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REMEMBERING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Introduction

There is a strong autobiographical impulse among Australian writers. Autobiography and memoir comprise one of the most popular forms of contemporary creative writing. In these memoirs, some space is usually devoted to personal reflection on religious experiences and religious education. The purpose of this paper is to review a selection of recent Australian memoirs. The authors selected each have some association with Roman Catholicism. The discussion of these extracts focuses on their implications for religious education in Catholic schools.

For the religious educator, the study of memoir can have a particular purpose – revelation. I do not intend the meaning of revelation found in common speech. Nor that meaning given in Christian theology, but rather the meaning of revelation described by Maria Harris: revelation as a work of religious imagination. In Harris' view, if we can cultivate an attentive awareness of the world, all kinds of experiences can become "eye-openers" that sharpen awareness of a livelier, larger reality beneath the surfaces of things. These "eye-openers" can be contained in a multitude of forms: "verbal forms; earth forms; embodied forms; forms of discovery. Then looking becomes seeing, seeing becomes believing, and learning becomes revelation" (Harris, 1987, pp. 64-65). Memoir provides a verbal form that may lead to revelation.

The religious educator, then, can read autobiography not primarily for insights into psychological constructs and theories of personality, or as an historian for its capacity to uncover the patterns of the past. Reading autobiography as a source of revelation suggests a personal and communal agenda. Not only does it provide an answer to the question: "How does your life tell me about my life?" it also provides entry to whole other worlds. Jill Ker Conway describes the process in this way:

> We like to try on new identities because our own crave the confirmation of like experience, or the enlargement or transformation which can come from viewing a similar experience from a different perspective. When we read about totally disparate experience, say as Christians reading about a life lived by a believer in Islam, it is as though the set designer and the lighting specialist had provided us with a totally different scene and pattern of light and shadows to illuminate the stage on which we live our lives. When, for instance, we encounter a world of arranged marriages, we see the Western convictions of romantic love differently and begin to ask ourselves where those romantic feelings come from, since in another culture they simply do not occur (1998, p. 6).

The following memories of religious education offer such opportunities to enter the worlds of other Australians whose writings may confirm, enlarge or transform our own experience of religious education.

A Sharp Awakening

Anne Summers (born 1945) feminist, historian, political adviser and magazine editor grew up in Adelaide in the post-WWII period. In *Ducks on the Pond* she reveals a narrator conscious of a strong religious vocation. At 15 she wants to become a nun, encouraged by the stories of stoicism and self-sacrifice told to her by her teachers.

> *For a time when I was 15, I was convinced I had a vocation. I could not wait until I was 16 and could enter a convent. I found the self-denial and sacrifice of the religious life extremely attractive, or so I told myself. Every morning that winter I got out of bed at 6, refusing to shiver, taking pleasure in the penance I was performing by enduring the chilly weather as I rode my bike to 7 o'clock Mass. I was devout and obsessive, willingly shouldering the burden of atoning for the sins of the world by foregoing sugar or refusing a second helping at dinner. The rest of the family was mostly oblivious to my penitence but this did not matter to me. I was well schooled in the piety and self-denial of the women saints* (Summers, 2000, p. 67).

Such feelings of denial and self-sacrifice do not last. Within a few months, Anne moves from a strong sense of vocation to complete disavowal of Catholicism. Whereas stories of heroic self-sacrifice inflamed her desire for a life of vowed commitment, her experiences of hypocrisy and prurience among the clergy, and the inability to square her life dilemmas with the rigorous precepts

of the church lead her away from church involvement. Unsophisticated presentations of church teachings do not match her growing intelligent appreciation of the puzzles and dilemmas life presents to her. She thinks now that her interest in a religious vocation was largely a desire to escape the constraints of an unhappy family circumstance, especially the abusive relationship that existed between her and her father. Her loss of religious faith is cast as a necessary step in the process of growing up.

