

Get Me to the Church on Time: Christianity in Australia as an Exploration of the Present Moment

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In the middle of George Street, soaring high above the bustle and clamour of city life below, the spectacular towers of St. Andrew's Cathedral preside serenely over the streets of Sydney. A testament to the beauty and grandeur of Gothic architecture, the Cathedral quietly stands its crowd as the chaos of 21st Century Sydney sweeps around it. It emanates a welcome tranquility, a respite from the constant cries of the road, the station, the office. Within its sandstone walls, one is overawed by the sheer enormity of its scale, the painstaking artistry of its stained-glass windows, and the almost crushing gravity of its silence. More than anything else, however, the astute observer is confronted with the Cathedral's tacit yet thunderous acclamation of the values of a time gone by; A time when a building was constructed to bring glory not to the architect, but to the Architect; to draw a person's eyes not inward, but upward; to bring the entrant to a realisation not of man's achievements, but those of God. St. Andrew's Cathedral can be understood as a bastion of the beliefs of Christianity. It is a towering reminder to Sydney's streets of Australia's rich traditional affinity with Christianity since settlement. Though the countless passersby may ignore, the Cathedral has stubbornly refused to cease its silent campaign of support for this tradition, ever since the young city of Sydney sprung up around it almost 200 years ago.

For all its tranquility and calm, however, the peaceful aura of St. Andrew's Cathedral belies a violent war that rages on an ideological battlefield. Recent decades have brought the traditions and values of Australian Christianity into contact with new and exciting ways of thinking, but their instances of meeting have almost universally broiled over into conflict. Australia is not alone in witnessing this belligerence, with outbreaks being sparked the world over. The war is being fought over the most precious commodity available to an ideology: the souls of humankind.

On one side, the traditional beliefs and ideas of Christianity seek to draw people back to the way things were, emphasising how more than ever Australians must look to tradition for the security they need to survive in the turbulence of the 21st Century. Opposing them is arguably Christianity's greatest enemy yet: the ideologies and discourses of the postmodern way of thinking. Undeniably, this is the side winning the most numbers; people find in the abolition of the absolute, the emancipation of thought and the open arms of liberalism a way of thinking much more in touch with the world around us, much better equipped to deal with its concerns.

However, to explain the interplay between traditional Australian Christianity and contemporary postmodernity in terms of a straightforward battle between two diametrically opposed sides is over-simple and inadequate. The reality we will observe is one of ambiguity as definitions of tradition and postmodernism are continually undergoing transformation and being problematised by members of both camps. Nevertheless, to trace Australia's clear transition away from its traditional Christian roots towards postmodernity sheds much light on the uncertainty of the present moment we inhabit.

It took only thirty years after the colonising of Australia in 1788 for the first foundation stone of St. Andrew's Cathedral to be laid, as Johnstone's 1937 history of the Cathedral records (Johnstone 1937). Governor Lachlan Macquarie had grand visions for the young town of Sydney, and demonstrated commendable foresight in his prediction that Sydney would soon grow enough to require a large cathedral. In fact, Johnstone suggests that Macquarie's plans for the Cathedral exceeded even the ambitious dimensions of the one that stands today. Macquarie's plans sparked a great deal of controversy, as inquisitors from Britain deemed a large Cathedral to be beyond the means of newly colonised Sydney. Johnstone proposes that the furore following the deferment of Macquarie's plans was a major factor in his decision to resign in 1821. While it would in reality be a further fifty years before the dream of Macquarie would be realised with the opening of the Cathedral to public worship in 1868, what can be clearly seen is the significant degree of importance placed upon a centre of Christian worship in Australia's settlement. Places of Christian worship were expected without dispute to play an essential role in the lives of the early colonisers; the only question was of their size and the projections for their time of completion. Building on the foundation stone of St. Andrew's Cathedral, a tradition of Christian affiliation in Australia had begun.

An inevitable part of the inheritance colonised Australia would receive from its motherland, Great Britain, was the social and cultural adherence to the tenets of Christianity, with which Britain had enjoyed, or perhaps more appropriately endured, a centuries-long association. Religion and society and culture were strongly interwoven in 19th Century Europe, and in keeping with the pattern of colonisation at that time, Australia found itself similarly imbued with Christian values and practices. In his 1985 study, Hans Mol effectively traced the ways in which Christianity diffused throughout almost every sphere of Australian society (Mol 1985). In particular, he notes how different denominations of Christianity, such as Anglicanism, Catholicism and Presbyterianism influenced, and were influenced by, the cultures of particular colonising nationalities (English, Irish and Scottish, respectively). The gradual assimilation of these different cultural groups, Mol observes, produced an Australian culture lasting throughout the 19th Century in which one's denominational affiliation was a key component of the individual's identity. He also explores the fundamental position held by Christianity in the establishment of Australia's educational and political institutions. Webb argues that even the Federal Constitution's precepts on the separation of church and state (Section 116) have a record of poor litigation in Australia (Webb 1960) and we observe this still today in ongoing matters of controversy concerning the government's allegedly favourable funding of denominational schools.

