

## Chapter 1 Churchmen at the Bathurst Convention

Why did the religious issue revive at this time, and from such a different standpoint? The answer relates partly to socio-economic and political changes that had been taking place over the past few years; partly to certain changes of clerical outlook occasioned by these socio-economic and political changes; and partly to the policy of the organizers of the Bathurst Convention to encourage church leaders to become participators in and promoters of the federal cause.

Economically and in certain respects ideologically the short period of the early and middle nineties was one of the watersheds in Australian life. A sharp contraction of the British and European demand for Australian wool, poor seasons, and increased difficulty in raising or renewing overseas loans had created severe stress within the colonial economy, and in the social structures which hitherto that economy had supported.

Depending on differences of value, of institutional attachment, of social class, of material interest, of presupposition as to how social and human reality was to be conceived, the problems and opportunities presented by the economic crisis were variously diagnosed. However, there remained a consensus that the remedy for society's ills lay not in the violent overthrow of the established order but in orderly structural reform.

Yet the sheer scale of the hardship and dislocation produced by the depression gave to many of the remedies proposed an intensely moral dimension. That largely was where the churches came in.<sup>1</sup> 'They feel that they are too cloistered', said John Clifford, an English Baptist, who visited the colonies in 1897, 'and ought to come forth and determine the direction of the whole of the surrounding life. They are ashamed and lament because they are discovering...their failure to exert their full influence on the social and political life of men...'<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally churches had assumed responsibility for ameliorating the kind of hardship and distress that the depression had produced. Hitherto they had worked either through specifically denominational charitable agencies, such as the Sydney Central Methodist Mission and the Society of St Vincent de Paul, or through voluntary philanthropic associations such as the Benevolent Society of New South Wales. But in this case, the scale of the economic and social breakdown placed this task well beyond the scope – and often the imagination – of such agencies. Some churchmen, looking to the past, appealed for increased government subsidies, but there now was widespread doubt in government circles as to the efficiency of traditional agencies. Another solution, which generally was more popular among Methodists, Catholics and high Anglicans than among Presbyterians and low Anglicans, was for the State itself, acting within guidelines drawn by the churches, to direct and finance welfare and work.

However, prevention is better than cure. Many clerics and concerned laymen, seeing economic and social breakdown as products in part of moral breakdown, and linking moral breakdown with sabbath desecration and alcoholic intemperance, formed societies publicly to denounce such evils and to persuade or induce legislatures to enforce salutary controls. 'Moral suasion is undoubtedly the highest method of turning a sinner from the error of his ways,' William Saumarez Smith, the Anglican bishop of Sydney, told the Vigilance Association in 1892, '... but the *salus respublica* demands the interposition of legal requirements and legal penalties to facilitate the practice of righteousness.'<sup>3</sup>

Behind these developments often lay compassionate and theological concern, provoked by the magnitude of the social problems now seen to be generated by commercial and industrial expansion. A similar response, occasioned by similar commercial and industrial development, was manifested at this time among many churchmen in England and a little later in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The Baptist globe-trotter Clifford, discussing the British Empire as a whole, described the phenomenon in the following way:

Retaining all the *old* emphasis on the inward and spiritual..., on the living energy of redeemed men and women, on the all-sufficiency of Jesus Himself, and recognizing that the supreme business of the Church is to save men..., it is clear the churches of Greater Britain have received from God the gift of a more vivid sense of their responsibility for surprising the evils around them, for ejecting evil powers and persons from the control and direction of our civic life, for initiating and sustaining movements calculated to reach the roots of human misery.'

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The older ecclesiastical tradition of charitable paternalism, operating now indirectly rather than directly, was returning to overlay the newer conceptions of laissez-faire and self-help. Yet more was involved than theological atavism. There was also the matter of public standing.

