Delivered 6 December, 1988

Published 1989 by

Catholic College of Education Sydney,

40 Edward Street, North Sydney, NSW, 2060

Designed, typeset and printed at the College

(c) Professor James Tulip

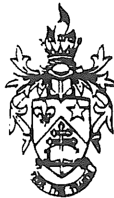
The inaugural

Victor J. Couch Lecture

Australian literature, religion and culture: an educational perspective

Professor James Tulip

Associate Professor of English Literature,
Chairman, Board of Studies in Divinity,
University of Sydney



Catholic College of Education Sydney

When I move between the two worlds of literature and religion as a teacher in the one and in the other as a kind of Minister - well, if not for everything - at least for many things in theological education, I must confess at times to a certain feeling of 'amphibiousness'. Venturing out on the 'sea of faith' from the hard dry land of academe is one way of putting it. Yet the opposite way of putting it is equally true, of leaving the sometimes wet and boggy marshes of the university for the sometimes firm dry land of religious belief and liturgy. The metaphor of 'amphibiousness' hardly defines the issue of literature and religion in itself, but it does help me in defining the experience, as the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* has it, 'of combining two lives, positions, classes, qualities, etc.'. And on turning to my old *Chambers Encyclopedia* I find 'amphibia' described as 'a class of vertebrates between fishes and reptiles'. And to keep me really humble in this venture I find the list of creatures of this amphibious kind including 'newt or frog, salamander or toad'. I think I will choose the salamander as my totem.

My concern here is with the apparent opposition of religion and culture in Australia, and how literature may serve to bridge the gulf between the two, and how education is important in offering the most realistic way of working through literature towards a greater reconciliation of religion and culture. I am here adopting quite

simple everyday uses of the terms religion and culture to point on the one hand to the world of Christian belief and worship (what we do at Church on Sundays and how it affects our lives) and the world of our general values in society as expressed in the media, in education, in the arts, and what we term the Australian lifestyle. To see these two worlds as being in opposition to each other is, admittedly, not a complete picture, but there is sufficient truth in looking at this opposition, such as it is, to begin here.

Australia has been called 'the most secular society in the world today'. Ultimately, I wish to challenge this statement. But I have to acknowledge, to begin with, its apparent truth. Indeed, in my own experience as an educator, it was an awareness in the early 1960s of how the Australian cultural tradition represses its religious instincts which led me to respond to the issue at the university. Returning from postgraduate studies in the United States where great Schools of Divinity and Departments of Religion and clusters of theological colleges flourish at the centres of the educational and cultural scene, I became conscious of how backward a nation we are in this regard. I coined the term 'ostrichism' to describe the way Australian universities related to religion. By burying their heads in the sand, our universities have tried not only to believe religion is not there but agressively even to suggest that it ought not to be there. 'Thou shalt not believe in belief' once seemed to be a university motto; an attitude which on academic terms alone is hardly tenable. As in fact it has proved to be so. The tradition of Australian 'ostrichism' in the universities has only needed to be challenged to be dispelled. The past twenty years have seen a large transformation of the Australian educational scene in this regard. There *are* now a wide range of developments in religious and theological studies in Australian tertiary educational institutions, and I am glad to have been part of this change. I am also glad, tonight, to be able to join in honouring Dr Couch for his part in this change. The quiet revolution which has taken place has been due to efforts such as his. I appreciate greatly the invitation to speak on this occasion.

Yet all is not well. The educational change in the study of religion had barely begun in the universities and colleges of advanced education in the 1970s when economic constraints stalled its

progress. Theological colleges, for their part, became degree-granting institutions in the 1980s, but are not yet (with some exceptions) part of the mainstream of Australian tertiary education. Theological students in these colleges are not eligible for government support in terms of Austudy or TEAS. In Sydney, as we know, there are special problems in terms of its history and its geography. But the formation a few years ago of the Sydney College of Divinity and the planned introduction in 1989 of a combined Arts-Divinity degree at the University of Sydney are signs of positive change in the traditional area of theological study. The growth of programs of Religious Studies in the universities and colleges of advanced education also points to a new and general health in this field. Yet there remains in Sydney no clear model, little focus, and even less community for those whose interest and concern it is to study and understand religion in itself, and its relation to the Australian culture in which religion finds itself.

