

Signs of Change, Works of Creation: The Library and the Church Historian

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by Edmund Campion

One of the joys of the recent Sydney Film Festival was the world premiere of a documentary, 'Silma's School' directed by Jane Jeffes. "Silma" is Mrs Silma Ahrim, an Islamic mother who founded the Noor Al Houda Islamic College in Western Sydney ten years ago. Islamic schools, I'm sure you've noticed, are a new feature of the Australian educational landscape. A few years ago, I was asked to bring the Macquarie Encyclopaedia of Australian Events up to date in its 'Religion' section; and for the year 1989 I nominated the opening of the Malek Fahd Islamic School at Greenacre in outer Sydney. Within a few years, I wrote, it had over 1000 pupils enrolled at primary and secondary levels. I continued: The largest Islamic school in Australia, it offers the normal state educational curriculum with an Islamic ethos.

Mrs Ahrim's Noor Al Houda College is part of the same movement. She began in 1995 in four demountable classrooms, sold to her by the Catholic Education Office for one dollar, on land leased from the Federal Airports Authority next to Bankstown Airport. Her school thrived. Within four or five years, however, they discovered that the land they had leased was toxic — it was a filled-in rubbish dump, and thus immensely dangerous. The school had to move to find new premises. Two or three places turned them down when they found out they were Muslims. Then they were welcomed at what had once been the Camden Theological College. Noor Al Houda College was liable for any diseases that their pupils might have contracted on the old site.

How liable? They didn't know. Then there was all the expense of moving and setting up again. So Mrs Ahrim sued the Airport authority (who, it turned out, knew they were leasing poisoned land to the Muslims). The case went backwards and forwards in the courts for five or six years as the airport authority resisted the school's claims, until earlier this year when it was settled in the school's favour by the Supreme Court of NSW. (The last I heard, the airport authority was appealing).

'Silma's School' is an immensely interesting documentary. It took me into a world I knew about, but didn't know. I think you too will enjoy it when it appears on ABC TV later this year. Coming home from 'Silma's School' at the Sydney Film Festival, I got to thinking about what I'd seen and what it might mean in the great narrative of our Australian story, and I want to say something about those thoughts on the bus, because I think they relate to your vocations as librarians.

The appearance of Islamic schools in recent years is a bright signal of change in our educational patterns; the recognition that Australia is now a pluralist community; that there are many different ways of being Australian. Once upon a time, the ruling view

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in society had been that there was really only one way of being Australian: to be Australian was to be proud to be British; to glory in being a member of the British Empire; to celebrate Empire Day each year and wave the Union Jack.

Not everybody went along with that. Noticeably, in historical and demographical terms, these were my own community: the Irish Catholics (who were the largest minority group in the community, and so the first ethnics). We celebrated Australia Day, not Empire Day. The flag we waved was the Australian flag. And as for all of us Australians being Britannically the same, we thought the essence of democracy was to be pluralist.... to allow (perhaps even, to encourage) difference and diversity. So, at great cost, both human and financial (we were a poor community), for something like a century, we kept our schools open, without state aid: our schools, where our own traditions, our own culture, our own stories, our own ways of being Australian could be transmitted to generation after generation. So when Mrs Silma Ahrim came along, wanting to start an Islamic school, to transmit to generations of Muslim children their own traditions, their own culture, their own stories, their own ways of being Australian, she found the ground prepared for her. Nowadays, cultural diversity is so commonplace that there must be people who imagine that Australia was always like this. No, it wasn't.

No one is born with good manners or a prose style, are they? You've got to learn these things — manners or a prose style — you've got to work at them, you've got to be encouraged to achieve them. Similarly, a society is not genetically tolerant or courteous or civil — citizens have to work at these qualities, to actualise them. This is especially true if, like modern Australia, the society aims at cultural diversity. Surrounded by 'the others', you must work hard to achieve courtesy, civility, toleration and freedom for people to be themselves. While you are thinking globally, you must act locally.

Then I remembered a visit to Melbourne a few weeks earlier. I was invited by the Islamic Council of Victoria to speak on 'Vilification: the Jewish and Catholic Experience in Australia'. In my talk I told the audience that one of the

strategies employed by a Jewish roof body facing vilification half a century ago was to get their people to stop crouching, to walk tall. Afterwards, at question time, a lady at the back of the hall stood up and said this: "When you said that about not crouching, that meant something to me. You see, when 9/11 happened, people started shouting at me in the street, and so I crept along with my eyes down, not looking at anybody. And after a while I stayed at home, frightened to go out. I stayed there for three days. Then I thought about it, and I prayed about it, and I made myself go out. I made myself walk along with my head up, and I looked people in the eye, and I smiled at them. And you know what? They all smiled back."

