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Christianity and a ‘good society’ in Australia: A first response to Stuart Piggin’s Murdoch Lecture

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Abstract

The article responds to a challenge to focus the values of Christianity toward making 21st century Australia a ‘good society’. The author charts the directions for a projected three-part series, framed by the typology of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr that examines the historic nature and current potential of Christianity in Australia.

Context

The efficient campaigns by Seventh-day Adventists (hereinafter abbreviated to Adventists) to influence Australia’s constitution and the religious stances of the emerging Commonwealth are better known since historian Richard Ely wrote *Unto God and Caesar*. Ely claimed: ‘For a church that so rigorously and with such determination believed in the separation of Church and State, the Adventists played politics very well.’¹

On 10 July 2007, in the eleventh annual Murdoch Lecture at Avondale College, Dr Stuart Piggin challenged contemporary Adventists to invest thought and effort comparable to that of their forebears into shaping Australia as a ‘good society’². The lecture (delivered at the Adventists’ principal tertiary institution that, among other vocations and professions, equips teachers for schools in Australia and New Zealand) should alert Christian educators and others to both perceived needs and promising opportunities.

Piggin is a careful observer of Adventism, especially since 1985 when he attended an important Adventist History Symposium at Monash University.³ He is now, in essence, asking Adventists to consider whether their historic emphasis on the separation of church and state causes them to undervalue the roles of modern Josephs and Daniels in government and to miss opportunities to leaven society.

Adventists are for Christian values. They are against coercion in the political arena in reference to matters of faith. So high are the stakes in the

contest between good and evil that every initiative for good must be intelligently embraced. Christians are entrusted with the responsibility to bear Good News ‘to every nation, tribe, language and people’ (cf. the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 with Revelation 14:6, NIV), including every human being that dwells in Australia. Therefore, the church must ask itself, anew, if at present it is effectively demonstrating just how much it cares about Christian values, social justice and human wellbeing.

This article offers merely the first exchange of a projected three-phase response to Piggin’s substantive appeal. Piggin’s initiative invites a fresh dialogue, amongst Australians in general and Adventists in particular, about the potential of Christianity in our culture and how better to employ the faith nurtured by sixty-six ancient writings in the task of making modern Australia a ‘good society’.

While there are many faiths in Australia⁴, Piggin is convinced that presently there is a ‘king tide’ of Christian opportunity in this nation. The first National Forum on Australia’s Christian Heritage (2006) is a concrete outgrowth of this conviction that is cherished by its participants and motivates Piggin’s urgent appeal that we do not miss the opportunity to take the present tide ‘at the flood’. His Murdoch Lecture is, therefore, a healthy challenge to examine again the historic relations between the religion of Jesus Christ and human culture, to understand the specific experience of religion in Australia, and to read as though for the first time all that the Scriptures say about the responsibilities of those who govern and those who are governed. This threefold endeavor will exhaust neither our opportunities nor our responsibilities; we can, however, expect it to orientate us better for our task of ‘being Christian, being Australian’⁵.

This article addresses only the first of the three considerations suggested in the preceding paragraph; specifically, it offers a brief overview of the relations between Christianity and culture as a precursor to further exploration of the potential of

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religion in Australia.

Christianity in colonial Australia

Australia's non-indigenous settlement, in the early stages, was a response to the incapacity of England's gaols to accommodate the country's rapidly increasing prison population. On a wider scale, it was a small part of a much larger movement of people; a result of the unprecedented expansion of the 'Old World' population that took place between the eighteenth century and 1930. During the first seven decades of white settlement in Australia, on average, the population doubled every eight years, mainly due to the high level of immigration.⁶ Since Australia was settled during eras of European expansion and imperialism, it was inevitable that Australian Christianity would reflect the religion of the Northern Hemisphere peoples who were transplanted into this antipodean land.

