



Religion & Australian society

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Dr Meredith Lake

www.meredithlake.com

Books:

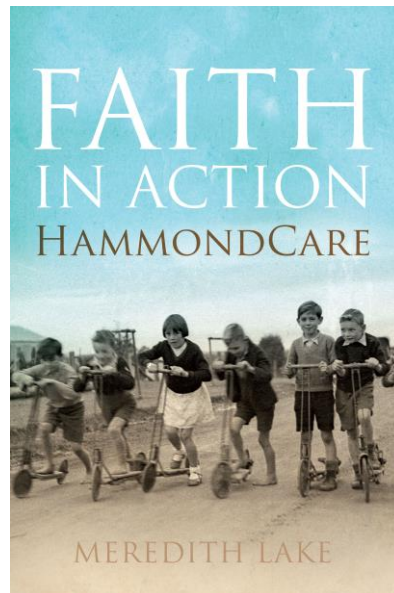
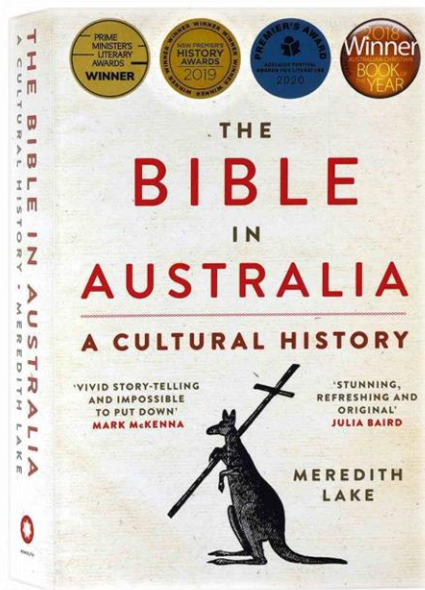
The Bible in Australia: a cultural history (2020)

Faith in Action (2013)

Podcast:

Soul Search

The lived experience of religion & spirituality



Today: Religion in Australian society

Focus:

1. the role of religion in providing social infrastructure in Australian society
2. the role of interfaith and ecumenical interaction in Australia

Outline:

Part 1: Orienting considerations

Part 2: Some historical context

Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

Part 4: Interfaith & ecumenical Australia

Questions and discussion

Part 1: Orienting considerations

How we approach the 'role of religion' is shaped by *our assumptions about the nature and purpose of religion*

- Beliefs?
- Objects of Worship? Sacred texts?
- Pursuit of the sacred?
- Habits / practices
- Rituals / ceremonies?
- Lifeways?

Who gets to decide?



Part 1: Orienting considerations

How we approach the 'role of religion' is shaped by *where we look for its expression and embodiment*

- Institutions & organisations
- Movements e.g. evangelicalism, Pentecostalism
- Cultural expressions art, literature
- Shared visions of human flourishing
- Patterns of moral formation / how people are socialised
- Individual lives



Part 2: Historical contexts

'Religion' is not straightforwardly a defined aspect or element of a bigger thing called 'society', in which 'religion' or even 'interfaith activity' has a 'role'

Example 1: At colonisation, there was no such thing as 'Australia', and no agreed idea of 'religion'

Diversity of Indigenous nations, languages, cultures, 'everywhens'

Diversity of early colonising population

e.g. Jewish convicts

<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/australian-jewish-community-and-culture>

e.g. South Asian traders, travellers and migrants

See Samia Khatun,
Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia
(UQP, 2018)

Part 2: Historical contexts

Diversity of the colonising
population:

Scots, Irish, English, Welsh

Men of the Enlightenment?

See John Gascoigne. *The
enlightenment and the
orgins of European Australia*
(CUP, 2002)

Adherents of various
churches, cheek by jowl

See
[https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/s
tories/religion-church-and-
missions-australia](https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/religion-church-and-missions-australia)

The institutionalisation of
Christian pluralism:

The 1830s Church Acts

The C19th Education Acts
/ Catholic resistance to
liberalism?

Pan-protestantism and
Catholicism?

End of state aid to religion
(a key plank of public
policy from roughly 1860s-
1960s)

Part 2: Historical contexts

Example 2: At Federation, the overwhelming majority of people identified as Christian and were socialised into that tradition

What about Religious heterodoxy? Darwinian doubt?