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Well done, citizens of Melbourne, making a culturally diverse society work. When I heard that story, I thought of something John Henry Newman wrote: "I am a link in a chain of connection between persons." For our culturally diverse society to work, we need people who will be links in the chain, bonds of connection between persons, who will think globally but act locally.

But why, precisely, share these musings on the bus with a conference of librarians? I have long held that librarians are agents of civilisation in our world. Indeed, because I believe that, I have devoted portions of my public life to the support of librarians, holding office in bodies such as the State Library Council of New South Wales and The Library Society at the State Library. I have seen, in small country towns, how creative librarians can be; how libraries allow people to take charge of their own lives; how libraries allow people to create their own futures, to escape controls put on them by circumstances or other people.

And librarians at religious colleges or theological institutes? It seems to me that they are in a special category. For the library of a religious group has a filial relationship to its parenting body; it is there primarily to

serve the teaching of that parenting body, to promote research on that body, to warehouse its history, to foster its theology and spirituality, its intellectual traditions and received wisdom. All these things, and more, I am sure you do; and it must be interesting, at a conference like this, to compare and contrast the differing ways in which you librarians fulfil these tasks.

I want to suggest that there is something more you can do, of your own volition. Ideas are caught, not taught. Librarians in religious

other worlds to your library's users.

Now I want to explore another possibility with you. This week in Sydney, at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the International Conference of Historical Sciences has been taking place. It is the first time this world congress of historians has met in Australia. Yesterday and today there have been sessions devoted to the topic, 'Religion and Memory' planned as tributes to two Sydney church historians, Tony Cahill of the University of

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settings can become culturally creative forces by opening up to their library users the worlds of 'the others'. Oh, I know there are courses available to your students on comparative religion; but I am thinking of something more domestic, more casual, more come-by-chance in your libraries. I like to think of a library where the religious student might come across material from outside his or her own faith tradition; not formal or even didactic but an odd pamphlet or magazine or memoir or stray publication that just happens to be lying there because the librarian put it there, using perhaps some of that loose mosey that all librarians have rattling round a bottom drawer of their desk.

To walk into a library is to begin a great adventure — you never know what you might find there. And that happens every time you go there, doesn't it? So I am thinking of what a student might pick up, just by chance, about a faith tradition studied perhaps formally and academically but never really known as a culture, a language, a way of looking at the world and God, a way of life rather than a set of beliefs in a book, or a creed. Stumbling across other people like this, entering their worlds almost without noticing — that can lead to an enlargement of courtesy, civility, sympathy, indeed empathy. Now, I am not arguing for clearing out of your libraries books that tell what, in the author's opinion, is wrong with other faith traditions. Our conversations with each other should be robust. Nevertheless, I think that librarians can do a service to Australian pluralism by consciously opening

Sydney and Patrick O'Farrell of the University of NSW, who died within days of each other 18 months ago. In particular I want to tell you about a tribute to O'Farrell; and to do so I will have to put on my hat as a Catholic church historian, which is what I am — you wouldn't want me to change my spots this late in my life, would you? Anyway, I'm confident that from what I say from the perspective of a Catholic Church historian, you will be able to translate to your own tradition and make the appropriate connections and applications.

First: some background. Patrick O'Farrell came here from New Zealand on a PhD scholarship at the newly established Australian National University in Canberra. His field was the labour movement; and from this research came his first book, a biography of the New Zealand labour leader Harry Holland. But no writer, as Miles Franklin said, is satisfied with only one book. So Patrick and his constant confidante, fellow researcher and wife, Deirdre, began casting about for a new topic. Thus they discovered the lack of a compact history of Australian Catholics.