What, then, is the relation between religion and culture? Societies where religion dominates a culture are often repressive; societies where religion is absorbed into a culture are often dangerous. An Australian observer looking at modern Iran or Nazi Germany or many other such examples in the modern world must feel a certain relief that those states of affairs do not apply here. The way that Australian religion and culture are wary of each other has much to be said for itself. In many ways it has been the strength and separateness of Church from culture in Australia that has given religion such power and leverage as it has in Australian social and political terms. But I venture to think this state of affairs belongs now to the past. A new agenda is appearing in which religion must address itself to the culture; and, indeed, pay a certain price for having kept itself in isolation for so long from the concerns and lifestyle of society. Moving from a position of strength and privilege into a new alignment with the forces of society, politics, and education describes the agenda for the future of religion in Australia. It will not prove easy.

Here, I am reminded that the term 'amphibiousness', with which I began my talk, first came into general use in the English language in the seventeenth century and in particular in the 1640s at the time of the Civil War in England. Roundheads against the Royalists,

Cromwell chopping of the head of King Charles I; it is no wonder that the two-sided term 'amphibian' came into existence, and that English society grew to adopt a cautious attitude towards religion. The eighteenth century enlightenment with its ideological preference for secularism reinforced the suspicion of religion, and it was from within this context that Australia had its origins. Contemporary Australia, of course, has many origins - many of them both ancient and modern only being rediscovered today - and while we have entered on a new phase of cultural and religious pluralism, it remains true that there is a deeply ingrained sense of 'difference' in our society between the respective interests of religion and culture.

What I now wish to focus on, however, is the degree to which society and its attendant secularism dominates the question of religion and culture in Australia today. We see it everywhere. At this time of the year, in terms of the Christian churches, we are in the season of Advent approaching Christmas, a major point of religious celebration. I hardly need to illustrate the way in which secular society has virtually taken over the religiousness of this time and converted it to its own commercialised uses. The process, of course, is worldwide and not confined to Australia; and in a certain respect we may choose to see this process as the way in which secular society continues to honour religion. The Christian message still survives and matters at Christmas. It is, however, part of a larger, more complex ritual. What concerns me in terms of religion and culture in Australia is how passive, defensive and uncreative religion has been in the face of this secular challenge. We have long become over-familiar with the irony of a southern hemisphere culture celebrating Christmas in northern hemisphere cultural terms. We need to do something about it.

Where are the words and the images and rituals which express us as Australians at Christmas? What does it say of us that in place of Santa Claus driving his reindeer we see kitsch Christmas cards of Santa driving a team of kangaroos? Or Santa tearing his trousers getting through a barbed wire fence in the outback. These are small examples but ones that point up the triviality of our religious imaginations in not being able to express what Advent and Christmas mean to us in original, new, and living ways.

There are so many signs and evidences in Australian experience of new life emerging in early summer, signs and evidences which should correspond to the meaning of Advent and Christmas. The glorious colours of our November trees - jacarandas, flame trees and silky oaks; the old bark falling from the brush boxes and angophoras; the first swim in summer ocean waters; the ripening harvests in the countryside; the brilliance of late afternoon light and the seemingly endless blue of our skies. These are the stuff of our daily living. Why can they not be taken up into our sense of the great gift of God to us of this world, of this life, and of Jesus Christ.

The early months of summer in Australia call for some religious expression of themselves. Instead, we see how secular society triumphs. The Melbourne Cup has taken on the shape of a national ritual. And in Adelaide right at the onset of Advent we see the Grand Prix with its assault on what was once called 'the city of churches' taking place on a day which was once called 'the sabbath'. And now in Sydney we have Sunday trading for the tourists! Grace Brothers abounding!

Let me pursue this critical view further. Each morning we see the secular gods of our lives, the gods of our days, spread out there in the daily newspaper. As we unroll our secular Writ and open it on the breakfast table like a prayer-mat, we bow down in solemn concentration before the idols of the press. War, money, politics and sport - the four riders of our secular apocalypse with many a running dog at their heels (and almost always male) - these are the surrogate gods, the substitute religion of our times.

