Article

Newspaper Leaders as Moral Exhortation: Understanding the Rhetoric of Civil Religion in Colonial Australia

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Abstract: This article argues that the leading article, or leader, of a newspaper played a role in the 'secular' society of colonial Australia not unlike that of the sermon in the religious sphere. One of its primary objectives was moral exhortation to encourage Australian colonists to follow a path that would enable the colony to fulfil providence and create an appropriate moral order. Their celebration of the British political order was a form of civil theology that matched the more dogmatic theology to be found in church sermons. This similarity was also assisted by the fact that a significant number of clergy either edited newspapers or wrote for them. This article considers several expressions of this civil theology, and then concentrates on the Rev John West who edited the *Sydney Morning Herald* and who used his leading articles to castigate his fellow colonists for their failure to live up to the ideals of their British political heritage. He was particularly harsh on the workings of colonial democracy which led him into conflict with another cleric, the Rev John Dunmore Lang.

Keywords: leading article; democracy; civil religion; Britishness; newspapers; Protestantism

1. Introduction

The newspaper leading article, leader or editorial is a very interesting form of literary endeavour. It is not reportage; it is essentially normative. It usually expresses the values of the paper and includes an exhortation to act or behave in particular ways which can be understood as being moral in nature. The leader plays a religious function in a similar fashion to what a sermon does, seeking to bring or 'bind' (*religare*) the community which it encompasses together in a sense of common purpose. It is an expression of the civil religion of a community, or at least an expression of how that community is understood by the editor or leader writer of the publication. Moreover, the leader is an expression of a particular point of view competing with other points of view in what is a pluralist society, the political equivalent of a religious community composed of a variety of sectarian entities, which may be viewed as in competition to attract adherents.

Colonial Australia is the period between the end of convict transportation in the early 1840s and the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901. This helped to mark a profound transformation in the nature of the colonies as now only free settlers came to Australia from the British Isles. In earlier times convict Australia had endured military rule and a religious monopoly by the Church of England; trial by jury was not available to the colonists (Neal 1991). The 1840s saw both the final establishment of trial by jury and the beginning of representative institutions, culminating in the granting of responsible government in 1856, rapidly followed by universal manhood suffrage and the secret ballot.

Colonial Australia saw a massive and rapid transformation from a convict to a democratic culture, marked by political and religious pluralism. The Australian colonies were primarily settled by people from all the constituent nations of Great Britain, resulting in a religious pluralism that was, to a significant degree related to ethnicity. A colony such as New South Wales always had about 25% of its population as Roman Catholics, primarily

of Irish ethnicity. It also contained Church of England, Methodists, Presbyterians, largely Scottish in origin, as well as other non-conformists. However, the crucial cultural dividing line was between Protestants and Catholics, especially in matters pertaining to education and marriage. This is in line with the interpretation of Linda Colley (1992) that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that to be British was to be Protestant. Certainly, what sort of Protestant mattered. The Rev John Dunmore Lang, whom we shall meet later in this essay was a democratic Scottish Presbyterian, a disciple of Thomas Chalmers, who clashed with the more sceptical English Congregationalist the Rev John West over democracy. Lang, however, was defined largely by his vitriolic anti-Catholicism.

This essay focusses primarily on colonial New South Wales and its emerging civic culture, emphasising the crucial role that Protestant Christianity played in that culture, especially key Protestant clergymen such as West and Lang who also took on the role of editing newspapers. In that civic culture the newspaper played a central role, and the most important part of any colonial newspaper were the leading articles that usually appeared on page 4 of the paper. Leading articles often took on the appearance of sermons, in the sense that they sought to use the word as a means of moral exhortation and creating moral community. The argument of this essay is that resemblance was no accident, reflecting a culture in which Protestantism in its various manifestations was intertwined with a religion of 'Britishness' that provided an aura for the British political institutions the colonists were so eager to embrace.

The argument is complex, but the starting point is the old argument that Australia is not, and never has been, a 'religious' culture.

One of the real problems for any understanding of Australian history is the way in which the religious sphere, conceived in terms of the practice of a specific religion or religious denomination, and the secular sphere, understood in terms of dealing with matters of the mundane, have interacted and seeped into each other. Until recently, there has not been much consideration of the nature of the secular sphere itself, or of the various discourses, both secular and religious, which constitute it (Chavura et al. 2019). It is too often assumed that the realm of secular discourse operates in a world which is at best separate from, and at worst hostile to, the religious one. If there is a discourse of politics it is understood as being dominated by utilitarianism, a mode of discourse that is characterised by its 'thin' view of human nature (Melleuish and Chavura 2016). This view of Australians as shallow and empty can be found in D H Lawrence's (1986, p. 146) characterisation of Australians as 'hollow stalks of corn':

> The Colonies make for *outwardness*. Everything is outward—like hollow stalks of corn. The life makes this inevitable: all that struggle with bush and water and what-not, all the mad struggle with the material necessities and conveniences— the inside soul just withers and goes into the outside, and they're all just lusty robust hollow stalks of people.

