

Understanding Australia's Christian history

Theological conferences are not normally seen as seminal events in the life of the Church. They may however, reflect some interesting contemporary aspects of the state of the Church.

Take for instance, the recent annual conference of the longwindedly-named Australia/New Zealand Association of Theological Schools/Society for Theological Studies (ANZATS/STS), held in Canberra.

It brought together a wide range of university academics, theologians, church historians and other people. If they represent an authentic cross-section of the community concerned with theology in Australasia, the following conclusions might be drawn:

- that community is Protestant dominated (or at least that Catholics have yet to participate fully in the ecumenical dimensions of the community);
- that community is still male dominated; while there were more women present than usual, it seems that the gender of the teaching hierarchy is changing more slowly than the groups which they teach.
- that there is still a very low ethnic input in most of our theological institutions.

The conference was organised around the theme of "Australian and New Zealand Religious History", and witnessed the emergence of church history as a major subject within the theological set up. Normally the conference is dominated by eminent theologians from overseas, but this year's gave preference to local scholars from a range of disciplines.

Bruce Mansfield, visiting professor of history at Sydney University, provided the setting and standard for the week with a paper entitled "Thinking About Australian Religious History." A stimulating debate centred on the use of the word "religious", rather than "church" in the context of history. Professor Mansfield commented that when the *Journal of Religious History* was founded, everyone thought that the context of "religious" in Australia was "Christian".

Thirty years later, the use of the word has broadened considerably and like the Rev Richard Moore of the Baptist Theological College of Western Australia, who represented a paper entitled "Religious History or Church History?", I think that

"church" history is more apt. Actually for wider use I would favour the term "Christian history", particularly when we consider the research that is being undertaken on christian movements and institutions which are in essence, para-church.

Although ANZATS/STS is a combined association, Australia is very much the dominant partner. The New Zealand perspective received only slight coverage (two papers out of over 30). The Rev Dr Allan Davidson of St John's Anglican College, Auckland who presented both papers, gave an excellent run down on his recently released volume of documents *Transplanted Christianity*, Davidson also managed to explore the Maori scene in New Zealand church life. I was interested to learn later that the college where he teaches has a policy of producing bilingual (Maori, English) prospective ministers.

The history of the Australian Aborigine and christian contact was the subject of a well attended seminar during the week. Though both speakers were from a white background, they are more than familiar with Aboriginal culture and religion.

Dorothy Turnbridge, a former missionary involved in translation work, gave excellent insights into a linguist's life and illustrated the importance of making christianity live in the culture and language of our indigenous races.

Dr John Harris, director of the Zadok foundation in Canberra, who is completing a history of christian missions to the Aborigines, gave a stirring and somewhat depressing address which illustrated the many failures of the missions. His talk raised an important question which was never fully discussed: To what extent do we criticise those from the past who have not had the benefit of our present enlightenment?

As well as a Protestant emphasis, the papers offered to the conference organisers and subsequently read reflected the dominance of the nearly established church — the Anglican Church of Australia.

Ironically though there is a wealth of written material about the Anglican Church, a national history has yet to be published. The *Catholic Church* of course has the now standard work by Patrick

O'Farrell *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia*. I was heartened to learn of the progress of the Rev Barbara Darling of Ridley College, Melbourne, on her history of the Anglican Church of Australia and look forward to the publication of this work by Acorn Press within the next year. She also presented a very stimulating paper on three leading female figures (usually forgotten or seldom told about) in the history of the Anglican Church of Australia.

One interesting and very topical paper was presented by Dr Norman Young of the Seventh Day Adventist College at Avondale. The title — "Dingo Girl: A study in Antipodean Intolerance" should explain its content and thesis.

"To what extent do we criticise those from the past who have not had the benefit of our present enlightenment?"

Other positive features of the conference included the development of historiographical work and research examining movements and theologies. The recently formed Evangelical History Association held a one day seminar during the week at which Dr Mark Hutchinson presented a paper examining history as religion within the context of 19th Century Australian historiography. The promotion of historiography within the Australian christian history scene is a very worthwhile cause.

Later in the week Dr Bruce Kaye, Master of New College at the University of NSW, embarked on a methodological discovery of Manning Clark's presentation of religion in his historical writings. Clark seems to be providing an impetus for historians/theologians to re-examine Australian christian history.

This conference and the continuing research are all hopeful signs of the development of historical writing in Australia. Professor Ian Breward's history and documentary record of the church in Australia which is due out in the next few months will be a welcome addition to this body of writing.

Hopefully other people will be encouraged to write the general history of christianity in Australia.