State of the Art

The Study of Religions in Australia: 1

This new section of the *REVIEW* marks the beginning of an enterprise with hopefully no end in sight. The study of religion and religions in its broadest sense draws on the variety of disciplines that are generally described as belonging to the Humanities and Social Sciences, although some might argue that History as foundation discipline and the much debated phenomenologies of religion take pride of place.

The formal beginning of the study of religion in Australia is only recent, but important Australian contributions to the scholarly enterprise pre-date the official setting up of Departments of Religious Studies in Universities and Colleges. As well as being heir to European and American traditions, Australian scholars have established areas of research specific to the Australian context, and in relation to Asia and the Pacific see themselves as having an opportunity of developing uniquely Australian expertise. There are, however, many areas of debate, not the least being the old question of 'cultural cringe', and the equally familiar problem of convincing Government and populace alike that this kind of research and teaching is both culturally valuable and practically necessary.

This on-going series on the study of religion in Australia will examine the 'state-of-the-art' of the disciplines and multi-disciplinary areas of research in relation to religion and religions, from the point of view of Australian scholarship. Each writer will have a particular perspective in assessing and analysing Australian achievements and in speculating on future directions. Response and debate is invited as the series opens with an examination of Sociology of Religion in Australia by Dr. Gary Bouma who is a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Monash University and Assistant Priest at St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Brighton, Victoria.

The Sociology of Religion in Australia

The sociology of religion in Australia has had a lively record of publication in this field during the 1980s. In the seventies the field was dominated by Mol's (1971) classic treatment, *Religion in Australia*. For those who want an excellent reference to the work done before 1980, I would recommend Michael Mason, editor (1982) *Religion in Australian Life: A Bibliography of Social Research*, Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions and National Catholic Research Council. This is a thorough, well-organized and very helpful guide to the literature in the field.

The Eighties: a Review

During the eighties there have been several major contributions to the field and several major research projects, in a context of rapidly expanding work in this area. Major research projects of the eighties include the Australian Values Systems Study, the Beliefs and Practices studies conducted by the National Catholic Research Council (Pastoral Investigation of Contemporary Trends — P.I.C.T. — project) and a similar project among Anglicans and Protestants conducted by the Christian Research Association. These

major projects plus a number of smaller projects have provided a much needed data base for discussing religion in Australia. Without these studies sociologists of religion would have been left to guess what was happening to Australian religion after its first systematic assessment by Mol. Those who did venture guesses on the basis of the presumed effects of secularisation found some of their predictions starkly contradicted by the evidence. A rethinking of the role of religion in Australia was clearly required. This is now well underway.

Several books published in the eighties are worthy of mention. They include (in order of publication):

Alan W. Black and Peter E. Glasner, eds (1983), *Practice and Belief: Studies in the Sociology of Australian Religion*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
Ken Dempsey (1983), *Conflict and Decline: Ministers and Their People in a Country Town*, North Ryde: Methuen.
Hans Mol (1985), *The Faith of Australians*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
John Bodycomb (1986), *A Matter of Death and Life: The Future of Australia's Churches*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education.
Gary D. Bouma and Beverly R. Dixon (1986), *The Religious Factor in Australian Life*, Melbourne: Marc Australia (World Vision).
Peter Kaldor (1987), *Who Goes Where?*, Sydney: Lancer.
Michael Hogan (1987), *The Sectarian Strand*, Melbourne: Penguin.

Each of these is written by sociologists (or in the case of Hogan, a social historian) and attempts to analyse the place and role of religion in Australian society. They represent the range of material produced in book form. It is time, but this is not the place, for a good review of all the literature of the eighties including articles, reports and monographs.

Black and Glasner put together a very useful and interesting collection of twelve papers on religion in Australian life. Bouma (Chapter 2) traces the rise, decline and rise again of church attendance, sacramental participation and religious identification of Australians using Census data, official records, and opinion polls. This was one of the first empirical indications that the progress of secularisation and church decline in Australia was not inexorable. Blaikie's (Chapter 4) work on Australian clergy is presented in terms of "Styles of Ministry". Leslie O'Brien's study of the "Hare Krishna" Movement is balanced and promotes understanding of this growing group. Other articles treat the Sociology of Ecumenism (Alan W. Black), Organized Irreligion (Alan W. Black), and Organizational Efficacy (Edwin Dowdy and Gillian Lupton).