For Lawrence, Australians were neither a religious nor a spiritual people but a people lacking souls.

This view coloured historical writing about Australia for much of the twentieth century. Religion and spiritualty are things extraneous to Australian life. Consider political rhetoric. One study (Crabb 2009) demonstrated that specifically religious references in political speeches had increased in the early twenty first century. Yet, as Stuart Piggin (2014) has shown, such accounts of an increase of religious influence in Australian politics from the Howard years of the 1990s onwards tend to underestimate the influence of religion in Australian politics up to the 1970s. It may be more accurate to say that there was a period from the 1970s to the 1990s marked by an unusual absence of overt religious influence in politics. A period, funnily enough, making up the intellectually formative years of many contemporary Australian historians and political scientists. Certainly, Kevin Rudd's apology had a distinctive religious feel to it (Melleuish 2010). Religious ideas, images and motifs seep into, or are 'smuggled into' the secular sphere (Smith 2010, pp. 26–39). Sir

Robert Menzies may not have been an overtly religious man, but his speeches are full of biblical quotations (Furse-Roberts 2021a, pp. 14, 4-3; Furse-Roberts 2021b).

But what of earlier periods? This article largely deals with colonial New South Wales.

2. Results

2.1. Religion and the Civic Culture of Colonial Society

It can be argued that the newspapers and, in particular, their leading articles played a crucial role in creating civic communities in nineteenth Australian colonies. Anyone who has written what are now termed 'op eds', including the authors of this article, knows that they constitute a particular, and peculiar, literary genre that is largely didactic and exhortative in nature. They provide an exposition of a principle central to the functioning of the community that the newspaper creates through its readers, and reinforce the values that 'bind together' (*religio*) those readers into a moral community. One joins that moral community by reading its leaders and opinion pieces. This was particularly the case in the nineteenth century when the two or three opinion pieces of an issue could be found grouped together centrally in the middle of the paper.

This article will examine how the emerging civic culture of the Australian colonies, especially in New South Wales found expression through the moral exhortation practiced by newspaper editors through their leading articles and the way in which those articles 'smuggled in' religious and theological themes while giving the appearance of being concerned with 'secular matters'. No strict divide separated the 'civil' and the 'religious' elements of the civic culture of the colonies. The colonists, primarily its Protestant population, had a particular cult of Britishness and the role of the British in realising God's plan (Melleuish 2013).

That said, the focus of this essay is not the literary form of the leading article in colonial Australian newspapers. This is not a study in media history but in the way in which religious ideas of particular type, ones that could best be termed civic Protestant Britishness, were used to justify a political/religious vision in the Australian colonies. Nor is the sermon as a mode of expression come within its ambit. The focus of the paper is very much on the ideas and rhetoric of newspapers; some quotes are quite long in order to give the flavour of what was written.

God's plan, however, could be construed in terms that were surprisingly metaphysical for colonies supposedly devoted to 'getting and spending.' A number of leading articles appeared in the *Empire* in 1855 devoted to the theme of providence, possibly written by the Rev. Barzillai Quaife, who would later tutor the future Australian Prime Minister George Reid. In them he elaborated the workings of providence in relation to the actions of human beings. Hence there was a leading article in 1855 describing the workings of providence (*Empire* 6 April 1855, 4.):

> The true notion of Providence is, that it uses moral beings, everywhere throughout its immeasurable realms, as its own instruments for the completion of its grand designs in ultimate futurity, without rendering those beings the less moral and accountable. And it is but consistent with the notion of a Providence so perfect and so absolute, that its designs should be at once beneficent and just.

Human beings needed to work with providence if the world was to arrive at a 'permanent peace.' The problem was that nations are 'disposed to seek their selfish ends rather than the common good.' (*Empire*, 20 June, 1855, 4) In particular the British, including the colonists, needed to follow the 'great laws' that govern the world. This is because, as it was put in another article:

> There are two principles which can ultimately govern the world, and these are Human Nature and Divine Providence. To deny or overlook the latter would be impiety; to supercede the idea of the former is tyranny and capricious absolutism. If there is ever to be a social Millennium on the earth, both must attain their perfect operation. They will not be antagonistic to each other, but will be in mutual recognition. Providence is the source of human nature and of all its laws,

principles, and modes of action, physical and intellectual. Human nature is the work and instrument of Providence. (*Empire*, 20 November, 1855, 4)

The path forward was to bring human action into accord with the principles of Divine Providence.

