

Fear and fallacies: reflections on religion in the city of Brisbane

Author: Dr Roger K. A. Allen

Date Published: 20 April 2004. Brisbane Institute URL: <http://www.brisinst.org.au>

As Roger Allen observes in this wide-ranging examination of the value system that underpins multi-cultural Brisbane today, charity begins at home. Today, in an environment of undeclared wars, tolerance, justice, faith, hope and charity are needed as never before. But today, as never before, the burden of responsibility has fallen back on the individual, not society's leadership.



Brisbane today has a multi-cultural religious mix

As Easter passed some Christians were in a reflective Lenten mood looking forward to the symbolic spiritual liberation of mankind as Easter Sunday dawned. The Jew celebrated the Passover, another historic event when the Angel of God flew over the houses of the Egyptians, smiting the first born males of man and sparing the Israelites about to depart for the Promised Land. Easter Sunday, and thus the Passover on the Sabbath the day before, is set as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. It is a lunar event.

This brings into focus the paradoxes inherent in religion and its meaning for 21st century Brisbane founded as a part of the far-flung 19th century British Empire with its protestant work ethic, Christian-based value system and hypocrisies. The Church of England dispensed the credo and Queen Victoria was the supreme Imam. The longer a city state lasts, the greater the socially-conditioned myopia; our inability to see our own society with the objectivity observed only by aliens or those who have lived in other cultures.

Religion once divided Brisbane like an invisible knife. It acted as a personal Berlin Wall which cut through families, schools and even the State Public Service. The job you had and the person you could marry depended on it. Yet today we rarely mention this festering sore which still lies not far below the surface. It is now unfashionable to raise such issues in the public arena. It is politically incorrect. Those were the old days. However, despite our apparent secularism and modernity there lies, no too far down, gold veins of prejudice within the Christendom of multi-cultural Brisbane.

But the Christian Church is a divided polyglot of disparate voices. The Protestant camp is inhabited by myriad shades of Christianity varying from 'safe' and 'mainline' to 'fringy' and verging on the loony. Each has its own rules. One acquaintance was baptised three times, all by different means, as each denomination discounted the method of the preceding. The Catholic Church too has its own spectrum of diversity. All have their problems and histories. The most vulnerable have been subjected paedophilia in both camps and the status of women, gays, the divorced, couples in de facto relationships and ex-priests is a gaping sore. Many perceive outmoded concepts in a religion which has failed to adapt to the 21st century.

A time when *Homo sapiens modernus* can access from home pictures of distant galaxies live via the Hubble telescope. The 'Big Bang' is part of life. Man, not God, has changed.

Here on earth American presidents invoke the name of God to bless the nation and its endeavours. God has become commercialised and colonised as part of the American icon as much as the endangered American eagle. Television once showed an American Air Force chaplain blessing B52 crews about to embark on a bombing raid over North Vietnam. He even blessed each bomb load. Such is the mind of man. Such is the utilisation of religion for national ends and has been happening since man began throwing sticks. Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ* may be politically well-timed for younger minds in the secular West. Most young cinema-goers never visit a Christian church except to attend weddings. Recently a jewellery shop customer was asked by the shop assistant selling crucifixes if she wanted the plain one or the cross with the funny little man on it.

Yet there remains in each of us a yearning for something bigger than ourselves; something immutable, powerful, just, kind, loving and satisfying. This need for the ideal parent underlines western psychiatry where the patient can connect with the ideal parent figure called the 'psychiatrist'. People pay handsomely for such a relationship with this modern secular phenomenon which in reality has replaced that of the parish priest.

Guilt is a particularly prominent part of any religious system and is the unseen barter of any transaction. To be a member of the system, one has to adopt certain belief systems which can not survive without the pay dirt of guilt, and lashings of it. The fear of that old evergreen monster Thanatos or Death (the brother of Morpheus or Sleep) keeps the religious cogs turning and is oiled by money and anxiety and greased by superstitious practices.

