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Christianity's Potential Contribution to Australian Society

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The proportion of Christians in the Australian population continues to decline. Internationally, the proportion of Christians in developing countries is tending to increase, whereas the proportion of Christians in developed countries generally is decreasing. This paper first provides a brief overview of the current Australian demographic data and trends in relation to Christian denominations and other religious groups over the past 100 years. Based on Christianity's past contribution to Australian society, it then posits a framework for a way forward to contribute to the current and future issues and problems confronting Christianity in Australian society.

Introduction

Religious organisations provide the structures, beliefs, ideology, goals, and purpose for religious groups, which in turn encourage people to connect with God, develop personal spirituality, meaning, and purpose in life. Tacey (2000) has commented that, "without religion we have no organised way of communicating or expressing truth, no sacred rituals to bind individuals into living community" (p. 28). Australia is not without religion. Indeed, Australia may be described as a multireligious nation, partly as a consequence of the change to Australia's religious profile (described below), which has facilitated the introduction of new beliefs, rituals, religious structures, and new models of religious leadership (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal & Leahy, 2004).

The term *religion* has been used in various ways over time and in different contexts. In 1902, for example, James defined religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude" (James, 2003, p. 32). Today, some use the terms *religion* and *spirituality* interchangeably (Tirri, 2006). Others refer to religion as "the organisational, the ritual, the ideological," and spirituality as "the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful" (Pargament, 1999, p. 3). Others divide religion into two parts, the formal ecclesiastical part and the personal reflective part. Legally, in Australia, the term religion is defined by the High Court of Australia as "a complex of beliefs and practices which point to a set of values and an understanding of the meaning of existence" (Henry, 2009).

The definition of religion can be further confused by multiple definitions of the term spirituality, leading to (at least) three different viewpoints being held in Australia: (a) spirituality is separate and distinct from religion, (b) spirituality may co-exist with religion, and (c) spirituality and religion can grow together. In Europe, according to Stifoss-Hanssen (1999), spirituality emphasized people's search for meaning in relation to the big existential questions. Spirituality, for others, is a soft option, used by people who are not committed to the discipline necessary for true religious commitment, since is easier to claim to be spiritual than to comply with the more disciplined requirements of a religion. For others (e.g., Tacey, 2000), spirituality is a "mystery, a deep source of unknowing," such that "we must approach this subject with humility, awe and reverence … because when we are most certain about spirituality, we are most certainly removed from its essence" (p. 24). Tacey notes that spirituality can pervade all religions, yet, if not treated appropriately, spirituality and religion can nullify each other. Some consider that spirituality can be expressed by atheists

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and agnostics, such as, for example, people deeply engaged in ecology and other altruistic endeavours. According to this view, spirituality is a concept wider than religion. Stifoss-Hanssen (1999) concluded that spirituality and religion share some common ideas, but they are separate and distinct concepts and terms.

However religion and spirituality may be defined, it is unequivocal that their meanings continuously change. To the modern thinker, religion is primarily something to think about (e.g., a set of doctrines to believe in, or theories to discuss), whereas historically, religion "is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 4). As Armstrong notes:

> It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood, before embarking on a religious way of life. You will only discover their truth – or lack of it – if you translate these doctrines into ritual or ethical action. (p. 4)

Armstrong has highlighted a significant aspect of all true religions and spiritualities, namely, that they continually discover new capacities of mind and heart that are actioned as an authentic way of life.

Religion in Australia

In 2006, the world's population was approximately 6.6 billion. Christians were the largest religious group with 2.1 billion adherents, and there were approximately 1.5 billion Muslims, 0.9 billion Hindus, 376 million Buddhists, and 14 million Jews. Christianity comprised approximately 34% of the world population, and was the largest group who claimed some religious affiliation. Christianity is growing in Africa and Asia, with a decline evident in Europe and the USA. In Australia, Christians comprised 63.9% of the population who claimed any religious affiliation, followed by Buddhists (2.1%), Muslims (1.7%), Hindus (0.7%) and Jews (0.4%). These figures support the common understanding that Australia is "predominantly a Christian country" (Tourism Australia, 2008). Although Christianity remains the predominant religion in Australia, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of Christians in the total population since the first census in 1901, when 96.1% of the population indicated that they were Christians (Table 1).

