Resistance & Hope in Australia: What are the Issues?

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Religion in Australia

Religion in Australia did not get off to a good start if we associate the start of religion with European colonization in the form of a boatload of convicts arriving at Sydney Cove in 1788. Nobody had given much thought to religion except for the provision of the officially-appointed Anglican chaplain who would look after the spiritual needs of these dregs of British society and their gaolers. The problem was compounded by the fact that many of the convicts were Irish Catholic and their imprisonment had as much or more to do with their political aspirations – the overthrow of British rule in Ireland – as it did with serious crime. Of course, one should not be too romantic about the noble or heroic qualities of the convicts and emancipated settlers described by an English Benedictine monk in 1833 in the following terms:

We have taken a vast portion of God's earth and made it a cesspool; we have poured down scum upon scum and dregs upon dregs of the offscourings of mankind and we are building up with them a nation of crime . . . whose men are very wicked, whose women are very shameless, and whose children are very irreverent. Whose occupation has been and is as that described by the prophet of sorrow, 'to steal, to murder, to commit adultery, to swear falsely'.... The removal of such a plague from the earth concerns the whole human race.¹


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The Church of England, as it has continued to be called until recent times, remained the established Church in the Australian colonies even though other religions were eventually catered for by their own priests and ministers. Not that this altogether pleased the Irish Catholics who resented the consecutive appointments of English Benedictine monks to be the Archbishop of Sydney when the majority of Catholics, whether of convict or free-settler origin, were of Irish background (and this included the majority of the clergy). It was not until the 1880s that a good Irishman became the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney. In fact, Irishmen continued to supply Australia with both priests and bishops well into the second half of the twentieth century.

I know this is beginning to sound like the Catholic story, since it is the one I know best. Nonetheless, it is demonstrative of the nationalistic and derivative nature of Australian religion which has played itself out in largely sectarian terms. Although this is changing through more ecumenical contacts and the waves of European post-war migrants, one cannot miss even today the distinctively Irish, English, Scottish and Germanic qualities of Australian Catholicism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism and Lutheranism respectively. Post-war migrants also tended to bring their own churches – along with their soccer loyalties – which were, until recently, nationally based (for example the Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholics). The more recent Evangelical and Pentecostal groups are equally derivative of North American evangelising techniques and business culture.

The sectarian nature of Australian religion is evident in three particular historical battles centred on or closely related to the Catholic Church: Government aid for Church Schools; Conscription; Anti-Communism. ² As in Europe, the Australian colonies were initially served by Church-run schools of


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mainly dubious educational quality. There was a strong political push in the 1870s to improve education by taking it out of the hands of the churches and placing it directly under the State. Henceforth, education would be "free, compulsory and secular". Only the Catholics were strong in their denunciation of what they saw to be a State-backed support of Protestant values. The Catholic response was to import mainly Irish nuns and brothers who would provide Catholic schooling for Catholic children without State-support – which they did for the best part of a century lasting until the 1960s when the battle for State-Aid for non-governmental schools was finally won. Although this situation is not entirely without critique, Australia continues to provide a dual system of education in which both systems are substantially funded by government. A case could be made that this only extends the sectarian nature of religion even if, as most surveys indicate, religion is no longer the major factor for parents choosing to send their children to religious schools.

The conscription debate during World War I also became a sectarian issue. Daniel Mannix, Irish Archbishop of Melbourne, is one of Australia's most well-known and controversial Churchman. It was Mannix who took up the anti-conscription cause. It is far too simplistic to suggest that Catholics were anti-conscription and Anglican and Protestants pro-conscription. For one thing, the anti-conscription vote won the day when Catholics represented less than a quarter of the population. Moreover, the more Catholic State of Victoria voted for conscription, whereas the less Catholic South Australia voted against it. In reality, the conscription defeat had little to do with religion. But the populist voice of Daniel Mannix railing against what he considered to be the misuse of Australian men and money to prop up a corrupt empire for a war on the other side of the world still remains in the Australian psyche. The image continued to be used, intentionally or otherwise, to stir up sectarian

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sentiments. It also established Daniel Mannix as an Australian public figure for almost half a century until his death in 1963.

Mannix also played a significant role in the post-World War II anti-communist debate that led to the splitting of the Labour vote with the formation of the Democratic Labour Party. Historically, Labour had been the traditional party of the Catholics who saw themselves as – and historically were – the underclass. The initial movement against Labour in the early fifties was more likely an indication of changing economic fortunes, especially by Catholics who had been climbing up the social ladder, than any ideological decision about Labour being white-anted by communist sympathies. The religious element still played a major role insofar as Santamaria’s Movement and its offspring, the National Civic Council and the Democratic Labour Party, began as expressions of Catholic Social Action with the support of sections of the Catholic hierarchy, notably Archbishop Mannix in Melbourne and Archbishop Duhig in Brisbane. The other factor lurking beneath the surface is the manner in which State-boundaries played a role supporting or opposing direct Church involvement in party politics: this was not the first time and would not be the last in which Victoria (Melbourne) and Queensland (Brisbane) would join together to oppose a common foe (Sydney / New South Wales) whether in religious or political affairs. Only in recent times has such a close liaison between a Church and a political party been so evident in Australian national politics with the Assembly of God backed Family First Party which had some electoral success in 2004.

