joke ... a complete irrelevance', or of 'no consequence in the

counsels of the nation', I see these as pre-dating the decision to ignore religion in the establishment of Australian universities — as curiously understandable as this may have seemed at the time. The roots lie in the fact that virtually from 1788 onwards religion was regarded as a social utility — its role was that of a handmaid to individual morality, and, through such 'reformed' individuals, a useful social influence. Its value was seen also in areas of practical social service, and matters of principle, theological or liturgical, were of little consequence to a Phillip, a Macquarie, or a Menzies. What was of greater impact was public acceptance of liberal Benthamite utilitarianism, and the equation of this, along with certain neo-Stoic and Platonic ideas, with Christianity.

This equation was accepted by most church members, as well as by those whose 'Christianity' was no more than that of census identification. Sectarian squabbles, so called 'moral crusades', and the natural tendency to look for practical outworking and to be impatient with intellectualising led to a suspicion and rejection of religion as a matter of substantial temporal or eternal consequence. That 'divinity was at best' a fringe subject in only two Universities (Sydney and Queensland), taught almost wholly on a part-time basis and regarded with suspicion merely as a means of training clerics, did nothing for its status in the eyes of academia. Little wonder that those involved in this 'peripheral teaching' were keen to see that academic standards were, if anything, more rigorous than those in other areas of the humanities.

As to Professor O'Farrell's broader comments about Australia having become a multi-faith society, I could not be more in agreement. It is indeed a glaring blind-spot that for all the talk about multi-culturalism little, if any, notice has been taken of the multi-faith implications of such a situation. It may be obvious to the residents of Lakemba, Woolgoolga, or Helensburgh, but most Australians and their governments seem oblivious of this.

A very recent request from the Office of Multi-cultural Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department to the AASR for some assistance in this area came with an impossible deadline — the sort of deadline which guaranteed that nothing useful could be done. As a consequence the publications which resulted have no substantial reference to the multi-faith situation which confronts us. They are content with 2 or 3 platitudinous references to the fact that opportunity should be open to all irrespective of such issues as religion.

However, to have been faced with a 25th hour request which it could not meet, is no reason for the AASR to decide that it will take its marbles and go home. It may well be a major area of social responsibility for the Association to set about building awareness in Australia and helping Australians to understand the situation which already exists and to deal constructively with it. In another way then the AASR could be seen as less of an academic fox hole in which to take refuge from the real world.

There is not a little experience to call upon out of our past as a people. We were beset with Protestant-Catholic fears and resentments for much of our history, but fortunately weathered these without too many physical casualties. The situation in this field is now vastly improved and mutual respect is widespread, albeit not yet universal. It may be little more than wishful thinking, but it is to be hoped that out of the experiences of common schooling and even of propinquity those of various faiths will learn to live together as have those of various denominations. This is said along with the recognition that some bring to Australia religious, political and national commitments which may daunt older Australians and even cause considerable alarm — as did those related to understandable Irish resentments in days gone by. We have no need of attitudes and practices, which however relevant to other situations, will be disruptive of social harmony, and O'Farrell is right to alert us to this — although I find that his approach

is less open than might be helpful to anything but the 'prevailing and accepted traditional Australian religious orthodoxies'.

A sign of our maturity as a people, largely fashioned in our past by aspects of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, may well be an openness to learn, as part of the process of accommodation, to examine inherited viewpoints more rigorously than we have ever had to do before — our 'Judaeo-Christian ghetto' days are gone. Clearly, widespread understanding will be at a high premium, and out of it a readiness to stand alongside those who grieve, for example, out of whatever religious and cultural background they come. Readiness to understand and to be flexible enough to accommodate as wide a range of customs and sensibilities as are amenable with the general well being of the whole community is a necessity — rather than the arrogant demand that all conform with that with which most of us are comfortable.

To conclude by returning to where we began, O'Farrell has joined others in identifying a significant area of growth in the sphere of religion in Australia. At first there is indeed something quite startling in the increase between 1967 & 1986 from 0.3% to 12.8% of the population who declare on census returns that they have 'No Religion'. The number of those who decline to answer the question, as is their right, has remained at about 11% over the same period. There are real problems about simply adding the figures from any one year together, as does O'Farrell, and in concluding from this that acknowledged religious disbelief or indifference marks about 1 in 4 Australians. On the other hand such a ratio sells short the number of those whose overall stance towards formal and institutional religious belief and practice is apathy and/or antagonism. The fact that currently at least 40% of marriages in Australia are performed by civil celebrants is probably a much more accurate guide to the real situation. So I doubt that what is being re-

vealed in census forms is anything but the tip of the iceberg.

