
Looking to the Future: Pluralism — The Challenge Ahead, Part 3 of 3

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Introduction

Some years ago my wife and I visited South Carolina. Our hostess had made arrangements to take us to visit a cotton plantation. She got lost on the way, but managed to locate a farm belonging to a cousin. An old Afro-American farmhand was sweeping the driveway. I got out of the car, asked directions, and he explained the route we had to take. As I got back into the car he said: 'Which way you going, suh?' I repeated his instructions, but got one turn wrong! 'No, suh.' He repeated the process, and again the same question was posed to me: 'Which way you going, suh?'

This is a highly relevant and important question. We need repeatedly to ask ourselves the same question in relation to our Christian ministry and specifically in reference to our chaplaincy involvement: 'Where are we going?'

We must recognise that the future is not going to be easy for Christians in Australia.

There has been a downgrading of the Christian presence. This is manifest in many different ways. To take but one example, Anzac Day services are losing their distinctively Christian character, which is being replaced by a more secular approach to the commemoration.

Christians are also being pressured to 'conform' to the prevailing world view. Whereas previously Christian viewpoints and practices were encouraged, now the Christian voice is being muted or silenced.

At present there is disparagement, which may lead to stronger ridicule and then to active persecution. I am not a prophet, but that is where, in my opinion, the current trends are heading. Some legal cases in Britain show us the trend there that could easily be replicated here.

The future in Defence chaplaincy

Three facts seem certain about our chaplaincy work in the future:

The number of non-Christians in the Defence Force is going to increase. At present the numbers are comparatively small, and are probably not even in proportion to the general population figures. Already there is quite a spread of non-Christian faiths represented, and these will increase over time.

The number of those professing no religion is going to increase. At present, around one third of those in the Defence Force have no religious affiliation at all. Whereas previously Defence members would give their nominal religious affiliation, now the figures are close to reality. About a hundred years ago almost everyone claimed to be Christian.

There can't be any legal compulsion to maintain the Christian position in society in general, or in the Defence Force in particular. Some of us can well remember when certain Christian religious observances were compulsory for all in the Defence Force. I conducted the last compulsory service at Laverton for women recruits in the Royal Australian Air Force at the completion of their initial training. To take the opposite position would be an attempt to perpetuate the myth that we live in a Christian country. People can't be forced by legislation to adhere to Christian beliefs or moral standards.

Facing the future with realism

If I am right about future trends in Australia, then what follows for us as chaplains?

We as Christians, and especially Christian Defence chaplains, need to have a Christian mindset, a Christian world view. Our faith is expressed in far more ways than just the conduct of religious services, and we need to be able to draw out the implications of our faith for the whole of life.

We need to prepare for the greater impact of non-Christians in Defence who will wish to assert their rights. So far this has been apparent in some issues such as those relating to food and uniforms, but it could easily extend to other issues.

As chaplains we have always been in Defence to serve others. Right from the outset of Defence chaplaincy, our Christian chaplains have served Defence members without discrimination. I am sure that the present situation will continue, as we see non-religious or non-Christian members coming to chaplaincy centres to seek help.

At some time in the future we will have other non-Christian chaplains in addition to the small number of Jewish chaplains we already have. We need to prepare for this introduction of non-Christian chaplains. When that happens we will have to maintain our position as Christians and as Christian chaplains with integrity.

Some try to separate what they do in one area of life (their private life) from what they have to do in public. At one of the lectures John Anderson gave in Geelong, he was asked about the integration of Christian belief into his political views. He recounted how one fellow cabinet minister used to say to him: 'John, leave your Christian beliefs at the door of the cabinet room!' In effect, we have seen a very similar position stated more recently — that politicians can have a private or theological position but a completely opposite one with regard to parliamentary legislation.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu adopted a different position in his chairmanship of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He has written about how the commission commenced its meetings under his chairmanship:

Very few people objected to the heavy spiritual, and indeed Christian emphasis of the Commission. When I was challenged on it by journalists, I told them I was a religious leader and had been chosen as who I was. I could not pretend I was someone else. I operated as who I was and that

*was accepted by the Commission. It meant that theological and religious insights and perspectives would inform much of what we did and how we did it ... As I grow older I am pleasantly surprised at how relevant theology has become, as I see it, to the whole of life.*⁶

That latter position is one we should emulate. We have to be who we are in chaplaincy, and service to all does not mean we have to abandon our own faith commitment.

What of the future?

I refer again to Carl Henry's 1970 lecture. To the phrase 'The Barbarians are coming', he added, 'however, Jesus Christ the Lord is coming!' His assertion means that we must assess the future in terms of biblical eschatology. Christ comes to vindicate God's righteousness and to crown his grace. There is a real danger that pessimism will rule hearts, but the Christian message is one of optimism because of biblical teaching on the lordship of Christ.

We can't predict the future of Christianity in Australia, but we must take a broad view of God's kingdom. History teaches us that religious life ebbs and flows. The biblical teaching on the final end of all things should encourage us to press on with our tasks, and also to take heart. We are servants of Christ and, because of that, servants of others. Let us continue to serve with vigour and enthusiasm in our calling as Defence chaplains. ■

Endnotes

- 1 The lecture is reprinted in his book, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism*, Crossway Books, Westchester, 1988, pp. 15–22.
- 2 John Barrett, *That Better Country: The Religious Aspect of Life in Eastern Australia 1835-1850*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966, p. 206.
- 3 Probably the best discussion on this is by Keith Mason, 'The Myth of an Inherently Christian Legal System' in *Constancy and Change: Moral and Religious Values in the Australian Legal System*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1991, p. 130.
- 4 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1984, p. 1.
- 5 Don Carson, 'Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism' in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *God and Culture*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, p. 36.
- 6 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Rider House, London, 1999, pp. 72–73.