Of Australian churches, Mol concludes that "They alone provided both a moral and a transcendental frame of reference for the vicissitudes of life and guaranteed the moral integrity of community and family life" (Mol 1985 p. 55). While the evidence for the impact of Christian values on Australian society is considerable, it is interesting to observe how much of the 'Christian moral fibre' of 19th and early 20th Century Australia actually translated into Christian religious practice, such as church attendance. Barrett classifies the first half of the 19th Century as "the bleak age of religion" (Barrett 1966 p. 185) and church attendance statistics provided by Mol certainly suggest that this was the case in Australia (Mol 1985). Even by 1918, Spurr was observing with disgust that only 25 per cent of Australians attended church regularly, due in his opinion to an epidemic of hedonism plaguing the country (Spurr 1918).

We therefore encounter a formidable obstacle in our attempt to classify Australian Christianity as a 'tradition'. While on one hand Christian beliefs and values have contributed almost exclusively to Australian morality and institutional values, it must be questioned whether or not the failure of these values to evolve into particular cultural practices is problematic to its qualification as a tradition. Eisenstadt puts forward the following definition: "The essence of traditionality is in the cultural acceptance of... cultural definitions of tradition as a basic criterion of social activity, as the basic referent of collective identity, and as defining the societal and cultural orders and the degrees of variability among them" (Eisenstadt 2003 p. 138). It is with respect to "social activity" that Australian Christianity has fallen short of a conventional classification of 'tradition'. However, Eisenstadt would certainly agree upon observing the integration of Christian morals and values into the early Australian social fabric that, although problematised, elements of a tradition certainly existed. While Australians historically have adhered to this tradition somewhat more nominally than practically, it is the transition from this tradition to the postmodernity we observe today that provides profound insight into what the present moment holds for the Australian identity.

The laying of the foundation stone of St. Andrew's Cathedral so early in the history of Australian settlement is a poignant image from which to draw implications concerning the traditionally central place of Christianity in the lives of Australians. However, it admittedly fails to tell the whole story. As early as the first half of the 19th Century, other opinions disputing the necessity of Christianity in Australian society and culture began to make themselves heard. Attitudes of indifference and a notable lack of religious zeal characterised early Australian settlement almost as much as the idealism of Governor Macquarie. In his history, Johnstone recounts how it took almost half a century for the Cathedral to develop from a cornerstone to a building, and while he attributes much of this to matters of funding, impractical designs and the unforgiving Australian climate (Johnstone 1937), there is evidence to suggest that the 'Christianisation' of Australia was not high on the colonisation agenda. Border records that the Reverend Johnson, the first chaplain of Australia, campaigned for funding for the country's first church building for five years, and after eventually constructing one out of his own pocket, waited a further four years for compensation (Border 1962). Christianity's assertion of importance in the lives of Australians has not gone unopposed, and we can see even in Australia's colonial beginnings the forebear of the postmodern attitude that has challenged Christianity's assertion more boldly than any other before it.

Australians are postmodern, although they may not be aware of it. While they may be far from identifying themselves with the verbose and very, very French writings of Lyotard and Foucault, the ideologies and discourses of late 20th Century Europe have nevertheless found their way to our shores. They have been folded into the Australian lifestyle with a practical level of application never extended to the values of Christianity, to the point where extricating postmodernity from the 'Australian way of life' is almost impossible. One of the most evident examples of the out-workings of postmodernism in Australian culture is the exaltation of our status as multicultural. In his 1992 study of religion in Australia, Bouma explains how Australia's immigration patterns over the course of the 20th Century have produced a strong change in Australian spirituality and attitudes towards Christianity (Bouma 1992). With Australia adapting to the demands of a plethora of different cultures, he claims, a culture of pluralism, tolerance and respect for subjectivity has developed and become integrated into the Australian psyche. Compromise has replaced the once unquestioned assertion of Christian values and beliefs, as churches are now viewed as the espousers of particular 'ways of thinking', not the 'truth'. Aldridge advocates a serious reassessment of the

position of religion in contemporary societies, claiming that the development of “major new themes” such as detraditionalisation, globalisation and gender equality necessitate a reconsideration of the conventional assertion of religious authority (Aldridge 2000 p. 185). Australians have certainly prescribed to this reconsideration. It is no longer socially acceptable to claim that the beliefs of another are ‘wrong’; Australian culture brands this as intolerant, bigoted and politically incorrect. But is it accurate to correlate this culture of tolerance and pluralism with the ‘high-brow’ tenets of postmodernity?

One of the most vocal ambassadors of postmodernism in the late 20th Century was Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his essay *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard denounced what he termed the ‘grand narratives’ that had dominated Western ideology since the Enlightenment (Lyotard 1979). He disputed their claims to an absolute truth or one true way of knowing the world, taking particular issue with the empirical allegation of objectivity, the idea that the truth can be discovered by observation and measurement of the world. Returning to our consideration of the postmodernity and increasing secularism of Australians, it would be erroneous to accuse Lyotard of specifically attacking the position of Christian values in Australia. Rather, the process can be better understood as the ripples created by Lyotard’s, and others’, ground-breaking work reaching our shores, resulting in a change in the Australian psyche. Turner describes the effect of postmodernity on Christianity thus: “In so far as Christianity is the grand narrative, the postmodernist technique of deconstruction and the critique of textuality is a direct analytical challenge to the biblical authority of the Christian tradition” (Turner 1983 p.xix). It is difficult to ignore the strong resemblance between Lyotard’s rejection of a universal truth and contemporary Australia’s adoption of an attitude of plurality and subjectivity towards religion.