> *Several girls in my year chose the religious life, though few of them stuck it out. My own vocation evaporated after several months. It is so obvious when I think about it today that my desire to enter the convent was merely a fantasy about leaving home. I was obsessively devout for a time, but it was short-lived and it was also selective. I didn't, for instance, turn the other cheek when it came to my father; nor did I "offer it up", the Catholic Church's passive prescription for handling hurt. If the only way to get to heaven was through indulgences granted for putting up with pain, I didn't think I wanted to go.*
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> *My disenchantment with the Catholic faith was swift and irrevocable. Within a few months of upsetting my mother with news of my vocation, I announced I would no longer attend Mass. Each Sunday morning there was a fight, Mum trying to make me go, and me resisting. I was now contemptuous of Catholicism: of what I saw as its hypocrisy, of the prurience of many priests in the confessional, and of its insistence that all conundrums - like the existence of evil - were matters of faith. I had no existential crisis, no prolonged period of wrestling with my conscience, no weighing up of the arguments for and against. I simply stopped believing. It felt like shedding a skin. It felt like growing up* (Summers, 2000, p. 69).

Anne resists what she sees as a common theme among Australian feminists from a Catholic background, such as Germaine Greer and Susan Ryan, to see in the experience of vowed religious women a model for an independent, assertive feminism. On the whole, Anne's experience did not lead her to the same conclusions as her feminist peers. And yet, one encounter with a particular religious woman changes the course of her life.

> *Although there were individual nuns I liked or admired, few of the Dominicans I encountered encouraged girls to be strong and independent. The school was run by women but they deferred egregiously to men, and especially to priests. On speech night each year the school's annual report was read by the school chaplain "on behalf of the sisters". What sort of example was that! But Sister Mary Vianney was, if not a role model, certainly a guiding light. She diverted me from a foolishly self-destructive path, she made me respect my intelligence and she encouraged me to do something with my life. If I had not met her, I don't know what would have become of me* (Summers, 2000, pp. 69-70).

Despite the positive influence of Sister Mary Vianney, Anne finds no place for religion in her life. In a short space of time, she has moved from deep devotion to cynicism and negativity about religion.

The Road from Unbelief

The adolescent religious development narrated by Anne Summers contrasts significantly from that described by a slightly older compatriot. Jill Ker Conway (born 1936) is a research fellow at MIT in Boston, chair of the Board of the Lend Lease company, a member of the boards of a number of multinational corporations, and a specialist in the area of women's writing. In *The Road from Coorain* she tells of her years growing up on a sheep station in far western New South Wales, her move to school at Abbotsleigh Girls Grammar and her undergraduate years at Sydney University. Her story during these years is dominated by an increasingly uneasy relationship with her mother and the effects on her psyche of the tragic drowning of her father - the mysterious circumstances of which continued to haunt her late into adulthood.

Jill Ker's religious interests were awakened by the private devotions of her devout Catholic father. But their isolated location far from a parish community and the constant sniping of her anti-Catholic mother allowed little outlet for orthodox religious practice. With her attendance as a teenager at Abbotsleigh Girls Grammar came the confrontation with organised religion. She relates how her concerns for comprehending, in a critical and intelligent way, some of the great crises of the twentieth century as well as her own personal tragedies stifled her religious imagination. As a teenager, she is quite convinced she is not ready for confirmation in the Anglican church.

> *In 1949, the year my brother Bob turned twenty-one, I was in my third year of high school, transformed from adolescent rebellion to genuine intellectual interests. That year, I refused instruction for*

confirmation, explaining to a disapproving school chaplain, aptly named Canon Pain, that I had no religious faith. To my own experiences of disaster at Coorain, I now added the pictures of Belsen and Dachau, and the chilling photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While these might well have convinced me of the truth of original sin, they served me at the time as further confirmation of the malign nature of the fates, and reinforced my sense of religious faith as a sentimental illusion (Conway, 1989, p. 114).

Personal experience and deep contemplation of the world cause her to discount the plausibility of religious faith. Despite this, she begins to change her views in late adolescence. Her studies in literature prompt her to consider the significance of religious belief. The language and concepts explored in various undergraduate classes at Sydney University provide her with categories to interrogate and resolve the questions posed by her experience of childhood and adolescence. She describes how her studies in politics and history "shattered most of the ideas I'd been brought up to take as the bedrock of moral and political values". Likewise, her course in English literature had an equally profound impact. She was profoundly moved by her classes with Professor Wilkes of the Faculty of Arts. She studied the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and concluded the course with the work of Australian poet Christopher Brennan.