The faith in the special status of the British, and their need to follow the ways of providence, owed something to both Christian impulses and to non-Christian traditions, including the idea of the unique nature of the development of English law and political institutions, as expressed in the idea of the British Constitution. This entanglement of an essentially 'civil religion' of worshipping one's own long established institutions and Christian religious faith was characteristic of Australian colonial culture. It can be argued that it was no accident that the end of empire in Australia in the 1960s coincided with large scale de-Christianisation.

Recent studies of colonial liberalism by David Kemp (2018) and Evangelical Christianity by Piggin and Linder (2018) have emphasised how closely connected liberal ideals and Evangelicalism were in the Australian colonies. Liberalism and Evangelicalism reinforced each other as many liberals were also good Protestants. It is the contention of this article that that alliance was not only a natural one but also manifested itself as much in the public sphere as in the religious sphere. The pulpit and the press were engaged in projects that were strongly connected.

Certainly, some key figures of mid-nineteenth century Australia believed the press to be crucial for the colonies' emerging civic culture. Defences of the newspaper actually mirrored defences of the building of churches. Defending the building of churches in Port Phillip, or what would become Victoria, Charles La Trobe (1843, p. 69) affirmed that 'Christianity is the proper foundation alike for civilisation and of respect for human laws'. Henry Parkes (1876, p. 177) saw the newspaper as having a special role in colonial life. The newspaper, he claimed,

> The newspaper was our great political educator, and political education was the one thing absolutely necessary to the successful working of our institutions. Let us for a moment try to imagine the moral eclipse that would suddenly darken this country if the two Sydney newspapers were stopped.

Or as John West (2001, p. 56), clergyman editor put it, 'It would not be easy to imagine the utter confusion of our political affairs if deprived of the chief organ of political life.'

Newspapers played a crucial civic function in the Australian colonies. They helped to create civic communities out of aggregations of individuals who may, or may not, have had connections with each other. In this sense, colonial communities more resembled the new cities of the English industrial revolution, than older established towns and villages; their sense of community needed to be created. Newspapers also helped to 'bind together' the political communities of which they were part and create 'imagined communities' out of what may be described as the flotsam and jetsam who had been thrown together in a new world far from home. As those who came to Australia came from different parts of the British Isles, including Anglican and non-conformist England, Presbyterian Scotland and Catholic Ireland, there were multiple communities in the colonies. The churches played a similar role for their members, just as churches today are often the first port of call for new migrants in Australia, especially from Asia.

One key matter, especially in the nineteenth century, was the relationship between the religious function of the churches and the civic function of the press. It can be argued that the two were not competing with each other for influence, as may be the case today, but were complementary. If a key element of being British was being Protestant, then the two identities were but two sides of the one coin, one civic, one religious (Melleuish and Chavura 2016). For many, including a figure such as Henry Parkes, there was a political tradition of liberty which looked back to the great heroes of the seventeenth century, Cromwell and Milton, and which was embodied in the British Constitution (Parkes 1857, p. 2). It operated alongside the more dogmatic religious beliefs of the various denominations of the colony but not in opposition to them, with the exception of Roman Catholicism. Most

certainly it did not seek to displace those religious beliefs. The secular/civic realm was not one devoid of religion; rather it was a realm in which the moral principles of religion operated in such a way as to inform public life without specific, and potentially contentious, issues of religious dogma coming into play (Chavura et al. 2019). This clear distinction between general Christian principles and matters of dogma peculiar to particular religious denominations was most clearly enunciated by Parkes's partner in the creation of the New South Wales education system, William Wilkins (1865). They were understood as complementary not in conflict.

Wilkins' views on religious education in schools indicates how complex the relationship between religion and education was in a British colony composed of a variety of nationalities (English, Irish and Scottish) who followed various forms of Christianity (Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, non-conformist Protestantism). Wilkins engaged in an interesting discussion of the nature of religion and its various components in order to justify school teachers providing religious education based on stories and morality that appeal to the affective side of human nature while avoiding the intellectual elements of religion that, he argued, children could not really understand. Education was a civic activity and secular in nature. It also had a religious dimension, but only in a general, primarily moral, sense. This made sense for the colony's Protestants if not its Catholics. It also indicates the extent to which the secular and the religious seeped into each other; there was no clear demarcation line.

Part of the issue here is that the 'term' religion was fluid in the colonial setting. There was dogmatic religion in the denominational setting but there was also non-dogmatic 'moral religion' that most Protestants believed they shared. It also included 'natural' religion in such things as the involvement of especially Anglican priests in the cataloguing of a previously unknown flora and fauna (Young 2016). This moral religion shifted easily into the civic arena where it could easily be identified with Britishness and the worship of ancestral institutions. 'Secular' education in public schools included a good dose of religious moral education and bible reading. In a 'bottom heavy' social order where clergy played prominent intellectual roles it was not surprising that the relationship between religion and secular was blurred.