Table 1

Percentage of Christians in the Australian Population 1901-2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

Year	1901	1947	1954	1961	1966	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006
%	96.1	88.0	89.4	88.3	88.2	86.2	78.6	76.4	73.0	74.0	70.9	68.0	63.9

There are, of course, acknowledged difficulties in interpreting these census figures. First, the figures are not indicative of actual adherents, given that many reporting affiliation with a particular religion would be nominal or non-practising, and many would be unknown to the churches with which they report affiliation. Further, there is an acknowledged discrepancy between the church roll (which may include many lapsed participants) and active members. As a result of these two sources of data, some statisticians place the percentage of active Christians as low as 7.5% of the population (e.g., Tourism Australia, 2008).

Second, the census uses a self-report methodology that has inherent difficulties, such as whether or not respondents understand the question. This is possible, given that the increasingly multicultural population in Australia includes a growing proportion of people for whom English is not their first language. These persons may have difficulty understanding the questions and completing the census form. Third, the methodology does not allow identification of the number of Christians who change from one Christian denomination to another (thought to be relatively high).

The fourth difficulty relates to the honesty of responses. For example, a short time ago, many people in Australia who were of no particular religious persuasion used Church of England (now known as Anglican) as the default category. More recently, it is possible that the more socially acceptable category of no religion has become the default category. In support of this possible change in behaviour, the census data reveal a declining number of people identifying as Anglican, and an increasing number of people reporting no religion. Of course, other explanations are possible. Fifth, many Christians and non-Christians alike, for privacy reasons, may not wish to enter their religion on a public form and, therefore, enter a position of no religion. Sixth, the movement of Christians between Christian denominations apparently is quite frequent, and the census instrument lacks the sophistication to identify these changes in Christian denominations.

Although it is acknowledged that many difficulties, such as those identified above, are apparent in interpreting census data, nevertheless it equally should be acknowledged that difficulties exist with all census data. Therefore, there is still merit in comparing data from year to year, and especially over an extended time period of 100 years. The census data on religious affiliation over the period 1901-2006 indicate that the majority (96%) of the Australian population reported being Christians in 1901. Of these, 80% belonged to one of four main denominations – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, or Presbyterian (the latter two merging as part of the Uniting Church). By 2006, the proportion of Christians had declined to 63.9% overall, with only 53.2% in the four main denominations. This decline in the major Christian religions (Anglican, Catholic, Uniting) is illustrated in Figure 1.

