
Looking at Australia Today: A Glimpse at Our Society, Part 2 of 3

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Introduction

Australian society has changed enormously since the end of the Second World War. We are living in a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual society. Even in remote areas one can hardly be unaware of how our social structure has altered. The census of 2011 showed that over 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes, with a decided shift to Asian languages in more recent times. We are all part of this transformation, and Defence is a microcosm of what is happening in the wider society.

Challenges facing us today

One of the greatest pressures we are facing comes from post-modernism. Probably the most significant way this manifests is in the absence of absolutes, particularly in moral life. The thought patterns in the world have changed radically in the last few decades and yet many of us do not realise how this new situation impacts on the Christian church and its agencies. This is as true of those of my generation as it is of those who are much younger. However, there is one major

difference. Those of my generation grew up with different attitudes to truth and moral issues, while those who are younger have been surrounded by changes in attitude during the whole of their lifetimes.

We see the changes in many areas of life, including the church, politics, business and education. So often there is an absence of principle because everything has become relative. What is popular becomes what is right. The herd mentality takes over, like the French revolutionary who said: 'The mob is on the streets. I must find out where they are going, for I am their leader!'

What changes do I have in mind? Let me illustrate this by quoting from an American Jewish professor of philosophy. In his book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Allan Bloom comments:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don't think about.⁴

Bloom goes on to say that, regardless of the student's background, the response is the same: truth is relative. There are no absolutes in life. Openness was regarded as the major insight of the late twentieth century. The greatest danger from this modern point of view is that some people will still hold that truth is absolute and they are to be feared because this is being intolerant!

In a general way we see this exhibited in Western societies. Increasingly much has been reduced to the lowest common denominator, and that applies to education as well. One American Jewish talk show host put it like this:

Liberals are always talking about pluralism, but that is not what they mean ... In public schools, Jews don't meet Christians. Christians don't meet Hindus. Everybody meets nothing. That is, as I explain to Jews all the time, why their children so easily inter-marry. Jews don't marry Christians. Non-Jewish Jews marry non-Christian Christians. Jews for nothing marry Christians for nothing. They get along great because they both affirm nothing. They have everything in common — nothing. That's not pluralism.⁵

A consequence of this relativist position is that all faiths are regarded as equal. On this basis, there can be no exclusiveness in religious matters, and claims for tolerance become a claim for equality of all faiths. Compromise so often replaces commitment. Even 'tolerance' has changed so that its adherents push to suppress viewpoints that stand against a dominant position.

Another consequence is that all language has as many interpretations as it has readers. But here there is a major inconsistency. Road rules and traffic signs, for example, are regarded as being capable of only one interpretation. Interestingly, this claim is more common among those studying literature or social sciences, not among mathematicians or scientists.

Post-modernism exerts tremendous pressure. Whereas after the Enlightenment the challenge to the Christian faith was 'prove it!', the response today when we tell someone about the Gospel, or our own personal commitment to Christ, will often be: 'I am happy for you, but so what for me?'

Another result is the absence of integration — there is no uni-verse. The change this has brought is that universities in general no longer have an integrating factor. The English word 'university' (cognate to 'universe') contains the idea of unity of knowledge or approach that bound a group of scholars together. Clearly the concept was that within a university there was adherence to a common basis of knowledge that tied together the teaching in all the faculties. That concept is perfectly valid, providing there is a basis that enables the knowledge and teaching to be viewed from a single perspective.

Our present position

Today as Christians we are in a position very like that of the early believers in New Testament times. The Palestinian and the wider Mediterranean worlds of the first century ad were also multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual. Throughout the centuries, Christians have often lived in such multifaceted societies, and we do today. Our calling is to be both salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). ■