We had in our instructor someone who took Eliot's conversion seriously, and whose own learning made it seem easy to comprehend the range of symbolism in Eliot's poetry. He read beautifully, so that one could hear people lay down their pens to listen to him recite "Ash Wednesday" or "Little Gidding". I had never thought it possible to entertain religious belief, accepting, before I knew how to state it, Marx's view of religion as the opiate of the masses. Now I listened while the intellectual and spiritual progression of one of the twentieth century's great poetic geniuses was analyzed with great sensitivity. The verse became as much a part of the inner landscape of my mind as Shakespeare's sonnets, and its language made it possible for me to examine my own religious feelings. To do so was unfashionable in the extreme. Australia's academic culture was one of conformity to shallow rationalism and positivism. To think about taking Catholicism seriously was to begin to enter my father's religious experience, and also to challenge my mother's fierce belief that Catholicism was Popish nonsense aimed at the suppression of women. Nonetheless, I started reading other Catholic writers, Hopkins, Waugh, Graham Greene (Conway, 1989, pp. 183-184).

The encounter with powerful, personal accounts of religious experience in an open and encouraging manner changed her religious landscape. Notable in this process is the disinterested passion of the teacher - disinterested in the sense that while clearly passionate about the nature of the content and ideas that were being presented there seems to have been no coercion or exhortation to find them likewise fascinating.

This growing awareness of the significance of the religious imagination is enhanced by a European tour she undertook with her mother. She is attracted to the cultural symbols of European Catholicism. They cause her to doubt, at a fundamental level, whether her received Enlightenment values hold universal meaning after all. The tour kick starts a process of reflection and reclaiming of her father's Catholicism. She recalls a trip to the monastery at Montserrat outside Barcelona for its impact of the landscape and religious culture on her evolving consciousness of religion in her life.

So it was with my mind filled with Edmund Burke's phrases on the sublime and the beautiful, and Wagner's imagery in Parsifal that I drove up the steep and narrow road to the monastery. It was true that from this high point in the mountains one could see the ocean and the expanse of the eastern range of the Pyrenees. It was a grand extended view on a scale I was used to, but I felt nothing here akin to the mystical sense of oneness with nature I felt alone on the plains of New South Wales. On the other hand, when we went into the chapel at Montserrat and heard the boys' choir singing at the end of mass, the same chants such a choir had been singing for seven hundred years, I was transported by the beauty of the first Gregorian chant I had ever heard. I realized that the English romanticism I had taken for a universal was a cultural category in which I did not participate. Nothing made it clearer to me that I was from another world and would have to arrive at my cultural values for myself. Sacred music and ecclesiastical architecture expressed real universals which spoke to me wherever I met them. I hadn't expected to be moved by the imagery and sounds of Catholic Europe, but I was (Conway, 1989, p. 203).

Religious symbols and imagery provide concrete expressions of universal categories that she can use to understand her experience of the world. Her adolescent religious journey contrasts with Anne Summers. While both experience adolescent questioning and criticism of religion, Anne finds liberation and growth in disavowing religion while Jill finds fulfillment in embracing it.

Looking Back in Anger

In *A Fine and Private Place*, Brian Matthews (born 1936) writes an unsentimental account of growing up in St. Kilda amid petty gangsters, colourful characters and hardscrabble working families during and after the Second World War. Religion and religious matters scarcely enter these recollections. The spiritual impulse, which might have found expression in religion, instead is indulged in a life-long devotion to St. Kilda - the football club. This saint, Matthews is quick to point out in his introduction, has no record in Christian hagiography. Memories of St. Kilda's solitary 1966 premiership at the expense of an unlucky Collingwood provide context and contours to the material in much of the second half of his book.

Matthews' silence on religion is telling. It is breached only once - in a lengthy and explosive remembrance of his days at various Catholic primary and secondary schools. Even then, these memories are recalled with reluctance. He says that others have already written enough about their experiences of Catholic schools and he expresses little enthusiasm for recounting his own regrettable memories. And yet, the vehemence with which he recalls his Catholic school days betrays the influence of religion on his development. To say the least, his memories of school are forlorn. After attending the Sacred Heart primary school, he wins scholarships to attend St. Leo's and De La Salle in Malvern. His memories focus on the brutalities of his teachers and the injustices occasioned by teachers who favoured respectable Catholic families over the suspect ones.

