

Smith Lecture 2015

Handout A

Christianity's secular legacy

The West

Many key features of Western civilisation are by-products, wholly or substantially, of Christianity.

None of the following were features of the "classical" (i.e., Graeco-Roman) world, and most were not features of the non-Christian Eastern world either.

- **The scientific method**
 - Nature obeys fixed laws because there is one supreme lawmaker who set them
 - Human beings can discover and understand those laws by observation and experiment
 - Mere human reasoning is inadequate
 - Almost all the great scientists of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were serious Christians
- **The systematic study of history**
 - History does not infinitely repeat itself
 - There is a purpose to events
 - Historians must prove their points
- **Egalitarianism**
 - All human beings are intrinsically of equal worth
 - Infanticide is wrong
 - Slavery is wrong
- **Marriage is an equal partnership**
 - Different roles but equal respect
 - Reciprocal rights and duties
 - Husband's obligations to be faithful and kind are just as important as the wife's

- **The primacy of individual conscience**
 - Human beings have free will
 - Morality is not man-made
 - There is such a thing as an unjust law

- **The idea that work (with periods of rest) is better than leisure**
 - Commitment to one's individual calling
 - The Protestant work ethic

- **The idea that humility is a good thing, in leaders as much as followers**
 - The example of Jesus
 - The Apostles

- **The idea that charity is a good thing**
 - Hospitals
 - Care of orphans and widows
 - Prison-visiting
 - The relief of poverty

- **Mass literacy**
 - The book (codex)
 - Schools
 - The Reformation and the translation of the Bible into everyday languages

Source: *Post-God Nation?* (ABC Books, 2015), Chapter 2, and references cited therein

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Handout B

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Britain

Britain, by 1788, owed all of the following primarily to Christianity:

- **The creation of England**
 - At the time of Roman occupation of Britannia in the first century, there was no such country: a disparate collection of Celtic societies, all pagan and often at war
 - The conversion of the Romans to Christianity
 - Emperor Constantine's conversion in 312
 - Roman withdrawal from Britain in the early 400s
 - The Anglo-Saxons
 - Pagan when began to settle in Britain
 - St Augustine's mission in 597
 - St Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731)
 - Unification of rival kingdoms under a common religion
 - Offa of Mercia
 - Alfred the Great

- **The survival and strengthening of England through foreign invasions**
 - The Vikings
 - Guthrum's conversion to Christianity in 878
 - King Harald Bluetooth's conversion in 965
 - King Canute's conversion in 1016
 - The Normans (1066)

- **Universities**
 - Oxford and Cambridge established by the Church in the Middle Ages

- **The English legal system (the rule of law)**
 - Separation of church and state
 - Courts as we know them
 - Crime punishable by the state

- Mens rea (guilty mind)
- Magna Carta 1215
- Trial by jury
- The common law
- Equity
- Until 1883, Christianity was formally “part and parcel of the law of England” (*Taylor’s Case* 1676)
- **Parliamentary democracy**
 - Simon de Montfort’s rebellion 1264-65
 - Supported by leading reformers in the Church
 - “*Discussions with ... Franciscan intellectuals had fired Simon’s mind with visions of a new order in both church and state*” (R.F. Treharne)
 - English Civil War 1642-51
 - Oliver Cromwell (Puritan)
- The Glorious Revolution 1688
 - The Bill of Rights 1689
- **The Church of England**
 - “*That finest flower of our Island genius for compromise*”
- **The distinct identities of Wales, Scotland and Ireland**
 - Ireland’s loyalty to Rome
 - The Scottish Reformation
 - Act of Union 1707
 - Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)
 - Combined Protestant strength of England, Scotland and Wales
- **English literature**
 - The entire corpus – including the Shakespearean canon – saturated with Biblical assumptions and allusions
 - King James Bible (1611)
 - Book of Common Prayer (1549, 1662)

Source: *Post-God Nation?* (ABC Books, 2015), Chapter 3, and references cited therein

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Handout C

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Australia

The European discovery of the continent of Terra Australis was a long-term by-product of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation.

