

# **The Riddle of Christianity in Aotearoa.**

**By Prof. Dr. Peter Matheson**

In 1979 Ian Breward argued persuasively to an audience of secular historians that the focus on the institutional and biographical history of the churches in NZ needed to be supplemented by a socio-political and cultural approach. For three decades now a succession of historians and archivists have taken up this challenge. The latest Newsletter of Religious History testifies to the amazing transformation of the field. Archives have been professionalized, bibliographies produced, research projects flourish, above all new perspectives have been developed. Progress towards secularism and nationalism, the NZ variant on the Whig school of history, is no longer regarded as the driving factor in our history. Yet in the recent lavishly illustrated version of Michael King's history of NZ not a single church building or church event figures. We have recognized, thank God, in our general histories that women existed, that Maori existed, we give generous space to depictions of war and sport, but it's as if religious life and thought never existed, or as Ian Breward put it, was 'socially irrelevant'.

So there seems to be a riddle here, one that was sharpened for me as I began to read my way into the papers of James Gibb, who mobilized and often polarized society as well as the churches for some three decades at the turn of the twentieth century. His genial melding of preaching, pastoral work, uniting Presbyterianism, promoting education and crusading for peace rattled Prime Ministers like Seddon as well as inspiring and infuriating church people up and down the land. He can stand for other outstanding Christian leaders and movements who carved out the shape of local and national community life. What was said about Rutherford Waddell in the ODT in 1913 could equally be applied to Gibb: he has 'impressed his personality in an almost indelible way upon his environment.'

So here is the riddle: given the virtual inseparability of the religious and the secular for most of our history how to explain the apparent decline in the churches' influence and standing in society today? And how is this, in turn, related to the interpretive difficulty so many of our secular historians have in doing justice to the religious dimension? What contribution can we make as historians of religion in New Zealand to resolving this riddle?

What are the key research projects we need to be addressing if we are to do justice to the energy and, at times, prophetic vision of leaders such as Gibb, and to the courage and pertinacity of their followers? How do we get our heads around the genial mix of activism and creative scholarship in countless manses and rectories and presbyteries up and down the land, the educational and caritative drive of the religious orders, the pastoral care offered people in the highs and lows of their personal life, the forging of community life in suburban and rural areas, the broadening of horizons through missionary movements, or the Student Christian Movement or the response to Vatican 2, the back-breaking slog behind so many religious schools?

And why did so much of this run into the sand, in the 1960's, apparently, or so the current consensus would seem to suggest? (How, incidentally, do we interpret such statistics as we have? Auckland in April 1882 apparently had 25% of population in church, but what does this, or contemporary statistics on church attendance, really tell us?) Are we to assume that nominalism and indifference, ineffectiveness and inarticulacy were always there, but simply harder to trace? Is Geoff Troughton right that the overweening concentration on Sunday Schools inculcated a childish, immature faith in the wider population? Was James K. Baxter right that the combination of liberalism with a 'broken-down Protestantism' led to a moralizing ethics remaining through faith had departed? Was the James Gibbs always the lonely exceptions in a heroic sea of mediocrity?

Where are the gaping chasms in our knowledge of Christian life and influence in New Zealand? What are the questions we should be asking of the sources? What are the research priorities for the next decades compared with those set out by Ian Breward some forty years ago now?

## **CULTURAL HISTORY**

Certainly we do need to look more carefully at our cultural history. Breward drew attention to the unhelpful nature of the 'myth' of denominational uniformity, ignoring variations due to region, gender, and demography, not to mention ethnicity. The evidence emerging of the cultural and social mobility of a Dunedin suburb such as Caversham is fascinating, but how representative is it? Many, undoubtedly, loved the old traditions, or what they conceived them to be: the architectural or procedural baggage

dragged from 'Home' by Marist or Presbyterian clergy; the specificities of Anglican or Baptist liturgical language. Were clergy or laity more wedded to Scottish or Irish or US models? On the other hand, what examples are there of churches leaping to the other extreme, and swallowing passing fads whole, and forfeiting, as a consequence, theological depth and liturgical coherence? There appears to have been from the beginning some recognition of opportunities to create a less 'encrusted' church, free of patronage etc., even among Anglicans and Presbyterians.

Are there cultural phenomena, such as the observance of the Sabbath, which we need to look at again, from a less judgmental perspective? What examples are there of cultural adaptiveness: the 'home missions' movement, or in recent years the superb Anglican Prayer book, or Colin Gibson or Shirley Murray's hymns?

## **INSTITUTIONS**

Today's church leaders are conscious of redundant churches and buildings and networks. From a relatively early date churches gave considerable priority to building up their institutional frameworks, generally replicating traditional European confessional patterns. How responsive were such episcopal, synodal, congregational and societal networks to urban and rural and suburban realities in a thinly populated, ethnically and denominationally diverse country? Sometimes, certainly, they were. What self-understanding did such church buildings reflect? What was the value of cathedrals, churches, chapels as identity markers to particular congregations and to communities as a whole? Are there discernible differences between clerical and lay attitudes here?

**Organisations.** What was the contribution to the larger society, at different periods, (Victorian, Edwardian etc.) of Sunday Schools, Bible Classes, Bands of Hope, YM/WCA, devotional and sacramental groups, self-improvement and literary groups, missionary societies etc.? Did the 'total world' of church organizations lead to a false dichotomy of church and world? Have we any data at all on the huge contribution of lay Christian input to secular community groups? What decisive institutions were completely or largely missing from the NZ scene, e.g. German style evangelical academies, state financed kindergartens etc., monasteries? (Need for more comparative history). Why did Bible classes or SCM fade away so rapidly? Are the sociological answers sufficient: availability of TV, increased mobility etc.