Religion is the key to morality, and morality the key to social happiness and material prosperity. However, the churches held the key to religion. It followed that the churches generally, and the clergy in particular, were not merely useful, but *necessary* functionaries in any society. Yet most of the solutions advanced in the early nineties for society's economic and social problems – varieties of socialism and liberalism, single taxism,, protectionism – saw little need for God, and less for his ministers. Hitherto, despite the cessation of state aid to religion, relative prosperity had enabled the churches to maintain, in the corners of public life, a similitude of the role of community conscience. Now even that was at stake. It was not simply compassion and piety, but also in some measure anxiety over public status, over their public role and rank in a future rendered uncertain by partial economic breakdown, which lay behind the resurgent Protestant and Catholic political initiatives of the nineties.\*

By 1896 many politically minded clerics not only were deeply involved in colonial politics, but were responding with increasing enthusiasm to the surging currents of national feeling in the community. Some of the more nationalistically minded clerics became involved as organizers or delegates in the People's Federal Convention. Naturally they stressed the religious aspect of federation, an aspect which they considered the colonies could not ignore at their peril. The particular ideas they expressed at Bathurst, and the tactics they employed, may usefully be examined in detail. In many ways they foreshadowed the intense campaign that soon developed.

Because the Convention essentially was a bid to publicize the idea of federation on a popular level, the presence and assistance of prominent churchmen was welcome to the body organizing it – the Bathurst branch of the Australasian Federation League. The Catholic and Anglican bishops of Bathurst, J. Byrne and C. E. Camidge, were among the vice-presidents of the Convention, and a prominent local Wesleyan minister, A. J. Webb, was secretary to the Convention.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran, a long-standing advocate of federation, had specially been invited to address the Convention.

The Convention was preceded by the observance of Federation Sunday in the churches of Bathurst. The sermons and addresses given were amply reported, and show the way many churchmen were thinking about federation. Were he able to 'read the signs of the times', declared the Reverend Professor Gosman at the Congregational Church, God was 'calling us as a nation and empire' to the civilizing mission to which He had committed the 'British people'. Only a federation regulated by the principles of righteousness, he considered, could prosper. Later in the day, as a guest speaker at the Wesleyan Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, Gosman asserted that government should be conducted by Christians: it 'should not be allowed to be manipulated' by those who were without faith in God.<sup>7</sup> Gosman was a theologically liberal Victorian Congregationalist who often involved himself in social reform

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\* The concept of status motivation, while central to some parts of this study, has occasionally proved difficult to handle with satisfying precision. The concept, as used, has a double aspect. Mostly it refers to clerical desire for formal recognition, by the community at large, of the validity of those religious roles (prophetic, didactic, intercessory, etc.) undertaken by clerics on the community's behalf. Less often, it refers to the clerical desire to be accorded, as clerics, public rank or precedence. Taken overall, the evidence examined shows that, in relation to the federation movement, clerics persistently sought status in one or other, and sometimes both, of these senses. Yet the direct evidence has not in every case proved compelled: clerics in the heat of battle did not always analyse or refer to their own motives. In such cases the 'a priori imagination', as discussed by R. G. Collingwood, has perforce supervened.

issues. In 1896, in fact, he became chairman of the Victorian shirt (wages) board.<sup>8</sup> Webb, at the morning service in the Wesleyan Church, preached on the 'Federal Lord'. Federation, proclaimed, 'was a mighty fact in God's universe'. Afterwards, at the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon, he turned politics. Federal questions, he said, "should not be left to a few professional politicians and nobodies; but they wanted men of character and religion to go into them, and carry them on in a noble spirit".<sup>9</sup> At the Roman Catholic cathedral J. O'Dowd cited as an exemplar of the union that was needed the Roman Catholic church itself, uniting as it did some 260 million persons of all nations, castes, conditions and stations of life.<sup>10</sup> Bishop Camidge, a high Anglican, sounded a note cooler and more remote than Gosman or Webb, and less triumphalist than O'Dowd. 'Let them remember', he declared, that there was one Federation to which they belonged as members of the mystical body of Christ. While they worked as Australians today, and while they took their place as citizens of no mean city, let them remember their wider and truer citizenship to which God was drawing them all in the fulness of time. The citizenship of the City of God.<sup>11</sup>