What we sample here is a situation which has been hidden from general view for probably as long as Europeans have lived in Australia. Of course, pockets of settlers here and there would have given the lie to such a claim. But the overall picture is of a people the majority of whom, while ready to admit to 'belief in a God' and to deny atheism, are loath to take this further into commitment to and support for those institutions which lay claim to 'God-believers'. What has become clearer in the last few decades, in part because of changes in the census forms themselves, is closer to the actual situation. No longer do the same number of people feel social pressure to affirm beliefs or memberships which they do not in fact hold or exercise in any effective way. To amend O'Farrell's trenchant comment

'dissent is not so much dissent *within* Christianity as dissent *from* Christianity'.

The roots of such dissent, its manifestations, its growth, and its implications all demand study. Such a task certainly is within the charter of the AASR and it is surely time that it was addressed. Our thanks to Professor O'Farrell for his reminder and his insights.

## A Response to Patrick O'Farrell

Norman Habel

S.A. College of Advanced Education

Patrick's play on Pyke's term 'dissent' is a happy one. Today 'dissent' from the mainstream by active devotees is somewhat rare. Religion is no longer part of the public ethos in politics or education.

"Religion is between me and me God." To speak about God in relation to the economy, government policy, the press or futurology is to speak out of turn. Even the avowed Christian tends to keep Christ to

himself or herself. To dissent is to speak up about one's faith or Lord in public or the pub. The popular response will probably be 'pull your head in.' And the devotees of the many faiths, with but few exceptions, have been pulling in rather than dissenting! And I agree with Patrick that the atrophy of religious or spiritual values in Australian society deserves serious study. What has taken their place?

As Patrick suggests, space and distance may have been a fortuitous circumstance which kept early groups from experiencing some of the conflicts of other compact communities. Yet, I recall from my youth, Patrick, that we Lutherans and you Catholics were at loggerheads. The battle of the Reformation was still being fought in our pulpits. We would not pray with you; you worshipped 'another God.' Thankfully that has changed. But at what cost? Proximity is not the basis of the change. Something else has taken the fire out of the faith we once fought for with such fervour! Tolerance has become indifference. What has caused this change in attitude?

True, irreligion and the broad hedonistic philosophy of life which marks the premature move of Australians into a post-industrial society are indeed challenges for the Christian Church. Religious bodies, which tend to be conservative, are in danger of being left in another world if the rate of social and economic changes predicted by futurologists such as Herman Kahn and Daniel Bell continues apace. Religious miracles can no longer match technological marvels; to denounce multinationals as Mammon is likely to have little effect. Whence religion in the international economy?

The need to explore the multi-religious in the context of the multi-cultural is evident. The question at issue is the purpose of such a study. To understand the phenomenon? Indeed! To work toward a government policy maintaining the rights of religious groups to dissent from the irreligious public *Weltanschauung* of Australia? Perhaps! To give the total reli-

gious community courage to assert itself collectively? Less likely. To create a lobby for producing effective responses or initiatives of an academic, political or social nature? Worth considering! Given, as Patrick notes, the poor intellectual repute of religion in Australia, a conference of all religious groups to address the issues of their collective role in Australia would be a notable first. It is doubtful whether the AASR, with its academics interested in personal fields of research, would ever take up such a challenge.

Patrick is justified in lamenting the withdrawal of any serious study of religion in the public educational systems. The vision of the mid-seventies, which brought many of us back to Australia, that religion was to be a required component of the school curriculum, faded quickly. The teachers were protective of their own fields, the churches were suspicious and the educational leaders succumbed to other more practical dreams. And I would agree, that the religion courses at the various colleges and universities have relatively little interaction with the religious bodies of Australia and even less impact on the wider affairs of Australian life and culture. But then, Religion Studies and Religious Education, as something other than a denominational exercise, are new phenomena in Australia. The question is whether, given this dissent from religion, the wider study of Religion has arrived too late to gain the intellectual respectability demanded to speak effectively on public issues.

Perhaps, as Patrick suggests, religion has been more quietly significant than we realise. "Quietly" is certainly the operative word today. And maybe religion is a sleeping giant, waiting for the barbs of anti-religion to wake her. Certainly we appreciate the barbs of Patrick himself reminding us that an Association obsessed with academic trivia will contribute little to the understanding and voice of religion as part of the cultural world of Australia. A major study of religion and society

would be a worthy focus for the Association in the future.

I have appreciated the reflections of Patrick on the role of Religion in Australia's past and its malaise in the present. I would like to have read more projections or agendas for the future ... as the title of the article suggests. But that is a minor cavil. More important is the future of 'dissent,' not as an *apologia* but as engagement of religion with society.