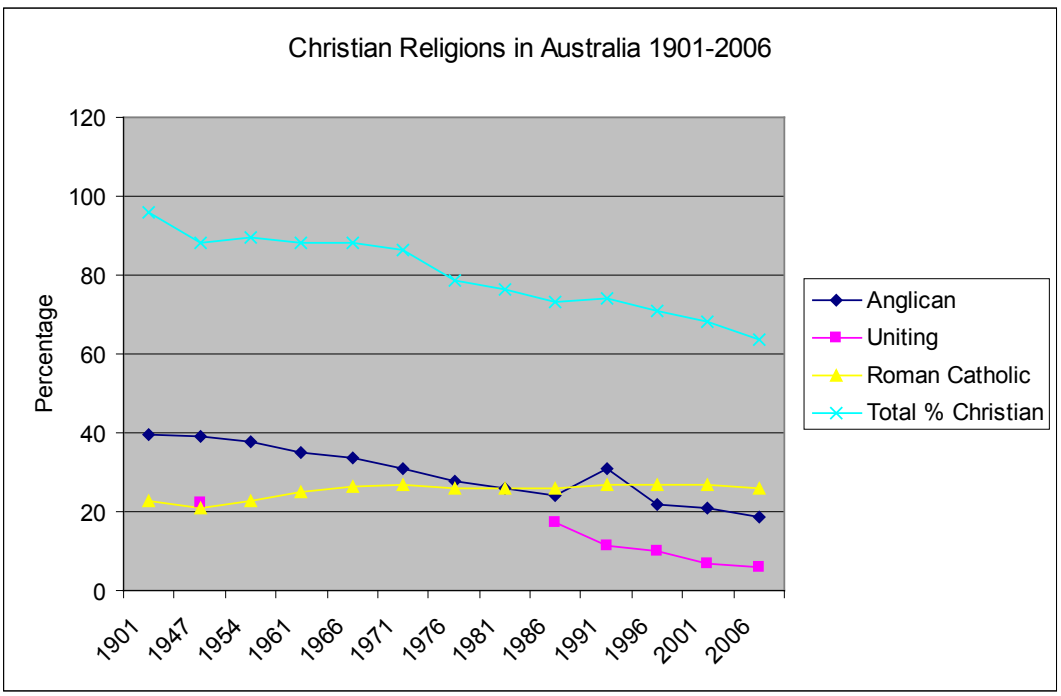

Figure 1. Decline in the major Christian religions in Australia 1901-2006, expressed as a proportion of the Australian population (The Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Table 2 shows a more recent breakdown of the trends in the major Christian religions, together with the addition of the remaining smaller ones. These trends indicate that the decline is more widespread than the major Christian religions, including

all Christian denominations except for the categories of Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Other Christian. These trends are not spread homogeneously throughout Australian society, and some local areas have experienced increases whereas other local areas have experienced decreases. (The total of 63.55% differs from the overall 63.9% due to rounding and to the omission of some very small groups.)

Table 2

Percentage of the Australian Population for Christian Denominations 1996-2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

Denomination	1996	2001	2006
Catholic	27.03	26.65	25.8
Anglican	21.99	20.68	18.7
Uniting	7.52	6.65	5.7
Presbyterian/Reformed	3.81	3.4	3
Orthodox	2.8	2.82	2.9
Other Christian	1.43	1.72	2
Baptist	1.6	1.65	1.6
Lutheran	1.41	1.33	1.2
Pentecostal	0.98	1.04	1.1
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.47	0.43	0.4
Salvation Army	0.42	0.38	0.3
Churches of Christ	0.42	0.33	0.2
Seventh-day Adventist	0.3	0.29	0.27
Latter Day Saints	0.25	0.27	0.26
Brethren	0.12	0.1	0.12
Total	70.55	67.74	63.55

While most Christian denominations have been experiencing decline, there has been some growth in (a) Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Other Christian denominations; (b) non-Christian groups such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam; and (c) the proportion of Australians indicating no religious affiliation. These trends are illustrated in Figure 2.