There are a few other comments worth making about religion in Australia. Even though religious identities caused division and conflict, there is a contrasting perception that Australia is essentially a secular or non-religious

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culture. Certainly, there are no profound religious motifs associated with our Australian national identity as, for example, in the United States. From the early days of the colony, there is a tendency among some groups – such as emancipists, larrikins and battlers – to dissociate Australian identity from religion. This is illustrated in the story of an uncultivated white youth who appears before the magistrate around the 1840s and, when asked his religion, replied "I am a Native". This suggests something about the way in which the churches have been, and remain today, rather foreign, non-indigenised. Despite all attempts to Christianise Australia's Indigenous peoples, there is still only minor evidence of Australian mythological dreaming influencing mainline religious thought or praxis. We have some fine examples of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – poets, artists and writers – who express something of the profound mystery and spirit of this land and its people. With few exceptions, the same could not be said of our theologians or ecclesiastical leaders throughout most of Australian post-colonial history. Genuine Australian inculturation of the Gospel is still the primary task awaiting us as we confront the challenges of the third millennium.

Resistance and Hope

I now point to themes of resistance and hope through the eyes of Australian poetry. To this I will add some brief theological reflections and connections as space allows.

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4 Exceptions include: *Compass Theology Review* which published essays on Australian theologies and spiritualities from the 1970s onwards; Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollinsReligious, 1997); Peter Malone, ed., *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul's; 1988), and; Peter Malone, ed., *Developing an Australian Theology* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's, 1999).

6 Gerard Hall, *Resistance and Hope in Australia: What are the Issues?*
The Land: Alienation & Revelation

The strangeness of the Australian landscape to European eyes is first and foremost a symbol of alienation. Our landscapes are not those of green, fertile England; nor is this land to be tamed. Bushfire and flood, dust and drought, gum tree and cyclone all exhibit a peculiarly Australian sense of mystery and power quite at odds with the presuppositions of European settlers. It is a different kind of beauty – and a different kind of terror. Something of this strangeness of the Australian landscape, as experienced by European settlers, is captured by many of the images in A. D. Hope's poem Australia: "a nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey"; "the last of lands, the emptiest"; a place "without songs, architecture, history". In particular, the image of "second-hand Europeans (who) pullulate timidly on the edge of alien shores" says it all in terms of the alienated soul confronted not only by distance from "home" but by the strangeness of this old, untameable and, to a large extent, unforgiving land.

The land is not a 'thing' to be mercilessly exploited. One needs to hear the land speak of its mysteries and inner-depths. Theologically, this is the place of God's creation and self-communication. God's voice speaks through the landscape which is revelatory, symbolic, sacramental. In the words, poetry and

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prayer of Rod Cameron who has dialogued deeply with Indigenous peoples and their traditions, especially in their relationship to the Land:

As the Aborigines say, it is through the land that the Spirit speaks. The land is loaded with the words of the Sacred (God). Creation is on-going. The *Alecheringa* is NOW; In the land is the story of Creation and we can read it like a book. The land is the library of God.... The land is the poetry of God.... The land is the mask of God. It is worn not to conceal but to reveal. This is God's primary revelation and the beginning of communication. The land is full of God's words for all humanity to hear.6

After two hundred years of contact with the Land and its first peoples, white Australians are just now beginning to recognise that the land is sacred with its own mysteries. Our resistance to continued exploitation and devastation of the earth, and our hope in discovering a new, life-giving relationship to the land, require us to adopt a different stance and to listen to the Indigenous peoples who have learnt through tens of thousands of years to respect the land as "Our Mother".

Politically, High Court decisions – *Mabo* (1992) and *Wik* (1996) – and government Native Title legislation (1993 & 1996) have provided some legal recognition of and protection for Aboriginal relationship to the land.7 This is after more than two hundred years of European colonization which had proceeded on the legal basis of *Terra Nullius*, the assumption that Australia was

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7 See Peter Butt et al., *Mabo, Wik and Native Title* (Annandale NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) for a clear and insightful analysis of these important issues in recent Australian legal and cultural history.

8 Gerard Hall, *Resistance and Hope in Australia: What are the Issues?*
uninhabited. Philip Rush articulates this confounding history of Australian legal practice and cultural desecration:

An empty land, a vacant land, unpeopled, uninhabited;
No fox, no sparrow, goat or horse, uncamelled and unrabbitted!
And then the white man came and stayed, and lived their meagre history,
Not recognising those before, whose origin is mystery.
The aboriginal, the black, was not considered one of us,
And so the land was thus declared unpeopled - "Terra Nullius".

The aboriginal is lost when they are dispossessed of land;
For their existence, heart and soul, is bound in rock and earth and sand.
Two centuries on, their Dreaming fades, their fire of hope now but a spark;
But then a judgment handed down revives the flame and sheds the dark.