### Is there an Australian religion? A reply to Prof. O'Farrell

Klaus-Peter Koepping  
Baldwin Spencer Professor  
of Anthropology  
School of Asian Studies  
Melbourne University

In his keynote address to the Australian Association for the Study of Religions in 1986, Prof. O'Farrell discusses some very provocative ideas in the context of religious studies and religious life in Australia. Some of the main points he contends that scholars of religious affairs are neglecting, are 1) the rejection of religion by growing numbers, 2) the degeneration of the study of religion from personal commitment to scholarly distance, 3) the increase of non-Christian topics at religious conferences, 4) the excision of serious religious studies from the educational system, 5) the impotence of religion in affairs of state and religion's poor intellectual repute, and 6) the danger of ideologies being fused with certain religious beliefs or denominations which go against the traditional grain of Australian cultural orthodoxy.

There are many more challenging and thought-provoking points emerging from the address, but these six points, which I think are clearly interrelated, should be debated in depth, not only because they are the *raison d'être* of this society, but also

because they lie at the heart of the very question, "what is religion, how do we define it, in which way do we or should we approach it?" Before going into these six points, I would like however to question the very title of the address itself, for it reveals a certain uneasiness and ambivalence.

The title speaks of "Australian Religion": this seems to imply an unusual understanding of the manifestations of religion. Do we have or do we ever speak of German religion, Indian religion, Japanese religion, or French religion? In the case of Germany and France the answer is absolutely clear: we do not use such designations. In the case of India and Japan, all the literature can do is to refer to "Japanese religions" or "Indian religions", or to specify the particular creed or denomination, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Shinto etc. in the same way as we speak of Protestantism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the Euro-American context. The notion of German or Australian religion implies that a national entity shares a certain culture, identifiable pattern of language and behaviour, beliefs and actions, and that it shares a "religion", indeed that this cultural sharing *is* a religion.

The only way we can condone such a loose usage of 'religion' is in a very "secularized" and actually metaphorical way, when we are discussing the core of ultimate values shared by a group who identify as a group. Through this common culture and the shared values, members identify each other, demarcate themselves from outsiders and other groups, and legitimate through a value-rational commitment their social mores, their customs, their way of life, their very distinctiveness and identity.

To call such a value-system a religion is rather misleading, as normally we reserve such a term for value-systems which find their ultimate legitimation in a non-human, super-human, supernatural, ideal world of forms, of divinity or in the laws of the universe, in personal or impersonal forces which are assumed to govern natu-

ral, including human, affairs, controlling life and death, birth and fate, forces which have once and for all laid down the laws governing social and natural life. These ordinances are re-enacted, re-created or commemorated in ritual and put to memory in sacred texts, epics and poetry.

In other words, religion always refers to the sacred realm as opposed to the secular human and natural realms, though this dichotomy is not always easy to delineate. Through ritual many acts and forms of utterances which are normally secular become sacred. The religious rules adhered to by a group are conceived by that group as divinely decreed *in illo tempore*, or given as revelation through divine inspiration to humans until the existing present.

There can thus be no such thing as an 'Australian religion', not even in the beginnings, not even in the beginnings of South Australia. It is certainly true that many shared the belief in the Paradise of Dissent, in the antipodean possibility of an Edenic new beginning, with the hope of the improvement and perfection of mankind at a pristine place. The Lutherans from Prussia who left because of state persecution shared this hope and millennial expectation with their benefactor and economic supporter George Fife Angas: but the motives of a diversity of German ethnic sub-groups with distinct pietist or Lutheran beliefs and the almost Calvinist creed of Angas that money and influence are only worthwhile when used for the greater glory of God, did not of themselves create an Australian religion. Already in the first few decades of its existence as colonial outpost of the imperial power of England, Australia was riddled with interdenominational strife between Anglicans, Catholics and Protestant denominations. Even within such a community enterprise as that of the German migration to South Australia no consensus of a religious kind existed, a situation which was neatly described in 1938 by one of the historians of the South Australian German Church, Theodor

Hebart. Such schism was expectable, as the Germans who later formed the Lutheran Church of Australia were homogeneous neither in regard to religion, politics nor cultural background. As Hebart says, in the South Australia of the 1840s, the bells pealed messages to their parishioners: "We are the Church", say the Catholics; "No, you are not", retorts the Church of England, and Hebart continues: "The Congregational bells announce merrily 'Independent'; the Methodists beg, 'Collection, please'".

Hebart in 1938 gives a beautiful example of the apologetics of dissent when he insists that the Lutheran Church stood "firmly...on the solid ground of the fundamentals, and therefore never ceased to proclaim Christ as the One who died for the salvation of sinners". And he continues: "This is all the more astonishing as the Lutheran Church was surrounded by Churches which to a marked degree gave way to modernism". Each could proclaim *The Way* and did so.

