

AMERICAN RELIGION/AUSTRALIAN RELIGION

James Tulip

Father Robert Drinan SJ, the American Jesuit priest and former Congressman, surprised his Australian audience recently by saying that he thought Australia was a very religious country. They assured him quickly that it wasn't, and surprised him in turn by saying that they thought the United States was a very religious country. Father Drinan seemed mystified. So much for a prophet - or a saint - in his or her own country!

What Drinan had in mind, it turned out, was the way the Australian Government supports financially those institutions - religious or other - which are active in such fields as health and education for the public welfare. In the United States a constitutional separation of Church and State prevents any such cooperation - although Drinan expressed some anxiety lest the growing power of the right-wing fundamentalists might be eroding this principle. As a liberal, he feared more the loss of this constitutional separation (in view of the potential religious totalitarianism of the religious Right) than the restrictions under which the US now operates. At the same time he clearly envied the Australian solution.

Why Australians think of the US as a religious society is for a variety of reasons, foremost of which might be the pietistic rhetoric used by US Presidents and politicians compared with the secularised invective from Canberra.

Yet there are many differences and paradoxes in the comparison of the US and Australia in religious terms. Harold Bloom, the Yale literary scholar, in *The American Religion* (1992) endorses Donald Meyer's view that:

separation of church and state, with its ban on any establishment of religion... carried the positive meanings that Americans were free to invent new theologies, new churches, new religions. This fertility of invention was not some principle laid down in the Constitution but a fact of American life.¹

Separation of church and state has energised American religion. By being separated from the State, religion in the US has led to reconstruct itself in ways peculiar to the time, place and culture of the people.

Bloom's book is a remarkable embrace by an intellectual of the various forms which Christianity has taken under this stimulus of innovation and self-reliance. The Mormons, the Southern Baptists, Christian Scientists,

Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and New Age adherents are studied. Mainstream Christianity, World Religions and Feminism receive short shrift. It is the originality of vision and experience in American religion that catches Bloom's attention. He sees here "a way of knowing" that is peculiar to the American cultural psyche and which he claims is religious.

As a literary scholar Bloom places great value on the nineteenth century transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and the twentieth century poet, Wallace Stevens. Here he finds a form of reasoning and reflection that bridges religious belief and literary imagination. Literature and religion flow in and out of each other in the American tradition of culture.

To study the language of US Presidents, especially their formal speeches, is to see the roots of US politics in religion and literature.

Religion, by contrast, suffered in Australian history by seeming to be too close to an English establishment. In reaction, the surging democratic socialist-leaning forces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century turned to a secularism as an ideology. The cultural despisers of religion in universities and intellectual circles also forcefully articulated this ideology as a dominant style. The powerful Irish and Roman Catholic wing of Christianity reinforced this division of Church and State by retreating to a fortress mentality. The result was a general attitude of more or less tacit repressiveness towards religion. The 1960's, when the Government began its support for church schools and hospitals although in a strictly neutral and secular basis marked a belated change in the negative tradition.

Ironically, a kind of double-jointed genius has become the Australian style. The State appears not directly to recognise religion, but supports it indirectly. Separateness now adds up to a strange coherence. There is no integration of religious style into politics as in the United States. Canberra is a centre of the nation but mainly in a formal way.

One recent study of the Australian situation in this regard is that of David J Tacey in *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (1995). Tacey, a literary scholar from La Trobe University, is becoming known for his writings along Jungian and Hillman lines. His study of Patrick White, with much reference to the unconscious and to archetypes, has aroused strong reactions.

In *Edge of the Sacred* Tacey, in taking up the question of an Australian spirituality, seems to accept that there is no central tradition of values in imagination to draw upon. He points his own experience as central, his own experience of the land and of Aboriginal culture. He works from the

periphery towards a centre where, as he sees it, 'an authentic rediscovery of the sacred is already in preparation here'.²

Tacey's early years spent in Alice Springs gave him a sense in a literal way of the Centre; and through his experience of the Land there and of being introduced to Aboriginal customs and beliefs he developed a strong sense of what he calls 'the Other'. It was this combination of the Centre and the other that Tacey refined with the help of his readings in Carl Jung, D. H. Lawrence and James Hillman into a vantage point from which to interpret Australian literature and, beyond that, Australian culture and history. Tacey's is a visionary text, but one that grounds itself, realistically, in the factual realities of Australian life.

Comparison of Bloom and Tacey shows there is considerable difference between the conditions that apply in the United States and Australia in terms of the relation between religion and culture. The United States, if we follow Harold Bloom's line, draws on centuries' old traditions which by virtue of their quality of inclusiveness lead to a modern embracing of what is new and marginal in society. The Australian religious tradition by virtue of itself being rather exclusive has forced artists and thinkers away from itself as a Centre and out to the peripheries of experience and imagination, and from there to return and recreate a Centre.

Bloom finds in the United States a religion characterised by what he terms 'Enthusiasm, Gnosticism and American Orphism'. Enthusiasm comes from European roots, and was focussed in the eighteenth century in the Wesleys and Jonathon Edwards; and leading on to emphasise personal experience, especially conversion. Gnosticism (which Bloom obviously believes is the religious *Zeitgeist* in these premillenarian days) is the special knowledge of God separate from the Judaeo-Christian traditions which holds that the true God is unknown and ineffable, that the material world is inferior and that human beings have a spiritual part trapped here and needing to escape to the divine world through knowledge of one's spiritual nature. Gnosis of the divine, therefore, is essentially knowledge of self. Ralph Waldo Emerson for Bloom is a focus for this position in American terms. For Bloom Emerson is also the focus of what he calls Orphism, a religious position of the elitist self. Bloom's use of those abstract, qualitative and universal criteria for defining the American religion allows him to spread himself across the historical and political spectrum to claim Ronald Reagan and George Bush enmeshed in his spiritual perspective, and Billy Graham as a national icon more than a biblical evangelist.

Bloom's embrace of all the peripheral aspects of American religious experience is something new and positive in western intellectual terms. His literary stance allows him freedom of movement between the world of ideas and beliefs and historical and political material. He identifies with the prophetic insight of the early Mormons, and celebrates a relatively unknown Southern Baptist theologian E Y Mullins whose 1908 text *The Axioms of Religion* reads for Bloom like the discovery of a nerve centre in the American psyche. Yet alongside his appreciations of American spiritualities, Bloom as a prophet is somewhat limited; he projects his own feeling and ego into his subject. In May 1991 he writes 'my fear is that we will never see a Democrat in the Presidency during my lifetime'!!

How these Gnostic readings of religion in the US and Australia stand up to argument is therefore before us. Tacey's is not consciously an ideological reading of Australian spirituality. Yet he is confident as to the presence and reality of 'the Unconscious' and 'the other'. He seems to have transferred the transcendentalist terms Bloom accepts into a new orientation: not upwards towards an absolute but downwards and inwards towards a relational situation.

The likeness of US and Australian religions comes from the fact of their being two modern democratic and largely secular societies. Yet within this likeness there is a difference and paradox. A sense of unity or oneness in the US is recognisable in rhetorical styles and a pietistic foregrounding of patriotism. In Australia unity or oneness is more repressed, or recessed; cautious of calling itself or seeing itself as religious, yet through a mystique of the land and a growing accommodation to indigenous spirituality, most strongly articulated by the Aboriginal people, emerging to greater self-reliance and maturity in, as many feel, the future development of Australia as a republic.

REFERENCES

¹ Bloom, *The American Religion*, p. 55.

² Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred*, p. 4.