> *In later years, I would meet and in some cases become good friends with blokes who went to St Thomas Aquinas or Kostka Hall. The story was always the same. Beltings, force feeding, rote learning, favouritism on the basis of class, intensity of demonstrated family Catholicity and size of family; with amelioration of the stringency of these criteria being achieved only by sporting or scholarly elitism. St. Leo's was no more and no less of a hellhole than any of the others. You got belted for every mistake, had the flesh of your arm pinched until you wanted to scream, and were regarded as a nonentity (literally – I was "Matthews" for months after the favoured ones were "Gerry" and "Brendan" and "Johnny") unless you demonstrated Einsteinian brilliance, were a champion sportsman or had brothers already at the school* (Matthews, 2000, p. 135).

Matthews' recollections are unrelentingly negative. When, as an adult, he comes to check the record of his time at De La Salle, he is unable to find any record that he ever attended the school. While the records show a *Barry* Matthews, he presumes this fictitious character was the result of a continuous confusion by staff over his first name. He observes that he has "actually been expunged from the records. Like Barry Matthews, I did not exist" (p. 144). These regrets and disappointments reflect his overriding impression of his time in Catholic secondary schools:

> *I spent my entire time at St. Leo's, and afterwards at De La Salle, wishing I was smarter, better at sport, had six brothers and an obviously Celtic name* (Matthews, 2000, pp. 136-137).

His caustic recollections of school days mirror his father's suspicions about "the general run of middle-class Catholics as people who used their flaunted religion to justify smugness, self-satisfaction and easy ignorance of a rougher world of disappointment, bone weariness and hardship" (p. 142).

His memoirs culminate in a distressing portrayal of the death of his child in the early years of his marriage. In revisiting this pivotal event which casts its shadow on his whole life, Matthews offers no religious reflection on its meaning, nor admits of any consolation or insight that can be offered by a religious tradition.

The End of an Era

Gerard Windsor (born 1944) is a professional writer who lives in Sydney. His three-part autobiography chronicles the lives and loves of a Catholic family and their relationship to the church and the world. In the middle volume, *Heaven Where the Bachelors Sit*, Windsor chronicles the final crumbling and collapse of the predominant forms of 1,500 years of European Catholicism. The decline in the Catholic church parallels his own movement from intense devotion to these religious forms to his abandonment of childhood religious aspirations.

Windsor relates how he formed the idea early in life of joining the Jesuits. He calls to mind the

childhood significance of the Jesuit house of studies in the Melbourne suburb of Watsonia. The idea of a vocation to the Jesuits seemed to be obvious, given his skills, interests and appreciation of the value of a life of religious service.

> *Watsonia was a word I first understood when I was seven. I was still in my unselfconscious, single-digit years when I wrote a school essay about what I was going to be when I grew up, and I wrote that I was going to Watsonia. Not that the resolution survived so openly or healthily into adolescence. But it haunted me. The priesthood was incomparably the single most worthwhile thing to do with one's life, and God's finger beckoned in a hard-headed, no-nonsense way. His signs were easily read. Yes, I was in good health, I was leading a good life, I was competent at my studies. I didn't want messages, but I knew these facts were flashes from God's fingernail. I was good at Classics, I was a reasonable public speaker, and Law, the obvious worldly opening for me, I could feel no quiver of interest in. My ticket was marked for the Society of Jesus* (Windsor, 1996, pp. 12-13).

Windsor realises his ambition. Much of his adolescence and young adulthood is spent in formation according to the spiritual disciplines of Ignatius of Loyola. Ultimately, however, he decides that a lifelong commitment to the Jesuits is not possible. Surprisingly for himself, his decision to leave is not accompanied by regrets, anxiety or self-doubt. Despite his friends' assurances of the difficulty he must be experiencing in leaving the Jesuits, he notes the "relative ease" with which he is able to do so. At 25 and after seven years with the Jesuits, he is given $200, obtains a part-time job at David Jones and resumes his university studies as a layperson.

> *That I could have done it so lightly shadows the whole seven-year enterprise. Had I ceased to believe in the Jesuit, or even the Christian vocation? Or was my belief suspect in the first place? No, the latter. I had entered clear-eyed, with resolute intensity of purpose. All through my schooldays, the compulsion never left me. I just procrastinated and wriggled and said I had not made up my mind (Windsor, 1996, p. 158).*

Windsor judges that his promptings to join the Jesuits in the first place had been relatively pure. He felt no coercion from his parents. He imagined as an adolescent that a spirit of sacrifice and a life of hardship were reasonable options for sharing in the way of the cross and a cause that mattered above all others. Priesthood with the Jesuits was the most comprehensive form in which to live the commitment of love and service. However, his further studies and intellectual inquiry raise questions about the validity of this way of expressing his religious beliefs.