O'Farrell sees that dissent leads to strife, and Australia was no exception: whoever believes in the perfectibility of man, and risks persecution for his brand of perfectness and his ways to gain such, is prone to be not only dogmatic, but righteous, belligerent and aggressively exclusive. To speak of anything like "Australian religion" is therefore a daring feat of muddled historical discontinuities. The only Australian religion existing in 1800, thousands of years before, and still with us is the religious system of the Aborigines, if one can generalize the rituals and beliefs of a diversity of groups under one umbrella. The only other way to describe "Australian religion" would perhaps be to declare that "everybody has the right to become a saint in his own fashion", a view which the enlightened and sceptical atheist Frederik the Second of Prussia held, as long as all the saints were also good citizens of the nation-state.

Is it possibly this hopeful idyll that Australians of all backgrounds originally held one faith which makes O'Farrell un-

easy about the multitude of topics which at a religious conference are interpreted as dissent from Christianity? I would maintain that the very concept of a thoroughly Christian Australia is itself a wishful image which people under threat from outside, such as during world-wars, might have believed as an ideological expedient but, other than in confrontation, or on Lambing Flats, it has never existed. To speak, as O'Farrell does, of dissent in regard to other creeds and denominations of non-Christian derivation gives the impression that these religions only exist and can only be discussed in the light of such a confrontation. This is, if not imperialist thinking, at least suffused with a strong dose of soteriology and messianism, as if these others are only worthy of discussion because they are different from Christianity, as if they only exist *in order* to become a fencing ground for Christian thinking, a reminder to consider God or our own souls. But several of these systems of belief and ritual existed thousands of years before Christianity, and it is only through the Christian emphasis on the *One* way of salvation that difficulties arise. Otherwise, one could dispassionately discuss otherness in religious and in other contexts for that matter.

This brings me to the second point of challenge: what about these anti-religious feelings, irreligiosity or rejection of religion, which O'Farrell assumes from the shrinkage in the denominational count and census-declarations? As he has himself rightly seen, many other cults have grown over the last few decades in Australia, the evangelical and charismatic movement has increased in giant strides, and figures are still notoriously unreliable.

Is it not perhaps a sign that people begin to perceive denominational adherence as irrelevant, beyond their true wants and needs? Can it not rather be a dissatisfaction with the message proclaimed in institutionalized churches? And is somebody who professes not to belong to any denomination necessarily non-religious or anti-religious? To put the question more

specifically and at the same time more generally: is a Marxist-Leninist necessarily non-religious? What about the philosophers of the Enlightenment? As Karl Löwith has so long ago quite cogently pointed out, Marx may be seen as one of the most religious men of 19th century Europe, and the same is certainly true of pietist enlightenment thinkers like Herder, or even professed atheists like Voltaire. All of them believed in the improvability of mankind, in the admittedly rational organisation of human affairs, as did many Renaissance thinkers, as did Plato.

Yet it is inconceivable that these systems of values could have been created without recourse to or the background of the Christian message. No Hegel could have thought out his dialectic without the messianic message of the saviour, without the idea of the teleological foundation of nature and history, and nor could the advocates of an ethics of natural law and natural justice. As Gluckman pointed out, even the Lozi kingdom of Central East Africa in its justice system had recourse to the ultimate legitimation of the law of nature and to the ultimate definition of a human person as one who had kinship-laws, which implies an ultimate grounding of the social order in original times. The sceptic, like the Mephistophelean devil in Goethe's *Faust*, might say: "I hear the message, but I lack belief in it": this does not make the devil irreligious. To sum up this point: I am very sceptical about any claim to irreligiosity or anti-religious feelings or the imputation of such to people.

It is a completely different matter from the issue of religion/irreligion, if denominational and institutional religion wanes: that still does not say anything about the religiosity of people nor about the conduct of their life not being guided by ultimate principles. Certainly we will find the pragmatist, the opportunist and the power-hungry among us: each society has criminals too. I am not sure what ideal O'Farrell is hinting at: but my suspicion from his text is that he yearns for the per-

fect world in which religion (which he does not define) of one particular kind dominates all spheres of life. But those imagined theocratic times of ancient Mexico, of Mesopotamia and possibly in Aboriginal Australia are no more, for social differentiation brings about the segmentation of concerns, of values, of goals and of the means to achieve diverse goals.

Maybe people have matured in their belief as well as in their rational debunking of authoritarianism; and let us not forget that this individualistic streak is also one of the markers of the Australian historical heritage, or at least a wishful and still powerful ideal image for many Australians. Trends which O'Farrell doubtless perceives as signs of decline may also be taken as signs of freeing ourselves from the era of nonage to become more enlightened about our own selves. This does not necessarily have to lead into hedonism and the pursuit of material happiness or an aggressive free for all society. The very pluralistic make-up of Australia has taught us much about getting along without impinging on the others' cherished beliefs. We may enjoy ethnic festivals, wonder that parts of the Australian public have become more open and accommodating than the ethnocentric ocker of yore. Multi-religiosity is but one facet of this.