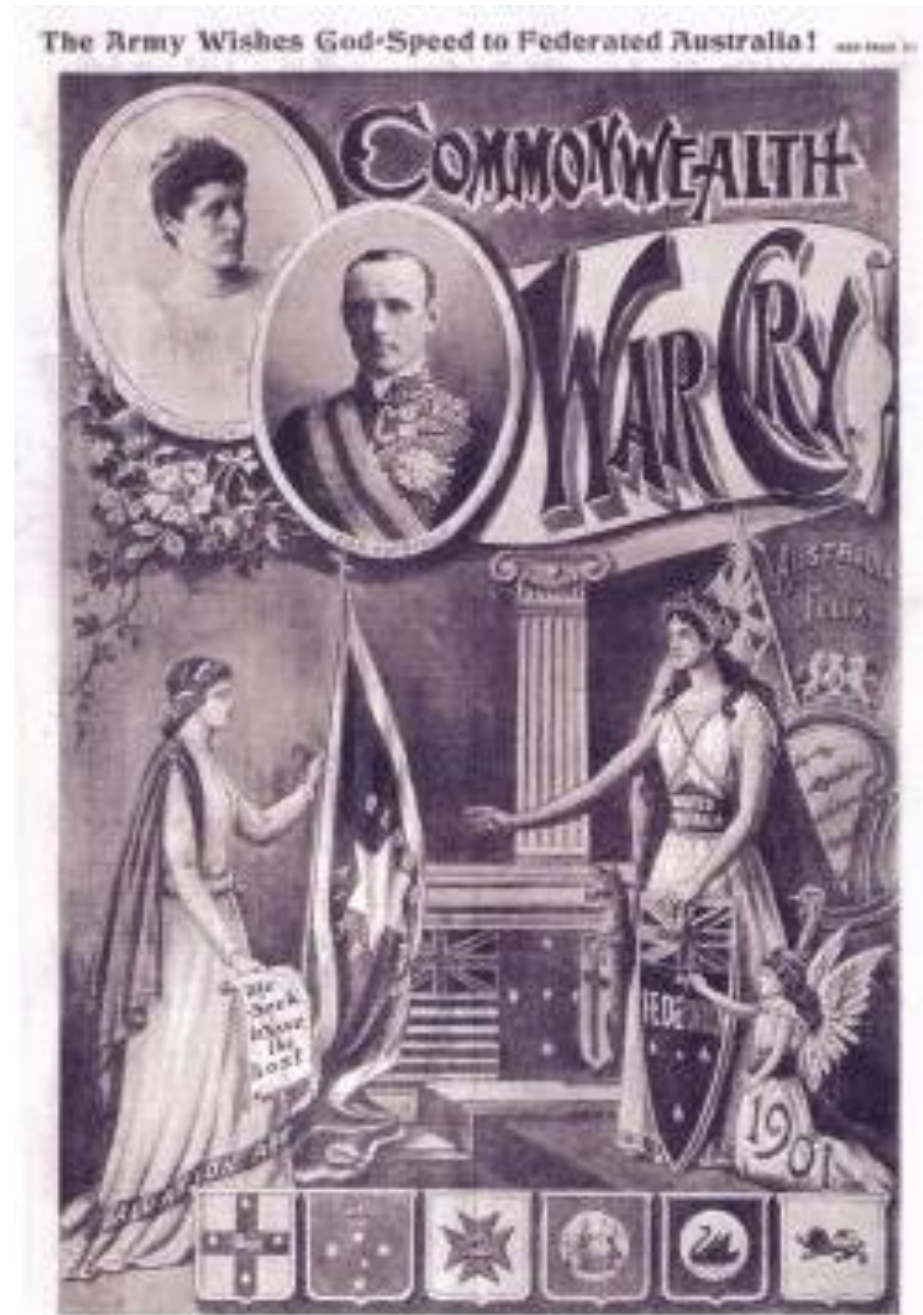
A 'commonwealth'

A prevailing 'common Christianity'?

A 'Christianised' society?

Sectarian conflict?

Characteristics of this era built into lasting social structures and institutions?