One small problem with this approach was that it rendered the teaching of history extremely difficult because of what Wilkins termed the 'Denominational difficulty', especially in the teaching of English history. Wilkins (1872) argued that 'quite hopeless would be the task of pronouncing upon the career of William III to a mixed class of Irish Catholics and English and Irish Protestants.' That 'problem' would be solved a decade later when the Catholics refused to take up the offer of free and secular education.

In the case of Parkes, and for many others, it was liberal Protestantism which informed this civic spirit, and one of Parkes's favourite religious thinkers was W E Channing. Hence in a leading article in the *Empire* in 1851, presumably written by Parkes we find the following after a quote from Channing (*Empire*, 8 October 1851, 2):

> This passage contains the essence of the philosophy of success, in every plan and project for the elevation of humanity. It is this scarcely less than divine quality in individuals that has, in different ages, concentrated the moral energies of large portions of mankind on works of benevolence, and led them successfully to the adoption of the wisest and best means for their own improvement and happiness.

The leader goes on to discuss the Sydney School of Arts. It is a piece of what can be described as a fusion of civic and religious values, designed to support the cause of moral progress. It fits Michael Roe's (1965) argument about the growth of moral perfectibility as a public doctrine during these years, perhaps also an indication of how morally imperfect New South Wales had once been. But, as Roe points out, it is not utilitarianism; nor is it anything remotely resembling Godless materialism. It is a doctrine that combines civic and religious themes, liberal in tone, but in no way bound to dogma. It is one form that the enmeshing of civic and religious values can take in the public realm; another is the

lambasting of the public for having failed to have lived up to the model of perfection, for not following the path which providence had established for them.

In this respect ideas regarding providence, the expansion of the British and their future destiny are central, as Michael Gladwin (2010) has argued. Hence Gladwin points to the views expressed by clergyman/geologist W B Clarke in the 1840s, a view echoed by Robert Young (2016). It is worth considering a couple of extracts from Clarke (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 1847, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 March 1846):

> And it would be folly as great as that rashness to doubt that the chief instrument in the changes that are passing over the face of the world, is and will be Great Britain, whose influence in commercial, warlike, and colonial operations, is a feature stamped upon her brow by the hands of HIM, through whom kings reign and nations prosper.

> It is, indeed, a remarkable fact, that wherever the Anglo-Saxon race have established themselves, those depositaries of fossil fuel are found to exist; and to the contemplative mind, this thought may be found productive of much interesting and useful enquiry into the probable future destiny of these vast insulated regions inhabited by the descendants of those, who were in ancient times denominated 'tolo divisos orbe Britannos.'

Similar views, which taken together may be described as the 'civil religion of Britishness', were still being expressed in the 1860s and 1870s: Occasions of public celebration were marked by rhetorical displays which moved easily into this sort of quasi-religious territory in an unconscious fashion. Again, Henry Parkes (1876, p. 206) is especially eloquent on this topic:

> It is characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race to propagate the principles of freedom and progress wherever their steps are planted. The great people of which we form part had been designated by an eminent man, "the English-speaking nation," as that people is now rooted in every quarter of the globe, carrying its institutions and its language to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Similar sentiments can be found expressed in the various speeches of the Governor of New South Wales for much of the 1870s, Sir Hercules Robinson (1879, pp. 116, 59–60):

> feelings of reciprocal sympathy which will tend to bind these Anglo-Saxon communities in Australia still more closely to each other, and to unite them in the advancement of the glorious mission of their race—the mission of peaceful commerce and human progress.'

> . . . by principles which tend to ennoble human nature, to dignify human life, because they teach us that the end and object of our lives here is not the pursuit of any merely selfish policy of sordid gain, or personal aggrandisement, but that our lives should be passed in one unceasing endeavour—how best to magnify our Creator, and how most to benefit our fellow-men.

This fusion of a sort of Anglo Saxon race worship and a vague religiosity, owing more to a form of spiritualised natural religion than dogma, had a number of consequences. For one, it gave the institutions of the Anglo Saxon past a sacred quality. British political culture was more than just an inheritance from the past; it embodied special qualities that made the British special. Hence Robinson could refer to the 'glorious mission of the race' which he defines in terms of progress and free trade.

This mode of British civil religion sacralising British history and political and constitutional development is exemplified by future Australian Prime Minister George Reid (1875, pp. 13–14) in his *Essay on New South Wales*:

> Living under the political system which has made England illustrious, our people have adopted also the commercial policy which has helped to make her prosperous and powerful. If they strive, besides, to emulate the virtues of the British

character, New South Wales may soon become the Queen of the South, with none to dispute her right to wear her crown.