There are other issues in this paper which worry me. I cannot see what relation the move from a philosophical to an emotional religion can have to the waning of the power of religious thought over the counsels of the nation, and secondly I cannot see at all why as O'Farrell put it, "the evangelical, individualist and charismatic swing", which may be an empirical fact, should be looked at negatively. Is this movement not one of personal commitment? And why should only philosophical religion be of interest? Does O'Farrell seriously think that the protagonists of diverse denominations in the 19th and early 20th century in Australia, when pushing the Irish or English bandwagon, were intellectually

our betters? I think that on the contrary overall Australian scholarship in religion has considerably improved over those pious and interest-governed — one hesitates to use the term — theologians, cum preachers and powerbrokers of the past. It may certainly be true that a united denominational force may have had more clout in political affairs, because they played as interest-groups in political circles, were parties in their own right. The emergence of personal religion which does not follow the dictates of Papal or other authorities may indeed not have the power of block-votes: does that diminish it?

The third issue is closely related to this conundrum: I cannot see why O'Farrell insists that the removal of religion from the educational structures imposed, as he put it, "a gradual degradation on the intellectual level of that interest". In another paragraph he deplores the fact that scholars, intellectuals *par excellence* I would have thought, approach religion from a dispassionate angle, not from one of commitment. Well, we cannot have it both ways here. The removal of religious debate from educational institutions does not necessarily need to lead to degradation. Religion as a personal concern (maybe with important social functions) about the ultimate meaning of life, of nature and mankind, of the interrelations between people, and people and the environment, will, if withheld from the intellectual disciplines, flourish in personal belief, commitment to and attendance at places where religion is preached and practiced. People will still go to their congregations, their priests and pastors, and will, if they are serious about it, try to lead a life according to precepts into which they are born or which they have joined.

Intellectual debate and personal commitment to faith have something in common: they depend on each other, but are very different forms of discourse, as it is labeled nowadays. But I would see commitment and detachment in a different relationship than is implied by O'Farrell.

If we want informed intellectual debate, as we had for over 2000 years, on exegesis and meaning, on salvation and afterlife, on the right way to live, on tolerance and commitment and their intellectually insoluble contradictions which each and all of us have to solve in our own way in living and co-existing with other human beings, then we do *not* have to be committed to what we discuss. We may be committed to some form of religious belief, but we could discuss other forms of belief without always having recourse to our own belief — though we might actually understand the other better by recourse to our own commitment, indeed we might wake up to what our own commitment really is when encountering the other. The theologian is not necessarily a better theologian because he is committed to a particular brand of belief: it may take the committed believer, especially one with wobbly foundations, *more* effort actually to discuss religion on an intellectually satisfying basis, without recourse to the scriptural texts of his particular belief system, because he has to gain perspective, to examine his own unquestioned, taken-for-granted system of assumptions, prejudices and principles. This confrontation is indeed easier when stirred through the encounter with Outside, with Otherness.

Simmel's image of the stranger is still one of the most potent when extended to this dilemma: strangeness and nearness, distance and passion, commitment and detachment are inextricably intertwined, dialectically indivisible, if our aim is understanding and empathy with and for the other, as well as of and for ourselves. Without self-love we will not be able to extend love to others, and without experience of love from outside (from other people or from the totally other source of divinity) we will never be able to love ourselves. And without love for the subject matter, not necessarily belief in it, commitment to canons of rationality, debate and intellectual honesty, we will not know what it means to believe, to suspend judgement: Kant knew this very well.

I do not at all understand why it would matter that courses on the Reformation are not always 'religious'. Indeed, I do not know what 'religious' is supposed to mean in this context. For me, it would be as valid and as religious to speak in such context of the social conditions and cultural parameters which brought the reformation movement about, or in which it was intellectually embedded, as to read the *Encomium Morise* of Erasmus as an inroad toward an understanding of desperate believers, religious men and women who did not like what they saw happening. Should we not mention the atrocities committed by the early Church in Asia Minor against non-believers or other creeds and contrast them with the high point of tolerance of Arab courts at which Jewish theologians and philosophers could breathe, while the very same Jews were put in body and book to the autodafé as soon as the Holy Mother Church reconquered the areas? What about the Bull of Tordesillas concerning the sub-human nature of Non-Christians of the Americas? I am sure O'Farrell does not intend this, but it can be a logical extension of this plea.