Death, disease and misadventure have produced anxiety since *Homo erectus* stopped stooping. We call ourselves *Homo sapiens* (Thinking man) rather than *Homo religionis* but millions read the daily horoscope in the morning newspaper and our very language is full of superstitious and religious allusions lest we invoke bad luck or heaven forbid, the Evil Eye, touch wood. Myriad Christian saints have been allocated portfolios to oversee every aspect of human endeavour from romance to roads. Yet even the Holy Saints had their seasons of doubt.

Innate in many, if not most religious systems, is the concept that the particular system is the only right one and that this provides you with the direct line to God or the gods. All the others are infidels or unbelievers, 'Outsiders', the 'non-saved' or potential souls to be rescued and recruited. Aborigines have their dreamtime and family totems, Buddhists seem to enjoy the best of both worlds, Hindus and the most feared of all, Moslems, seem to have the big advantage of simplifying that intellectual stumbling block, the Christian Holy Trinity. They have one true God, as do the Jews. The 'heretic' Egyptian pharaoh, Akhenaton, patented the idea long before Moses. It just didn't take on at the time and the idea lapsed for a millennium or two.

This appreciation, nay humility, that there may be more than one road to Nirvana, can have positive spin-offs. In a thousand ways multi-cultural acceptance can be visited upon our increasingly diverse city. How about some simple acts such as mowing the neighbour's nature strip or stopping for Moslems at pedestrian crossings? Islam may be our

preoccupation in the West, but what of our own past? Christendom has committed more bloody sadistic acts throughout its history than any other surviving religion today. Let us not forget the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the mass murder of Catholics by Cromwell's Puritans in Ireland.

Spain under the Islamic Moors was a surprisingly tolerant and culturally diverse society. It was the Catholics who later expelled the Jews and started the Inquisition. The Crusades were Holy Wars against Islam, what the Moslem calls a jihad. The great mandate was to convert the whole world to Christianity. It was, and remains, an expansionist religion which suited colonialism well. It was the white man's burden. Not so many years ago well-meaning souls belonging to a church missionary society in Jamaica branded the chests of their black slaves with the word, SOCIETY, standing for The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Our history of colonisation of most of the planet is steeped with sad tales of Christian abuse, far removed from the ideals of its founder. No wonder many of the Islamic tradition fear and even hate the West, especially in the light of recent events since the fall of the Communist Block.

Yet few of us ever challenge our inner fears and prejudices with any real attempt to read outside the square. If religion is to survive and be respected in this modern and increasingly secular world, it must reform. It must bring not only inner peace to its myriad believers but also be beneficial to society at large. We even need to laugh at ourselves a bit and see our belief systems from a bit more distance. The shop must be cleaned up and the tolerance inherent in most religious systems needs to be revisited. And there is a real need for tolerance today. I bought a translation of the Koran and was going to read it while on holidays. I was advised not to take it on the plane lest I be branded as a terrorist. Sadly I left it home.

There has always been more than one direct line to God or the gods. Extremism, fundamentalism and bigotry fail to acknowledge the true state of this endangered biosphere. The old concept of a one party-line is fallacious. It is more a spiritual internet which provides a diverse range of consumer options for the spiritually needy. Unless we meet these needs and acknowledge past wrongs, the evils of the past will continue to come back to bite us. We need to see ourselves as we really are before we can go on. The tragedies of Palestine, Afghanistan and now Iraq, with all their past injustices and colonial boundary-lines are but a few examples from which we cannot hide. We were silent until after the Rwandan genocide occurred and were pragmatically indifferent to the aspirations of the East Timorese for 25 years. We can no longer run away like Jonah to hide in the whale's belly; nay not even the new tunnels for a traffic-congested Brisbane will hide us. The spectre of a bomb-ravaged Madrid commuter train will come to haunt us. To use a Christian maxim, 'Faith without works is dead'.