

# Not Quite Established: The Gospel and Australian Culture

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I want to argue that the gospel has never had a real 'bite' on Australian culture, and in particular, that the Christian church has never quite been established in either the narrower or broader sense. There is a certain truth to the common claim that Australia is one of the most secular societies to be found. But the picture is not as simple as this. While Australians are not generally interested in organized religion, most believe in God and are open to the spiritual dimension of life, even if they are somewhat inarticulate and stop short of commitment to a group. There are opportunities facing the Christian church in Australia as a contextual faith shows signs of developing in terms of Australian theology, new forms of church practice and engagement in wider society.

Some qualifications are important. In this discussion I'll be referring to the dominant cultural strands of Australian society. A thicker description would have to take account of Australia's multiculturalism, indigenous culture and marginal groups. Also, for the most part I'll be discussing Australian distinctives, though many Australian cultural trends are actually trends in Western culture, linked through the effects of globalization.

## **Secular Australia?**

It was a popular view until recently that Australia is one of the most secular states ever to exist, perhaps

'the most godless place under heaven' (in the words of Scottish Presbyterian James Denney). Although I'm going to put an alternative perspective there are several factors which led to this view gaining wide acceptance, particularly in the 1980s.

First, it is arguably *the first modern society without deep religious roots*. Unlike other New World colonies, New South Wales had no religious ceremony to mark its foundation; a worship service was not held until eight days after the first fleet landed. Historian Patrick O'Farrell writes, "There came here no truly religious people, save very few, and they founded here no [Australian] religion."<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, *European Australians have been slow to appreciate the Australian continent, to come to terms with the indigenous people they displaced and to learn from indigenous spirituality*. Most Australians have had a relationship of attraction to, and yet avoidance of, the vast center of the continent. They see themselves as pioneers and people of the bush but live on the seaboard. The 'sky God' of European Christianity has not been integrated with the immanent God of the Australian landscape. European Australians have lived on the 'edge of the sacred,' unable to integrate within themselves their relationships to the country, to indigenous people, to migrants, to the opposite sex and to their place in the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> Their experience has largely been one of exile. The gospel in Australia has been a truncated gospel.

A third often-mentioned factor, related to the land, is *the sun, sand and surf which have often led to a shallow hedonism*. A television documentary series on Australian spirituality, screened in the 1980s, summed up this view with its title: 'The sunburnt soul.' Closely linked is the national obsession with sport. As just one example, in 1888 the Melbourne Cup drew 100,000 people, reputed to be the largest crowd ever to gather for a horse race until that time. The gospel has struggled in Australia to come to terms with pleasure and

celebration, with the churches repeatedly cast as killjoys.

Fourthly, *a set of myths has emerged from Australia's nation-building phase* that is powerful for the way Australians (particularly men) have seen themselves. Australians see themselves as easy-going larrikins who stand by their mates—self-reliant, laconic, anti-authoritarian, egalitarian, iconoclastic and impatient with abstract thought. The world has seen this self-image most clearly in the larger-than-life characters of Paul Hogan (especially in the film *Crocodile Dundee*) and Steve Irwin, the crocodile hunting television celebrity. The gospel has had to compete with the frontier myths of self-sufficiency and tribalism.

In the 1980s all of these factors combined with a realization that Australia was experiencing a *significant decline in church attendance and belief in God*.<sup>3</sup> Sociological research into religious belief and practice, until then scarce, began to show trends common to most Western countries.

Nevertheless, the statistics then and since have also challenged the popular view that Australia is highly secular. Further, they suggest that complex changes have been taking place in Australian society over the last few decades. Consider just a few representative indicators, each of which gives some comfort but also raises issues of concern for the Christian churches seeking to express the gospel in an Australian way.

### **Spiritual but not religious**

First, *the great majority of Australians have always identified as 'Christian' at a time of Census*. In the 1901 Census 96% identified as Christian, and in 2001 the figure, though significantly lower, was still 68%.

Secondly, *although for most of Australian history church attendance has been low, belief in God has remained high*. Australian spirituality is arguably not absent but inarticulate. Many people believe in 'someone behind it all' but find it hard

to go beyond this general belief and translate it into religious commitment of any kind. Most Australians believe in God. The National Social Science Survey of 1993 found that 61% believe in a personal God, a figure that goes up to 79% if the idea of God is broadened to include a 'higher power'; only 13% identified as agnostic and 9% as atheists.

Thirdly, *for a long time the churches have had the respect of average Australians for their defense of the poor and for addressing the darker issues of Australian society*, such as racism, conflict and poverty, but (as in other countries) have recently lost much of that moral authority by being slow to respond to their own dark issue, abuse of vulnerable people in the care of the churches themselves and, in particular, sexual abuse by clergy.

### **The double call of contextual faith**

I've painted in broad brush the ambivalence that exists in Australian society towards the gospel as it is expressed in the churches. The record of the church has had highlights and lowlights, but for the most part it has been mediocre. Australia is not a secular society if by 'secular' we mean that most people are atheists or irreligious. But if a secular society is one that ignores religious dimensions in its mainstream daily pursuits, then Australia is increasingly a deeply secular society. Despite many positive things that could be said about Christianity in Australia, it has lacked vigor and has often failed to engage in a vital way with politics, economics, the arts, education, the law, entertainment or other aspects of Australian culture.

