



a Christian country?

"Things were more Christian when I was growing up. The churches were full of true worshippers and morality was not only practised, but believed."

Does the quote sound familiar? I am sure that we have all heard something like this before. Is it true? Does it matter? Why do people espouse these views?

Like most statements of this type, it is difficult to justify. What is 'more Christian'? Does it mean attending church or perhaps being 'holier than thou'?

Often such a statement is made by someone whose formative church experience was in the 1950s and/or 1960s. The 1950s are often regarded as the golden period of Australian church life and are looked back on with rosy memories. This was the time of outreach missions which culminated in the Billy Graham Crusade.

The statement may have something to do with going to church but those who use it would also probably say that, of course, a person does not have to go to church to be Christian.

More than likely, it is related to their perception of the 'Christianity' of society and the position of the churches. One can point to the decline in the number of people identifying with a church and the growth in nominalism; however, these factors do not necessarily mean less belief. They may reflect a growing alienation with parts of the institutional church.

While there have been significant changes in Australian society and church life over the last 30 years, it is quite difficult to say that Australia has become 'less Christian'. Australia is a different nation today and the churches reflect the differences.

Those who believe that Australia is 'less Christian' neglect a number of factors.

1. The relative consistency of attendance at institutional church services.

One could be forgiven for thinking that everyone in the 1950s attended church. The

truth is that a large proportion of the general population have never attended on a regular basis (i.e. at least monthly). The figure for regular attendance has oscillated between 15 and 30 percent, with some periods of our history recording a higher figure than others. Of course, higher rates of attendance at church should never be taken as an indicator of how 'Christian' the country is at any point in time. People attend church for a variety of reasons, probably many of which have little to do with the worship of God.

2. The diversity of denominational and religious life.

People who say "Where are all the people in the pews?" are usually members of one of the 'mainline' churches and seem to be unaware of the proliferation of church life. Today there are more denominations and independent churches to attend. Once a country town had perhaps only a Catholic church, an Anglican church, a Methodist/

Presbyterian and one other. Now the town probably also has one or more Baptist churches and several Pentecostal denominations.

One perhaps also needs to point out that some denominations have always had a higher attendance rate at church and view a fall in attendance as a very serious matter. Other denominations have traditionally recorded low rates and place little emphasis on regular attendance for membership. The smaller the denomination, usually the stricter the view of membership — a view usually predicated on regular attendance at church.

3. All generations, even those who grew up in the 'golden age', develop and maintain practices which are hardly Christian in any sense of the word.

In fact, by implying that there was a 'golden age', people give the impression that it was one without sin, whereas in reality its sins were usually covered by a multitude of respectabilities.

What interest was there in the 1950s in issues of peace and social justice; prison reform; Aboriginal concerns; the environment; institutional corruption; ethical investment; the status of women; the exploitation of women, children and migrants etc?

Often people confuse certain middle-class values — values which appear mainly on the outside — as true Christian values; like looking respectable, dressing well, a public adherence to strict moral codes (for example, marriage in a church versus a *de facto* relationship). Emphasis on the sanctity of marriage over and above all other values (like partnership and respect within the marriage) could be used as an argument for condoning domestic violence.

When these 'golden-age Christians' accuse other Christians of taking on the values of the present age, they do not

realise that they have been guilty of what they condemn.

4. An absorbing preoccupation with sexual issues.

Many Christians in Australia today are burdened by matters of sexuality. And as a former Moderator of the Uniting Church in NSW, Bruce Irvine added: "However, not their own sexuality, but that of others". Are issues of sexuality the only concerns for the church? Certainly such an emphasis reinforces the stereotype that the churches are the guardians of morality but, more than that, it gives an impression that Christianity is a rigid moral code that only frigid and neurotic people can follow.

5. A failure to reflect and come to grips with the changes that have taken place in Australia over the last thirty years.

A hearkening back to a golden era points to an inability to come to terms with change. It encourages us to bury our heads in the sand. Many may wish they were back singing Alexander's Hymns with the other faithful, or listening to Blue Hills, but the fact is that many people, like Homer Simpson, would rather listen to the football in church than the sermon.

6. What is a 'Christian' country anyway?

What do people really mean when they say Australia was or should be a Christian country? Some perhaps want a rigid theocracy, a country where they can impose their conception of

Christian law and order and, for them, this could include capital punishment and harsh penalties for homosexuals, prostitutes and other 'sinners'. Of course, Australia has never been a theocracy. Though the Church of England thought and sometimes behaved as if it was the established religion, it never officially took on the mantle.

Perhaps what people really want is the Christianisation of Australia, but are they helping the mission of God in Australia or denying it? The concept of a 'Christian Australia' could enslave us to a particular way of spreading the gospel or rather entrenching Christianity as an institution. Dialogue is regarded as a word from Satan, rather than a positive attribute promoting tolerance and understanding, which can enhance the quality of life.

How do we share the gospel today? What we need to do is understand our complex culture, rather than reminisce about the rosy past. What value is there in proclaiming the inadequacies or the achievements of any particular era over another, to the extent that we promote an impression that we can only become truly Christian if we take on the values and practices of the past. In particular, we need a greater depth of Christian leadership in Australia, leadership which takes our culture seriously, rather than wants to subsume it into one understanding of the Christian gospel. ■

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