

Australian Christian Heritage National Forum

In Parliament House, Canberra on 6 and 7 August 2006 interested Christians from around Australia gathered to consider the Christian heritage of the nation of Australia. Chair of the organising committee, Associate Professor Stuart Piggins, Macquarie University said *It's not that we knew it once and we've forgotten it, we never knew it, nobody's ever told us. Our Christian heritage has never been identified as such and therefore it's in danger of being totally lost before it's ever been found. In this forum we are searching for that which has never been found. So we'll be making lots of new discoveries.*

This meeting of Christians, supported by a number of politicians from both parties, attempted to highlight a concern about the way the story of Australia has been told by many of our historians. It is a story that provides little recognition of the role that individual Christians played in the building of our nation. It is a story that recognises the achievements, but not the motivation, the driving spiritual force of faith, that drives Christians to ignore personal gain and do it for God - an act of worship.

In an increasingly secular society where Christian heritage is marginalised, some Christians have sought to make the wider community take notice by demanding an attention to the nation's Christian heritage. The emphasis has been very much on individual motivation and faith rather than looking at the institutions of the church and its agencies. In the accounts of Australia's history the church is often given recognition for its social work and advocacy of the rights of the less privileged, but is also the focus of contempt for its treatment of Aboriginal peoples, children in care and conservative attitudes. The Forum did well to focus on the stories of individual faith.

The News Release says, *Our civilisation draws on the spiritual capital of the Christian faith. We need to keep investing in our spiritual capital so that it keeps pace with developments in other areas of our social infrastructure. Our children will benefit with the augmentation of this capital and the values based on it.*

1. This gathering has done well to raise the issue of Australia's heritage and some of the questions that flow from the Forum are : How Christian is Australia?
2. Does a Christian heritage make a difference?
3. Is there confusion between individual faith and "the church"?
4. What (whose) history is taught in schools?

1. How Christian is Australia?

Obviously, Aboriginal Australia before 1788 knew almost nothing of Christianity. Initial contact with the British would provide a conflicting picture that to some extent remains today. They would find individual Christians who could show great kindness, such as the first clergyman and his wife Richard and Mary Johnson, but also experience the harshness of British law based on "Christian" principles. The ambiguity between individual faith and institutions has always dogged Christianity, and many atrocities have been attributed to the church and those who followed its rulings.

While the basis of our laws and institutions have origins in Christian doctrine, it is individuals administering these that provided the face of Christianity and many of

these administrators were anything but believers. The convict colony was much like Australia today, individual Christians and secular people in a “Christian” country with Christian-based laws and institutions.

Throughout our history the institutional church has played a role in Australia being classified a Christian country. But today that claim is under challenge as the percentage of the population believing in God, aligning themselves with a Christian denomination and attending a church regularly are all declining. The question raised here is: Does our Christian heritage make Australia a Christian country or is it the number of professing Christians. How would you classify Australia: a Christian country or a secular country and would your classification be different at any time during our history or are we fast attaining Manning Clark’s view where he characterises Australia as *The Kingdom of nothingness*.

2. Does a Christian heritage make a difference?

Here is where the debate about Christianity and Australia really heats up. What would Australia be like today if it was colonised by the French or by Muslim traders from Indonesia? What sort of society would we have? While such, *What if* questions, have no answers they do help to focus on what the legacy of British rule is in terms of our laws, institutions and religion. Would we be a democratic country? What would our justice system look like? Would there be freedom of religion? Perhaps there is much to be thankful for in our British-Christian heritage. Yet, I am not sure Australia’s Aboriginal people would agree with this point.

3. Is there confusion between individual faith and “the church”?

In this question is the root of the problem being addressed by the National Forum on Australia’s Christian Heritage. On the whole our historians have ignored two important matters: the Judeo-Christian basis of our society, preferring to see it as submerged into secularism, and the religious motivation of key Australians, recognising their achievements and not why they did them.

Instead, Australia’s history is told with a critical view of the church, often totally justified, with an emphasis on sectarianism as a divisive force and with some charitable references to the social welfare work of the church. Individual Christians are not recognised for their faith. While their accomplishments are documented and sometimes their allegiance to a particular denomination, their faith, what they actually believe, is not. Do you know what John West, William Spence, Caroline Chisholm, Jim McGowen, William Ullathorne, Mary Lee, Charles La Trobe or Alfred Deakin actually believed and how that belief motivated their actions?

The question being asked is: Has our Christian heritage been ignored because historians have ignored the religious motivation of many of Australia’s key figures? Is it this heritage, as well as greater recognition of our Judeo-Christian heritage, that needs to be resurrected and respected? Is this the story that Piggins claims we never knew?

If this is the case, then we are talking about the heritage of the “Christian faith” not Christianity which is aligned in the mind of most Australians with the church. Is this a helpful separation or a confusing one?

4. What (whose) history is taught in schools?

Just two weeks later a different group met by invitation in Canberra at the Prime Minister's History Summit. They were called to consider how to redress the situation in all states and territories, except NSW, where history is not a distinct subject in the curriculum before Year 11. They agreed that states and territory need to ensure that Australian history is a narrative, told with some sense of chronology, and focused on Years 9 and 10. The merits of compulsory studies in history I will leave for someone else to expand on, because I want to link this agenda to the National Forum on Australia's Christian heritage.

If it is true that Australia's historians have not given due attention and regard to our Christian heritage both its Judeo-Christian roots and the faith of prominent Australians, then the school curriculum and accompanying resources and professional development for teachers is a good place to start to get it right. Such a quest is not new. Retired teacher and one of the original 1960s "Freedom ride" participants, Alec Mills, has been on about this point for years. His lobbying of the Australian Government about the lack of attention to religion and the religious motivation of people in the Discovering Democracy materials is legendary. However, this is not the only target of Alec's concerns and now after the Forum, it might be the right time for Christians to demand a more accurate history that presents the lost heritage especially in terms of the beliefs that have motivated prominent Australians are and the basis of our Judeo-Christian society.

In an item on the ABC's Religion Report, presenter Stephen Crittenden said: *If the conference had an overarching theme it was the sense expressed by almost every speaker that mainline Christians (and the vast majority of the participants were Protestants) that mainline Christians are feeling marginalised, unloved and undervalued.* I am not sure that this was the message that was supposed to come out.

I would have thought that Christians are feeling that the Christian heritage of Australia is under recognised and that the faith motivation of prominent Australians in our history has been ignored to the detriment of the whole society. While the NSW Department of Education and Training has published a resource for primary teachers, *Belief in action* that addresses these concerns, the school history curriculum, and support materials for it, may need a review with these matters in mind.

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