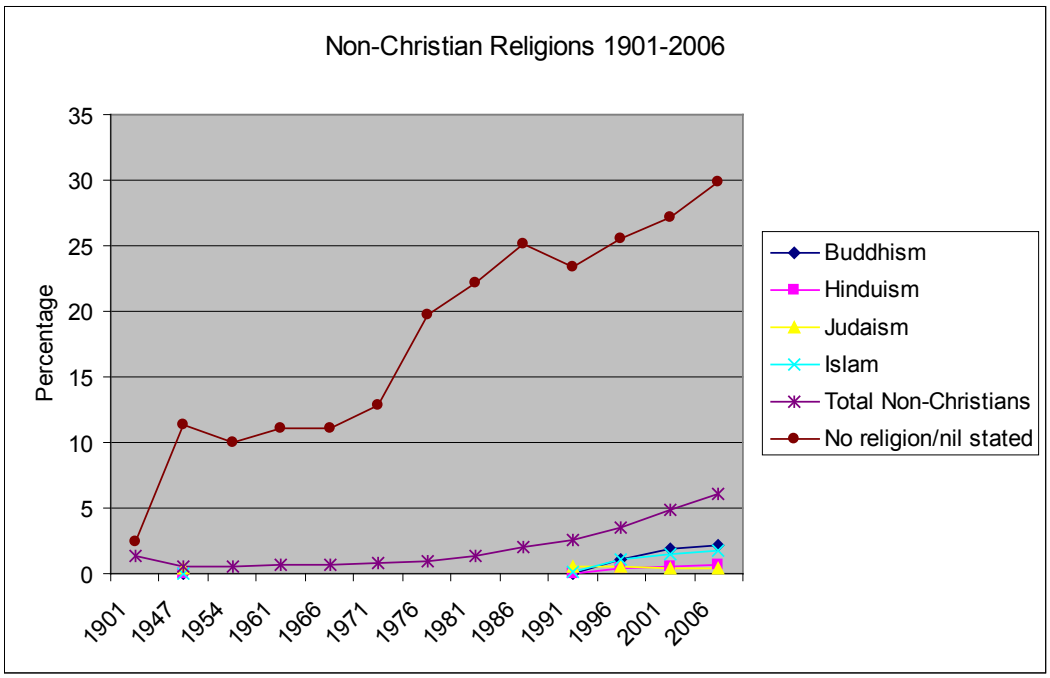

Figure 2. Increase in non-Christian groups 1901-2006, expressed as a proportion of the Australian population (The Australian Bureau of Statistics).

It is important here to observe that, since 1901, there has been an increase in the proportion of the population either indicating no religious affiliation or failing to state an affiliation. In recent years, this proportion has increased from approximately 23% in 1991, to 25% in 1996, 27% in 2001, and to 30% in 2006. These figures mean that, currently, approximately 30% of Australia's population appear to have no religious affiliation, and approximately 6% appear to be adherents of non-Christian religions or groups. With respect to this latter trend, Cahill et al. (2004) observed that long-term residents of Australia increasingly are concerned about the impact of this change in religious profile on the Australian way of life. This concern relates to the largely unknown nature of other world faiths, to the religious extremism often perceived to be associated with them, and the potential to "destroy the fabric of Australia's civil, pluralist and democratic society" (p. 8).

The Past: Australia's Christian Foundation

Christianity has contributed greatly to the development of what is often called the "lucky country" and the "best country in the world," a country that has achieved a great deal in a comparatively short period of time. Given these past contributions, a worrying aspect of the demographic changes to date is the decline in actual active participation of Christians in the community. Piggin (1994, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) observed that, in the past, Christianity has made a rich and substantial contribution to Australia, and that Australia has essentially a Christian heritage. Christianity played a key role in the development of the new colony, so that the Judeo-Christian ethic is a key part of Australian identity. Christian structures, efforts, and events, feature as part of its icons. Contributions include the establishment of hospitals, schools, churches, universities, aged-care facilities, welfare agencies (e.g., Salvation Army), politics (e.g., establishment of the Labour Party and Union Movement), festivals (e.g., Christmas, Easter), and societies (e.g., Young Men's/Women's Christian Association,

Women's Christian Temperance Union). Such significant contributions begs the question: With a declining proportion of active Christians contributing to the national work effort, productivity, and the beliefs and values of the nation, what is to become of the foundations and heritage so firmly established by the pioneers? What is to become of Australia's Christian identity?

