

**Popular Religion in New South Wales and
Van Diemen's Land from 1788 to the 1850s**

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Certificate

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Introduction

I

It is the task of the historian to make the past intelligible to contemporary society. The investigation and reflection on the past must be a contribution to the understanding of significant contemporary issues and debates. Religious history in Australia has been dominated by the issues of denominationalism and sectarianism. For contemporary Australian society these issues are of diminishing significance. Australians today are less likely than ever to identify themselves with the particular denomination into which they may have been born. For regular church attenders or Christians looking for a church in a new location, issues such as the style of the service, the personality of the priest, minister or pastor and the broader designations of evangelical, charismatic, conservative or socially committed are likely to be of more significance than the traditional denominational labels. Sectarianism has largely disappeared as an issue in Australian society. The "publics" no longer shout, "Conny-wackers stink like crackers on a Sunday morning", as they pass the local Catholic parish school. Even when the Moslem community wishes to build a mosque in the local area, the objections are couched in terms of noise pollution and traffic problems rather than religion.

Since the Australian community has moved on from its previous obsessions with denominationalism and sectarianism, it is essential that

historians also take a wider view of religious history. Just as the collapse of the Soviet Union has made it necessary for political historians to find new paradigms such as the notion of "the end of history", so the interests of contemporary Australian society make it necessary to abandon the "flogging parson" paradigm of Australian religious history. As Professor James Tulip has pointed out this paradigm is the result of the "early colonial connection between Church and State" which left religion as merely part of the mechanism of social control while the broader community set about "worshipping power, money, sport, even war".[1] Consequently there developed the notion that religion and the Australian way of life were strange bedfellows. [2] Contemporary evidence suggests that Australians are not as spiritually bankrupt as such comments might imply

Interviews with well-known Australians in the arts, media and public life conducted in 1989 produced a wide variety of personal responses to the question of belief in God. [3] The views of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the Rev. Fred Nile were expressed in terms of clear cut conservative Protestant doctrine. At the other end of the spectrum Bill Hayden and Rene Rivkin declared themselves to be atheists. However most of those interviewed held beliefs between these two positions. The majority of opinions would defy any attempt to classify them in terms of denominational creeds or orthodox dogmas. Typical of the warm and fuzzy theology was Manning Clark's comment that "Music and love help me to know grace but ... I do not know

1. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 1995

2. *ibid.*

3. Langley, K., "What Australia is Believe About God", *Good Weekend*, 25 March 1989, pp.24-33

whether grace comes from God or from some temporary inner harmony". While such statements of belief may be vague it should not be assumed that imprecise religious ideas are of no significance. Common themes of cultural significance can emerge from popular religious ideas which have little connection with the official doctrines of the churches. Atheism or irreligion are not the necessary result of the popular lack of interest in orthodox doctrine. A significant theme which emerges from the interviews is the encounter with God in nature. Blanche d'Alpuget spoke of the ground of her being as love called "the Christ" which could be represented in the female form as in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, "or as light or a rose or the sun". Sallyanne Atkinson, former Lord Mayor of Brisbane, said, "I like to immerse myself in nature ... This to me is evidence of God. I feel that there has to be somebody up there controlling and organising all this". The designer, Jenny Kee was even more emphatic about the connection between nature and religion: "My religion is nature. I cherish the earth, and religion for me is part of looking after the earth. It is about man believing in the land, not destroying it". These sentiments came close to those of the Aboriginal people interviewed. The actor, Ernie Dingo, declared, "Wherever I go I carry within me my spirituality, for my temple is the land I walk on". Burnum Burnum stated his belief in God as the Great Spirit or Biambi who was represented with outstretched arms "to embrace all beings, all natural things". Burnum Burnum's comments are not so far removed from those of psychologist and author, Ronald Conway, when he writes,