However, the colony's geographical location and characteristics influenced its religious ethos. The alien nature of the Australian environment, from the viewpoint of the earliest European inhabitants, included far more than the strangeness of its existing Aboriginal culture. The unfamiliar aspect of its flora, fauna, climate and seasons was striking. It was prone to excessive summer heat, drought and bush-fire. The quality of its soil was often poor and, combined with climatic factors, unsuited to some of the best-loved plants of the British Isles. The impact of these geographical characteristics was exacerbated by the enormous problem of distance from other centres of Western civilisation, the separateness of its various colonies, the isolation of inland settlements, and the loneliness of many of its individual families. Covered by radically unfamiliar vegetation bathed in a mysterious light, the new country took a century to develop its 'first truly Australian school of painting'⁷. Many other aspects of colonial life would require a similar time period for the umbilical cords of dependence to be cut and for national independence to become evident. During its first century, Australia's white inhabitants viewed it as a fatal shore or a promised land, and sometimes, ambivalently, as both, simultaneously. Therefore, the colonial period witnessed at best a struggle between competing loyalties. The nurture of the Christian religion was seldom a paramount consideration amongst the general population.

The last decade of the colonial period and the founding years of the Commonwealth of Australia are important as a reference era for Piggitt's Murdoch Lecture. Elsewhere I enumerate the major characteristics of Australian colonial Christianity, citing evidence that this particular transplanting of religion may be regarded as a remarkable success.⁸ We shall now focus on the concepts of Christianity

and culture that European Australians were likely to bring with them as incidental or chosen 'baggage' as they came to the land of the Southern Cross.

The 'double wrestle' of Christianity

Christianity in colonial Australia mirrored the religious ethos of the Northern Hemisphere; specifically it was fragmented by a major cleavage between Roman Catholics and Protestants, who commonly evinced a competitive rather than a cooperative attitude toward each other. In addition, there were important divisions within such major denominations as the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. Catherine L. Albanese identifies in Christianity a 'counterpoint between manyness and oneness'. In nineteenth-century Australia the emphasis favoured denominationalism rather than commonality. Thus the churches spent much time establishing and maintaining the boundaries of religious acceptability, safeguarding their identity, specifying the nature of their mission, recalling the meaning of their heritage and clarifying their denominational relations with society and government. However, the adherents of a given denomination frequently shared a cluster of ideas that motivated or constrained their relations with society and all denominations related in identifiable ways with historic Christianity.

It is of decided value, therefore, to observe analyses of typical ways in which, since the founding of their religion, Christians have related to society. This task has engaged many minds from a wide variety of disciplines. For instance, H. Richard Niebuhr devoted much of his career to what he called the 'confused', 'many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilisation'. He came to believe that the ever-recurring question of how to live the Christian life within a given culture calls for 'an infinite dialogue ... in the Christian conscience and the Christian community'. Niebuhr's lectures published as *Christ and Culture* have evoked doctoral dissertations, books and articles during the past six decades, indicating the substantial nature of his claim about 'typical partial answers that recur so often in different eras and societies that they seem to be less the product of historical conditioning than of the nature of the problem itself and the meaning of its terms'.⁹

'Christ and culture': Five typical options

The relationship between Christianity and culture is, in Niebuhr's terms, 'the enduring problem' that may be better understood in terms of five constructs. Three of the typical answers belong to 'that median type in which both Christ and culture are distinguished and affirmed', whereas the other two are polar opposites, emphasising

“*The ever-recurring question of how to live the Christian life within a given culture calls for an infinite dialogue in the Christian conscience and the Christian community*”

either 'the opposition between Christ and culture' or 'a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture'. We shall, at this point, summarise Niebuhr's typologies and list some of the main examples that he cites, acknowledging that it is impossible to do so without employing much of his language in the next five paragraphs.

The first option

Niebuhr claims that history is well supplied with examples of anti-cultural, non-conforming, radical, exclusive Christianity. Clement of Rome and Tertullian are first century examples. Later ones include some early monastics, Protestant sects, Leo Tolstoy and many others. Mennonites and Jehovah's Witnesses are two of the more visible examples of the twentieth century. Such groups emphasise portions of the Gospel of Matthew, the First Epistle of John and the Revelation of St John. They stress a long series of contrasts: Christ and Caesar, church and state, divine revelation and human reason, light and darkness, God's will versus man's will, the children of God and outside society, spiritual and material, eternal and temporal, Christian and secular, God's work in Christ versus human work in culture, and soul-regeneration over against social reform. For such believers, history is the story of a rising church or Christian culture and a dying pagan civilisation. Their religion presents an inseparable relation between the three themes of love: God's love for human beings, their love for God and their love for each other. Hence, the believer's loyalty is directed entirely to the new order, the new society and its Lord, without concern for transitory culture. Niebuhr describes and illustrates this stance cogently in his chapter entitled 'Christ against culture'.