And so, in August 1968, came *The Catholic Church in Australia: A Short History 1788-1967*. Sourced largely from the Sydney church archives and written in six months, it sold 10,000 copies. Those are impressive sales figures; but alone they don't tell of the full impact of O'Farrell's work, for single copies went through many hands, they were passed round and read in convents, teachers' colleges, parish discussion groups and through library

use. Its reception was generally favourable: in *The Anglican* newspaper, Francis James, that ecclesiastical leprechaun, said that when the history of his own church came to be written, he hoped they would do as good a job as O'Farrell. The impact of the *Short History* was wide; it was also deep. Let me remind you, those were turbulent years — the era of Vatican II (1962—1965) and the birth control encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968) — and in this foundation-shaking era O'Farrell gave Catholics something solid to hang onto: their history. It is worth noticing the importance of this, since Catholic identity and spirituality is rooted in history, so O'Farrell's book had a large pastoral significance.

"But no history is final," as he himself wrote in an expanded version of the history published in 1977. Expanded is the right word here: the *Short History* had 278 pages of text; this new book, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia: a History* weighed in at 429 pages of text. The author's bibliography in each book tells something of what had been happening between publication: the 1968 bibliography has 95 items alongside nine unpublished theses and research papers; by the 1977 publication, however, the bibliography had grown to 216 items with 54 theses and research papers. History is a moving frontier, one knows; but here is a remarkably rapid expansion of territory. Spare a thought for the librarians trying to keep up with this moving frontier, with all this new material to access.

Now, in the middle of all this new territory stood Patrick O'Farrell himself, as teacher, supervisor, examiner and writer, an historian at the height of his powers. He had gone to teach history at the UNSW in 1959, at the age of 25, and he was to remain there, in the School of History, until his death on Christmas Day 2003. By the time the 1977 book appeared he was becoming recognised as a significant Australian historian, the dean of Australian Catholic historiography. Some years later, I would write of him in an American historical journal, these words: "To him, more than to any other individual, is owed the fact that Catholic intellectual life in Australia is noticeably historical, rather than theological, philosophical or biblical."

So for the 1968 book, 95 items and nine pieces

of research; for the 1977 book, 216 items with 54 theses and research papers. What did this mean? It meant that O'Farrell could revise the estimates and judgments of the 1968 book, because more material had become available to him. To see what a difference the nine years between 1968 and 1977 made, take a look at his pages on the first Catholic archbishop, John Bede Polding. In Canberra while gaining his doctorate, the young New Zealander had come under the influence of an older man, a confident Thomist and former Dominican, Timothy Suttor. Suttor had learned to venerate Polding from the Sydney archivist J. J. McGovern, who in turn as a boy had learned his veneration from his parish priest at Newtown in Sydney, Archdeacon Cassidy, Polding's last Benedictine postulant. Here was an apostolic succession: Polding, Cassidy, McGovern, Suttor, O'Farrell.

O'Farrell's veneration for Polding was reinforced when he began to work with Dr Con Duffy in the Sydney archdiocesan archives — for 'Uncle Con' pressed his own reading of history on anyone who worked in his archives. And so Polding became a hero to O'Farrell too: his chapter on Polding's "Benedictine dream" was highly sympathetic. It was influenced too by Timothy Suttor's *Hierarchy and Democracy* in 1965.

In 1973 however, John Hosie a Marist historian, published a revisionist article in *The Journal of Religious History* which so upset Polding's admirers that they organised a day of rebuttal against John Hosie. By then too, Mary Shanahan (formerly of *Sancta Sophia*) had published her life of Polding's unfortunate Vicar-General, Henry Gregory, in 1970. So when O'Farrell came to expand the *Short History*, he had all this augmented material on which to work; rightly in my view, he never lost his veneration for Polding, but the portrait you get of him from the 1977 book is darker than that of 1968.

You can see the same process — more material leading to more nuanced, or revised, or augmented assessments — in the 1977 book's treatment of Caroline Chisholm and Jeremiah O'Flynn and Bishop James Quinn and the Australian Jesuits and the churches in World War 1 and Melbourne lay intellectuals, and in attitudes to international affairs in

the interwar years. But not, noticeably, in its treatment of B. A. Santamaria and his Movement, which did not change from the 1968 book's bland description (because Gerard Henderson's seminal work on Santamaria would not be published until 1982). Critics of the Short History had called it "a bishops' book", and so it is — a book sourced largely from the archives of the archdiocese of Sydney could scarcely be otherwise. For those are the bishop's archives, they mirror his episcopal policy and his interests. O'Farrell's histories did not carry footnotes; to see where his material came from, you go to his two volumes of Documents in Australian

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Catholic History where you may be surprised to find so many pastoral letters and episcopal statements: these are the stuff of his history - 'head office history' - not the view from the pews. O'Farrell himself made no bones about this, writing in his preface to the 1977 book: "I still view the Roman Catholic as, historically, a hierarchical and clerically controlled church, and make no apology for the continued substantial attention I have given to bishops and priests, their characters, policies and conflicts. This appears to me an appropriate reflection of historical reality, and I remain unmoved by suggestions that the contemporary role of the laity should be read back into the past."