Part 2: Historical contexts

Example 3: More recent rapid changes regarding both religion & society

Post war migration, growing diversity within churches

Post war migration and growth of world religions

Changing ideas of the nation (no longer white, British, Christian? Increasingly multicultural? Religiously plural or firmly 'secular'?)

Changing patterns of religious socialisation (e.g. decline of church participation, rise of independent schooling following the reintroduction of state aid)

Changing social bases of religious life and expression

Changing forms of the market and the family



Religious v secular?

- Wayne Hudson, *Australian Religious Thought* (Monash UP, 2017)
- Hudson: the idea that 'secular' means excluding religion is a recent and peculiar idea, and more misleading the Australian case than for many other societies.
- Here, the issue is more often clericalism and denominationalism, which are excluded from particular domains in order to better advance religion. (NB impatience with bible bashers and wowsers)
- Draws a distinction between unbelief (as an inability to accept religious tenets even when there is some desire to do so) and disbelief (as a positive conviction that certain tenets are false),
- Develops ideas of sacral secularity and a post-secular consciousness

AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT WAYNE HUDSON



'Learned and precise, this book shows what's wrong with the old boundary between secular and sacred in Australia. The implications for rethinking our past, present and future are enormous.'

Alan Atkinson

Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

Colonisation and
'Commonwealth'
(exclusionary v
inclusionary?)

No poor law in a jail

(Christian) Voluntarism
under informal patronage of
state

Benevolent society and
charities

See Brian Dickey, Why
Were There No Poor Laws
in Australia? *Journal of
Policy History*, 4(2)

Concept: a 'mixed
economy' of welfare

Diverse 'Christian'
responses to poverty:

- Bible Society / Westpac
- AMP and the mutuals
'bear ye one another's
burdens' Galatians 6:2
- Sectarianism and the
replication of religious
agencies?
- Efforts to 'civilise
capitalism'?
- See Stuart Piggin, *The
fountain of public
prosperity: Evangelicals in
Australian history* vol.1
(MUP, 2019)

Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

The crisis of capital and labour

1890s Depression

8 hour day movement

The New Unionism

W. G. Spence

- Presbyterian and then primitive methodist lay leader
- founding secretary of the Australian Workers Union, and then its president for nearly twenty years.
- Elected to the NSW parliament in the late 1890s,
- Went on to serve in the new Commonwealth legislature, including in the cabinets of Labor Prime Ministers Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes.

To a meeting of socialists in 1892:

‘The aim of ‘new unionism’ is a grand one, a noble one ... If asked to give a short definition ... I should say it is an effort to give practical effect to the teachings of the founder of Christianity, by making it easy and natural, for men to act justly, truthfully and honestly ...

‘If I understand anything of the teachings of the founder of Christianity, it is that he came to bring heaven upon earth – to set up the kingdom of heaven on earth ... an ideal state where we can escape from all the ills and sorrows that we experience here ...

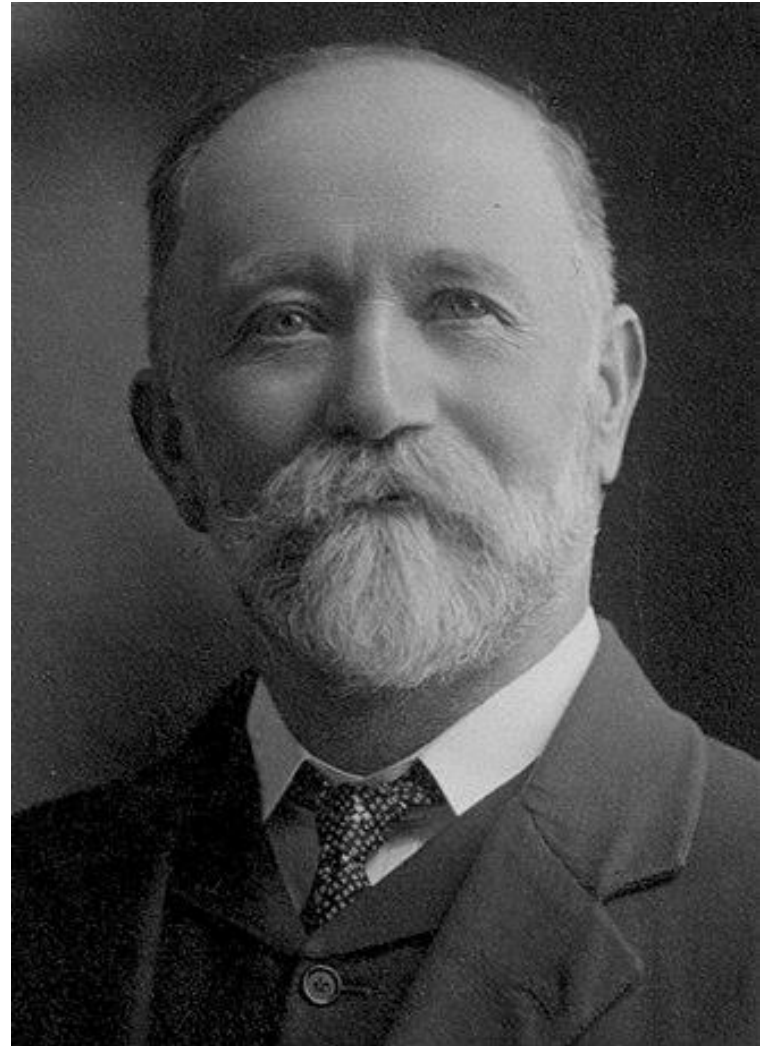
A bit further on Spence added:

