



01 Prof. Austin Cooper OMI, Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia

Senior Fellow of Catholic Theological College and member of the Department of Church History and the Department of Pastoral and General Studies. He lectures in Church History and Christian Spirituality.



An Australian perspective on Religious Plurality and Religious Identity

The Australian scene 1788-1945: European settlement dating from 1788 and was almost entirely comprised of people from the UK. They brought with them their traditional religious affiliations: Anglicans from England (and Wales, though the Methodism was gaining popularity in Wales); Presbyterians (Calvinists) from Scotland and Catholics from Ireland. They also imported the conflicts and prejudices stemming from the Reformation of the 16th Century. Sectarian conflict has long been part of our religious history.

Some general characteristics of Australian History: However traditional religion was also 'shaped' by local conditions. 1) An interpretation of Australian History entitled *The Tyranny of Distance* by Geoffrey Blainey highlighted the extent to which **distance** their countries of origin affected various settlements as did their distance from one another.¹ 2) '**Secularism**' also shaped the Australian experience, especially from the mid-nineteenth century, giving Australia the dubious distinction of being among the most secular societies in the world. 3) Perhaps because of the nostalgia highlighted by 'distance' and the increasing secularism, Australian Churches long remained **dependent** on their parent Churches in the UK for personnel. 4) **Laity** generally tended to leave Church issues to clerical leaders though Anglicans and others included lay representatives in governing bodies from about the 1850s. 5) The Australian approach to life has often been described as '**pragmatic**' and lacking in reflectiveness and a sense of vision. One historian commented 'Australian Christians have been builders rather than seers or scholars'.² Finally 6) **the Land** itself seemed strange and difficult to manage, with its different seasons, uncertain rainfall and poor soil around the original settlement. It has often defeated the settler and it took Europeans a century to realise something of its haunting beauty.

Australian religion tended to be dominated by the four larger Christian Churches until after World War II. However their influence was mitigated by secularization as well as by the arrival of some other groups such as Greek Orthodox who opened their first Church in Melbourne in 1898; a number of Jews settled in Australian colonies; Chinese came (temporarily) in great numbers during the 1850s 'gold rushes'.

Australian Aborigines: Australian Aborigines were often neglected. Most of the efforts to serve them were initiated by the various Churches. An early friend of these peoples was the Spanish Benedictine missionary, Rosendo Salvado (1814-1900), Abbot of New Norcia and later Bishop. He sought to understand Aboriginal beliefs and customs to see how they could be fertile soil for the Gospel.³ Aborigines were granted the status of being Australian citizens as late as 1967! A major landmark in understanding their culture and beliefs was articulated in the 1988 speech by St. John Paul II at Alice Springs.⁴

Postwar developments: At the end of the war, the Australian population numbered no more than 8 million. But a vigorous immigration policy resulted in great numerical development including a wide variety of

¹ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1967) and later editions.

² J.D. Bollen, *Religion in Australian Society* (1973) p. 28

³ E. J. Storman SJ, (ed. and trans.) *The Salvado Memoirs*, (Perth: University of WA Press, 1978)

⁴ https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html

ethnic and religious backgrounds. Between 1945 and 1970 the Australian Government mainly sought migrants from the UK and Europe, especially among 'displaced persons' from the Continent. In the 1970s, this policy changed, the scope being broadened to include people from Asia, the Middle East and South America. Many of these came as refugees from homelands marred by warfare, persecution and poor social conditions. In 1978, the first refugee boats reached Australia at Darwin. Suddenly Australians were made aware of the problems of refugees. By the end of 1979, 2011 Vietnamese 'boat people' as they had been termed by the media, survived the dangerous journey from Vietnam, many more dying *en route*. By 1982 some 60,000 Vietnamese had arrived in Australia. These refugees included a large percentage of Catholics who have greatly enriched the Australian Catholic community. This influx of Asians and folk from the Middle East has resulted in a growing religious and cultural diversification. Australia had become a multi-cultural society. Many small groups are promoting better relations between Christian, Moslems and Jews. On the specifically Christian scene, settlers from the various Eastern Christian Churches have presented additional challenges and opportunities to the ecumenical scene. Those in communion with Rome have greatly enriched local Catholicism.

The Theological Scene: My own involvement in religious diversity and identity has mainly been through my research and writing on Anglican issues and also my involvement in theological education. In 1967, the then Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne James Robert (later Cardinal) Knox sought to unite the many houses of theology in the diocese (religious and secular) into a unified theological faculty. This resulted in the formation of Catholic Theological College in 1972. He also promoted the idea of opening theological studies to religious sisters and brothers and also to interested laity.

At this juncture, the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) was undergoing revision. The MCD was a government approved degree-granting body established in 1910 by the Parliament of Victoria. It was a response to the local University's repeated refusal to establish a theological faculty for fear of 'sectarianism'. The MCD was an examining, not a teaching body and comprised Anglicans and many Protestant groups. In 1972 it became a teaching body and the Catholic Church became a member.

This marked a great 'cultural' change. Theology was no longer confined to a (usually) remote seminary and limited to future clerics, but was open to all. The four 'Affiliated Colleges' of the revised MCD represented the four larger churches: Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian (the two latter soon to be part of the 'Uniting Church of Australia'). Each Affiliated College was encouraged to remain faithful to imparting its own tradition, while a representative Board of Studies approved curriculum and monitored examining to maintain appropriate standards. This ensured great advantages making us 'answerable' and enriching us through close personal contacts with other traditions. From 2012 the MCD obtained government recognition as the 'University of Divinity' and an integral part of the national university system: theological studies had 'come in from the cold'! The University now numbers ten theological colleges from eight denominations, including the Coptic Church (St. Athanasius College).⁵

Bitter sectarianism overshadows much of Australian Church History. As a Catholic member of the MCD from 1972, I clearly remember we faced a mammoth task of widening horizons to include teachings in several different traditions while maintaining a unity and cohesion. From the beginning all worked as responsible colleagues and numerous long standing friendships ensued. Sectarianism had given way to a more ecumenical atmosphere and perhaps Australian pragmatism helped. I personally was privileged to have an established Church historian like Professor George Yule (later of the University of Aberdeen) as a colleague. I once asked him his aim in teaching Church History. Without a moment's hesitation he simply said 'I just teach my students the faith!' Church History: how we have expressed our developing faith, sought to teach it and so live it changing contexts. I have since been faithful to this word of advice from a Calvinist friend. The MCD had speedily and effectively laid the sectarian ghost to rest.

⁵ Peter Sherlock, ['The Foundation of the Melbourne College of Divinity'](#), *Journal of Religious History* 40 (2016): 204-24.