Exploration of the South Seas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was fuelled by competition between Catholic powers (Spain, Portugal, France) and Protestant powers (The Netherlands, Britain).

By reason of Captain James Cook's discovery of the more temperate east coast of the continent in 1770, it was Britain that ultimately "won" this competition. Thus, in 1788, New South Wales inherited all of the gifts bequeathed by Christianity to the West in general and to Britain in particular.

But Australia's debt to Christianity has many additional local twists.

Colonial Australia, 1788-c.1850

But for Christianity, and exceptional individual Christians motivated by their faith, the colonies would not have survived, let alone prospered:

- **The voyage of the First Fleet**
 - Avoided the dismal fates of the Second and Third Fleets
 - Arthur Phillip, the commander
 - Evan Nepean, the organiser
 - William Richards Jnr, the supplier
 - John Hunter, Phillip's second-in-command

- **The survival and development of early NSW**
 - Adherence to civilised formalities
 - Baptism
 - Marriage
 - Burial
 - Adaptation of the rule of law to local conditions

- *Kable's Case*
 - Emancipation of convicts
 - The convicts' aversion to suicide
 - The care and education of the first "native-born" generation
 - *"How did the cankered stock of English criminality produce such fresh green shoots?"* (Robert Hughes)
 - Devoted mothers
 - The churches provided all education
 - The best farmers were devout Christians
 - Rev Richard Johnson
 - Rev Samuel Marsden
 - James Ruse
 - Elizabeth Macarthur
 - The best doctors were devout Christians
 - John White
 - William Redfern (averted a typhoid epidemic in 1814)
 - The best educators were devout Christians:
 - Rev W.P. Crook
 - Thomas Taber
 - W.T. Cape
 - The best governors were devout Christians
 - Lachlan Macquarie, the "Second Father of Australia"
 - Richard Bourke
 - George Gipps
 - The best lawyers were devout Christians
 - J.H. Plunkett, draftsman of the Church Act 1836
 - William Burton
 - The best publishers and journalists were devout Christians
 - Edward Smith Hall
 - John Fairfax
 - The best explorers were devout Christians
 - Charles Sturt
 - John Oxley
 - Edward John Eyre
 - The most generous philanthropists and charity-workers were devout Christians:
 - Edward Smith Hall
 - Caroline Chisholm
 - The most influential figure in nineteenth-century Australia was a devout Christian:
 - Rev John Dunmore Lang
- **The founding of South Australia**
 - Established in 1836 for explicitly religious reasons – as a "paradise of dissent" for non-conformist Protestants
 - German Lutheran presence from the start
 - **The benefits of the gold rushes (1850s)**

- Fears of massive societal disruption not realised
- The new immigrants were more religiously observant than before
- **The survival of the Indigenous population**
 - The early colonists who took the greatest interest in Indigenous languages, customs and religious beliefs were devout Christians
 - Watkin Tench
 - William Dawes
 - Rev Lancelot Edward Threlkeld
 - The voices who spoke up most strongly against extermination on the frontiers were devout Christians
 - George Augustus Robinson
 - Fr John Bede Polding
 - Rev Edward Stone Parker
 - Historian Robert Kenny: *“In the mid-nineteenth century a secular belief in a future for Aboriginal Australians, or a right to that future, was difficult to find. Those who believed in such a future were driven not by visions of ‘democratic equality’, still less by ‘Enlightenment’ philosophy, but by dogged Christian faith.”*

Passage to Federation

Christianity, and exceptional individual Christians motivated by their faith, played a key role in transforming the six colonies into civilised societies, fit for nationhood in 1901.

In addition to the factors already covered – the rule of law, exploration, charities, etc. – there were several vital turning points.