The wider theological/historical vision underpinning this vision of British progress can be found in the poem that Reid (1879) wrote to celebrate the 1879 International Exhibition in Sydney:

> 'The star of England shed a more auspicious light,
> When COOK dispelled the darkness of thy ancient night,
> And fraught with happy fates was the eventful hour,
> That saw thy virgin form embraced by Britain's pow'r.
> Thy sunny plains—so long the paradise of brutes,
> Will now be bless'd with Cultivation's choicest fruits;
> And where the horrid fires of cannibals had glow'd,
> Perchance become of Christ-like love the calm abode.
> If might is ever right then was that most divine,
> Which o'er the vast unknown caused faith and hope to shine,
> For if at soul redeem'd the heavens with rapture fill,
> How would this joyous change angelic nature thrill!'

2.2. Modes of Expression in Colonial Culture

It can be argued that nineteenth century Australia was founded much more on an oral culture than is now the case. In this regard, it was similar to the metropolitan British culture where oratory, be it secular or sacred in nature, was a highly regarded form of cultural expression (Meisel 2001). Forms of oratory ranged from the parliamentary speeches where Gladstone and Disraeli duelled with quotations (untranslated) from the Great Latin poets, most commonly Horace and Virgil, to the great preachers of Victorian England (Meisel 2001, pp. 84–86, 107–66). It was a performance culture, and performance cultures of this type only exist where there are free political institutions. They also place a premium on the reputation of those who perform in the public arena, legal action may be required to protect one's reputation.

Political speeches were long, Gladstone could speak for three hours, as were the sermons attended on a Sunday. Listening required considerable concentration. The same is true of the carefully wrought newspaper leaders found even in colonial newspapers. They were meant to be examined carefully, and the reader to reflect on their content. The oral nature of the performance culture is caught in the sediment left behind, the accounts of meetings, banquets, speeches and lectures deposited in the newspapers of the day.

If the role of the sermon on a Sunday in a church, or chapel, can be viewed as an exposition of the particular dogmatic theology of the denomination involved, then one primary role of the secular sermon of the newspaper was to expound its particular version of the civil religion which bound the colonists together, in particular its quasi-religious British identity founded on liberty, science and commerce. The newspaper leader was primarily a Protestant enterprise; indeed many of its most significant practitioners came from a non-Anglican background, including John West, Andrew Garran, Henry Parkes, J D Lang and David Syme.

As such the newspapers helped to elaborate a set of common values for the colony which they served, thereby reinforcing those values and what has been termed elsewhere the 'moral order' (Melleuish 2014a) which summed up the values of its readers. The most extraordinary example of this process was the way in which David Syme's *Age* helped to create, and very effectively articulate, not just the economic doctrine of Protection, but also the moral order which underpinned it. The novelty of Syme's position was that it articulated a distinctive moral vision in opposition to British imperial theology; a dour radical Calvinism at odds with optimistic liberal Anglicanism, such as expounded by Hercules Robinson (Melleuish 2014a). Perhaps it is only with the publication of the *Bulletin*, and its anti-clerical outlook, in the 1880s that it is possible to say that there is genuine

conflict between what can be understood as 'secular' and 'religious' values (Docker 1991, pp. 39–40).

The speeches delivered in Parliament, on the hustings, at banquets, along with the newspaper leaders which provided a running commentary on those speeches, are the other side of the coin to the sermons delivered in the churches and chapels of colonial Australia. They express two different modes of a single performance culture in which religion and the political culture were distinct but usually complementary. While the sermon expressed religious element derived from revelation, the other performance acts dealt with the civil dimension of religion, which encompassed common moral values. Colonial culture only makes sense when both of its dimensions are examined, along with their interaction with the significant moral outlook of the Catholic minority.

The leading articles played a crucial part of this civic function as they enunciated the values which brought its readership together. Just as colonial society was divided by denominations, so it was assumed that politics would be divided into, at the least, conservatives and liberals. Newspapers reflected that expectation, even though the political culture of colonial Australia could be described as a 'broad church' adhering to a single ideology which was liberalism. Genuine Tories were few and far between.

The crucial point is that the civic discourse, as expressed through the newspapers, is a series of variations on a liberal theme. It emphasised such themes as providence and the laws of nature, and the glorious future which awaited the colonists if they followed the correct path. Following the road which was mapped out for the British people was another way of doing God's will, comparable to holding orthodox beliefs. The supposedly clear lines between religious and secular are in reality blurred. This is quite different to republican France where the role assumed by the republican government was at odds with the Church leading to conflict (Himmelfarb 2005; Gascoigne 2002).