For court of law has now proclaimed that "Terra Nullius" is wrong;
The aboriginal has rights to where he's dwelt for ages long:
"To use, possess and occupy, to once again enjoy the land,"
From which for twenty decades long he has been so unjustly banned. 8

Evidently, both Aboriginal legal alienation from the land and European cultural alienation from the same land are not easily or quickly overturned. We are on a process of discovery in which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are beginning to reclaim the land as a sacred reality revealing God's


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creative Wisdom. In this regard, Indigenous Australians are the first teachers. Yet, the complexity of two hundred years’ oppression of Indigenous Australia needs to be recognized and forgiven before reconciliation and redemption can occur on an intercultural level.

The Invasion: Love & Guilt

No Australian has spoken more profoundly on the innate connection between Australian alienation from the land and victimization of its first peoples than poet and activist Judith Wright (1915-2000): "The love of the land we have invaded and the guilt of the invasion have become part of me". She is deeply challenging of white Australia's blindness: "I know that we are justified only by love, but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none" (At Cooloolah). Some poems lament the sadness of a people dispossessed of land, culture and identity: "The song is gone; the dance is secret with the dancers in the earth, the ritual useless, and the tribal story lost in an alien tale" (Bora Ring). Wright also points to the political and social failures of the assimilation policy and governmental hand-outs; she points to the social reality of apartheid that so often kept – and still keeps – black and white apart: "On the other side of the road the dark ones stand. Something leaks in our blood like the ooze from a wound" (The Dark Ones).

Clearly, for Wright, it is not only Aboriginals who suffer. She also names the impact of colonization on the souls of the conquerors: "I'm a stranger come of a conquering people" (Nigger's Leap, New England). In her poem Two Dreamtimes, Wright poignantly describes her Aboriginal friend, fellow-poet

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9 All Wright quotes are taken from Gerard Hall, "Judith Wright (1915-200): Australian Poet and Prophet" in National Outlook (November 2000); All Wright poems are available from Judith Wright, Collected Poems 1952-1985 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994).

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and activist, **Oodgeroo Noonuccal** (Kath Walker) as "one of the dark children I wasn't allowed to play with". This is a poem about spiritual apartheid in which the life of the imagination and the human spirit is ruined by blind prejudice, dying children, raped women, white guilt and misguided righteousness. The result: "If we are sisters, it's in this – our grief for a lost country" since "we too have lost our dreaming". Conqueror and persecuted alike are "raped by rum and an alien law, progress and economics". In this and other poems, Wright confirms the lesson admitted by cultural anthropologists: the conquerors become the conquered!

> Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah knew that no land is lost or won by wars, for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears. *(At Cooloolah)*

The issue of black and white reconciliation continues to challenge Australia both at political and spiritual levels. Current national government policy is to refuse an apology to Australia's first peoples and to concentrate on what it terms "practical reconciliation".

The Prime Minister of Australia is fond of stating that he does not personally feel responsible for harm done to Aboriginal people through "European settlement". In so doing, he risks what could be termed cultural-historical amnesia. As members of political, cultural and religious traditions, we do carry responsibility for those traditions' past injustices – not in the sense

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10 The Prime Minister in 2005 was John Howard. In February 2008, one of the first acts of newly elected Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was to make an apology on behalf of the Australian Government to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for “past mistreatments” especially to members of “the Stolen Generations”.

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of individual guilt but in the sense of shared responsibility for our colonial past and the mistreatment of Australia’s first peoples.

The voices of Indigenous peoples and the Christian churches continue to speak of the need for both practical-political and symbolic-spiritual forms of reconciliation. Both are necessary.

Refugees and Migrants

A final issue facing Australia at the level of its own identity is its recent treatment of migrants and refugees. Throughout the past decade Australia's attitudes of hardened in the face of the so-called "boat people", mainly middle Eastern Muslim refugees from countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The government went to extraordinary lengths to denigrate these people for what it calls "queue jumping". Some have been imprisoned for seven or more years including many children. Others have been placed in refugee camps in other countries such as Papua New Guinea and Nauru – designed to preclude these people's access to Australian legal rights. Recently there has been a "softening" of legislation following the outcry of a handful of politicians who finally heard the voices of resistance among ordinary Australians, Christian Churches and affiliate organisations such as the Edmund Rice Centre for Social Justice. However, it needs to be said that the harsh governmental policy has been electorally very successful – which certainly says something about current fears in the Australian soul.

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There is hope precisely because there is resistance and an alternative human vision of artists, prophets and others who inspire more humane attitudes and practices. It is especially these three areas of relationship to the land, reconciliation between black and white Australia, and the humane treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers that confront contemporary Australia and should be at the forefront of the prayer, reflection and action of the Christian churches and their practical theologians.

Source: This presentation, initially entitled “Resistance and Hope Locally: What are the Issues?” was made by Gerard Hall at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, 24th-29th June 2005, on the theme: “Practical Theologies in Resistance and Hope”.

Post-Script: Although written in 2005, the issues of resistance and hope outlined in this presentation remain abidingly relevant for Australian Practical Theology in 2018! GH