Australia, of course, is not the only country with a rich Christian heritage. Sløk (1993) reviewed Christianity's overall contribution to the European community, and despite persecution at levels not known in Australia, Sløk concluded that the reason that Christianity had been so successful was due to its belief system. This system had provided the foundations by which the European culture had extracted itself from the Greco-Roman culture to form a nation founded on Christian ideas, which had a "lasting impact on the way of life of the European" (p. 128). The major ideas, according to Sløk, were the beliefs in Jesus as Saviour God, God as love, the demand for love to fellow human beings, and a focus on the future world. In practice, these ideas produced a particular way of behaviour or lifestyle by which European people believed that they should not ignore another human being in need (based on the golden rule and the story of the good Samaritan), and that the only true humanity which ethics is able to demand, is to help the needy and the oppressed in their despair. The final goal for all human effort was entry into the future world, thus creating the concept that the current world was temporary and insignificant. While Sløk's thesis may be contestable (e.g., Paul, 2005), it is the case that, irrespective of denominational affiliation, the basic beliefs of all denominations are the drivers by which active adherents are motivated to engage with each other and the community.

The Present: Problems and Issues

Pope Benedict XVI (2005) is said to have observed that, "the mainstream churches appear moribund … in Australia … and also in Europe, but not so much in the United States" (Collins, 2007, p. 1). In concert with the demographic data outlined in the introductory section, this statement appears to indicate that the task of changing the situation in Australia is almost impossible.

Perhaps, however, there is reason to be more optimistic. Pohlmann (2009), for instance, identifies a seeming paradox that, though there is a decline in Christianity in Australia, there is a corresponding increase in the growth of chaplaincy services in Queensland public schools, which are funded by the government. Superficially, it appears that, on the one hand, the nation is claiming to be not religious, and, on the other hand, public schools are quite welcoming of a (predominantly Christian) chaplaincy service. This seeming paradox appears to highlight the fact that definitions of religion and spirituality have changed in contemporary Australian society, and from those used in the census data. The Australian community has a perception that Christianity can make a positive impact (such as in counselling unchurched young people in secular contexts). Webber, Singleton, and Hughes (2006) found that 48% of young people aged 18-25 said they believed in God, and a further 32% were not sure. These data point to differences in understanding of the beliefs and the spirituality of young people when compared to the understanding of religious observance of older Australians. Bouma (2006) concurs with this position, suggesting that Australians are not godless but are "quietly spiritual."

Christians in Australia have to engage with a number of contemporary issues. For example, it is reasonable to suspect that the number of active Christians is far less than the number of Christians indicated in the census data. Christians live in a society that perceives itself to be mostly secular. They also acknowledge that they have internal problems of their own. Cahill et al. (2004, pp. 19-20) reported that the main issues of concern to Christians were religious education in mainstream public and private schools; the definition of religion in a multi-faith context; Aboriginal

reconciliation; the education of faith community leaders; employment practices and religious expression, including religious holidays; religion and the role of women; and the place of Aboriginal spiritualities in a multi-faith context.

It is right and proper that attention be given to the problems within Christianity itself, and to problems associated with the decline of Christianity. Christians, however, are also called upon to engage with numerous general problems in the wider community, many of which require urgent attention. These problems include child sexual abuse and neglect (Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, 2006), breakdown of family structures, illegal drug use, various health care problems (Rodricks, 2006), homelessness (Thompson, 2007), financial uncertainty, water shortages in many of Australia's urban areas, drought in rural Australia, the proliferation and safety issues related to the use and storage of nuclear weapons, international terrorism, the economy, medical ethics, taxation (Pinnock, 2007, p. 337), climate change (Stern, 2007), the impact of the global financial crisis, and the development of vulnerable complex systems resulting from the computer-based infrastructure upon which most operations of the global village world depend.