I have the greatest masters and saints of *all* religions on my side (to say nothing of the physical sciences) in guessing that God is an omnipresent Creator who is immanent in every moment of our

existence and whose Essence provides the spark at the heart of every sentient creature. Such a recognition could put an end to Catholic triumphalism, to sectarianism and to all those other vain "isms" which keep a destructive human race from accepting its connections with all creation. [4]

The connection between spirituality and the Australian landscape was recognised in the papal mass for the beatification of Mary MacKillop held in Sydney in January 1995. The mass incorporated an Aboriginal smoking ritual which took the place of the traditional penitential rite. The theme of preparing a way in the wilderness sought to connect Mary MacKillop with the spirituality which emerges from the Australian landscape.[5]

While historians of religion in Australia remain locked in a paradigm which sees religion in terms of the official doctrines expounded by religious bureaucracies dominated by men, and which takes the rejection of this paradigm as evidence of irreligion, a significant element of Australian popular religious culture will escape their notice. The rejection of the religion of the "flogging parsons" does not entail the rejection of a meaningful belief in God. It is the role of the historian, confronted with the contemporary directions of popular religious culture to review the evidence and to ask new questions about the role of religion in the development of an Australian culture.

4. Conway, R., "Infallible by Proxy", *Quadrant*, December 1994, p.67
5. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 January 1995

In that masterpiece of popular culture, *Casablanca*, when trouble arises the police chief gives the order, "Round up the usual suspects". To find some clues to the nature of the popular mind in the early colonial period, it is also necessary to round up the usual suspects for investigation, beginning with the authors of First Fleet journals, followed by writers of dispatches and private letters, both free and convict, correspondents to the *Sydney Gazette*, the authors of colonial novels, poetry and drama, both male and female, convict and free. Then follow the writers of journals and memoirs, men, women and children, Catholic and Protestant, native-born and immigrant, well educated and barely literate, from Government House to bush shack, from colonial magistrate to axe murderer. From this mosaic of evidence, religious ideas which cut across traditional divisions of colonial society become apparent. The nature of the evidence makes it necessary to draw conclusions based on the consistency of the ideas across a variety of social and denominational divisions, since there were no sociological opinion polls for the period under investigation.

It may be objected that novelists, poets and dramatists whose work has been referred to are representatives of an elite culture, not a popular one. Rather it is the case that these voices have for too long gone unheard as a reflection of the religious attitudes and values of early colonial society. Patricia Brennan, campaigner for the ordination of women, has described the church transported to Australia as "monarchist, colonialist and class-ridden", but has not despaired of finding spiritual value: "It has been, rather, artists and writers who have given voice to the religious imagination of this land; to the Aborigine, the bushman, the migrant and more recently women

reformers". [6] The failure to recognise this voice has been noted by Patrick O'Farrell in the comment that: "whereas in other countries matters of self definition - of who and what a person or community is - are substantially the domain of poets, creative artists and thinkers ... within Australia ... both questions and answers are imposed and sustained by politicians, bureaucrats and a variety of self-servers for their own purposes". [7]

Popular ideas cannot be quantified into neat sociological categories. They are ideas which cross boundaries and contribute to the creation of a unique culture. While such ideas may be inconsistent, fuzzy and elusive, they are still worthy of serious investigation. Such an investigation must by nature be carried out with a broad brush and on a large canvas. There will be ragged ends, and qualifying details may be lost in the broad sweep. But it is the historian's role to join in debate upon the big picture and to risk provisional conclusions.

II

Delivering the 1986 J.D. Northey Memorial Lectures, John Bodycombe, Dean of the Uniting Church's Melbourne Theological Hall, asserted that there are two tenets of belief which are deeply held in the Australian community: deism and decency.[8] In support of this proposition he argued that few clergy with reasonable experience of parish ministry and an