Commitment might take many different forms. I do not know what a religiously committed person should teach, but I do say that any atrocity of mankind against its own should be pointed out as inhuman, by whomever it was committed. It is the very sign of commitment to the ultimate value of human life, for instance, to be able to distance ourselves from our own cherished beliefs in our own heritage, history and culture to the extent that we are able to point to the inhumanities committed by dogmatists of our own ilk. But then for this stance I do not have to be a believer in religious truth; I can be a rationalist who agrees with Voltaire or Herder or Bentham or others of our Enlightenment past, a past which is still, at least for scholars if not for statesmen, a cornerstone of our social order. Yet again, it is obvious that the deification of Reason has led mankind to as many atrocities as

has the worship of institutional religious power or of dogmas of faith. We may have to remain inconsistent to a certain extent: yet the mark of scholarship is the commitment to the truth, and that commitment should be more than an intellectual play with logical niceties or oratorical skills. More than formal, scholarship should be emotional. The scholar's commitment is one to the emancipatory power of dialogue with other people, whether he is a religious believer or not. Knowledge and faith need not be united: they operate in very different frames of discourse, one in the realm of ultimate Truth, the other in the realm of the rational and emotive sphere of humanity. The danger for the intellectual debate arises when the commitment to the search for knowledge as a means toward emancipation from bondage, nonage and authoritarian submission is replaced by mental fireworks of the circus-show, when ecstatic delivery pandering for audience applause (with the obligatory "in-jokes") becomes the means for self-gratification.

Yet commitment to belief does not preclude intellectual doubt: the theologian Bultman makes this clear. We may be aware from our experience of social life that it is impossible to have both equality and freedom, yet we are still able to hope for the ideal. We may intellectually believe it impossible to have social life without hierarchy and order, but we may still believe in the ideal of non-hierarchical social relations. As Kolakowski once said, we may think it right to hold up the laws of the state, but if we see a neighbour enjoying a forbidden food, we may cherish the value of the neighbour's friendship higher than the value of upholding the laws of the state. We are all rather inconsistent, and thus very human, in having our personal value-hierarchies. Yet living in a pluralist society, it is difficult to imagine a state authority subscribing to any specific value-hierarchy; as religions and denominations themselves squabble about rights and wrongs, we cannot fault the state for not subscribing to "religious values".

The intellectual's prerogative and brief is to be critical, to have distance, to be a disinterested observer. Otherwise no theologian could in good faith turn the phrases of the prophets over and over in order to for instance discover similarities of textual form, of fore-runners, of similarities to, let us say, other prophetic writings in the Near East in the times of the Old Testament. This does not mean that belief has to degenerate. It may flourish and find expression in communal worship and sacrificial participation, whether people participate because they cherish human contact or the reaffirmation of their social nature, or whether they do it because they cherish the holy sacraments as re-union with the divine.

Let me close by noting that O'Farrell has put his finger on a timely concern. Scholarly discussions of religious matters have in general not progressed very far, for we still live off the conceptual capital of our masters, Weber, Durkheim, Troeltsch, Bultman or the Church Fathers, yet, measured against their achievements, the plethora of papers at some conferences can seem trivial, repetitive and in the worst case irrelevant, ignorant, or both. But this is not a particularly Australian problem or one of Religious Studies alone. With the explosion of teaching positions, the increasing number of people achieving higher educational degrees, the quality of a time when only one in ten thousand would have become a reasonable scholar cannot be expected to be retained. Not every parish-priest can be a great preacher and thinker like Thomas Aquinas or Luther; not every believer can be as committed as a martyr, and not every religious experience can match Theresa of Avila, Juan de la Cruz or Hildegard of Bingen.

All these points should be widely discussed, certainly at conferences of Religious Studies. This reply to some of O'Farrell's points is not intended as insult *ad personam*, but should be seen as genuine concern for a debate, a passionate one, I would hope, but also a disinterested one. It is not so much the questions which

O'Farrell raises and short-comings he implies which aroused my interest. What I miss in his remarks are any *unqualified* statements as to his own preferences, beliefs, definitions and solutions. His address left me hanging in the air looking for one definite honest statement of "what I think should be done".

It is not enough to toss out such statements as (on multi-religiosity of conference topics): "And a good thing too, I hear you say. Why is it a good thing? A good thing or otherwise, what are the implications and consequences for this culture in this place and time?" No direct answer is given by O'Farrell. Is it a good thing to talk about Shinto and Buddhism on a par with Christianity? I gather, he means to say, "no, I wish it were not, even though I must/should say it is". He later declares that he wishes Australia to remain a plural society. How can we truly exercise pluralism, if we do not put Buddhism on par with Christianity?