- **The abolition of the convict system**
 - Quintessentially a moral issue
 - A popular source of free or cheap labour
 - Better for the “economy” if transportation continued
 - Abolition in NSW in 1840 led by devout Christians
 - Rev J.D. Lang
 - Fr W.D. Ullathorne
 - Quaker missionaries, James Backhouse and George Walker
 - Alexander Maconochie

- Governors including Richard Bourke, George Gipps, Charles La Trobe
 - Abolition in Van Diemen's Land in 1853 led by devout Christians
 - Fr Robert Willson
 - Rev John West
- **Religious and cultural pluralism**
 - Competing religious traditions
 - Church of England
 - Scottish Presbyterianism
 - Irish Catholicism
 - Protestant non-conformism
 - Jews
 - Church Act 1836
 - No established church
 - All Christian denominations to be treated equally
 - *"Australia was a multicultural [place] long before the word was invented"*
(Donald Horne)
 - Religious equality led to political equality
 - failure of the squattocracy
 - early moves to self-government
 - early extension of the male franchise
 - free, compulsory state education
- **A self-sufficient yet civic-minded middle class**
 - The "moral middle class"
 - Not mere thrusting go-getters
 - Protestant work ethic
 - Many "gave back" in charity, philanthropy - e.g., founders of the AMP Society
 - Robert Barr Smith of Adelaide
 - Supplied the great political leaders, including the "founding fathers"
 - Charles Cowper, Henry Parkes (NSW)
 - Charles Gavan Duffy, George Higginbotham, Alfred Deakin (Victoria)
 - Samuel Griffith (Queensland)
 - John Forrest (WA)
 - Supplied the great historians/publishers
 - James Bonwick
 - George William Rusden
 - Charles Pearson
 - George Robertson (Angus & Robertson)
- **An empowered yet moderate working class**

- Did not follow violent, radical options as in Europe
- Trade unions
 - Established by Protestant Christian socialists
 - W.G. Spence
- Australian Labor Party
 - Most of its early leaders were devout Christians, the cream of the Christian working class
 - J.S. McGowen
 - ALP kept Protestant and Catholic working men together, plus a smattering of secularists
 - *Rerum Novarum* (1891)
- **The civilising influence of women**
 - In the private sphere
 - Wives, mothers, sisters, daughters as “God’s police”
 - Companionate marriage
 - Pastoral care at the congregational/parish level
 - In the public sphere
 - Catholic nuns and other “women religious” (Mary Mackillop)
 - Women’s Christian Temperance Unions
 - Votes for women, decades before Britain or the USA
- **The vote for Federation**
 - Far from inevitable
 - Some mercantile hardheads wanted a customs union
 - Some socialists thought it a bourgeois distraction
 - Smaller colonies feared dominance by NSW/Victoria
 - Support of the mainline churches critical
 - Insisted on a reference to God in the Constitution – “humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God”
 - Pro-Federation secularists gave in because feared a popular Christian backlash
 - Cardinal Patrick Moran pivotal in NSW

The making of modern Australia, 1901-2015

At Federation in 1901, some 96% of Australian citizens identified as Christian and one-half of the adult population went to church regularly. Most children went to Sunday school until the 1970s.

The influence of Christianity continued through the twentieth century in a number of critical ways.

- **The legal system**
 - Disproportionate number of key figures serious practising Christians
 - Two early giants