I don’t want to preach to you, but I will ask you, in reading His life – and I suppose all of you have read it – did it ever strike you that it is possible to live as he did ... He went about doing good.

Part 3: social infrastructure

The wage earner's welfare state

- Henry B. Higgins and *Rerum Novarum* (1891)
- Harvester judgement (1907) and the basic wage – ‘wages as primary welfare’
- ‘the worker is worthy of his hire’ (Luke 10:7)
- Augmented by age pensions, ie support for the aged worker
- Concept: ‘The wage earners welfare state’ articulated in Francis Castles' *The Working Class and Welfare* (1985)
- See also: John Murphy, *A Decent Provision: Australian Welfare Policy, 1870 to 1949* (Routledge 2011)



Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

Australia as a 'social laboratory'

- 8 hour day movement
- World's first labour governments (half ALP's first federal caucus attended church weekly)
- Suffrage for women
- Temperance, economic security, DFV...
- See: Pat Grimshaw and Jane Carey, 'National Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia', *Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia* <https://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0774b.htm>

The WCTU

- 'outstanding' amongst the organisations that pursued the women's franchise in Australia..
- In SA: the WCTU gathered 7000 of the 11 000 signatures on the petition to the House of Assembly for female enfranchisement. Soon after in 1894, the Bill was passed:
- In New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, it mobilised thousands of members whose grounding in evangelical Protestantism – along with their temperance work – lent 'particular determination and skills' to the overall campaign.
- Grimshaw: 'it would be hard to envisage the relatively early passage of the franchise in Australia without the organisation close involvement'.

Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

- Becoming a laggard - the 1930s Depression
- Voluntarism outstrips government – religious conflict and tension over this, e.g. R. B. S. Hammond, the brotherhood of St Lawrence etc etc
- ‘the moving frontier’ between govt and other actors
- Concept from GEOFFREY FINLAYSON. A Moving Frontier: Voluntarism and the State in British Social Welfare 1911–1949, *Twentieth Century British History*, Volume 1, Issue 2, (1990) <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/1.2.183>
- Shifts in ‘the mixed economy of welfare’

Post WW2: church-state collaboration in a welfare state?

- Welfare state – concept of Anglican Abp William Temple, in contrast to the ‘warfare state’ of Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany. Also R H Tawney (author of religion and the rise of capitalism), Beveridge
- Re-entry of government into social service provision; new fields of social welfare e.g. Aged Care
- Churches as ‘natural partners’ of state? ‘the Australian way’?

Part 3: Religion and social infrastructure

Today:

- A huge faith based social service sector:
- The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission reported in 2015 that faith-based organisations are 'by far the largest single category of charities in Australia'. Of the 25 largest charity organisations in Australia, 23 are directly associated with Christian churches (Beth Crisp, 2014: 101)
- Faith-based organisations, or FBOs, play a major role in Australia's mixed landscape of welfare services. NGOs provide over half of all welfare and social services in Australia, with church-affiliated organisations essential to this provision (Oslington, 2015: 80).