6. Hudson, W., and Carter, D., *The Republican Debate*, Kensington, 1993, pp.224-225

7. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 1995

8. Bodycombe, J., *A Matter of Death and Life*, Melbourne, 1986, p.39

understanding of their congregations could claim otherwise. [9] He notes the application of “the lofty doctrine of ‘adiaphorism’ - which means that theological controversies are not really worth worrying about”. [10] In his opinion, most churchgoers are little concerned with evangelism because the outsiders hold beliefs in ‘deism and decency’ very similar to those of the insiders. More quantitative evidence in support of this view can be found in surveys of religious belief and moral values. A 1983 survey revealed that 85% of Australians believed in God, 73% in the existence of the soul, 64% in the existence of Heaven and 40% in Hell, though it was noted at the same time that “these beliefs do not imply widespread religious observance”. [11] A 1993 survey puts belief in God at 74%. However this survey also reveals substantial belief in such esoteric notions as astrology, (32%), and mental telepathy (40%). [12] Hans Mol, Australia’s most noted sociologist of religion, has summed up this situation of religious belief without church attendance in the following terms:

Australians may be critical of religion, accuse churchgoers of hypocrisy and characterise church leaders as preoccupied with money, but when push comes to shove they wouldn’t want to be without it. ... Pleasures of the flesh may have definitely won out over self denial, but deep down religion is still widely respected. [13]

9. *ibid.*

10. *ibid.*

11. Hancock, K., *Australian Society*, Cambridge, 1989, p.112

12. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 1993

13. Mol, H., “Religion in Australia: Who Goes Where”, *Current Affairs Bulletin*, September 1985, p.8

Mol also supports the proposition that religion is seen more in relation to decency than in relation to salvation. He notes that various surveys have demonstrated that “the churches are still primarily seen as sources of morality and civilisation rather than repositories of supernatural truth”. [14]

This mixture of deism and decency is given clear expression in the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial for Easter in the bicentennial year, 1988. According to the author of the editorial the Easter story is

history’s supreme example of the triumph of right. It declares that we too can have hope, knowing that corruption will be overcome, oppression will give way to freedom and that the future lies not with violence and war, but with peace. ... It enables every Australian to face the future without fear, for always there will be available the love and power of the living God.[15]

There is no suggestion in the editorial of the value of the doctrines of atonement and the salvation of humanity by the grace of God. Rather the view is that God is acting to promote the welfare of humanity by the application of the principles of liberalism and decency, while providing support for the present and hope for the future.

Criticism of churches and clergy, lack of church attendance and disinterest in theological issues does not imply a repudiation of religious

14. *ibid.*, p.12

15. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1988

belief. The failure to recognise this fact has resulted in the down-grading of the significance of popular religious ideas in Australian history. The responsibility for this down-grading must be shared by both clergy and academics. A constant theme in writings of churchmen in the Australian colonies was the immorality and the indifference of their hard-hearted flock. In his Lenten pastoral letter of 1860, Archbishop Polding lamented that the Catholic Church in New South Wales was under the influence of a spirit "which appears to form to itself a sort of law of indifference".[16] This indifference has been widely observed by academics in the writing of Australian history. While there are a large number of general histories of Australia and histories of everything from politics and war to cricket and the Australian diet, there is no general, non-denominational history of the Australian religious experience. The launching of Professor Moloney's bicentennial history of Australia was made memorable by the fact that the book was thrown into Sydney Harbour by Aborigines protesting that they had not been given their due significance in it. The Dean of Sydney could with equal justification have done the same.

This lack of interest springs from the idea that religion played no significant role in the formation of the Australian character, and was not a major factor in shaping national institutions or outlooks. In the words of Ian Turner,

The Australian dream is, I believe, a worldly dream. Its concern has been the natural and social environment rather than the hope of a life

16. O'Farrell, P.[ed.], *Documents in Australian Catholic History*, Vol. 1 London, 1969, p.119

to come. God has not loomed large. [17]

The notion of the essential irrelevance of religion was effectively promoted by Russel Ward. He presents his archetypal bushman as “a ‘hard case’, skeptical about the value of religion and of intellectual or cultural pursuits generally”. [18] While Ward does not want to promote mateship to the level of religion itself, he argues that mateship was for the bushman a substitute for religion and that the bushman’s view of the world was moulded by his physical environment. This view has been elaborated by Allan Grocott in his study of anti-clerical attitudes of convicts and ex-convicts from 1788 to 1851. Grocott comes to the conclusion that

