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EARLY COLONIAL RELIGION, WITH OR WITHOUT CHRISTMAS...

Historians and theologians are quite direct with their assessments of Australian colonial religion. Scottish born theologian, James Denny (1856-1917), stated Australia was
“the most godless place under heaven”. (*Quoted in Breward 1988*)

In 1788 when the First Fleet arrived in New South Wales from England, Governor Arthur Phillip not only established a penal colony, a goal for the 736 convicts—548 males, 188 females—and to a certain extent the marines and officers who accompanied them,
he also won the land for ‘protestant’ Christianity. (*Breward 1988:2*)

His orders included the charge that he
“enforce a due observance of religion and good order among the inhabitants of the new settlement, and that you take steps for the due celebration of publick [sic] worship as circumstances will permit.” (*Woolmington, quoted in Thompson 1994: 1*)

Likewise the oath of allegiance at the foundation of the colony included
“a rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, presumably to ensure that no taint of Romanism entered even a prison colony.” (*Breward 1988:2*)

Exiled from home and family perhaps forever,
both marines and convicts found their new land ‘alien’,
“from the stone-age Aboriginal people to the inverted seasons, from the weird birds and animals to the scrubby eucalyptus trees which never lost their leaves.” (*Porter 1990:6*)

So let’s pause and step back a bit to 18th century Britain.
The Church of England was the state church in England, Wales, and Ireland while the Church of Scotland (or Presbyterian)—under a strong Calvinist influence—
was the state church north of the border.

But changes were beginning to take shape.
The Church of England’s authority had slipped somewhat
as laws enforcing compulsory attendance at Anglican church services
had lessened—it was becoming an age of voluntarism.
As a result many people, primarily working class people, had stopped attending.

Then there were the evangelical revivals—the movement called Methodism
and the emphasis on personal faith in Jesus Christ,
and the dissenting or nonconformist churches—Congregationalist, Baptists,
Quakers... and Unitarians.

“They now had freedom of worship,” said Canberra historian Roger Thompson,
“but were still shut out of the universities and public office... The history of
discrimination made nonconformist denominations strong opponents of established
links between church and state.” (*Thompson 1994:2*)

And not forgetting the Roman Catholic Church,
the national church of many Irish people,
suffering more discrimination than most.

Thompson continues:

“Such religious diversity among the first European settlers to Australia posed a major threat to the perpetuation of the early alliance between church and state.”

(Thompson 1994:3)

The first chaplain to be appointed to the colony was Rev Richard Johnson,
with home country support from a group of Church of England evangelicals.

His appointment came about through the agency
of a well-known member of parliament, Yorkshireman William Wilberforce...

A leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade.

His appointment as chaplain to the new goal

“was the toughest job in the Church of England,” *(Porter 1900:10)*
and made all the more difficult because his letter of appointment demanded
he obey the orders of the governor and of any superior officer.

He was, and was seen to be, part of the system

despite the fact he was quite compassionate towards the convicts.

“Consequently, there were ingredients for conflict between the evangelical Johnson and broad or high church government officials. Johnson saw his main mission as converting European and native inhabitants of the colony to a personal Christianity... this mission conflicted with Johnson’s task of assisting the maintenance of local order.”

(Thompson 1994:3)

For several years colonial church services were conducted in the open air.

When Johnson was not given resources to construct a church building,
in 1793 he used his own money—a total of 67 pounds—
to erect a wattle and daub building.

The church had a thatched roof and an earthen floor and could seat 500.

But some years later—in 1798—it was destroyed

“when allegedly a group of disgruntled convicts burnt down the building in response to Governor Hunter's decree that all residents in the colony including officers and convicts were to attend Sunday services.”

It was not replaced for some time.

Interestingly, it was also in this year—1798—that

“the first Nonconformists came by accident. Missionaries with the London Missionary Society... fled to Sydney from danger in Tahiti.” *(Porter 1990:15)*

Johnson’s colleague—who had arrived in 1794—was newly ordained Rev Samuel Marsden.
Gifted with an ‘iron constitution... and a fair share of Yorkshire obstinacy’,

Marsden acted as both priest and magistrate.

He was known for handing out savage flogging sentences,
as well as contributing to strained relations between the

Protestant majority and the growing minority of Catholics... contributing

“to the alienation of the church from the majority of the population who had some past or present personal contact with convictism.” *(Thompson 1994:5)*

Marsden's bigotry was typical of his generation.

His behaviour compromised the church for decades.

His legacy to the future Australian church can only be described as tragic. (*Porter 1900:13*)

Of the Irish convicts the official position of the colony authorities was of a pack of dangerous, low, Papist rebels.

In fact, nearly all could be described as ordinary criminals, mostly thieves.

“[A]s all research suggests... the Irish were a better type of convict, less criminally inclined, more likely to completely reform, [and] less inclined to turn to crime in Australia.” (*O'Farrell 1987:24*)

In all, the Irish-born element was about a quarter of all convicts transported.

Other protestant chaplains—firsts for their denominations in Sydney—followed Johnson.

Rev Samuel Leigh (Methodist, 1815), and one of the few politically radical Protestant ministers,

Rev John Dunmore Lang (Free Kirk/Presbyterian 1823) who never flinched from controversy.