Ken Dempsey presents a careful analysis of the role of a particular church in a particular country town. His study is rich in detail and takes a long historical view. The conflict between the town and its clergy is bitter and debilitating. The clergy were trained to expect one thing: the people expected something else. The story is one of the decline of the place of the church in the life of this community. Hans Mol's *The Faith of Australians* is an update of his earlier book, *Religion in Australia*. It is a solid descriptive treatment based on his mid-sixties survey of Australians updated by careful reference to surveys conducted since then. He pays particular attention to the way different kinds of religiosity relate to attitudes, beliefs and morals. He measures religiosity by levels of church attendance, prayer and certainty of belief in God. Religiosity is not a unidimensional variable. For example, some people pray and know without doubt that God exists, but do not go to church. These Mol calls "private believers", and they comprise 8 percent of his sample of Australians. On the other hand, the orthodox believer goes to church, prays and believes without doubt that God exists (14 percent of his sample). Mol finds that his six styles or types of religiosity are related to differences in beliefs

and morals. In general, the more religious favour self-denial, asceticism, and repression while the less religious favour self-assertion, pleasure and expression (Mol: 146).

John Bodycomb emphasizes that he is taking a sociological, rather than a theological approach to the life of the church in Australia. His treatment of the difference is very instructive. His conceptual device called "zones of disposition" helps to free thinking about church growth. Bodycomb sees church growth and decline as a process of movement between four zones of involvement. One of the strengths of his analysis is that the outermost zone is not seen as comprised of hopeless heathens, but of people who have not as yet formed or given shape to their faith.

The Religious Factor in Australian Life by Bouma and Dixon presents and analyses data from the Australian Values Systems Study conducted in 1983. Three questions are raised: Is Australia as secular as many say? Are differences in religiosity related to differences in attitudes, morals and values? Does denominational identification make a difference in Australian society? In short, it can hardly be said that Australia is secular when 57.9 percent of Australians claim to be religious persons (4.5 percent claim to be atheists) and when 85.6 percent of Australians, when asked, identify with some religious group.

Religiosity was found to be related to differences in attitudes, values and morals. Self-identification as a religious person and the rating of the importance of God in life were the two most influential dimensions of religiosity. They made more difference than did frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, or belief in a personal God. The major new contribution of this book is that it demonstrates clearly that denomination makes a difference in Australian life.

Peter Kaldor's careful assessment of patterns of church attendance in Australia represents one of the contributions of church-related (Board of Missions of the Uniting Church in NSW) sociologists to the field. He carefully analyses several surveys conducted over the post-war period, along with church and census data. It is probably the most thorough and systematic study of patterns of church attendance in Australia to date.

Michael Hogan has provided a very readable history of religion in Australia. He demonstrates the significance of denominational differences in Australia's history. This theme is now more popular with social historians than before (*cf.* e.g. John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988). Hogan's treatment runs from the first settlement till the 1960s, examining the role of religion in politics, education and social life.

It is easy to forget how things have changed since 1980. Alan Gilbert's book, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (1980) had just been published. After five chapters describing the seemingly inexorable course of secularisation in western culture, he began to report some early findings indicating that pessimism about religion's future in Britain needed to be questioned. His last chapter was entitled, "Limits to secularisation". Then some early signs of the continued vitality of religion in Australian society were reported. The census figures for the 1981 census supported this view as did the results of the Australian Values Systems Study. Some time in the eighties historians "discovered" the role of religion in Australian history. It seems to me also that the media have changed their style of reporting religion. Less and less attention is now paid to sensational coverage of new religious movements and rather more to sensitive and positive reporting of genuine research into Australian religion. It may be that the AVSS conveyed a needed sense of legitimacy to religion and its serious study and reporting.