The leader, or leading article, was the central part of any newspaper; it was often a serious piece of moral exposition to be read, pondered, and reflected on, every day. The dialectic of many leaders during this period revolved around exhortations to fulfil one's destiny within the framework of the British enterprise, and condemnation of failures to achieve that destiny. As has been argued elsewhere, this combination of exhortation to claim a glorious future and denunciation of the sordid nature of colonial life was a central feature of public life, as expressed by the newspapers in Sydney in the 1850s (Melleuish 1980). The colonists had a glorious destiny because of their British heritage and yet they seemed to be incapable of grasping it. Even the coming of free political institutions did not put an end to the binary nature of colonial political rhetoric.

Here is an example by Henry Parkes (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February, 1872.) in an election speech delivered in 1872:

> What we have to do in any great national struggle is to select the right side, to do our best to win and whether we succeed or not, if we have performed our duty there can be no disgrace. . . . My first object—and I declare it before the whole world—is to punish the traitors, to vindicate our institutions, and to roll back the tide of corruption, which has set upon us. To me it is of no moment whether I go into the Assembly or not; but, if by the powers which God has given me, I can assist in bringing this battle to glorious result, I shall have done a good work.

> If the present inhabitants of the colony, holding the virgin land fresh from the hand of the Creator, with an omnipotent voice in the disposal of it, forget the sacred nature and magnitude of the trust reposed in them, in giving authority to any set of men finally to deal with the priceless possession . . . if they do not in common retain a lively sense of their responsibility at every step in this stupendous business, all hope of that moral supremacy, which is the great characteristic of British progress, will be gone from New South Wales.

This is not just political rhetoric; it is also an expression of civil religion. Parkes is expounding a vision, a vision which is founded on an ideal of the mission of the British people, a mission given to them by God. Of course, all of this culminated in Federation, whose

achievement found its expression in the very language of Providence that characterised the leaders of colonial newspapers. As Alan Atkinson (2014, p. 264) puts it: 'Religious feeling made Federation possible.' It is worth reflecting on the fact that the Protestant clergy were one of the major groups advocating the federation of the colonies in the 1890s (Coleman 2021, pp. 23–4). Consider this advocacy of federation by the Anglican Rev Arthur Killworth (1891, p. 5):

> Can it be that these Colonies of the Southern Cross will lag behind in the progress of the world? Can it be that they will stand all of the one from the other in childish petulancy, and refuse to take that noble and patriotic step forward whereby a nation would be born in a day? If with our four millions of people, all of British origin, united to the soil by ties of birth, friendship and love, we are incapable of making a nation, then we can scarcely be fit to occupy this bounteous land.

Patrick McMahon Glynn (Official Report 1897, p. 1185), delegate from South Australia, perfectly captured the national spirit in the 1897 Adelaide debates:

> The foundations of our national edifice are being laid in times of peace; the invisible hand of Providence is in the tracing of our plans. Should we not, at the, very inception of our great work, give some outward recognition of the Divine guidance that we feel?

As John Hirst (2000, p. 4) wrote, 'God wanted Australia to be a nation.'

2.3. The Cleric as Editor, a Case Study: John West

Clergyman editors and newspaper authors were not unknown in the colonies, especially in the early to mid-nineteenth century, which helped to cement the bond between the secular and religious dimensions of colonial culture. The most influential of these was the Revd John West who edited the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1854 to 1872. West is an intriguing figure because although he was a Congregationalist, he was very mistrustful of democracy and placing too much power in the hands of the people. On the one hand West (1971, p. 352) had expressed himself a believer in the fate which Providence had prepared for the Australian colonists as expressed in the conclusion to his *History of Tasmania*:

> The happiness and prosperity of the people is by Divine Providence placed within their power. If they grasp at wealth to the neglect of their social and political duties; if, for the sake of selfish ease, they resign to ignorant and violent men the business of legislation; if they tolerate systematic debauchery, gambling and sharping; if they countenance the press when sporting with religion, or rendering private reputation worthless; if they neglect the education of the rising generation, and the instruction of the working classes; if the rich attempt to secure the privileges of rank by restricting the franchises of the less powerful; if worldly pleasure invade the seasons of devotion; and the worship of God be neglected by the masses of the people,—then will they become unfit for liberty; base and sensual, they will be loathed and despised; the moral Governor of the world will assert his sovereignty, and will visit a worthless and ungrateful race with the yoke of bondage, the scourge of anarchy, or the besom of destruction.

This passage would seem to indicate that West, like Quaife, was an adherent to the British ideal of Providence as progress, and the need for moral improvement, or observance of the laws of nature as the best means of attaining that goal. Nevertheless, much of his political discourse is difficult to read as an expression of specifically religious values. His political discourse seems to be Machiavellian, not in the pejorative sense, but in the sense that he had an appreciation of politics as an art that can be grasped according to principles but not reduced to a simple set of theories. It can also be read as Burkean in the sense that he appreciated the importance of tradition as the foundation of politics.

