

CHAPTER 5

The Protestants Fight Back

'You can break up a setting hen', declared a writer in the Adventist *Bible Echo* on 10 May, 'but you cannot convince a worldly church that it ought not to unite itself to worldly power.' Pleased though they were at the secularist victory at Adelaide, the Adventists held no illusions that the clerical interest would simply accept this rebuff. Those who sought to unite religion and State, the *Bible Echo* writer predicted, would continue to pray, petition, and besiege legislators at every turn, until they got what they wanted: 'A fallen worldly church is bound to unite itself with worldly power, come what will.'

The Victorian *Presbyterian Monthly*, of which the enthusiastic 'recognitionist', the Rev. Professor Andrew Harper, was editor, was especially vexed by the editorial opinion of the *Argus*, cited, in chapter 4, that 'a Christian atmosphere' was better than 'any formal clause carried by strife'. Scenting in the *Argus's* viewpoint an essential irreligion, the *Presbyterian Monthly* countered, '[In] vain is the snare spread in the sight of any bird,... the Christian communities will assert themselves notwithstanding the new doctrine of Christian peace.'¹ This forecast proved substantially right, provided one reads 'Christian communities' in a fairly ecclesiastical way – that is, as covering only the clergy and those members of the laity closely associated with the liturgical and organizational life of the colonial churches.

The Adelaide session of the Convention had concluded on 23 April, and the draft it had constructed was now, in accordance with the provisions of the Enabling Acts, to be examined and commented on in the various participating colonial parliaments – those of Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. These legislatures could propose any amendments they saw fit. However, even before the rejection of Glynn's amendment on 22 April, there were indications of a virtually nation-wide revival of the 'recognition' campaign. When, earlier, it became known that the constitutional committee had rejected Quick's 'recognition' proposal, letters or statements began to appear in the press suggesting or hinting in various ways that no Christian could in conscience vote for a Federation Bill that did not 'recognize' God. For instance the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 14 April a statement by Rev. W. Matheson at the Congregational Union Conference that, if God were not 'recognized', he 'trusted the people of the colonies would decline to accept such a Constitution'; while in the *Adelaide Advertiser* of 20 April appeared a letter from a C. H. Goldsmith in which, after complaining tersely about the Convention's failure to 'recognize' God, and also about intercolonial railway sabbath violations, he threatened that 'If no further steps are taken, the loyal servants of God will know what to do when the referendum takes place.' As early as 13 April, it had been suggested in a letter to the *Argus*, from J. Walsford, that a new campaign be organized on an intercolonial basis by the various councils of churches.

After the full Convention's refusal on April 22 to 'recognize' God, this campaign rapidly took shape. On 26 April, in a letter to the *Age*, the fiery Presbyterian, J. Lawrence Rentoul, a colleague of Harper's at Ormond College, declared, 'The Convention, by their refusal, have simply forced upon us, needlessly, the labour and expense of having this good thing effected through the respective colonial Legislatures.' The New South Wales Council of Churches in late April resolved to present a petition to the New South Wales parliament, signed by its chairman on its behalf, urging that legislature to refuse to adopt the Federation Bill, unless that Bill 'recognized' God. However, the Victorians envisaged now a much more forceful campaign. They would not give in to 'a little squad of Seventh Day Adventists'. 'Let the Churches unite to see that this great blunder is not perpetuated.' Rentoul told the commission of the Victorian Presbyterian Assembly on 6 May, 'Let them bombard Parliament.' Nor were the fathers and brethren thinking solely of circulating petitions and arranging delegations to leading politicians. They also resolved

That in view of the coming general elections, ministers be instructed to press upon the people the imperative duty of supporting only such candidates as... promise to maintain the recognition of God in the Constitution of the proposed Commonwealth.

The public questions committee, of which Rentoul was joint convener, was also instructed to communicate 'with the various churches of the respective colonies' in order to formulate and set in motion an intercolonial 'recognition' campaign.² By the end of May the councils of churches in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia had committed themselves to an energetic campaign, which mostly consisted of collecting signatures to petitions, writing to the press, holding public protest meetings, canvassing members of the parliament, and sending delegations to leading government ministers.³ The organizational initiative remained broadly Protestant and Anglican, although a few Catholic bishops sent petitions to the colonial parliaments on behalf of their flocks, and a few prominent Catholic laymen such as Sir W. P. Manning lent their names to public meetings of protest.⁴ In Sydney, Rabbi Davis participated at the public meeting level⁵ while in Victoria Isaac Isaacs, one of the Convention's two Jewish members, who was acting premier while Turner was overseas at Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, was actually the one to introduce the 'recognition' amendment in the Legislative Assembly. So the campaign, while at its core broadly Protestant, had something of an interdenominational, and indeed at times merely theistic, character.

Why had colonial Protestantism become so intensely involved in this campaign? More specifically, what was the basis of that imperative quality which the campaign held for many Protestant leaders, especially those in the non-conformist tradition? Considerations of public status, of being regarded in the community at large as performing some essential public function, clearly had something – and perhaps at times a great deal – to do with it. While each of the separate colonies, declared the *Presbyterian Monthly* on 1 May, betraying this anxiety, 'has a history which runs back always to some point at which the supremacy of God was acknowledged in some way... [the Commonwealth] will have absolutely no traditions of this kind.' If some 'explicit reference to God in the Constitution was not insisted on,' it warned, 'the omission will in the future be made the ground for asserting that our new Constitution was deliberately founded on the negation of God.' Yet there was more involved than the need to 'belong'.