Again, it is beneficial to consider the extent to which the presence of these values and beliefs in Australian society has resulted in a change in social activity. Are Australians becoming increasingly secular in practice under the influence of these postmodern ideologies? For the sake of comparison, let us draw upon our previous indicator, church attendance. NCLS Research is the leading researcher in Christian practice in Australia. According to recent findings, Australian churches today are grappling with the crisis of a loss of younger generations (Powell and Jacka 2008). NCLS points vaguely towards “a unique set of social and cultural changes during the 1960s” (p. 6) as the cause of defection of youth from churches. NCLS also reports a definite decline in church attendance over the past twenty years (Bellamy and Castle 2004). Supporters of the ‘secularisation argument’ use this evidence to suggest Australia’s trend towards secularisation, though it would be remiss not to acknowledge the work of Bouma, who believes that Australians, rather than discarding religion, are simply finding new ways in which to integrate it into their lives which may not be as easily measurable as church attendance (Bouma 1992).

The evidence, then, is inconclusive, and the matter is characterised by the ambiguity which so consistently indicates the present moment, far more than a supposed trend towards secularisation. The question of whether or not Australia has indeed undergone a transition from tradition to postmodernity is heavily problematised by the indefinite nature of these terms. For instance, we have assumed that, if indeed Australia did ever have a tradition of Christianity, it owes it to the process of colonisation as enacted by the British. The effect of colonisation on culture has been well documented, and a particularly relevant work is that of Gillen and Ghosh (Gillen and Ghosh 2007). They describe the interaction of the coloniser and the colonised as one of mutual negotiation, the product of which is modernity. This would seem to contradict with the supposition that Australia’s attitude towards Christianity since

colonisation has been predominantly 'traditional', as opposed to 'modern'. However, whether or not Australia has ever attained modernity is questioned by the writings of Latour, who famously proposed that the nature of human development is one of hybrids and the interplay of the natural and the social, making 'modernity' impossible to attain (Latour 1993). What, then, was produced by the interaction of coloniser and colonised in the case of Australia? Taking into account the extremely problematic nature of the term, Australia's relationship with Christianity, as inherited from its colonial interaction with Britain, is as close to a tradition as colonised Australia has ever known. It should be noted however that many scholars (Turner 1983; Aldridge 2000) tend to draw a correlation between 17th-19th Century Protestantism and modernisation. Perhaps, then, it is reasonable to conclude, in keeping with Latour's theory of hybridisation, that Australia's relationship with Christianity is something of a traditional modernism, a modern tradition.

Postmodernity is equally shrouded in ambiguity. Turner argues convincingly that postmodernity ought not to be considered as a particular historical moment (Turner 1983). Rather, any movement launched in reaction to the modern, in any of its varied forms, can be understood as possessing postmodernity, without necessarily being classified 'postmodern'. He draws upon examples of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the baroque movement and feminism, explaining that, though entirely independent of each other, such movements best exemplify postmodernism for their reaction against some element of modernist thought. Australia's own brand of postmodernism in regards to Christian traditions, then, seems to fit Turner's definition to a degree, as we have seen Australia's reaction against the 'modern' assertion of the dominance of Christian beliefs.

Finally, it is important to observe that even if Australians are moving away from the traditional beliefs and practices of Christianity that they once knew, it does not necessarily follow that they are moving towards godlessness or secularism. What lies ahead for Australians may well be closer to our traditional Christian roots than we expect. Micklethwait and Wooldridge point to examples in the booming superpower of China to suggest that spirituality, particularly Christianity, goes hand in hand with the material wealth that the Western world strives for (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009). It remains to be seen whether or not the consumerist culture of Australia may in fact lead it full circle, back to the tradition of Christianity it seems to have all but abandoned.

For all the seemingly eternal, unchanging nature of St. Andrew's Cathedral, we have seen that Australians are not the same as they were when its foundation stone was laid. In keeping with the turbulence and tumult of the present moment, Australians are constantly undergoing a process of identity transformation. We have attempted to trace this process of transformation, particularly as it applies to Australians and their attitudes towards Christianity, and how this translates into social practice. Pursuing the vague shadows of a trend, we have investigated the possibility of Australians moving away from their traditional Christian roots towards a postmodernity characterised by pluralism and a rejection of absolutes. However, it has been not in attempts to explain the Australian identity, but rather in a consideration of how extremely problematic a task this is, that we have gained the most insight into our present moment. Notions of tradition, modernity and postmodernity are characterised by ambiguity, making it extremely complex to shape a nation's history into any of the three paradigms. It is by engaging in an endless process of definition, problematising and redefinition with these terms, however, that we begin to truly appreciate the Australian identity for its variability and multiplicity.

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