> *Even at the height of my fervour I knew that there was a secular, even commonsense, explanation for the gushes and the constrictions of the life of prayer. As soon as I learnt about Occam's Razor it forced itself into my hand whenever I wondered about the emotions of my spiritual life. If the rises and falls of my euphoria could be explained without immediate recourse to God, they should be. The simpler explanation sufficed perfectly. Grace built on nature. It did not pre-empt or displace it* (Windsor, 1996, p. 160).

The religious certainties of childhood break down, and are replaced during his undergraduate years by doubt and the ever-present possibility of despair. The only response he can find in the face of this break down is hope: "you hope or you despair" (p. 160). His pure, though possibly naïve, religious commitments are replaced by a more sophisticated though less confident understanding of the life of faith.

Insights for Religious Education

Each of these narratives describes familiar experiences of adolescence and early adulthood, but the rhythm and direction of their reminiscences vary. Two of these memoirs register intense feelings of religious awe leading to a desire for a life of self-sacrifice and service. Eventually, these acute feelings subside, making way for equally intense feelings of doubt, despair or denial of religious faith. The other two memoirists exhibit alternative directions for their religious journeys. Jill Ker moves from doubt and dismay to an enlargement of her religious imagination. Brian Matthews maintains a lifelong suspicion of religion and religious people. While this selection of Australians writing in mid-life cannot represent a scientifically valid sample, they nonetheless provide resources for reflecting on contemporary religious education.

These memories question the validity of Australian religious education's traditional concern for young people to "have it all" by the time they depart school and adolescence. What are we to make, for instance of the religious fervour of an adolescent Anne Summers and the determined irreligiousness of a Jill Ker at the same age, when the course of the

religious journey for each is almost precisely opposite? Religious educators who work with young people might take this study in contrasts into account in their own work. Some perspective is also provided on the meaning of so-called "outcomes" studies so beloved of some Australian religious educators. What interpretation of "outcomes" might be attached to the responses of a fifteen year old Jill or Anne? What might such a study predict of future developments? Unpredictability is the one keynote of this collection of memoirs.

These memoirs call into question those factors that might predict interest in religion among adolescents. The evidence of these lives muddies any easy response to this issue. Family of origin seems to have an ambiguous influence. The level of religious interest of parents and siblings did not predict which way these memoirists pursued their own religious questions. Some adolescents may show an interest in religion because of their parents' interest, or even in spite of it.

The quality of classroom religious instruction seems to have influenced each writer – generally in a negative direction. For these Australians, the presentation of religious material did not match the experience or depth of their own emerging intelligence. Their religious instruction was simply not intelligent enough for these inquiring young people. In most cases they simply looked elsewhere for resources to explore their life questions. This was often the case with their studies in the arts and sciences. None seems to look back with any favour on their experiences of religious education.

Conclusion

The experience of religious education is idiosyncratic, if we are to accept the evidence presented in these accounts. This brief survey of some Australian Catholics' experiences of religious education reveals a disparate range of experiences and responses. Within this disparate recollection of experience are a multitude of opportunities for "eye-openers", sources of revelation or enlargement on our own perceptions.

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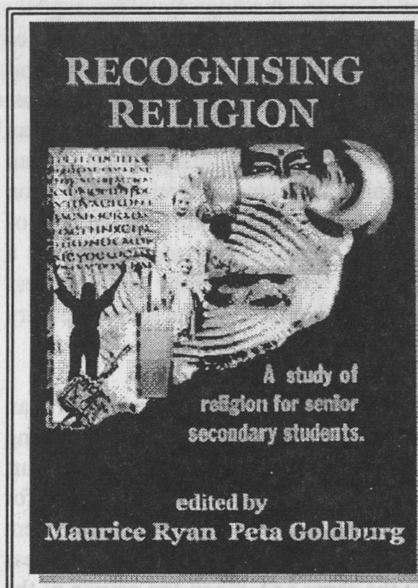

RECOGNISING RELIGION

by

Maurice Ryan and Peta Goldburg

Recognising Religion is a student text that has been written to support school programs based on the revised 2001 *Study of Religion Syllabus* of the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies. It has also taken account of the senior secondary school programs offered in other Australian states. A teacher guide provides background, teaching and learning approaches and assessment and evaluation strategies.