The second option

An opposite answer is given by the 'one-born' and 'healthy-minded' harmonisers of Christ and culture. Cultural Protestantism accommodates Christ to culture while selecting from culture what conforms most readily to Christ. Such Christians interpret the New Testament as relevant to the there-and-then and to the here-and-now, in that it agrees with the interests and needs of the time. Judaisers, Nazarenes and Ebionites sought to maintain loyalty to Jesus Christ without abandoning any important part of current Jewish tradition, or giving up the special messianic hopes of Israel. The Christian Gnostics also exemplified this stance, as did Lactantius and others who sought to amalgamate Hellenistic culture and Christianity in the time of Constantine. Peter Abelard reduced the faith to what conformed to the best in his culture; John Locke stressed the reasonableness

of Christianity. Gottfried Leibnitz and Immanuel Kant opted for religion within the limits of reason; Thomas Jefferson, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Walter Rauschenbusch also stood within this stream. The harmonisers seek to reconcile the gospel with the science and philosophy of their time; they make Christianity a religious and philosophic system, emphasising Jesus as spiritual saviour rather than Lord of life, and the church as an association of the enlightened. They offer, rather than the exacting demands of certain biblical passages, kindly and liberal guidance for good people who want to do right. This answer assumes that the tension that exists between church and world is due to the church's misunderstanding of Christ. The radical Christian charges this group with reducing the kingdom of Christ to a fellowship of human beings. Yet the 'Christ of Culture' position, to use Niebuhr's third chapter title, claims that it is recommending Christianity to an unbelieving society and presenting reason as the 'highway' to God and salvation.

The third option

According to Niebuhr, the great majority of Christians have 'refused to take either the position of the anti-cultural radicals or that of the accommodators of Christ and culture'. The majority movement in Christianity includes three principal strands: synthesists, dualists and conversionists. The synthesists adopt a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or' stance, attempting to combine appreciation of culture with loyalty to Christ, while at the same time placing Christ above culture. Passages in the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans are crucial to this answer which was articulated by the apologists of the second century and many others, such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and Pope Leo XIII. The synthesist's understanding of Christ separates him from the cultural believer, whereas his appreciation of cultures distances him from the radical Christian. He believes that Christ is far above culture; indeed, there is a gulf between them, even though culture may be a preliminary training for the work of the Lord. Such a believer combines, without confusing, philosophy and theology, state and church, civic and Christian virtues, natural and divine laws. This 'Christ above culture' synthesis is not easily attained or maintained, being subject to obvious tensions.

The fourth option

Another 'Christian of the centre', the dualist, lives in conflict or tension between two magnetic poles, and in the presence of one great issue: the conflict between God and man due to the righteousness of

God and the unrighteousness of fallen humanity. The dualist believes that in the cross of Christ man's work has been judged, and by Christ's resurrection the new life has been introduced into history. Hence, man now lives between time and eternity, between wrath and mercy, between culture and Christ, with no solution to this dilemma before death. Niebuhr finds many examples of this stance: Paul the Apostle in the first century, Marcion in the second century, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, Roger Williams, Soren Kierkegaard, Ernst Troeltsch, Reinhold Niebuhr and others. Yet the complexity of 'the enduring problem' is such that some of these individuals combine more than one option. Hence, for Augustine the conversionist note is more characteristic than the dualist stance; Troeltsch does not always hold a tension between Christ and culture. The dualist fixes his gaze on the depths and heights of wickedness and goodness as revealed in the cross of Christ. His theorising begins with the miracle of God's grace, which forgives men without merit on their part. He believes grace is in God, sin is in man, and man is in sin. He affirms that before the holiness of God there are no significant differences, rather, everything that is creaturely is depraved. For the dualist, therefore, all culture is injected with that godlessness which is the essence of sin. He knows he belongs to a culture and cannot escape from it, yet he believes God sustains him in it and by it. Hence, adopting the 'Christ and culture in paradox' stance, the true dualist lives in the tension between wrath and mercy.