The churches, with some exceptions, failed to win the hearts and minds of the felony. Prisoners and old hands were not interested in God the Father, or God the Son or God the Holy Ghost. ... The evangelical and moralistic message of the Protestant Churches especially was unappealing and unacceptable to the convict world.[19]

It is assumed by such writers that the only alternative was the “practical atheism” of the bush mates. Grocott’s view of the convict era is endorsed by Michael Hogan in his study of sectarianism in Australian history, with the

17. Turner, I., *The Australian Dream*, Melbourne, 1968, pp.ix-x

18. Ward, R., *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1970, p.2

19. Grocott, A., *Convicts, Clergymen and Churches*, Sydney, 1980, p.284

clergy being supposedly regarded as “righteous, god-bothering killjoys”. [20]

The argument that the Australian environment was in some way unsuited to the growth of religion was put in 1904 by A.G. Stephens.[21] It is an argument which has retained its popularity. Patrick O’Farrell summed it up with the remark that “The whole external image of imported religion in Australia appeared as sombre, constricting, stifling in a land of colour, fun and freedom”. [22] The argument was expressed in its simplest form in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article by Kim Hawtrey, who wrote, “By neglecting to take baptisms to the billabong and to hold worship under the wattle tree, so to speak, the church has remained an alien institution in the Great South Land”. [23]

As long as religion could be regarded as an alien appendage to the history of Australian society which was viewed as essentially secular, no serious consideration of the significance of religious ideas seemed necessary. In Geoffrey Blainey’s most populist publication, *The Blainey View*, characters such as Ned Kelly and Harold Larwood manage to catch the historian’s eye, but religion is a blind spot, except for a passing reference to quiet Sundays.[24] As the Anglican clergyman, Bruce Wilson, has pointed out, this is not a new phenomenon. Wilson draws attention to the lack of any serious interest in religion to be found in Sir Keith Hancock’s *Australia*,

20. Hogan, M., *The Sectarian Strand*, Ringwood, 1987, p.22

21. Turner, *op.cit.*, p.x

22. Goldberg, S. & Smith, F. B.[ed.], *Australian Cultural History*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 9

23. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1991

24. Blainey, G., *The Blainey View*, Melbourne, 1982, p.70

(1930) and A.G.L. Shaw's *The Story of Australia* (1955).[25] Wilson puts this down to a general intellectual disinterest in religion. This view is supported by Ronald Conway, who claims that the subject of religion in Australia has received little attention from researchers because of "an intellectual climate of widespread indifference towards religion".[26] This is, from Conway's perspective, because the churches in Australia became "social ghettos or lobbies in which fringe obsessions such as temperance, gambling, property rights and sexual conduct were pushed, to the embarrassment of governments and the jeers of secularists and ordinary blokes".[27]

The most comprehensive attempt to write an account of the Australian experience has been Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*. Clark did indeed give consideration to the religious experience, but his approach to the subject must be seen in the light of his Epilogue to the final volume. For Clark, religion was ultimately a failure:

A turbulent emptiness seized the people as they moved into a post-Christian, post-Enlightenment era. No one any longer knew the direction of the river of life. No one had any thing to say.[28]

Clark applied his literary skills often with a touch of overstatement, so as to leave his clerical subjects looking faintly absurd and befitting their status as

25. Wilson, B., *Can God Survive in Australia?*, Sydney, 1983, p.119

26. Conway, R., *The Great Australian Stupor*, Melbourne, 1971, p.188

27. *ibid.*, p.187

28. Clark, C.M.H., *A History of Australia*, Vol.VI, Melbourne, 1987, p.500

historical failures. His comment on evangelical parsons illustrates the point:

[They] spent their days in anguish, publicly attributing the failure of their mission to the depravity of their charges, while in the privacy of their chambers lacerating themselves for their unworthiness to serve the Lord. [29]