When in the days of multiple establishment the State recruited non-conformist clergy into its ranks as moral policemen, it necessarily gave them wider scope to exercise themselves on one of the perennially recurring themes of biblically oriented Christianity, namely the total reach of the salvation offered in and through Christ. Salvation, it was natural to say, pertained to the whole of man – of all men, and of every aspect of man, social, economic, political, etc. This overarching concern survived the termination of state aid. 'How', asked a writer in the *Southern Cross* on 4 May, 'can human life be divided into two air-tight compartments... one of which is labelled "religious" and the other "secular"?' To Protestants such as Gosman, Rentoul and Dunstan, what was at stake in the 'recognition' campaign was, on a certain level, public status and political power. The Adventists were right about that. But what the Adventists either failed to notice, or underestimated, was that behind the recurring political involvements of Protestantism was a dream – a dream, nurtured by the entry of the middle classes into the main stream of political life, of the total power of God and the total reach of His salvation, which they would not now willingly give up.⁶

This social concern, as one might expect in such an individualist religious tradition, was often rationalized in terms of a conception of the State as 'an aggregate of individuals, all of them moral, or immoral...'⁷ But it was nevertheless fundamentally a concern for society envisaged as a kind of morally responsible *unit*. The State had a conscience, and they, the Protestants, were or ought to be the chief interpreters of the dictates of that conscience. The vote, said Andrew Harper, in *Australia without God*,

as the symbol of political and social duty, ought to be prized and exercised as a great trust, of which we must give an account to God. The Puritan demand for a State worked in accordance with the divine law of righteousness needs to be renewed.⁸

Sometimes, although not typically, this concern was linked to a kind of racial mysticism, a conception of racial destiny. 'We are one great community,' declared a Protestant commentator on the draft Federation Bill in 1898, 'Christian in faith and British in blood, set

in the Southern Hemisphere... We are, by mere force of our geography, a sort of great missionary outpost... The Pacific is to be our Mediterranean.⁹ 'We do not ask for an elaborate creed', declared the *Australian Christian World*, 'we simply ask the Commonwealth formally to say that God is the great Governor-General.'¹⁰

Many of the Protestants who were so deeply and passionately involved in the 'recognition' campaign were, in a sense, locked into this commitment by the contrarities of their recent history. The anguish which conscientious commitment to this extended conception of salvation was bound sometimes to bring to a sensitive Protestant mind is conveyed vividly by the following:

No wise man... desires to see the Christian pulpit turned into a political sounding board, or to have the great themes of Christianity – themes which have the spaciousness of eternity and the seriousness of life and death – thrust aside for the wrangles of secular politics. But if Christianity has no law that is applicable to politics, and no message to men on their national concerns, then it disappears utterly from the great chamber of human life.¹¹

The Christian was bound in *conscience* to watch over and care for the *total* welfare of the community. He was, as a Christian, responsible not simply to his fellows but ultimately to God for the material and moral welfare of the community. 'For the condition of this community,' said Harper,

for its readiness to forget God, for its greed, its vices, its sins, for every unrighteous law, for every unnecessary burden on the poor, for the war of classes, for the evil social conditions which everywhere are marring human lives, for our collective pride, for the base elements in our politics, for all the darker features in the character of this community, we shall have to give an account at the judgement-seat of Christ.¹²

While the Protestant's commitment was at times deeply and painfully felt, and while, given their values and outlook, it was perhaps necessitated by the situation in which they were placed, it remained in certain respects deficient in moral seriousness. Whether through a lack of specificity in the overall vision, or a lack of nerve, or too great care not to jeopardize beyond a certain point the worldly standing they still retained, they steadily sacrificed, at least to outward seeming, the substance of 'recognition' for the mere form. Formalism might have a certain justification. Harper for instance argued that 'while the formalisms of our best moods may lead us into hypocrisy, they yet remain an incitement to aspiration, and an encouragement to us in our sincere moments to aim at an ideal in our conduct.'¹³ But more deeply, formalism represented a failure of nerve, or a clouding of vision, or a love of high places in the market-place.

A move in the direction of form and away from substance was evident in the proposed prayers in the 'recognitionist' petitions. There was now, largely perhaps in response to Barton's criticisms,¹⁴ no reference to Quick's or Glynn's 'invoking' of Divine Providence, nor indeed to any sort of invoking at all. The 'recognition' proposals now being canvassed did not any longer convey or imply that the Australian people, in electorally accepting federation, were in the process performing an act both political and religious. The New South Wales and South Australian petitioners wanted 'acknowledging Almighty God as the Supreme Ruler of the universe'; the Victorian petitioners wanted 'in reliance on the blessing of Almighty God'; the Tasmanian petitioners wanted 'Duly acknowledging Almighty God as the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, and the source of all true Government'.¹⁵ Conceptually the change was fundamental. To depend on, to acknowledge, to be grateful to God was to be a religious condition or state, but since such a condition or state was not in itself an *act*, there was no longer an implicit denial of, or retreat from, the secularist viewpoint that religious and secular activity belonged in different although related spheres.