So, regarding bishops as an essential element in the Catholic thing, O'Farrell gave them plenty of space in his history; and he used the opportunity of those extra 150 pages in the 1977 version, to give them more space, exploring there, for instance, the politics of episcopal appointments. Not that Patrick O'Farrell was a flatterer. No way. In the Sydney archives he found the spiritual diary and introspective jottings of the fourth archbishop, Michael Kelly, a mitred mediocrity; and he spread this material over five derisive pages of his book. Furthermore, in some circles, the best remembered sentence of Patrick O'Farrell comes from his review of Tom Boland's biography of the esteemed Queensland archbishop, Sir James Duhig; O'Farrell asked

of the archbishop. "Would you buy a used car from this man?" No flatterer, he.

So O'Farrell, like a good historian, used the opportunity of the nine years between books, to produce a better book. Not that it was simply more of the same. No. There was much fresh material in the 1977 book.

In 1969, John Neylon Molony had published *The Roman Mould of the Australian Catholic Church*, which challenged O'Farrell's heavily Irish account. Molony enunciated his thesis on his first page: "The Catholic Church in Australia has no spirit, no liturgy and no law that is not almost entirely Roman." To this O'Farrell replied in 1977: "The agencies for transforming the laity were to be Irish episcopal authority and church discipline, Irish priests and religious teachers, Irish devotional practices." And over the next seven pages he argued that, "the question of whether Ireland or Rome was the dominant influence on the Australian church is a false and misleading one ... the two influences were blended, but it was an Irish blend."

Here's another example of new material. In 1975, International Women's Year, Patrick and Deirdre O'Farrell published together a booklet, *Women: Australian Catholic Opinions*. It is perhaps the least read of his publications but he was tender of its reputation. When, two years later, a book on Australian Christian women came out and did not mention the O'Farrell booklet, Patrick rubbished it as unscholarly. The 1975 booklet was a first draft of what became new pages in the history, a welcome appearance, given the centrality of women in the Catholic story. In terms of space, there is a curious absence of religious sisters in the O'Farrell histories, apart from their tensions with bishops. Yet religious sisters were the true makers of Australian Catholicism. Somewhere — but I cannot now find the reference — O'Farrell regretted that he had left out of his story the Catholic hospitals and other institutions of social service; which is a proper regret since they empowered the women who ran them in ways that, at the time, were unique in Australia. I would add that in the 1977 book, in additional pages on the reception of Vatican II in Australia, there is no treatment of the extraordinary rethinking that went on in convents throughout the country.

Perhaps an explanation of both absences is that before 1977 the relevant books had not yet been written; they would come later, individual histories of hospitals and of religious congregations and even biographies of religious sisters. An historian cannot make bricks without straw.

But what new riches there were in the 1977 book, alongside the ever present bishops: Aborigines, sectarianism, wowsers, birth control, migrants, Queensland, the laity. To find a place for the laity, he opened up his narrative at several points. Yet something is absent — what is it? Is it that one scarcely gets from this history a sense of what it felt like to be an Australian Catholic? I've already called it 'head office history', to distinguish it from history that is alert to the experience of popular religion. Katharine Massam, Professor of Church History at the Uniting theologate in Melbourne has a book, *Sacred Threads*, that offers a sharp contrast to the O'Farrell works. For Katharine Massam gives you the world of the people in the pews: the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and feel of popular religion. *Sacred Threads* was published only in 1996 — too late for Patrick. For that matter, Massam says in the book that the first Australian article on popular religion was published only in 1978 — again no straw for the 1978 book there either.