To compensate for the lack of academic interest in general religious history, there have been a wide variety of denominational histories written to celebrate the achievements of a particular church or church leader. These works are often exposed to the dangers of being too much committed to a particular outlook, which has affected their objectivity. Cardinal Moran's *History of the Catholic Church in Australia* [Sydney, 1900], and Father Eris O'Brien's *The Dawn of Catholicism in Australia* [Sydney, 1928], produced for the XXIX International Eucharistic Congress, both contributed to a process of Catholic triumphalist myth making. These myths portray the Irish convicts as innocent victims of British oppression and of a brutal Protestant system, who heroically maintained their faith despite the lack of priests. These myths were dispelled by James Waldersee's study, *Catholic Society in New South Wales 1788-1860* [Sydney, 1974], which showed that most Irish convicts were indeed felons and not much given to faithful devotion.

Myth making is not restricted to the Catholic Church. In the introduction to his book, *Australian Christian Life from 1788*, the Presbyterian writer, Iain Murray, claims, "This book sets out to show that true Christianity was once a

29. Clark, C.M.H., *A Short History of Australia*, New York, 1963, p.23

vital power in this land and that it can be so again".[30] A more balanced judgment is given by John Barrett in his book, *That Better Country*. While he recognises the widespread indifference to the Churches' mission in Australia, he uses this fact as a basis for rejecting the idea that there has been a religious decline. To argue this way, he claims, it must be first shown that "religion in the Australian colonies was ever on a sufficiently high level to make it reasonable to speak of later decline".[31] The main disadvantage of these more doctrinally or denominationally committed studies is that they do not appeal to a wider reading public. Rowland Ward's history of Presbyterianism in Australia, *The Bush Still Burns*, [St Kilda, Victoria, 1989] is a good example. While it is a diligent compilation of information, it could not possibly be of interest to anyone except the most devoted of Presbyterians. If historians writing on religious themes are not prepared to write for an intelligent general readership, then they cannot really complain that religion is not given due recognition.

Thus the debate has gone on over the significance of the place accorded to religion in the writing of Australian history. However, as Bruce Mansfield has pointed out, "the argument is now tiresome. We should be able to pass from arguments for giving religion a larger place in general histories of Australia to more significant reflections on the subject". [32] It is time to move away from the sectionalised church history to grapple with the intellectual dynamic of religious thinking as it influenced the development of Australian culture. It is time to explore the "experiences and mental states" which

30. Murray, I.H., *Australian Christian Life from 1788*, Edinburgh, 1988, p.xviii

31. Barrett, J., *That Better Country*, Melbourne, 1966, p.206

32. Mansfield, B., "Thinking About Australian Religious History", *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 15. No. 3, June 1989, p. 331

constitute a religious perspective [33] rather than organised religion and its enemies. It is time to delve into what Patrick O'Farrell has called the "private, subterranean, elusive, complex, ambiguous, mysterious - all those elusive unspoken things - that have hitherto been beneath the historian's gaze".[34]

The aim of this thesis is to provide a "more significant reflection" by attempting to discover the religious ideas commonly held in Australian colonial society between 1788 and the 1850s, concentrating on New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. In this investigation it is important that the central question should be what meaning did the people of the colonies place upon their experiences, and how it related to their use of religious language and ritual. Thus it is important to avoid forcing these ideas into particular denominational frameworks or imposing clearly defined doctrinal concepts upon the historical record. Where religious language is used, it must be taken seriously in relation to the situation in which it appears and the meaning it had for those involved. The emphasis must remain on the history of religious ideas and their significance for those who held them, rather than on a sociological and structuralist approach. In this regard it is also important to be aware of the inclination to impose blanket class affiliations on varieties of religious belief. While there are some clearly delineated class affiliations which can be made with particular denominational groups, it should not be assumed that ideas must necessarily be locked into class structures. Rather it is important to look for ideas which are meaningful across various social groups if a notion of a