What fired West was a desire that the Australian colonies create a form of politics which was a proper expression of the genius of English politics but which was adapted to local circumstances. This can be seen clearly in his articles on the need to federate the

colonies. He was a clear-headed realist who had a powerful appreciation of the fallen human condition and the need to guard against the excesses of human nature. It can be argued that his career in the public sphere consisted of one long jeremiad that the political life of the colony was just not good enough and the culprit was democracy. His outpouring of criticism of colonial politics was also an antidote to the excessive optimism which characterised the colonial world of the 1850s and 1860s and which accompanied the introduction of democratic institutions. Of course, his pessimistic view of human nature also had religious roots, and perhaps had been confirmed by his years spent in Tasmania (Ely 1999).

In this sense, West's role as an editor and editorialist is best understood in terms of his self-perceived role as a privileged individual providing moral guidance to the community to keep them on the straight and narrow so that evils did not prevent the colony from realising its destiny. He was a liberal conservative and stands at the opposite pole to someone such as the Rev John Woolley who had a utopian vision of democracy as the dawning of a new age, an age of the Holy Spirit (Melleuish 2014b, pp. 71–73). The likes of Woolley were far more likely to be found in the Herald's competitor, the *Empire*. As argued earlier, these were the sectarian divisions of the public theology of Britishness.

As editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* West spent much of his time denouncing the operations of colonial democracy in language which is often quite colourful. He could see little of value in the colonial legislature. In his eyes it had failed badly, and it was not because the rich were attempting to secure privileges and restrict the franchises of the less powerful. Rather it was because too much power has been placed in the hands of the people, and unscrupulous politicians had exploited these circumstances for their own benefit. The colony has great possibilities but it had strayed from the true path. This was a consequence, for West, of the frailty of human nature. Hence, West sought concrete practical ways of guarding against the weaknesses of human nature.

West, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the ideal political order was one in which those who ruled were the 'best', men who were able to exercise power on behalf of the community in its best interest, men of dignity and honour who knew how to behave well and ensure that politics was conducted in a decent and dignified fashion. This was entirely compatible with the liberalism of the time leading up to the 1867 Reform Act, as is evident in the thought and career of erstwhile colonial and eventual Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, later Viscount Sherbrook who had spent much of the 1840s in Australia (Knight 1966). Even the liberal democrat J S Mill ([1861] 1910, p. 283) wrote "But though everyone ought to have a voice—that every one should have an equal voice is a totally different proposition." Mill went on to advocate for the votes of an educated class to carry extra weight. In West's eyes, a community granted the great boon of being able to run its own affairs should make the most of that opportunity and act accordingly. To his great horror, this had not happened in New South Wales. Instead of a political order which embodied the virtues of the colonists' political heritage there was one which seemed to thrive on a whole set of vices, and those vices could be summed up in one word, democracy. Hence West took it upon himself to spend much of his time denouncing those vices, in the hope of leading the community back to its proper path, one as close as possible to the British original. Consider West's (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April, 1859) somewhat haughty view of the upcoming elections in 1859: 'We mean to extract as much amusement as possible out of the coming elections.' Following was his assessment of a 'sample' of the candidates:

> Unable to speak five consecutive English words correctly, but having borrowed all his imagery from the lowest walks of life, his addresses are in the highest degree terse and taking. He dances with the girls; "shouts" with the men; promises a millennium of similar joys: and has, we are told, really a prospect of honouring the floor of our future Assembly with his presence.

The problem, he continued, was that men go into Parliament for the wrong reasons to get a share in the distribution of the public revenue—to obtain it either in the shape of

salaries, or to secure the spending of money in a particular way: or, for the purpose of dividing those favours which are at the disposal of the Government.

But, he concluded, the actions of these men cannot destroy the destiny of the colony; eventually a better way will be found:

> The country is great: no trivial error can destroy us. We have, in the social feelings and habits of the people—more in their recollections and hopes—a vast Conservative power. The worst we can suffer is the sacrifice of a few hundred thousand pounds to ephemeral patriots—who will soon pass away, we hope, to give place to true colonists—men who have a stake in the country. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December, 1862)

These sorts of themes were standard fare in the *Sydney Morning Herald* over the next few years. Politicians are corrupt, ill-educated, self-interested who are simply in politics to find ways of lining their pockets. Democracy and its institutions are a failure, and a farce. Why, he asked, 'should we suppose men are capable of pulling to pieces and reconstructing our political organism, whom we would not entrust as the architects of a pigstye? (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May, 1859)' Three years later he again stated that 'Renouncing all personal views or party predilections is there any man who will deny that representative institutions have been hitherto a failure' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December, 1862) In a democracy the wrong sort of person was being elected, and the moral standard of Parliamentary politics suffered accordingly:

> Can anyone in his conscience say that under the present suffrage a man of education or of property possesses an equal chance with the man without either, who can stoop to the artifices of partisanship and with unscrupulous freedom scatter his denunciations and his promises. We have no right to expect that men will debase their moral nature for the sake of a political position.'