There is no more fascinating phenomenon to consider in Australia today in this regard than our own Prime Minister. Mr Hawke had in his beginnings an advanced and privileged experience of Christianity. He chose to deny this experience. His instinct for power in Australian terms led him to suppress the spirituality and religious consciousness of his past and adopt the style of rampant secularity; and while since gaining power he has found a way of redressing the balance, his life - or as we might call it his psychodrama - reflects the tension in this deep opposition in Australia between religion and culture. We see this tension in his language which, when it is not gratuitously and self-consciously colourful, is abstract to the point of being unverbal. An artist of

centrism, Bob Hawke disappears as a person culturally speaking - and is ourselves writ large.

The Bicentennial has reminded us of the essential structural dynamics of Australian society: of Convicts versus Puritans, while the institutions of power and authority - State, Church, Law, Education, Religion and the Army - remain quietly in control in the background as hierarchical and late colonial legacies. Yet I would like what I have said of Mr Hawke to seem positive since he is the first of our leaders to have instinctively grasped the full dynamics of our society. But at what a price! Chopping off his own head, so to speak, and removing his childhood halo, he has acted out a dramatic career in such a way that in vanquishing the system he has become its victim. Nonetheless, in his favour, it should be said that it is his suppressed spirituality that communicates something which transcends politics, a sense of a possible centre, a future wholeness. And certainly when we look elsewhere in politics and social life we want to say, better a suppressed spirituality than a repressive pietism.

Mr Hawke's rejection of his father's world is also relevant to our consideration of literature, religion and culture. The critique of the father has become a focal issue in recent writing as it is, indeed - especially in times of the impact of the women's movement - in religious contexts today. Poetry, for example, found one of its chief modern subjects in 1959 when the American poet Robert Lowell offered a 'life study' of his father's dying. It was unsentimental, even cruel. Yet for all its negative quality it was a creative act on Lowell's part to tell the truth in this way. It seemed to release in poets around the English-speaking world a power of feeling and complex attitude. It took the form of a confession of anger, rejection and loss; and it is not unrelated to the 'death of God' motif which surfaced in theology at the same time. A cultural shift was taking place in the mid 1960s which was finding expression in literature and religion alike. It is noteworthy how the practice of confession while changing within the church was reappearing in literature as if some law of conservation of spiritual energy was being observed.

In Australia it was Vincent Buckley in the mid 1960s who opened the way into this intimate painful area of human experience with his poem 'Stroke', which as the *Oxford Companion to Australian*

Literature says, 'reveals behind its terse language and often brutally frank description, the pathos of the final encounter between a father and son who have never in the course of their lives really 'learned to touch'.' (We remember this poem sadly today since Vincent Buckley himself died two weeks ago from a stroke. We honour him and his work. His book *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968) was the first study of its generation to explore the subject we are considering in this lecture.) Other poets such as James McAuley, Gwen Harwood and Robert Gray have written since Buckley, a series of deeply moving studies of the dying father. All have found their resonance through first seeming to reject the father and what he stood for. It is a complex ritual but one that demonstrates how literature in this instance, with its closeness to the hurt in human relationships, possesses a truth which if pursued deeply enough will be found to share in the same powerful feelings and experiences that shape religious imagination and liturgy.

Viewers of Australian film in the past twenty years have been delighted at what has happened. Something that we have long wanted to be said, and to be seen, of Australia has been there on the screen. Centrally, this has been the great landscapes, the space, the light, the colours. The camera has dealt with them lovingly, reverently - at times in adoration of the land as if it were a god. We carry images of the New England Tableland, of the Snowy Mountains, of the beaches, of the outback away from these films with joy and pleasure. We also see cities in their ordinariness and identify with the lives acted out before us. But Australian films have shown their limitations in their stories and dramas.

A quieter mode of art has been that of painting. The qualities of light in a Streeton or Lloyd Rees landscape capture something uniquely true of our world. A Grace Cossington Smith Turramurra living room is an epiphany of leisure, peace and colour. A Brett Whitely scene of Sydney Harbour conceptualises and images a sense of place or site as if it were a soul. The sounds of Australia are there in Peter Sculthorpe's 'Mangrove' and 'Sun Music'. The list could go on.