Another substantial change in the eighties was the increase in the amount and quality of research being done by church-related but relatively independent

research groups. Churches have long been doing in-house research for a multitude of reasons. Some of this research had been of a high standard but much of it never saw the light of day. With the advent of the National Catholic Research Council and, more recently, the Christian Research Association, this has begun to change. Their research is not only reported to their ecclesiastical funding bodies but is also being fed into the ongoing stream of social science analysis of religion in Australia. The PICT Project is being published by Collins-Dove in a six-volume series, while the CRA has tended to publish its own reports as they are prepared. These projects, and the fact that they are being made attractively available are providing some very valuable new data for the analysis of the role of the Christian churches in Australian society. The data they have collected have only begun to be analysed. Further cooperation between sociologists of religion in academe with those in ecclesiastical institutions can only benefit both groups.

The Eighties: a Comment

Like many other academic disciplines in Australia, the study of religion, including the sociology of religion, is characterised by the attempt to fit concepts, categories and theories derived from overseas research projects to the Australian context. Much of the work here mirrors work being done elsewhere. This is not to say that Australian sociologists are lagging behind, for they are not. Moreover, in any attempt to produce general statements about a widespread phenomenon it is important to see if concepts developed and tested in one place and time hold true in other places and times. This effort is as central to the sociology of religion as it is to any other discipline.

The difficulty is that the sociology of religion (particularly, it seems, in English-speaking societies) is dominated by scholars whose sole exposure is to religion in their own countries, *viz.* the USA and the UK. While both of these societies are fascinating and worthy of considerable attention, they are not necessarily useful models for building a general analysis of religion in society or of religion in Australian society. Both theorising and the formulation of research programmes in the sociology of religion tend to follow issues more directly relevant to either of the dominant English-speaking societies. The whole secularisation debate is a case in point. How secularisation is defined, and how it is seen to be related to other aspects of society is shaped largely by the situation prevalent in the dominant E-S society in which the researcher was raised or trained.

While it is true that those societies which were formed as colonies of the British Empire share many similarities, they are in themselves quite different. They have quite different histories and their institutions were established at different points in time. This means that while and in so far as they are derivative of the dominant society, they were derived at quite different times. For example, the formation of an independent central (federal) government in Canada took a very different form from the formation of the Australian independent federal government in the late nineteenth century. Of course, the American experience is entirely different again.

Another major factor differentiating the several colonies was their history of migration. Who went where, when and why? The fact that the USA was settled initially by those seeking religious freedom in the 17th century colours the nature of the relation of religion and other social institutions in that country. The USA began as a loose federation of intensely, but very differently, religious people. It was forced into becoming the first genuinely pluralistic religious (as opposed to indifferently secular) society by the nature of its early pattern of settlement.

The experience of Canada and Australia were very different. Canada's early history of conflict between French Catholics and English Protestants (more

Presbyterian than Anglican) continues to colour the religious scene in Canada. The fact that a major impetus to the establishment of continuous serious English-speaking habitation of Canada was the flight of the United Empire Loyalists (mostly Anglican) to Canada from the USA during the time of the American Revolution, also colours the Canadian religious scene. They comprised, founded and defined the first stable and continuous middle class English-speaking society in Canada. (Religion in E-S societies tends to be defined and dominated by the middle classes both in terms of participation and orientation.) This makes Canada very different from both its neighbour to the south, which never has dominated or shaped Canada in the field of religion, and from Australia.

Australia's experience is different again. Founded as a penal colony, the early middle (legitimate and legitimating) class was comprised of officers, warders, and early landowners. Their orientation to religion in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was very different to that of the middle class in the USA or Canada (although it may have been rather like that prevailing in the UK). Religion was something that was done for you by a religious professional. So long as services were said regularly, decently and without interference in the life of polite society or government all was well. Provision of ceremony to mark major events in the lives of individuals and families on the one hand and to underscore the legitimacy of Empire, local authority, and social decency on the other were the core essentials. (That religion might be a useful tool to promote morality and to pacify convicts and the lower classes was essentially a novel and untried idea.) This attitude toward religion, while very characteristic of those in the English armed forces, did not dominate other colonies because they had civilian middle-classes which were larger than the military. In Australia the military middle class was dominant for the first 50 years. While an indigenous middle class emerged after the middle of the nineteenth century it did little to change this attitude toward religion. A "military-chaplain" orientation toward religion seems to remain as one very strong undercurrent in the Australian orientation to religion. This fact needs to be taken into account when attempting to assess religious change or secularisation in Australia, as compared with other societies.