- Samuel Griffith (principal draftsman of the Constitution)
 - H.B. Higgins (*Harvester* basic wage decision)
 - both sons of Protestant clergymen
 - Dame Roma Mitchell
 - devout Catholic
 - first female QC
 - first female superior court judge
 - first female state governor
 - Recent High Court judges
 - Ronald Wilson
 - Gerard Brennan
 - William Deane
 - Murray Gleeson
 - Michael Kirby
- **Politics**
 - Both the Labor and non-Labor sides of politics have deep Christian roots
 - 22 of 29 prime ministers were/are believers in God, and almost all thought long and hard about religion
 - Seriously religious Labor PMs have included
 - Andrew Fisher (Presbyterian)
 - James Scullin (Catholic)
 - Ben Chifley (Catholic)
 - Paul Keating (Catholic)
 - Kevin Rudd
 - Seriously religious non-Labor PMs have included
 - Alfred Deakin (Anglican)
 - Joseph Cook (Methodist)
 - Joseph Lyons (Catholic)
 - Robert Menzies (Presbyterian)
- **The relief of poverty and social disadvantage**
 - Countless church-run hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, mothers' unions and other charities
 - Great individual social justice organisers and campaigners
 - Rev R.B.S. Hammond (Hammond Care)
 - Rev John Flynn (Flying Doctor Service)
 - Rev Alan Walker (Lifeline)
 - Rev Tim Costello (World Vision Australia)
 - The Catholic school system
 - The low-fee independent school system
- **Protective social policy**
 - The churches as a cautionary, conservative influence
 - Alcohol
 - Gambling
 - Pornography

- Sabbatarianism
 - Working hours
 - Marriage and divorce
 - Abortion
 - Euthanasia
- Too often denounced as malicious wowsers
- **Indigenous reconciliation**
 - Missionaries were strong (often lone) voices against frontier violence and other physical mistreatment
 - Rev Ernest Gribble
 - The churches, and exceptional individual Christians, led the study of Indigenous anthropology
 - The Dreaming
 - Translation of the Bible into Indigenous languages
 - Individual Indigenous leaders emerged through the churches
 - Rev James Noble
 - Rev David Unaipon
 - Rev Doug Nicholls
 - Fr Pat Dodson
 - Mum Shirl Smith
 - Post-WWII assimilation policy as a step forward
 - Paul Hasluck
 - The 1967 referendum
 - Strongly supported by all the churches
 - The land rights movement
 - Church support during the 1960s-80s, including Pope John Paul II
 - Church leaders opposed the post-*Mabo* backlash
 - The Stolen Generation
 - Ronald Wilson's *Bringing Them Home* report (1997)
 - The churches apologised promptly
 - Kevin Rudd's 2008 national apology
 - Evangelistic success
 - Rainbow Spirit theology
 - A flourishing Black Church
 - Indigenous Australians now more than 60% Christian
 - **Multiculturalism**
 - Experience of managing Protestant/Catholic tensions since 1788
 - Post-WWII immigration
 - Southern and Eastern Europe
 - Vietnam
 - South East Asia
 - Africa and the Middle East
 - The first two waves were facilitated by the Catholic Church

- Recent South-East Asian and African immigration has strengthened the Protestant churches (e.g., Koreans in the Presbyterian Church)
- Research for 50 years has shown that committed Christians (Evangelical Protestants and practising Catholics) have always been the least racist segment of Australian society
- **Australian history, literature and culture**
 - Consider the most influential figures – the enduring greats
 - Many were seriously religious people; all were thoroughly steeped in religion, if not practising Christians
 - Historians
 - Keith Hancock
 - Manning Clark
 - Geoffrey Blainey
 - Alan Atkinson
 - Don Watson
- Poets
 - Banjo Patterson
 - Henry Lawson
 - Christopher Brennan
 - John Shaw Neilson
 - Dorothea Mackellar
 - A.D. Hope
 - Gwen Harwood
 - Bruce Dawe
 - Les Murray
- Novelists
 - Henry Handel Richardson
 - Miles Franklin
 - Martin Boyd
 - Patrick White
 - Ruth Park
 - Christopher Koch
 - Thomas Keneally
 - Helen Garner
 - Tim Winton

Sources: *Post-God Nation?* (ABC Books, 2015), Chapters 1, 4, 5, and references cited therein; *In God They Trust? The religious beliefs of Australia's prime ministers 1901-2013* (Bible Society, 2013)