The real problem was the way in which colonial conditions had created a structure in which the natural leaders of society were not given their true role; instead of the best it was the worst, the lowest, who exercised political power:

> if political power is placed in the hands of the lowest—the most changing and most ignorant of the people, to the exclusion of all other, Government must become corrupt, violent, and feeble, and will soon be the object of the loathing of those by whom it has been most loudly demanded and blindly supported.
> (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March, 1863)

This was an inversion of the way in which British institutions functioned that a Legislature, formerly professing to copy the noble institutions of England, and itself being successor to a Council which, for its number, possessed once a larger proportion of eloquence and mental power than even the Parliament of Great Britain—has so destroyed its prestige that no one would dream of listening to a debate, except as an exhibition of human eccentricities. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March, 1863)

But all was not lost. The possibility of a return to true British ways, the ways which had made Britain great and allowed her to become such a power in the world remained. The colonists had a destiny and the opportunity remained of returning to it. Despite their stupidity and ignorance they were still blessed with great opportunity according to West, 'Our prosperity is in spite of our legislation. It results simply from the abundance which PROVIDENCE has heaped upon us, and which no folly of ours can scatter and destroy.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December 1862)

So, it went on, year in, year out, the condemnation and denunciation of colonial democratic politics as a sort of charade, a comedy of petty men competing for the spoils of politics rather than working for the good of the country. And yet, there also remained the confidence that Providence would somehow guide the country through, despite the foolishness of the politicians.

What drove West in all of this? It would seem to be largely derived from shame that his fellow colonists had not lived up to their ancestral traditions, the traditions of free born

members of the 'one free nation in the world'. They needed to be recalled to their duty, to the path which providence had laid out for them or risk the punishment which their sins deserved. The role of the newspaper, and West as an editor, was to remind his readers of the task which they had to play and to admonish them if they failed in that task. He was preaching to them.

And it led to a rather unseemly court case involving that other very political clergyman J D Lang. Lang wrote what can only be described as very unkind article about West in the *Empire* in January 1863. Part of the motivation was to refute West's condemnation of New South Wales politics, especially as West had been sending negative reports about those politics to the English press. In the article, Lang appealed to the 'Divine Author of the Christian Religion' and the 'infallible principle' for judging 'individuals and institutions': 'by their fruits ye shall know them'. On this basis Lang claimed that the political measures of recent times, from universal manhood suffrage to free selection, had not only been good, but were good 'beyond our highest expectations'. West was constantly referred to as the Rev John West and Lang stated that if deserters from the ministry were flogged, West would have been flogged long ago. He referred to the 'insane ravings of the reverend ex-radical . . . now turned tory and malignant'. (*Empire*, 21 February, 1863)

The passion is extraordinary and exceeds the sometime intemperate language which West used to describe colonial democracy. In earlier times one could imagine the pair of them fighting a duel. Instead they fought it out in the courts, with Fairfax and the *Herald* suing the *Empire* and Lang subsequently suing the *Herald*. (Baker 1985, pp. 462–6) This very unpleasant and unseemly business indicates the sectarian nature of the civil religion of New South Wales and its Protestant public theology. The bitterness of the conflict seems extraordinary to the modern reader, but it illustrates just how much the participants believed in the importance of what was at stake. It is also extraordinary that this battle for the political soul of the colony was being played out by two clergymen. So much for a 'so-called' secular Australia.

3. Conclusions

It can be argued that in nineteenth century Australia, or at least New South Wales, it is not appropriate to speak of distinct religious and secular spheres. This can be seen quite clearly when the colonists implemented what was called 'secular' education (Chavura et al. 2019). What Christianity was to the ecclesiastical domain, the British Constitution was to the civil sphere. There was no strict separation between the two as the British Constitution was an expression of God's will regarding the British and their glorious future. The colonists were subject to God's providence and to fulfil their role meant adhering to the political principles and practices which they inherited from Britain. There were conflicts as to what that inheritance involved leading to divisions in politics and civil religion, just as there were sectarian divisions in religion.

For West, the primary purpose of the civil religious values that he expressed in his articles was to bring the people of New South Wales back to the path which would ensure that they enjoyed good government which was both strong and free and would fulfil the role that providence had established for the British people. It was just that there was no agreement regarding what good government was even as there was agreement that the British were marked out for a glorious future.

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