In many respects the treatment of the federal question in these sermons and addresses typified both points of similarity and also points of difference between the Anglican, Catholic and Protestant approach to federation. On the one hand, most churchmen assumed that they were specially knowledgeable as to the divinely ordained principles of social order, and that their advice ought specially to be sought by political leaders; on the other hand, closer inspection shows differences of approach and concept. The Protestant clergy, partly because of the contemporary popularity among Protestants of the ideas of inter- and intra-denominational federation, and partly because such clergy ministered to those sections of society (largely middle-class) most materially interested in Australian federation, were often ready to conceive of federation *itself* in religious terms.<sup>12</sup> The Catholic and Anglican clergy, who were linked rather with sections of society - labouring classes in the case of the Catholics; pastoral and upper-middle urban classes in the case of the Anglicans<sup>13</sup> - by whom federation, while often regarded as useful, was not hoped for with the same urgency, were less inclined to see the federal movement itself in religious terms. It was characteristic that, for O'Dowd, federation in the religious sense meant the Catholic church. For Camidge, the high churchman, it signified the *Vicitias Dei*, while for the Protestants Webb and Gosman it meant, rather, a brotherly and British association of sovereign communities.

In the nature of the situation, one may add, clerical interest in federation was bound to relate far more to considerations of status than of power. Under the 1891 draft Constitution, which the People's Convention took as the basis for its deliberations, the division of powers between the federal and state legislatures left to the states nearly all the 'morally' interesting powers such as health, education, liquor licensing, and public welfare.<sup>14</sup> Later it will emerge that for some clerics the 'recognition' of deity was seen, in one of its aspects, as a device that would enable the Commonwealth constitutionally to legislate for such matters as national Sunday observance, for the setting aside of special days for religious purposes, and perhaps for certain aspects of temperance reform. However, this latter group probably was not numerous.

Two distinct strategems were employed by the clerical delegates in order to represent themselves to the Convention as necessary and desirable partners in the federation enterprise, and to have God 'recognized'. First, there was the device of the clerical untied front. Second, there was an effort to stage-manage the presentation of religious resolution in such a way as to make criticism appear petty or extremist.

It was the fact that the interest of churchmen in the federation movement related much more to their anxieties over status, than to their hopes in the field of social policy, which made the united-front approach practicable. Since about 1890 councils of churches in the various colonies had promoted what they regarded as the Christian view in relation to public issues. These councils, which usually met monthly, were composed of leaders of the major non-Anglican Protestant churches, and sometimes (as with the New South Wales Council of Churches) of the Anglican church as well. However Catholics, who usually took a less stringent view of temperance and Sunday observance issues, who usually were more suspicious of economic individualism than their Protestant brethren, and who were in any

event enjoined by Rome to stand apart from inter-denominational organizations, remained aloof. But when what was at stake was the religious view of society as such, and when divisive social issues were not involved, co-operation on an informal basis was possible. That is what happened at Bathurst.

The press noted with approval the willingness of clerical delegates to cross bridges in brotherhood. Here, declared the *Sydney Mail*, 'were two bishops of Bathurst, Anglican and Roman Catholic clergymen, and clergymen of the non-conforming churches, all working together admirably for the common cause.'<sup>15</sup> Cardinal Moran's irenic and patriotic advice to 'Catholic people', in his Convention address, was 'God hand-in-hand with your Protestant fellow-citizens in any measure that may have for its purpose to advance the interest, to develop the resources, or promote the welfare of Australia.'<sup>16</sup> The Anglican dean of Bathurst, J. T. Marriott, moving a vote of thanks to the cardinal, described his address as one that 'breathed a spirit of wide Catholicity and true Patriotism'.<sup>17</sup> The Wesleyan, Webb, also busy in an ecumenical way, accepted an invitation to attend a *conversazione* at St Stanislaus's College, at which Moran was to be present.<sup>18</sup>

A 'recognition' proposal was planned. It was to be put by Gosman. The text was as follows:

That this Convention of the people, acknowledging the existence of a wide-spread belief in the government of the world by Divine Providence, desires to commend the cause of Australian Federation to the wisdom and piety of the people; that the Supreme Ruler may be invoked to further, if it please Him, the Federal Movement, and so to guide and direct the course of events that Australian unity may rest upon an enlightened public opinion and on a solid foundation of righteousness, the only guarantee for the creation and continuance of national prosperity and peace.<sup>19</sup>

The issue could be expected to be touchy; and Gosman, before the start of the Convention, had attempted to arrange with the organizers for it to be brought forward in such a way that possible critics would be embarrassed into silence. His plan was that 'it should be ready by the *chairman* – approval to be indicated by standing, either before or immediately after the National Anthem. It would be better to be divested of any *personal* aspect.'<sup>20</sup> Better indeed! In one step, critics would utterly be disarmed by not wishing to appear unpatriotic, while the 'recognition' proposal would at once acquire a patriotic and national aura. The religious perspective would in one stroke become one of the norms of the federation movement, and the clerics – expositors *par excellence* of this perspective – would thereby obtain modest but secure standing in the movement.

