

tents of this slim book (only 130 pages of text) and their implications, are well worth the pondering of anyone interested in the role religion occupied in the development of Australian society. Given the continuing relevance of some of its themes, it is history with something of a contemporary bite for those sensitive to questions of relating the church to the world.

The book's major concern is to explain how the Australian federal constitution acquired its two religious clauses — the recognition of God in the preamble, and Section 116, which declares that the Commonwealth will not establish, impose or prohibit any religion. In addition, it deals with Cardinal Moran's role in the campaign for the federation of the Australian colonies — particularly his standing for election to the Federal Convention in 1897 — and the issue of clerical precedence on formal state occasions, focused on the conflict which occurred in relation to celebrations inaugurating the Commonwealth in 1901. All these matters are dealt with clearly and economically, indeed with a laconic crispness that leans towards the cynical in its effect: the dustjacket indicates that Dr Ely has suffered 'disillusionment with advertising, accountancy and the Presbyterian ministry', avocations which the tone of his book might lead one to suspect are not profoundly distinguished in his judgement.

Perhaps this has lent the treatment rather much of a sceptical edge, but it is an approach not unsuitable to the events surveyed, nor is it carried too far. Of particular Catholic interest is the discussion of Cardinal Moran's activities, and this is thoughtful, balanced and firm in its grasp of the man and his motivations. No less interesting or salutary is the account of the political endeavours of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which was opposed to any recognition of religion in the constitution.

But if the factual content of the book is interesting, and analysed with some perception, at least for this reviewer its

major stimulus is in the light it casts on some important questions about the relationship between religion and society. Dr Ely makes no such general claims for his book, nor can its limited scope and span offer any definitive answers, but it provides a departure point — and some information — for useful reflection.

What appears to be demonstrated, in the few years around 1900, is the sheer incompetence of the churches in the field of politics. And utter incomprehension both of political realities and of political process. Of course the two failings are closely linked. Failure to understand the electorate and how it thinks and acts leads to failure to enlist their support, or, more usually, positive alienation. Certainly, this failure can be put down partly to disunity and division within religious ranks — although here Dr. Ely's analysis might suggest that when applied in politics, sincere religious principles can produce a whole range of different, even opposite, policy conclusions.

But the basic problem seems to have been the failure of men of religion to understand the nature of secular Australia. For the book also indicates the centrality of a radical secularism in Australian political dispositions, a secularism which could readily co-exist in the individual, with genuine religious profession and practice. The strong and widespread conviction that Church and State should be entirely separate emerges as a basic postulate of Australian political thinking — or, at least, of political gut reactions.

This book also offers an interesting insight into the political repercussions of sectarianism, that of the double effect not often discerned by Catholics. It was not only direct anti-Catholicism which frustrated Catholic ambitions and strategies (or Protestant ones for that matter) but — and perhaps much more — the effect of sectarian explosions on the prevailing secular disposition. Often, the sequence was that the claims or initiatives of one religious group provoked the

vigorous and militant reactions of the other, producing conflict, conflict which alarmed and alienated the majority of citizens who valued peace and harmony in what they regarded as the central areas of national life, those governing public policy and economic prosperity. The decisive opposition to the entry of religion or the churches into political life came less from those hostile to religion as such, than from those who saw religion in politics as a dangerous generator of social conflict — a group which, at least in the period covered by this book, included many church goers. Their fundamental postulate was: religion had its place — in church.

It has long been the case that secularists have explained and justified their position by pointing to sectarian conflict. This argument has — or had — its point, but it was more one of convenience than anything else: an ecumenical age has not seen any massive desertion of secularism. What this book implies, by way of lesson, is rather the failure of religious men to understand their environment or communicate with it. Even without the direction pointed in this book by the author's somewhat acid tone, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that all too often in the things of this world, churchmen were blind, silly and inept. And it might be possible to push beyond that conclusion to yet another — that the growth and entrenchment of Australian secularism owed much to the narrowness and stupidity of those who most abominated it. There is nothing of profit in blaming the past, but does the lesson still live?

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RICHARD ELY  
*Unto God and Caesar. Religious issues in the emerging Commonwealth 1891-1906.*  
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