---

## Response to Patrick O'Farrell

John D'Arcy May  
Irish School of Ecumenics  
Dublin

Patrick O'Farrell's 1986 keynote address was both timely and useful, though his strictures on the AASR are not entirely justified. To have provided the forum for significant discussion and publishing in areas such as the place of the land and of women in Australian Aboriginal religion or the role of Asian religions in the cultures of some of our most important neighbours is no mean achievement. But this type of praise begs one of Professor O'Farrell's main questions: "Why is it a good thing" to treat Christianity "on a par" with other world faiths, and why is "dissent from Christianity" apparently a matter of indifference to students of 'religion in general' or 'any religion except Christianity'? More reflection is obviously

in order, and I am grateful to have been asked to help the process along.

My ability to comment on the study of religion in Australia, however, is severely limited by my 20 years of exile. But perhaps if readers whistle the recent hit tune *From a distance...* under their breath as they proceed, the following remarks may be seen in their proper perspective. Indeed, it is largely due to the publications and conferences of the AASR that I have been able to keep in touch at all with the development of religion and the study of religion in Australia. After a trip home in 1977, during which I discovered the AASR shortly after its foundation and visited some of the departments of religious studies already existing in a number of capital cities, I was so enthusiastic that I published an article on it in a German periodical after my return. It was entitled *Der Lotos in der Wüste* ("The Lotus" — the study of religious traditions whose unfamiliarity makes them appear exotic — "in the Desert" — of Australian social and intellectual secularism). Re-reading this in the light of Professor O'Farrell's address and subsequent experience of AASR, I find some of the issues I touched on even more relevant now than they were then.

One point I raised, however, has by now become such a cliché that one hesitates to repeat it: I saw Australia in the throes of a search for identity and the burgeoning study of religion in that context. In this bicentenary year the Australian identity crisis seems further along the road to resolution than it was in 1977, at least if the glowing documentaries cluttering the screens of British and Irish television, the omnipresence of Clive James's bland witticisms and the triumph of Dame Edna Everage are any indication of confident self-projection. A growing interest in local — and colonial — history was one expression of this need to define an Australian identity; the other was an increasing awareness of our incongruity in the Pacific context into which that history had unceremoniously dumped us. Since then I have come to see the Pacific as the new

Mediterranean: not a barrier but a bonding agent, a watery membrane through which an entirely unprecedented osmosis of cultures is taking place. Australia is part of that; being part of that is perhaps the most exciting thing about contemporary Australia; and, as Professor O'Farrell rightly brings to the attention of us students of religion, "this fact of life" makes inescapable demands on the universities and the intellectual community — not least the Christian churches.

It is at this point that I feel able to bring my highly diverse experiences at an ecumenical institute in a German university and at the Melanesian Institute in Papua New Guinea to bear on the study of religion in Australia and thus to come to grips with some of the issues pinpointed by Professor O'Farrell. The Federal Republic of Germany has been reluctant to acknowledge that it has become a country with significant and steadily growing immigration, particularly for Muslim Turks (one and a half million, 57% of whom are there to stay) and Yugoslavs (half a million, 78%; Dieter Oberndörfer in the *Rheinischer Merkur*, 29.1.1988). In the seventies there was much talk about the social responsibility of the universities, but whereas the theology faculties were among the most activist in taking up this challenge and the most sophisticated in their intellectual response to it, other traditional disciplines such as history and *Religionswissenschaft* were among the slowest to evolve new methodologies in both teaching and research. In Australia, where the recently expanded colleges of divinity affiliated to universities are only remotely comparable to the theology faculties traditional in most European universities, most of the burden of mounting the response to a multi-religious society falls on the departments and programmes of Religious Studies which cooperate in AASR. This comparison helps us to identify the deficiency pointed out by Professor O'Farrell: the academic study of religion and religions, even when the resources of philosophy and the social

sciences are brought to bear on it, does not of itself result in adequate analysis of the ways in which 'insiders' and 'outsiders' with respect to the various religious communities involved perceive and influence one another's values and beliefs, as N. Ross Reat has illustrated in a well known article (JAAR 51 (1983) 459-476).

In Papua New Guinea, with AASR member Garry Trompf as comrade-in-arms, I became involved in attempts to re-establish religious studies in the history department of the University of Papua New Guinea. It is not without relevance for our topic that I found myself doing this on behalf of the Melanesian Council of Churches and the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools. Admittedly, I had my work cut out explaining to some people in the churches that what was envisaged was not simply Christian doctrine but the study of Melanesian and other Pacific religious traditions and preparing the ground for the eventual inclusion of Islam and Asian and African religion. But the major obstacle was the ingrained hostility of some Australians in the university to any study of any religion under university auspices. This attitude seemed to me not only singularly inappropriate in a new nation confronted by the ethical dilemmas inherent in independence and development and deeply involved in the interaction of Christian with indigenous religious traditions, but quite simply anachronistic. No one seriously engaged in business or politics, development or even tourism in today's global environment can afford to be without an adequate understanding of the religious traditions touched by his or her enterprise. To profess enlightened interest in multi-culturalism to the exclusion of multi-religiousness, as Professor O'Farrell rightly points out, is myopic in the extreme.