In the event, the organizers insisted that Gosman take personal responsibility for moving his resolution. Whether they did not wish to take sides, or simply did not think Gosman's strategem would succeed, is not clear. However, if they anticipated trouble, their judgement was vindicated.

Gosman may have been encouraged by the approval, at a public meeting held on the evening of the first day, of the following resolution moved by himself and seconded by Webb:

That, as the influence of the ideal upon the national character cannot be otherwise than strengthening and beneficial, the pursuit of that ideal by the people of Australasia should be encouraged by the political, religious and intellectual leaders of the community.<sup>21</sup>

However, when he attempted on the second day of the Convention to obtain leave to introduce his 'recognition' proposal, he met a storm of protest. One speaker declared that they might as well be called on to express a belief in the solar system. Another stated that, 'while a firm believer himself', he thought that such questions should be left to the clerics, 'who might as a preliminary federate the churches'. More generally, it was suggested that the religious question ought not to be raised, that all discussion should bear directly on federal legislation, and that Gosman's resolution was out of order. A leading federationist, Dr John Quick – one of the main organizers of the 1893 Corowa Conference, author of the influential *Digest of Federal Constitutions*, and shortly to be elected as one of the Victorian delegates to the coming Federal Convention – offered it as his personal view that Gosman's motion was perfectly in order. But Gosman, understandably in the circumstances, did withdraw.<sup>22</sup>

So neither backroom manoeuvring nor clerical solidarity carried the day. The secularist *Sydney Morning Herald* dismissively referred to 'recognition' as a 'debating society' question.<sup>23</sup> The position of the churches and the clerics in the coming Commonwealth was still uncertain. Despite ready acceptance of clerical contributions to other aspects of the Convention's work, the hostility evidence in the response to Gosman's motion showed that the separationist sentiments expressed in Inglis Clark's 1891 draft Constitution were well entrenched at the popular level.

A devout lay delegate, Donald Cormack, who saw Church and State ideally as partners in government, the former ruling by love and the latter by force, who believed that 'it is to the Church that the State must look for conserving the virtues', and who held that 'a recognition of this truth should be expected of the framers of our Federal Constitution', had planned to table at the Convention a motion calling on the churches to unite in a biblically based 'Federal Church of Australia'. Its relation to the State was to be defined. It was to organize parochial systems of education and poor relief, and it was to model its government on the Hebrew sanhedrin. While Cormack's proposal certainly would have been congenial to some, it bristled with controversial political and religious implications. Not surprisingly, in view of the hostile response to Gosman's theologically much milder resolution, Cormack did not persevere with his proposal.<sup>24</sup>

Then on its closing day, perhaps partly as a result of the good impression made by Cardinal Moran's speech the day before, perhaps partly because only about a quarter of the delegates remained (it was the Saturday), and perhaps partly because of some lay resentment at the rough treatment of Gosman's resolution,<sup>25</sup> the Convention resolved, on the motion of the Rev. J. Fielding, 'That this Convention, acknowledging the Government of the World by Divine Providence, commends the cause of Federation to all who desire, not only the material, but also the moral and social advancement of the people of Australia.'<sup>26</sup>

This resolution, which was treated as formal and approved *nem con*, was largely a simplified version of Gosman's.<sup>27</sup> The most substantial point of difference between it and Gosman's proposal, and perhaps a major reason for its acceptance now by such separationists as remained, was that Gosman's reference to 'invoking God' had been deleted. The point may have been that while 'invoking' God clearly was a religious *act*, 'acknowledging' Him implied merely a religious state of mind. The modification plausibly can be read as a concession to the separationists.

So in a certain sense God, and 'the right of religious ideals, though not of religious sects, to a place in politics', were eventually 'recognized' by the tail end of the People's Convention.<sup>28</sup>

There was, furthermore, another solution prize for some of the more political clerics. Enhanced possibilities for future political leverage were opened up by the amicable and often enthusiastic Catholic-Protestant partnership at Bathurst. However, as Moran was soon to discover, these possibilities could easily be overestimated.