33. Gilbert, A.D., "Religion and the Bicentennial", *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 15, No.1, 1988, p.15

34. O'Farrell, P., "Spurious Divorce? Religion and Australian Culture", *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol.15. No.4, 1989, p.524

common or popular religion is to be valid in the Australian colonial context. As Peter Glasner has pointed out, there is a wealth of terms which can be used, including “popular”, “folk”, “common” and “civil” religion, for the examination of religious ideas which are beyond the ambit of the churches and clergy.[35] If the term “popular” is taken to mean a traditional, small community based religion, then only disconnected remnants can be expected to be found in the Australian colonies. If “popular” is thought of as only relating to a convict class, then the problem of imposing arbitrary class restrictions on ideas arises. Are the ideas of the gaolers in relation to religion of necessity different to those of their charges? This is a question which must be decided by reference to the evidence, and not by assumption.

According to Michael Hunter, the task of the historian of ideas is to explore “the interconnection of ideas among different cultural strata in society”. [36] The search for popular ideas should not ignore the ideas of the better educated members of the society, and their influence on the wider society, in producing common ideas about religion. This is particularly significant in the Australian colonial context where it can easily be assumed that the clergy were simply agents of the ruling class, who attempted to impose a set of alien values upon the population.

It could be objected that it is not possible to get an accurate idea of what the “lower orders” thought in religious matters because they were unlikely to commit their thoughts to paper. Marian Aveling has highlighted this

35. Black, A., & Glasner, P.[ed.], *Practice and Belief*, Sydney, 1983, p.169

36. Gardiner, J. [ed.], *What is History Today?*, London, 1989, p.117

problem in her chapter on religion in *A New History of Western Australia*:

Certainly most of the nominally Anglican labouring population appear never to have attended church, except to be married, buried or baptised. God may have had some further meaning for the migrants in a strange land, but we have no evidence to test this.[37]

Popular religion has also been referred to as an implied religion.[38] This term is used to contrast popular belief with the explicit religion of the churches. Thus, while recognising that much of religious history of a popular nature may have left no direct evidence, and that authors of documents which do survive were not attempting to make any explicit religious statements, the historian may still reach valid conclusions by working from the implications of the evidence.

Consequently it is necessary to examine as wide a range of documents as possible to extract common religious notions which are either expressed or implied. It must be added that in this thesis the emphasis in studying the documentary evidence has been on the earlier part of the period to define the themes that may be then traced through the rest of the time frame under discussion. If there can be said to be a methodological model for this thesis it would be in the writings of the English historian, Keith Thomas, in which the nature of popular belief is demonstrated by collecting evidence from a wide

37. Aveling, M., "Western Australian Society: the Religious Aspect 1829-1895 in Stannage, C.T.[ed.], *A New History of Western Australia*, Nedlands, 1981, p.576

38. Chapman, C., *Shadows of the Supernatural*, Oxford, 1990, p. 143

range of sources, which when compared, give a strong sense of shared or common opinion in a particular era.[39]

By examining issues such as the influence of Deism, the significance of providential language, the concepts of natural religion, natural justice and civil religion, the significance of personal religion and the rites of passage, and ideas of moral improvement, it is possible to demonstrate that there was a coherent religious world view which can provide a meaningful interpretation of Australian colonial culture. The thesis will demonstrate the existence of a popular religious culture which acted as a viable alternative to the formal doctrines of the denominations. However it should be stressed that this popular religious culture was not of a uniform nature. It was not a hitherto undiscovered denomination which sought to evoke a general consensus of opinion. Rather it was a set of ideas on which both "traditional Christians" and supposed "practical atheists" could draw in the hope of making sense of human experience in a new environment. The thesis thus offers an approach to the religious history of Australia which is meant to provide an escape from the intellectual dead end which has been the result of the conflict between the evangelicals on one side and the secularists on the other, and which has characterised our understanding of the early colonial period.

39. Thomas, K., *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Harmondsworth, 1988