Another factor differentiating Australia from the USA, UK, and Canada is the fact that the major revitalisation movements in Western Christianity in the past 300 years have largely missed Australia. The Great Awakening had crested and had been institutionalised before the foundation of E-S society in Australia. The revitalisation movements of the 1830s (nowhere the subject of careful comparative analysis), for example the Oxford Movement, the *Afscheiding* (in Holland), the religious ferment in the USA (Mormons, Disciples of Christ, etc.) which were often lower middle class revolts against established church domination by the upper middle class, had no counterpart in Australia. While the charismatic movement of the late seventies and eighties has made some impact, it has not become particularly indigenous in Australia and retains the feeling of an imported exotic form of religiosity.

The style of religiosity established in Australia in the early nineteenth century, reflecting the UK in 1780 as expressed by military chaplaincy has been largely unchallenged by subsequent history. Indeed the events of Gallipoli and the carnage of the First World War would have gone a long way to re-establish that religious orientation as Australians struggled to come to an understanding and explanation of those incredible losses. If the losses were not for nothing, what were they for? — for God and King. The role of religion became even more firmly defined in the "military chaplaincy" mould as something done as duty, done for others, or done for self by others, as legitimation for the established order (for which so much has been sacrificed), and focussed on the military as the

primary vehicle for the expression of selfless sacrifice. The strength of these symbols and orientations in Australian culture is most obviously evidenced by the continuous reaction against them by those who would define themselves as radical, revolutionary, or change agents. If these symbols and orientations were dead there would be no point in kicking against them. Those who would revitalise Australian religion also find themselves flailing against these symbols and orientations. Examples of this include Anglican priests who chafe at being asked to perform baptisms, funerals, or weddings for those who rarely or never attend regular worship services. Those clergy who insist on participation as a prerequisite to these services are adding conditions seen as unnecessary by those accustomed to "military chaplaincy" style Anglicanism. Anyone who seeks to increase levels of church participation among Australians is up against the assumption that it is not necessary to attend so long as a form of identification is maintained in rites of passage. The extent to which chaplains in church-related schools promote a "chaplaincy" orientation to religion needs to be explored.

I have not said anything about the religious situation in New Zealand, South Africa, or India because I am less familiar with these societies. The E-S minority in both South Africa and India makes them special cases. The different migration history and ethnic composition of New Zealand may explain some of the differences between Australia and New Zealand.

The "military chaplaincy" orientation to religion is worlds apart from the sectarian protestant view, so characteristic of the USA, which sees religion in intensely personal terms as something each must do for self, each must take very seriously at all times. The protestant view loses a great deal of the communal aspects of "chaplaincy" religion. The protestant view condemns the chaplaincy view as mere formalism, mere ceremony lacking in emotional/personal vitality or validity. (In another paper I have, following Weber, delineated and contrasted three fundamental loci of authority in religion and religious organisation. The "military chaplaincy" orientation is characterised by traditional authority and the protestant view by emotional (charismatic) or legal/rational authority.) The dominant form of religious authority in the USA is emotional/charismatic while in the UK, Canada and Australia it is traditional. Recognition of these differences is essential in assessing the religious situation of each place and even more important when making comparisons. Secularisation, for example, means very different things in each of these authority contexts.

Australia has a strong, well respected, and productive community of sociologists of religion. In my opinion, the work of the last decade has revealed much about religion in Australia. It is more alive than many thought. It is not about to fade away. It is changing as Australia's ethnic mix changes. It has different forms of vitality than are found in other E-S societies. It is responding to some of the same forces bringing changes to religion in other parts of the world, televangelism, affluence, dual career families and ageing populations. But it is doing so as part of Australian society, not just like religion in some other society. It is critical that the sociology of religion in Australian Society first examine the ways in which Australians are religious on their own terms, paying careful attention to the unique features of the Australian context and experience.

—Gary D. Bouma