But what of those who are committed to the study of religion yet have complexes about their Christianity? The complexity of Christian missionary zeal in colonialism and what Professor O'Farrell justly calls "a profound movement away

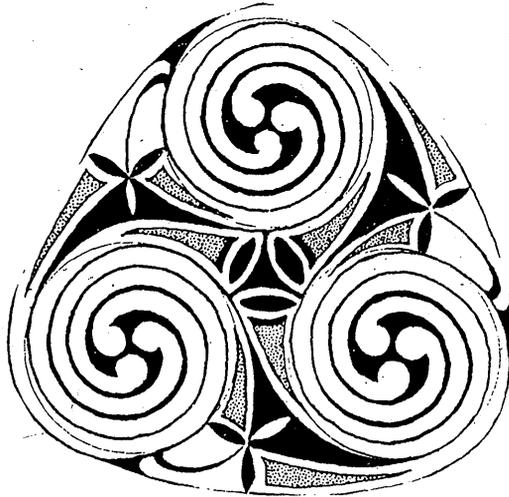
from philosophic religion to emotional religion" are not in themselves reasons for elevating value-neutrality and the scientific objectivity of "remote clinicians" to the status of an ideology whilst dismissing the extraordinarily fruitful problematic introduced into the study of religion by Christian theology under the guise of eschewing "judgements... on the truth value of any religion, tribal or universal" (from the religious studies programme of an Australian CAE). Every religious tradition has its equivalent of what Christians call theology, a hermeneutic immanent in its ways of formulating, adapting and passing on its beliefs and crucially concerned with questions of ultimate meaning and truth. I fail to see how any of them can be adequately studied outside the framework of a comparative hermeneutics. The rise of fundamentalism, in particular, whether in Christian, Muslim or other contexts, turns on just such questions of the self-interpretation of traditions, and far from dampening interest in the study of religion it presents a peculiarly fascinating intellectual challenge which is only reluctantly being taken up. The immense resources at the disposal of Christian theology are still concentrated in the West, thus seriously distorting attempts at 'dialogue', but its centre of gravity is steadily shifting to Latin America, Asia and Africa, and the resulting effort to reformulate faith constitutes one of the most formidable intellectual enterprises of our time. Why should the lessons being learned here be withheld from those engaged in the study of modern Buddhism or Islam under the pretext of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'? Professor O'Farrell does not actually accuse the AASR of aiding and abetting such obscurantism, and neither do I, but it can be sensed lurking in the background.

The upshot of all this would seem to be that there should be a discipline which transcends the entirely artificial divide between 'theology' (and its equivalents) and 'religious studies' (as a squeaky clean, *bona fide* enlightened pursuit). Secure possession of such a discipline would obviate

most of Professor O'Farrell's criticism of the way in which religion is being studied in Australia at present. It would operate in the area scientists call 'basic research' (and Germans *Grundlagenforschung*). It would have to maintain a high level of abstraction while meeting Professor O'Farrell's demands for intelligibility and 'relevance'. For my own idiosyncratic reasons I have begun calling this as yet inchoate discipline 'ecumenics', and now that I have become established at the Irish School of the same in Dublin I find myself straddling daily the diminishing gap between intra-christian dialogue, inter-religious dialogue and social ethics whilst negotiating with a

British university to assist in integrating peace and conflict studies into this already demanding programme. If this is possible in the constricting religio-political atmosphere of Ireland, what should be possible in Australia's multi-religious society and Pacific context?

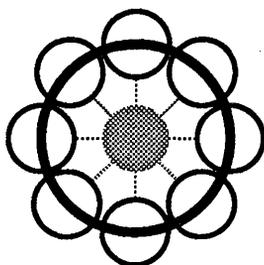
The pioneers of both dissent from religion and religion as dissent were not Nietzsche, Marx and Freud but Gautama, Jesus and Muhammad. In our study of religious traditions let us not become entangled all over again in elitism and sectarianism; let us aspire to their level of both criticism and vision.



**THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS  
13th ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

**The Women's College, University of Queensland**

**1 - 4 September 1988**



*Papers are invited for the following sections:*

**Anthropology/Sociology of Religion  
Philosophy and Methodology of Religion  
Psychology of Religion  
Feminist Perspectives on Religion  
Religion and the Arts  
Primal Religions  
Judaism and Christianity  
Islam  
Hinduism and Buddhism  
East Asian Religions**

Registration Fee: \$40; \$15 for students.

Accommodation available at The Women's College at \$36 per day.

*For information* contact Dr. Edgar Conrad or Dr. Rod Bucknell

Dept. of Studies in Religion, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Q 4067.

Phone (07) 3772154