There are signs that Patrick knew what was absent from his pages: he knew for instance, that single sentences listing catalogues of devotions were not enough to convey the vividness of the experience. Similarly, in two sentences he glided over the pamphlets of the Australian Catholic Truth Society — pamphlets sold at every church door for a century in millions of copies. These were the layman's library, clues to what was in his or her head. As were the popular religious magazines which had remarkable circulation figures; for the Catholics, the Methodists, were magazine readers. There's one sentence on parish missions, those heart-stirring revivalist meetings that took parishioner to new heights of emotional religion. Indeed, the parish itself as a social centre — with dances, house parties, picnics, car drives, fetes, concerts — has gone missing from these pages. The Holy Name Society, that exemplar of muscular Christianity is there, but fleetingly. And the

St Vincent de Paul Society is explored only as evidence of clericalism. Here's a last item of complaint. One critic noticed the absence from the O'Farrell Documents of the Green (or Penny) Catechism, the little book that generations of Catholic school children learned by heart

Q. Who made the world?

A. God made the world.

Q. Why did God make us?

A. God made us to know, love and serve Him here on earth; And to see and enjoy Him forever in Heaven.

O'Farrell's critic said that the Catechism was the single most important document in Australian Catholic history. Patrick O'Farrell must have read that criticism, because in 1977 he added a paragraph on the catechism, without quoting from it.

Well, as he himself wrote in a 1998 article, "God spare us from silly whingers." I mention these criticisms, however, because this is where you come into the story, librarians I mean.

The question is, where do you find the sources for writing a history that accounts for the people in the pews? Not in the archives at head office, that's for sure. The true archives of people religion are in the popular religious magazines. But what library has runs of these evanescent, flimsy, fragile publications? Who collected them? Forty years ago, where would Patrick O'Farrell have found them? I've said that the pamphlets of the Australian Catholic Truth Society were a layman's library; but where were they forty years ago? (The library I worked out of did not start collecting or cataloguing them till after O'Farrell had done his work). Where are the prayer books that people all used in those days? And the holy pictures they used as bookmarks? Sources of their inner lives. I've said that histories of hospitals and schools and other institutions are now being written (and they can give you the lived experience) but they are usually published locally; so how does a librarian find out about them and get copies?

Similarly, the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB), that finest communal project of Australian intellectual life, I'm sure you agree, can tell you about the nabobs and magnificoes

of your church, the hierarchs; but where do you learn about the parish workers, literally the people in the pews? Parish bulletins do not survive to tell their stories of faith at the grassroots; but there are some good parish histories (and many bad ones): where are they? How does a librarian get them? If someone wanted to write about the Green Catechism or its equivalent would you have it? Some of the richest, most suggestive material is in out-of-the-way places, places you cannot expect our librarians to know about. One example must suffice. I've spoken about parish missions, but where can you read about them? The best account I know is in the *The Boy Adeodatus*, the autobiography of the old Marxist art historian Bernard Smith who, as a young teacher in the country, attended a parish mission (to see what it was like, I suppose) and then wrote about it at length.

Sometimes I dream about making a collection of jokes about religion in Australia: they might tell us something useful about our history. It's sometimes said, isn't it?, that the settler history of Australia can be summed up by saying: Anglicans made the laws; Presbyterians made the money; and Catholics made the jokes. It's noticeable that, so far as I know there's only one church in history in Australia that has an index entry for 'jokes': it's a Catholic history. And in the great eleven volume Bicentennial history, *Australians: A Historical Library* there is, in the whole vast acreage, only one joke: it a joke about Catholics. So this is an under-researched field: who knows what research might reveal, what explanations might be made? What, for instance is one to make of

the man who walked into St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Melbourne while the choir was rehearsing. He had been a choir boy himself and as the choir sang he began to sing along with them. It was too much for the choirmaster. Who came down and told the man to keep quiet. What, said the man, are we not told in the Bible to raise our voice in songs of praise in the house of the Lord? Is this not a house of the Lord? Certainly not, said the choirmaster, this is St Paul's Anglican Cathedral Melbourne. What might a perceptive commentator make of that?

What, for that matter, might a perceptive commentator make of the man who was travelling by train on a long journey in the West of NSW. After some time a worried man came through the carriage, 'Is there a Catholic priest here?' 'Is there a Catholic priest here?' and back again, 'Is there a Catholic priest here?' Until the man cleared his throat and asked tentatively 'Um, perhaps I can help; I'm a Methodist minister...' 'You're no good: we want a bottle opener.'

In all of this, I've been trying to persuade you to find a place in your libraries for the voice of the people, not just for the religions of the hierarchs and theologians but the religion of the grassroots. Otherwise the lived experience of the people in the pews will be lost to future historians; and future historians will wonder what it felt like to be an ordinary believer in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century. But they will wonder in vain. Or will they? It's up to you.