We rarely stop to think why it is that paintings and the arts generally matter so much. Clearly, it seems to me, in a society starved in its secularity the arts are a substitute for religion. The

long queues which form at the Art Gallery are like those of ancient pilgrims, waiting to stand receptively before images of art which reveal their unique power and meaning. It is a form of meditation where the art form expresses for us as viewers our most serious and deep feelings. We stand before them unconscious of our modern spirituality. Paintings, films, theatre, dance and music work on us and work for us as secular worship. We accept them as a fact of our times. Religion needs the arts. It is equally true that the arts need religion.

It is in this context that I wish now to look at Australian literature. I cannot hope to do justice to a subject so large, and will focus on poetry as the most concentrated expression of what I want to argue. Less popular than film or painting, Australian poetry has nevertheless in its preoccupation with the words of our language, addressed the most varied, referential, and complex aspects of our existence. It has also come closest to articulating the connections with religion in our culture, which Australian social history has so effectively suppressed. Let me take some of the historical figures in our poetry, past and present.

I think of Charles Harpur, the son of convict parents, who became the first major Australian poet. For many readers he is inaccessible inside a nineteenth century language of Australian Romanticism. Yet in poems such as 'A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest', 'Dawn and Sunrise in the Snowy Mountains', 'The Bush Fire', and 'A Storm in the Mountains', he expressed a reverence and a fear before nature which has become a prototype of the Australian attachment to the land. Judith Wright has followed Harpur in modern times. Her evocations of New England are rich in wisdom and insight of both a philosophical and practical kind. She has depicted 'Birds' as if they were Australian angels. And like Harpur she has turned a transcendentalist mind to social issues in a way that makes her a prophetic figure in our times.

A.D. Hope and James McAuley in the mid twentieth century turned away from this kind of contextualisation to recover more classical and universal subjects for poetry. They offered a critique of innocent Australianism in a way that has relevance to comparable religious experience of the Australian context today. But each poet in himself had a distinctive attitude to Christianity, Hope rejecting

his early Presbyterian background and McAuley undergoing a powerful conversion to Catholicism. Paradoxically, Hope's finest poem for many readers is his 'Ode on the Death of Pius the Twelfth'; while for readers of McAuley it is his late renderings of the peace he found in the Tasmanian landscape which now appeal. Both poets, however, stand at a point where religion and literature cross over in Australia, and reveal strikingly the interweaving of religious and cultural concerns at a formal and conceptual level.

In contemporary terms it is, of course, Les Murray who now occupies centre stage on this issue. His recent *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* is a sign of a new relationship between religion and literature in Australian culture. At the same time it reveals this relationship as being extraordinarily varied. The three hundred or so poems Murray includes in the anthology represent a scatter of doctrinal reflections, personal experience, mysticism and moralism. They reflect the raw data of random perceptions from which it is not easy to detect a pattern. Nor is Murray's own position easy to characterise. A convert from Presbyterianism to Catholicism, Murray has revived as well the ideology of the Jindyworobaks which Hope and McAuley once thought they had buried. Murray has a great commitment to the Australian land He has built this up into a powerful context of otherness, contrasting his sense of traditional Australia as represented by the land and its farming communities with the urbanisation of metropolitan culture, which he perjoratively refers to as 'the Action' as if the city world is possessed by demons. The title of his selected poems is *The Vernacular Republic*, expressing his political and cultural preference for Australia's indigenous democratic lifestyle. Yet inside this embrace of Australia he structures his perceptions along quite rigorous and doctrinaire lines, appealing back to a pre-Vatican II Catholicism as the sanction for his imagination.

Coinciding with Murray's recovery of the Jindyworobak love of the land (and partly championed by his work) there has also emerged a new sense of Aboriginal writing. It has been a discovery of the past twenty years of immense importance for readers of Australian literature. A new world of mythology and a new kind of religious consciousness has become available to the reading public. Previously, it had been the preserve of the Aboriginal people and of

anthropologists. Now such texts as the Moon-Bone Cycle of Arnhem Land and the numerous Aranda songs and chants which T.G.H. Strehlow collected have entered Australian literature in ways that deepen and diversify our total sense of ourselves and the larger culture of which we are a part. Murray has spoken of the Moon-Bone cycle as possibly the greatest poem ever written in Australia; and alongside the new social reverence for places such as Kakadu and Uluru there is a seriousness towards 'place' observable in Australia today, different from a nature mysticism in the sense that nature itself is now seen as being both holy and endangered. As with so many aspects of modern society which were once seen as religious, the value in them is being recognised - negatively - in the fear of their extinction.