Of particular concern for Australian Christians is the continuing exclusion of Indigenous spiritualities in the fabric of Australian religion. Australian Aboriginal cultures have existed for thousands of years but, as yet, are barely recognised (1% of Aboriginal people) in Australian data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Indigenous spiritualities and religions should be recognised, for, as McIntosh (2006) comments, "We have our culture, our dreamtime and dance, our spirit guides and our elders" (p. ii). Furthermore, Indigenous spiritualities substantially fulfil the definition of a religion legislated by the High Court of Australia. In 2006, 73% of the Indigenous population reported affiliation with a Christian denomination, mostly Anglican and Catholic. However, when Indigenous Australians convert to Christianity, they want to maintain their links with their traditional religions and practice a type of "dual allegiance, based on the notion that God ha[s] created everything, including the Dreaming for Aboriginal people" (Tonkinson, 2002, p. 18). Noting that the Christianisation of Indigenous Australians has not been successful overall, Tonkinson attributes this fact to Christianity's inability to disengage the existing Indigenous religious system, which for Indigenous Australians was inseparable from life itself (p. 6). An Aboriginal theologian (Harris, 1996) has suggested that the Aboriginal church should lead Australian Christians back to the true and living God of the Dreamtime, and in this way be introduced to the Christ of the New Testament (see also Goosen, 1999).

In summary, Australian Christians currently confront a range of challenges relating to (a) the changed religious demographics; (b) the overall decline of Christianity; (c) the range of issues within the Christian churches and church structures; and (d) active participation in, and contribution to, Australian society. This current situation leads to the questions: What is the role of Christianity in Australia? When confronting contemporary issues (e.g., social, financial, ecological, and political), does Christianity have anything to contribute to contemporary society? What is the way forward?

The Future: A Way Forward?

Australian Christians may choose from three distinctive positions (e.g., Scharmer, 2009, p. 5): retromovement activists, defenders of the status quo, and advocates for transformational change. In terms of a movement metaphor, the three positions may be restated as retro-movement (past), non-movement (past and present merge), and forward-movement (future meets the present). The first position is taken by fundamentalists and old time religionists who have closed their minds and hearts to any new perspective, and their basic motto is to retreat and defend tradition. The second (and largest) group contains those habitualised in the uncritical present,

who also have closed their minds and hearts to any new perspective, and whose basic motto is no-change management of the current state of affairs. Both of these positions negate the Christian ethos of freedom, responsibility, and engagement. The third group contains those who wish to engage with future possibilities and new perspectives, mind-sets, and skills, and whose basic motto is relevant leadership for the future. If Christianity is to regain its relevance in contemporary Australian society, then it must reposition itself to the third positioning, and be prepared to engage with new perspectives for, and from, the future. It is this third position that confirms and sustains the Christian ethos of freedom, responsibility, and engagement.

Klingberg, Jr., (2001, p. 8), in his biography of Frankl, comments that Frankl saw spirituality as bringing human freedom, but more of a *freedom to* than a *freedom from,* in the sense that individuals are not removed from their circumstances and situations, but they are free to choose their responses and what will receive their attention and devotion. Frankl believed that this *freedom to* carried with it an *obligation to*, that is, an obligation to the world, to something and someone outside of self. This viewpoint aligns with the third position (forward-movement), and implies a significant way forward for the future, namely, community engagement, where Christians apply themselves to community challenges, needs, issues, and problems.

Christians may act alone individually, but perhaps it is now time for fresh collective action, for Christians to act communally for the good of the community. For such a collective to work, however, there would need to be an acceptable framework of factors to sustain its survival, including: relevance, common beliefs, a common group purpose, and a feeling by participants that their Christian faith is worthwhile and will provide strength in times of trial. Each of these factors is briefly discussed below.

Relevance

The process of addressing contemporary needs, problems, issues and concerns, was a focus of Australian Christian pioneers. Whether it was the establishment of schools, hospitals, political movements, or infrastructure, Christians were involved with the resolution of community problems. Contemporary Christians too can make a valuable and relevant contribution. Christian academics, for example, can research the most appropriate solutions to some of the current community problems, disseminate their findings, and engage responsibly with the community in implementing solutions. Christians can be a relevant force for good, if they unlock the handcuffs that often bind them to the past and which are a sure track to irrelevance and demise.

