
Looking Backward: Australia in Retrospect, Part 1 of 3

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Introduction

The fact that this year we are celebrating the centenary of the formation of the Army chaplaincy branch suggests that it is a good time to reflect on the past religious history of Australia, to look at the present, and to try to glimpse the future. This should provide us a perspective through which to view our task in Army chaplaincy.

I recently heard John Anderson, the former deputy prime minister, speak twice at Deakin University, Geelong. What he said jogged my memory on questions relating to our civilisation and particularly the decline of the West. A well-known lecture by Dr Carl Henry in 1970, 'The Barbarians Are Coming', also came to mind. This lecture was delivered in Philadelphia and, at that time, it seemed unduly pessimistic to many.¹ The lecture began with the words: 'We live in the twilight of a great civilization, amid the deepening decline of modern culture.' Many have since revised their assessment of cultural change to come much closer to Carl Henry's position.

Origin of Australia

The American Revolution created two countries, United States of America (USA) and Australia. Once the American colonies had revolted, Britain could no longer send convicts to Georgia, and so new destinations for convict ships had to be found. The decision was made to create a convict settlement in New South Wales (NSW), and later this was extended to include all the colonies in Australia except South Australia. In five colonies, convicts and former convicts lived and worked in close proximity to free settlers. Convicts, and those who were given tickets of leave, lived with and worked for settlers, especially those engaged in agriculture.

Arthur Phillip, a naval officer, was chosen as the first governor of the Australian colony and he selected Rev. Richard Johnson as the first chaplain. Johnson was actually nominated by the Clapham Sect, and John Newton, the author of 'Amazing Grace', even composed a poem about him and his future duties in NSW.

Before the first fleet sailed, Johnson visited hulks on the Thames, although he was advised not to continue this practice, or indeed to descend into the hulks, in case he contracted an illness! On the way out to Botany Bay, he was not aboard one of the major transports but on a small supply ship. However, on Sundays, he was taken across to two of the main transports to conduct services.

Commencement of settlement

The fleet first anchored in Botany Bay, but it was soon apparent that the lack of fresh water was going to limit the usefulness of that site for settlement. Following further investigation, the fleet sailed into Sydney Harbour and so, on 26 January 1788, the new colony was proclaimed.

The first church service was conducted by Richard Johnson on Sunday, 3 February 1788. A monument to mark the occasion stands on the corner of Bligh and Hunter Streets, Sydney. The inscription includes the text of Johnson's first sermon: 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me?' (Ps. 116:12). Governor Phillip provided Johnson little assistance, and he had to erect a church at his own expense in 1793, at or near the site of the monument. This building was maliciously burnt down five years later. Johnson only received payment for the building many years later.

The early years were not notable for religious life. Governor Hunter wrote in 1798: 'a more wicked, abandon'd, and irreligious set of people have never been brought together in any part of the wo'ld.' Intrinsic antagonism carried over from England,

notably the alienation of the British working class from the church in the eighteenth century. The fact that Anglican ministers also served as magistrates aggravated the resentment of many of the prisoners towards the church. Around a third of the convicts were Irish Catholics, and no provision was made for a priest to minister to them until a convict priest, James Dixon, was given provisional emancipation in order to say Mass in 1803. Following the Castle Hill rebellion in 1804 that liberty was withdrawn, and it was not until 1820 that two priests arrived to minister to the Catholic population. The attitudes towards religious life in the early period set the pattern for the rest of the century.

Development in the mid-nineteenth century

Rapid and diverse growth in the colonies meant that people were very dispersed making it difficult for clergy to provide Christian instruction and conduct services. While many religious families managed to sustain their convictions without the presence of clergy, many others succumbed to their situation and virtually abandoned religious practice. The large number of released convicts, having no desire to take part in religious worship and practice, added to the anti-Christian element in the general population.

One significant source of information on religious life in the Australian colonies is found in the replies by Scottish ministers of the Free Church of Scotland (held in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh) to questionnaires sent to them by the Colonial Committee of their church. These reports, in providing answers to the questionnaire, provide many details about the general religious and moral life of the various communities. This provides collaborative evidence concerning the secularism of much colonial life. Melbourne, for example, was a secular city, and this was evidenced in the fact that the charter for the University of Melbourne included a prohibition against the teaching of religion.

John Barrett's assessment was that, up to 1850, the Australian churches were never able to claim more than a minority of the population.² That claim has never been seriously challenged.

The turn of the century (1900)

By 1900, democratisation and social reform had pushed organised religion to the side. Statistics for attendance at church at the time are available and are best examined against the census figures for religious affiliation. In some states, such as South Australia, the records show that over 99% of people indicated that they belonged to a religious group. But for NSW, the figures show that, in 1900,

only 28% of people attended church, though this figure was boosted by much higher attendance among those of Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist and Salvation Army persuasion.

It is quite frequently asserted that Australia was somehow a 'Christian' country from the time of the first settlement. Early lawmakers and judges believed that they were safeguarding a system of law derived from the Judaeo-Christian traditions. Later, they operated on the basis that law and government were value-free. However, the assertion that Australia was a Christian country is unsupported by the evidence and, likewise, it is a myth that somehow Australian legal practice upheld Christian views.³

Development of chaplaincy

Military chaplaincy developed in Australia during the first twenty years of the twentieth century. Naval chaplaincy came first in 1912, followed by Army chaplaincy in 1913, and then in 1920 by Royal Australia Air Force chaplaincy. The development of these branches should be viewed in context of the social and religious conditions prevailing at that time. By no means were the first chaplains universally accepted or encouraged, nor was their work easy. They had to earn the respect of service personnel rather than simply expecting recognition because of their status as clergy.

The first large movement of Australian troops was to Egypt in advance of the landing in Gallipoli. Among the first chaplains was William McKenzie, a Salvation Army officer. When he reported for duty in Sydney before embarking he was met by an officer who regarded him very dubiously, commenting: 'I know very little about the Salvation Army.' The new chaplain replied that he knew little about the King's Army, 'but look here', he said, 'we'll teach each other!' Some of the men were far more outspoken, swearing and wondering why they deserved to have McKenzie as a chaplain. Reports of behaviour by Australian troops in Egypt, and particularly in Cairo, tell their own story. It was not easy ministering in such circumstances, but McKenzie and others gained respect and admiration for their self-sacrificing work.

The attitude of senior military figures to chaplains was also significant. General Birdwood, who commanded the ANZACs during the Gallipoli invasion, gave instructions that no chaplains were to be allowed ashore in the first landings. However, he had to quickly alter his instructions because they were needed to help care for the wounded and to bury the dead.

The chaplains in the First World War had to carve a niche for themselves. This they did with bravery and fortitude. They suffered alongside the troops and, at Gallipoli and in France, some were even killed. These early chaplains marked the enduring pattern for those who followed. ■