The fifth option

Niebuhr's last answer is that given by the conversionists who find their chief biblical foundation in the Gospel of John. This stance may be illustrated by the Letter of Diognetus written late in the second century; Augustine's *City of God*; John Calvin's desire for the permeation of all life by the Gospel, with the state as God's minister. There is also John Wesley's emphasis upon Christ as the transformer of life and F. D. Maurice's notion that Christ is Lord of mankind whether men believe this or not. Of these and others, Jonathan Edwards is 'the most consistent conversionist'. The conversionist approach emphasises Christ as redeemer and takes a positive and hopeful attitude toward culture. It makes creation a major theme, declaring that man lives in a created order. It further declares that the fall has warped, twisted, and misdirected man's good nature. Hence it stresses the redemptive work of God in the incarnation of the Son; affirms that God in Christ has entered a human culture that has never been without his ordering action and believes that history is a dramatic interaction between God and

man. Therefore, the conversionist understanding asserts that all things are possible to God. It sees history as the story of God's mighty deeds and man's response to them, and it presents to the world 'Christ the transformer of culture'.

Niebuhr's description of the 'many-sided debate' that engages 'historians and theologians, statesmen and churchmen, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and anti-Christians' provides a useful framework within which to consider the historic role and potential influence of Christianity in Australia.

Conclusion

Twenty-first-century Australian Christians exemplify the variety aptly described by Niebuhr, and well explored by Philip Hughes and others. Stuart Piggin and his colleagues also recognise this diversity within the papers read at Australia's first Christian Heritage National Forum. While the above exploration of the 'confused' and 'many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilization' identifies problems that are likely to arise as Piggin's ideal is implemented, it is also intended as a mirror for those Christians who want to see themselves in terms of historic Christianity. It must be emphasised, again, that this article is merely the first of three that are directed toward what it is hoped may become a lively, ongoing conversation. It is also expected that, in addition, educators will grasp the opportunity that Christian education has exerted and can continue to exert upon Australian society. For this writer, the need remains to more adequately define the nature of Australian Christianity before asking how a biblical investigation may inform the ongoing dialogue. **TEACH**

Endnotes

¹ Richard Ely, *Unto God and Caesar: Religious Issues in the Emerging Commonwealth 1891-1906* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), 44-5.

² Cf. Stuart Piggin, editor, *Shaping the Good Society in Australia: Australia's Christian Heritage: Its Importance in our Past and its Relevance for our Future* (Macquarie Centre: Australia's Christian Heritage Forum, 2006). Associate Professor Stuart Piggin is Director of the Centre for the History of Christian Thought and Experience at Macquarie University.

³ The symposium was linked to the Church's commemoration of its first hundred years in the South Pacific region and illustrates the vision of Walter R.L. Scragg as a president 'for whom history is more than a discipline'. The sixteen lectures were edited by Arthur J. Ferch and published as *Symposium on Adventist History in the South Pacific, 1885-1918* (Wahroonga: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986). Subsequently, Ferch and Noel P. Clapham edited two related volumes.

⁴ Note the way in which this concept informed the publications that were stimulated by Australia's bicentennial, such as Ian Gilman, *Many Faiths One Nation: A Guide to the Major Faiths and Denominations in Australia* (Sydney: Collins, 1988).

⁵ This has often been the endeavour of particular Christians and denominations; see, as an example, William Lawton, *Being*

“Educators will grasp the opportunity to discuss the dynamic impact that Christian education has exerted and can exert upon Australian society”

Christian, Being Australian; Contemporary Christianity Down Under (Homebush West, Sydney: Lancer, 1988).

⁶ It should be noted that population growth was not necessarily steady or uniform. During the gold rushes there were sudden and massive influxes of newcomers that skewed the 'average'.

⁷ Patrick McCaughey, *Australian Painters of the Heidelberg School: The Jack Manton Collection* (Melbourne, 1979), 16.

⁸ See Arthur Nelson Patrick, 'Christianity and Culture in Colonial Australia: Selected Catholic, Anglican, Wesleyan and Adventist perspectives, 1891-1900' (University of Newcastle: PhD thesis, 1992) published under the same title (Sydney: Fast books, 1993) for sources and discussion of issues touched upon in this article.

⁹ H. Richard Niehbuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Row, 1951). For detailed pages references, see *Christianity and Culture*, endnote above.