The first official Catholic chaplains, Fathers Therry and Conolly, arrived in 1820 to find a well-organised 'lay-led' community.

The major support for Christianity in the early colony was via government finance for the Church of England and its near monopoly on education.

This aroused hostility from the other denominations especially Presbyterian and Roman Catholic.

But such support didn't transform the majority of residents into church-goers.

Reflecting on this situation Ronald Conway observes:

“The churches quickly assumed the character of social ghettos or lobbies in which fringe obsessions such as experience, gambling, property rights and sexual conduct were pushed, to the embarrassment of governments and the jeers of secularists and ordinary blokes.” (*Conway 1971:187*)

Thus, Christianity was in the main rejected by the convicts and only slightly embraced by the free settlers in latter years.

“It was not merely their experiences of transportation that hardened the convicts against religious teaching” writes Anglican historian Muriel Porter,

“Secular Australia may have been brought to birth under southern skies, but it was conceived in England. In the late eighteenth century, the Church of England had completely failed to reach the urban masses—the poor, ordinary men and women of the crowded cities. Long before they set sail for Botany Bay, the convicts were known to be an irreligious lot, some felt even an irredeemable lot. They were impervious to religious teaching, or to encouragement to prayer or worship. Thus they... brought with them to Australia the godlessness of the hidden side of English life.” (*Porter 1900:13*)

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The Australian Christmas tradition was slow to emerge.

And it almost passed unnoticed during the grim years of early colonial settlement.

As an event in early colonial society, Christmas held little importance.

Unless the day fell on a Sunday a holiday was not declared.

And the day was usually celebrated with a compulsory Anglican church parade, an appropriate sermon and the 'hoisting of the colours, or,

if punishment had to be administered to a convict,
perhaps a reduction in the sentence was ordered.

But some bad habits continued.

It would appear that on Christmas Day in 1788 a convict was arrested for stealing and,
because it was Christmas Day, had his sentence of 200 lashes reduced to 150.

At other times, a double share of rum and rations was offered.

And in 1817 a gang of bushrangers broke into the residence of the
Lieutenant-Governor of Van Dieman's Land while he was out,
and ate his Christmas dinner! (*Ciddor n.d.:4*)

In those early years Christmas didn't get much publicity either,
until after the establishment of the first newspaper in Sydney in 1803,
and then it was rather scant—perhaps only a public notice.

Provisions were scarce and unpredictable,
even among the privileged officer corps.

A parrot pie and a mug of rum was not unusual!

When Christmas did begin to influence the social
and religious life of the colony—in the mid- to late- 1800s—
it was mostly through secular 'nostalgia' rather than religious leanings.

Old customs and symbols such as the tree and presents were yearned for,
and the arrival of luxury goods, toys and fashionable festive clothing, plus food stuffs
—hams, bottled fruit, barrels of currents, almonds, dates and figs—
and other items were eagerly awaited as supply ships from England docked in December.

But something even more special also arrived on those supply ships:
hugh block of ice from frozen American lakes.

“For the first time in Australia it was possible to have a really cold drink at Christmas
time.” (*Ciddor n.d.:5*)

These old traditions were never totally abandoned,
but 100 years after the first settlement aspects of the festival were 'Australianised'
and became increasingly nationalistic.

Such was the case with the Australian Christmas card or the early 1880s.
John Sands ensured there were newly printed cards
featuring distinctively Australian flora and fauna designs,
always “widely favoured for friends and family back Home”...

Father Christmas, as he was then called, first appeared in Australia around 1864.
His first appearance, according to *The Illustrated Sydney News*, was as:

“the traditional figure bearing gifts, dressed like a druid in a long gown.”

Instead of riding a sled pulled by reindeer, he was driving an oxen cart
“laden with festive eucalypt branches and an Australian Christmas tree... surrounded by
children in crisp, summer dress.”

Over the years colonial artists presented him in various garbs:

a druid, or a jolly old English squire, or an Indian raja
“riding a kangaroo escorted by six ladies-in-waiting riding emus and flanked by a
young ‘new year’ (complete with 1883 headband) riding of the wings of a cockatoo.”

One year later, there had been a dramatic change.

Gone were the English ‘old world’ touches.

In their place were such things as a buggy with its buck-board
filled with toys and possibly balloons, and drawn by
14 kangaroos through the sparse Australian bush towards a lonely house.

He had become the ‘acclimatised’ Father Christmas.

Slimmed down, his garb had also changed.

Dressed in what appears to be ordinary clothes
he looked very much like a country squatter, complete with wide-brimmed hat,
coming home from a day’s shopping in town.

Other artistic adaptations also featured him sitting on a cane chair

cooled by fern fronds and partaking of refreshments

offered by a team of aboriginals...

a romanticised version of the colonial ‘squattocracy’.

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Christmas would never have achieved the level of importance which it enjoys today
unless it had struck deep folk roots, and called forth a natural,
spontaneous human response. (*Roll 1995:271*)

Religion has always been rather a casual affair in Australia.

The legendary ‘aussie’ was a tough, laconic character

“who seldom gave way to emotion, let alone spirituality.” (*Porter 1990:46*)

Result? At best, the nation—this ‘most godless place under heaven’—
was only ever superficially christianised.

While Christmas—the world over—
has been likewise: difficult to christianise.

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