In Western societies where part of the church has been established at the center, whether legally or culturally, the missiological task includes intentional disestablishment. The church must disengage from the dominant culture in order to meaningfully reengage that same culture. Mission flows from neither simply disengaging (in order to be a sign of

the kingdom on the edge of culture) nor simply engaging (without critical awareness of our entanglement with culture). To use Douglas John Hall's words, it calls for a "dialectic of separation and solidarity."<sup>4</sup> To put it another way, the ongoing critical contextual task involves seeking both to be culturally attuned and to allow the gospel to challenge and transform the culture we live in.

The challenge for Australian Christians is to discern how the gospel, expressed in theology, church and mission, can authentically reflect the dialectic between cultural attunement and cultural critique. The search for authentic faith has led to solutions all the way along the spectrum from non-contextual to highly-contextual faith. At a shallow level the Australian church has tried everything from importing North American ways to articulating 'ocker' theologies such as a 'gumleaf' or 'boomerang' theology. But there are signs that in the last twenty or thirty years the Australian churches are engaging in this quest in these three areas.

### **Australian theologies**

Gideon Goosen, in his comprehensive survey called *Australian Theologies* (St. Pauls Publications, 2000), argues that "Australian theology is identifiable, vigorous and growing [and] has moved from being sectarian to being ecumenical [against] the wider background and reality of world religions, the whole planet and indeed the whole cosmos" (p. 68). Among the issues that contextual theologies are tackling are indigenous spirituality, traditional doctrines expressed in terms that resonate with Australian culture, the land, the environment, Australian identity myths, feminism, justice, everyday life, literature and the arts.

### **Australian ways of being church**

In ways of being church there are signs that churches are experimenting with authentically Australian ways of

gathering, worshipping and expressing community. Some churches meet over a barbecue, in neutral venues or on a weekday. Australian hymns are now being written (though the songs coming from the dominant Hillsong stable tend to be non-contextual). Most importantly, natural ways of exploring Christian community continually emerge. Training networks such as the Forge Network are devoted entirely to training younger leaders for a missional church attuned to the postmodern generations and those on the fringe of society (see [www.phuture.org](http://www.phuture.org)). Many of these trends are shared with other Western cultures, and the theme of disengagement in order to begin at the margins of society is a recurring one.

There are strands of the gospel which are muted in Australian churches but which I would argue resonate with both the gospel and Australian culture. One is the recovery of community, which is both at the heart of Australian longing (though it may be counter-cultural to talk about commitment) and at the heart of the gospel call to love one another as the body of Christ. Another is the practice of hospitality, again central both to Australian culture and the gospel. A third, rather counter-cultural at first sight, is the centrality of embodied life together, a central aspect of community. In a 'virtual world' marked by media saturation and fragmented lifestyles lived at an increasing pace, the always-embodied God offers in the authentic church a grounded and personal reality where the holy is valued and time slows for people to get back in touch with each other and the sacred, thereby allowing space for growth and transformation.

It must be said, however, that the signs of life in Australian churches are counter-balanced by many signs of conservatism and decline. Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are often global rather than contextual in character, drawing particularly on North American songs, theology and education programs. Cathedrals and other old church buildings often stand as symbols of

the 'cultural establishment' of a previous era, even though their congregations are ageing and in numerical decline. Churches find it difficult to shed the old patterns and to experiment with new ones. Their 'disestablishment' is being forced on them as they become weaker and less culturally relevant.

### **Contextual mission**

The third area in which there are signs of contextual engagement is mission. Incarnational mission, in which the church 'enfleshes' the message to which it points, is at the heart of God's way of communicating in Christ and therefore at the heart of Christian mission. It is also at the heart of contextual faith, because it seeks to take shape in its specific context and culture.

Australian churches are experimenting with new ways of sharing faith in informal settings or holding 'Spirituality in the Pub' evenings. Australian theological conversations held in public forums are beginning to cross boundaries and address questions of meaning that Australians are asking.

One of the goals of the amalgamation of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational denominations in 1977 to form the Uniting Church in Australia was to become an Australian church, and it has been a leading voice in contextual mission since. In particular it has led the Australian churches in speaking prophetically on social issues. On matters such as indigenous reconciliation, the environment, aid to developing countries, canceling the debts of heavily-indebted poor countries, poverty in Australia, the reduction of welfare funding, and gambling addiction, the voice of the Australian churches has been loud and clear.

Whether in theology, church or mission, these encouraging signs are only a beginning. In most aspects of the expression of the gospel in Australian culture the process of losing what power and influence the churches once had is still largely experienced as loss, and there is little

desire to 'disestablish themselves' voluntarily (as Douglas John Hall puts it) in order to discern more clearly what the gospel says to Australian culture.

There is an increasing number, however, who see the link between mission on the margins and the cultural location taken up by Jesus. When Australians, who are generally sceptical of the traditional church, see new expressions of the gospel which are at the same time both culturally-attuned and yet counter-cultural in a 'gospel way', the receding tide of the gospel's role in Australian culture may yet turn in the power of the Spirit and the transforming power of the Good News may be felt at a cultural as well as a personal level. ■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Patrick O'Farrell, "The Cultural Ambivalence of Australian Religion," in *Australian Cultural History, Vol. 1: Culture and the State in Australia*, eds. S. L. Goldberg and F. B. Smith (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities and the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1982), 5.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Tacey, "Relationship to Place: Spiritual Problems in Secular Australia," *Eremos* No. 59 (May 1997): 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Sydney: Albatross, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Douglas John Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis: The theologic of Christian awkwardness," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 204.