- Inequality? Wages?
- Calls for a permanent basic income?
- [Does Australia need a permanent basic income? - ABC Radio National](#)
- Crisis relief

Recommended reading (Religion & society)

- Anne O'Brien 'Religion', in Macintyre S; Bashford A (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australia : Volume 1 Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, (2013) [Religion \(Chapter 17\) - The Cambridge History of Australia](#)
- Graeme Davison, 'Religion' in Macintyre S; Bashford A (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australia : Volume 2* (2013) [Religion \(Chapter 9\) - The Cambridge History of Australia](#)
- James Jupp (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Religion in Australia* (2009) [Encyclopedia religion australia | Religion: general interest | Cambridge University Press](#)
- Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: a cultural history* (2020)

Recommended reading (overview articles)

Stuart Piggin, Power and Religion in a Modern State: Desecularisation in Australian History, *Journal of Religious History*, Volume 38, no. 3 (2014) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12074>

- Secularisation is a concept with many meanings making it difficult to analyse historically. Yet it is the default master narrative in much Australian historiography. Secular historians typically criticise the role of religion in history as being either too unengaged or, if engaged, too intrusive and negative in its impact. This article challenges both assumptions, taking five “nodal points” in Australian history and arguing that they are better given a “Christian” than a secular interpretation. Australia's first European settlement was a high-minded reform experiment, based partly on a humanitarian Christian vision. The Church Acts gave the population ready access to Christian influence, resulting in a highly “Christianised” nation. When federated, that nation refused to give ascendancy to any one Christian denomination, but largely assumed that its polity was that of a “Christian commonwealth.” Out of its Christian commitment, in the middle of the twentieth century, it withstood control by atheistic communists of its industrial and political life. In the first decade of the present century, a surprising number of politicians have sought to define its national identity largely in terms of its Christian heritage rooted in the Classical/Christian tradition.

Joanna Cruickshank, Religious freedom in ‘the most godless place under Heaven’: making policy for religion in Australia, *History Australia*, Volume 18, no.1 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2021.1878466>

- The appropriate role of religion in Australian society has been debated since colonization. Recently the Australian government has proposed legislative changes which, it is argued, will protect the right to religious freedom. These proposed changes have been criticised from all sides, providing evidence of ongoing division with the Australian public regarding the appropriate relationship between religion and the state. While history does not offer any easy answers to these complex challenges, in this article I suggest that understanding the historical relationship between religion and government in Australia can clarify the choices that face contemporary policymakers. I suggest three directions for policy (and law) reform in relation to religious institutions: protection of the rights of Indigenous people to practice Indigenous spirituality; protection of religious minorities; and greater limits on the presence of religious institutions in the ‘third sector’ of welfare provision.

Religion and social welfare reading

Short-read online papers:

- [Faith-Based NGOs in the Australian Welfare Economy | by Timothy / Τιμόθεος | Medium](#)
- Doug Hynd, 'Church-related social welfare agencies in Australia: a historical perspective on their development and their relationship with the state' [Microsoft Word - Document1 \(csu.edu.au\)](#)

Academic journal articles / book chapters:

- Shurlee Swain, A Long History of Faith-Based Welfare in Australia: Origins and Impact, *Journal of Religious History*, Volume, 41 no.1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12342>
- John Murphy, [Church And State In The History Of Australian Welfare in: Church and State in Old and New Worlds \(brill.com\)](#) (2011)
- John Murphy, 'The Other Welfare State: Non-Government Agencies and the Mixed Economy of Welfare in Australia', *History Australia* 3, no. 2 (2006)

Quick links

Web reference resources

[Religion - Theme - The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia \(womenustralia.info\)](http://womenustralia.info) – encyclopedia of women in leadership, with theme essay on religion and linked biographies

[ADB Home - Australian Dictionary of Biography \(anu.edu.au\)](http://anu.edu.au) – do an advanced search of ADB entries by religion

[Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography \(google.com\)](http://google.com) – an extensive dictionary

[Australasian Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements \(google.com\)](http://google.com) including a brief overview essay of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Australia and NZ, by Dr Mark Hutchinson (2018)