It is in many ways a simple claim I am putting forward in pointing to the kind of common ground between Australian literature and religion. To say that they share, or could share, in the deepening and strengthening of a possible Australian spirituality may seem too obvious and intuitive to demand attention. But in the circumstances where religion has not yet found an Australian style and ambience and in a society where secularism is so powerful and persuasive, it seems good sense to stress likeness and community rather than difference and suspicion.

In a larger context than Australian history and culture, it is worth noting, too, that a general *rapprochement* around the world is being felt for between literature and theology. A growing body of scholars in the United Kingdom and North America are exploring the relationship of literature and religion vigorously. There is on the literary side a resistance to the downgrading of terms such as myth, legend, story and fiction. Nothing seems more serious in literary circles than the way terms such as 'myth' and 'fiction' have become synonymous with 'untruth' and 'falsity' in modern Western culture.

Literature, traditionally, stands between history and philosophy in the way we approach reality. Between the world of 'fact' and the world of 'concept' are to be found the constructs of the imagination, the enacted hypotheses and possible interpretations of reality in terms of 'what might have happened' or the 'what might be'. If there is a way of valuing more genuinely these constructs of imagination,

of being open to the real likeness between fiction and faith, and of transferring the way we experience art and literature in modern society so personally and so particularly into a comparable experience of religion, then a profound new strength will become available to our culture. Literature and the arts generally are at the very least a bridge between religion and culture. At their best, and in the hands of a great artist, they offer us a wholeness of being that is at the one time realised and worshipful. The art of Mozart, for example, has been extravagantly praised in modern times by such great theologians as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. It is a somewhat humbler task I am suggesting here in our learning to value the literature of Australia as a point of entry into a new and large sense of an open Australian spirituality which grounds itself in our all too human experience.

Let me conclude by offering some succinct comments to do with an educational perspective on this subject. I hardly need to say to a gathering such as this and on an occasion such as this one, that religion must begin to take education seriously. It would perhaps be more pertinent in the Australian context to turn the statement around and say that education must begin to take religion seriously. The paradox of our Australian situation is slightly absurd. The study of religion exists in inverse proportion to its importance. Relatively speaking, religion is *not* studied. It is lived, believed or not believed in; it is something to have a commitment to, something that affects the whole of life. But it is not generally studied! Not, that is, in the sense that literature, science, mathematics, history, geography are studied. Why is this so? And why should it be so?

Education, whatever its limitations, has immense place and power in modern society. It happens to be, for better or worse, the place for the young to grow and develop in our society. From the ages of five to twenty-five it is the established ritual and rite of passage from youth to adulthood. It has its own traditions, its internal methods of procedure, its own integrity. It is here that religion must take education seriously. Religion must work with education on education's terms. This ,means, at the unviersity level, accepting an open, serious, critical and scholarly approach to the subject. It also means at the secondary level a new and more formal approach to the study of religion.

Why is it that Religious Studies are not part of the HSC curriculum? There are, admittedly, certain programs in particular schools at the Other Approved Studies level, but this is to accept the marginalisation of Religious Studies. The fact is that there is in New South Wales (which is well behind other Australian States in this regard) the need for a full two-unit course in Religious Studies at the HSC level to stand alongside other disciplines as an area of study which particular schools and students could choose to pursue.

There is ample content for such a course. Considering Christianity alone, there is its history and thought, the teachings of particular traditions, the religious texts and writings and the worship of the Church. Enough, indeed, for a whole university degree! There is no problem of content. Where the sensitive point emerges for educators is how to bring this content into some meaningful relation with the students. In academic circles it is sometimes felt that religion belongs two thousand years ago and at least two thousand miles away. The question becomes how to make such studies contextual and experiential as well as historical and scholarly.

It is here that I believe the case I have been outlining has its special merit. The study of literature and the other arts focusses questions of meaning, personal experience, feeling and imagination in a way that flows on naturally to religion. Australian literature is the best point of access to Australian culture, historically and in its complex contemporaneity It offers a possible ground on which a relevant Religious Studies program in the schools might develop in contextual and experiential ways. Equally, I feel, literature and other arts need a religious perspective to complete themselves in order to comprehend the fullness of human culture.