Common Beliefs

Since beliefs are motivational drivers for action, it is important to identify what the central beliefs of Christianity are, in actuality and practice. The published beliefs of the various Christian denominations are widely available on the internet, catechisms, and creeds. However, it is well known anecdotally that adherents' actual beliefs often differ from these denominational or faith-tradition sets of beliefs. Many individual Christians attempt to keep their beliefs current and relevant, and related to their perceptions of their contemporary society. However, this attempt is largely ignored, even condemned, by respective ecclesiastical hierarchies, and inevitably a gap opens between hierarchy and congregation that lessens the overall credibility of Christianity.

Sløk (1993) proposed the central beliefs of Christianity as belief in Jesus as Saviour God, God as love, the demand for love to fellow human beings, and a focus on the future world. These beliefs are demonstrated in a practical sense as care for human beings in need, and looking forward to the final goal for all human effort, which is entry into the future world. Perhaps it is time to move away from speculative theological traditions formulated over past centuries, to a fresh understanding of the actual, current, core beliefs of Christian denominations.

Common Purpose

A declining understanding of Christianity's identity has left many unclear about the future direction of many denominations and faith-traditions. Some traditional religions, after a process of introspection, have tried to clone the behaviours of "successful" churches (e.g., by introducing upbeat music and focusing on entertaining young people as a strategy for combating decline). There are alternatives to cloning successful business models for churches, however, such as religious worship and the development of spirituality. A focus on introspection and numbers should be replaced by a focus on community engagement. The focus on exclusion should be replaced by a focus on welcoming new members and inclusion. Those denominations which remain silent on current issues should begin to speak out.

Strength of Faith

Many previous Christians who faced war, death, martyrdom, imprisonment, illness and various trials and difficulties, declared that they were able to face these enormous challenges because of their faith. While this facet is not exclusive to Christianity, Christianity would not be credible unless it was able to sustain adherents in times of crisis. Therefore, the Christianity of the future needs to focus on character development, moral development, faith development, authentic spirituality, and how these are applied and meaningful to Christians in everyday practical life.

Advocacy

Religion is alive and well in Australia, as it is in the world. Armstrong (2009) notes: "Even though so many people are antagonistic to faith, the world is currently experiencing a religious revival" (p. 9). Consequently, as Tacey (2000) has stated, "We can no longer afford to remain silent about matters of meaning" (p. 6). Piggin (2006) also opines that, "We can afford, when we find our voice, to speak a lot more than we have, especially if we are at pains to make sense and to speak sensitively into our distinctive Australian context. If we don't know how to do that, let us do our homework" (p. 7). The latter point is pertinent to a proper and accurate advocacy, since, as Armstrong suggests, there is the temptation to succumb to a new religiosity that is unskilful (p. 9). Such an unskilful religiosity fits the first two positions (retro-movement & non-movement) described above, but what is needed today is a new religiosity (forward-movement) free from irrelevant traditions and practices, self-indulgence, dogmatism, ineptitude, violence, and intolerance, a new religiosity that is free to express itself in practical community engagement. Watts (2006), for example, has suggested that Christians can speak out on behalf of minority groups such as women, children, disabled, ethnic groups, and Australia's Indigenous peoples, all of whom are currently "rendered invisible or insignificant … by atheistic, or secular and other overtly and covertly anti-Christian movements" (p. 3).

Conclusion

In the past, Christianity has made a sustained and valuable contribution to Australian communities. To focus on the changing religious demographics in Australia may be discouraging for many Christians, but Christianity again can make a valuable contribution to contemporary societies – if its attention is focussed on the community and not on itself. This paper proposes that Christians learn from the past and, rather than introspectively focussing on maintaining the two first positions described above, accept the third position and engage with existing communities by utilising communal practical life-style Christian principles. Perhaps from this new perspective, Christianity will become relevant and re-invigorate the traditional (Christian) Australian values as described by Linder (2006), values of justice and a fair go, self-sacrifice for the good of the community, mateship based on selflessness, and neighbour love.

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