## **Congregations.**

How well 'funded' was the average congregation with resources: liturgical, biblical, and educational? How pervasive was the dead hand of local parochialism in particular regions? How significant is anticlericalism, compared with overseas? Where do we discern crises of ministerial confidence, and how was it addressed? Why was a James Gibb so successful in taking his congregations with him?

Have we any overall sense of the effectiveness of pastoral **care** at different periods: pioneer times, in war, depression, in Maori and PI contexts? It seems hard to fault the devotion of deaconesses, ministers, priests, home missionaries, yet in film and literature the picture that emerges tends to be negative. Why? How well were the primal concerns around birth, childhood, adolescence, relationships, illness, death met by compassion, effective counseling, apposite ritual? We need to assess the impact of **specialist** chaplaincies: war, prisons, schools, universities, hospitals, industry.

Why did ecumenism fail so notably in New Zealand, more so than in Canada or Australia, given the formidable investments of energy in it by generations of enthusiasts? Have its achievements, in terms of galvanizing social and political research action, been underestimated, on the other hand? How well has the endemic factionalism within denominations been charted: Marist vs. secular priests; evangelical vs. Anglo-Catholic Anglicans etc.? How do we evaluate the long-term effect of the at times bigoted hatred between Roman Catholics and Protestants not only on the mission of the church but on wider public attitudes to Christianity?

## **Understanding of Mission of Church**

For Anglicanism, Wesleyanism, Roman Catholicism considerable attention is now being paid to the consequences of the shift from a missionary orientation to the Maori to one of responsibility for settler congregations, made, of course more difficult through the Land Wars. Did the popular enthusiasm for Foreign Missions have negative aspects? Why did Maori self-government emerge so slowly?

Gibb was successful in complementing the emphasis on individual salvation, by word or sacrament, with fostering social, civic values. 'We have a very full and rich theology for the individual, but what theology have we for the nation?' How normal was this?

What were the presuppositions about the **nature** of this New Zealand society: Anglican, or Presbyterian, Protestant or Catholic? How long did, say, covenantal or Establishment ideas about society linger on? Did the tendency to think and act in denominational terms mean that the interpenetration of church and community was limited, and that the church was widely perceived as divisive? Or has this case been overstated?

## **ETHICS**

Is the broad assumption correct that the main priority was given to an individual morality and a disciplinary approach, with a particular focus on gambling, larrikinism, drinking, and that it was very much a male code of ethics? If so, why? Is it helpful to describe it as 'staunch Calvinism' or indeed Jansenism? (All categories: liberal, evangelical, broad church, catholic require review) To what extent were the moral crusades a natural reaction to a frontier society, an attempt to civilise and humanize, to strengthen family and community life? How should the crusades against drink and abortion etc. be regarded? Were they conducted in the interest of women and children or of an absolutist moralism or both? When did the individualist approach to ethics begin to change?

If it is true that clergy tended to **spiritualize** issues, such as workers' rights, is there evidence of more pragmatic, egalitarian code among laity? Has the significance of Christian Socialism (Waddell, Gibb, Dutton, A/S/ Adams, Nordmeyer, Nash within the churches and on the wider society been given enough attention? Bishop Julius and many others, show awareness that social conditions can 'suck the soul out' of spiritual life. As far as St John's was concerned Gibb was surprised that any rich people still attended, for, as he said, the preacher is practically a socialist. What political journals (Weekly Guardian, Statesman and Nation) were read by clergy?

Historically, how do we interpret official church attitudes which appear to us today as close to sexual repression or abuse, racism, (vs. Chinese as well as Maori) or chauvinism; or indeed the patronising authoritarianism of pulpit or church courts, the bigotry towards outsiders, the heartlessness of so much clerical and congregational behaviour to unmarried mothers? Gibb was surely not alone in his pastoral ear and willingness to listen to discordant voices: Chaplain Dutton or Charles Murray in WW1.

## **Education.**

Is it possible to discern any overall church strategy on education? How significant was its contribution to a young society to developing primary, secondary, tertiary education? How balance this with the resentment at the Presbyterian Church's attempt to control Otago University? Does the 1877 Education Act reflect weariness about actual sectarianism within the colony itself, or was it a carry-over from 'Home'. Is there any evidence of distinctive Presbyterian, or Anglican or Roman Catholic emphases in curriculum or teaching styles? Does 'muscular Christianity' figure large in the NZ scene? How important was the Syllabus of Errors in Roman Catholic schools or the hostility to it in secular ones?

How was the religious element to education envisaged? Do the dominant hymns suggest a strong individualistic piety, and yet a link with monarchy and Empire? How and when does this change? How is the 'Bible in Schools' campaign, so dear to Gibb's heart, to be evaluated? Was its focus too narrow from the beginning, possibly due to the need to avoid 'confessional' controversies, the objection being not to religion in school but to creeds in school? Was there a genuine commitment to 'secular' schools or did it cloak presuppositions about the basically Protestant nature of society? Why were the Churches unable to rally decisive support behind the campaign? Were the tactics deployed of threatening MP's counter-productive? Likewise how should the Roman Catholic insistence on church schools be interpreted? Does the eventual move of other churches towards church schools suggest retrospectively that the Roman Catholic hierarchy were correct?

We badly need an overall study of the effectiveness of the sermon as an educational tool. Almost no work has been done on the role of sermons, which have probably been considerably underplayed as the mirror and creator and inculcator of social and ethical values in civic and rural life, as introducing new perspectives, and as bonding society. Yet why are there so few instances of outstanding preachers like Gibb in New Zealand? The breadth of the leisure reading of Gibb and Waddell may provide a clue. The depth of his evangelicalism is another: central was Christ's life and atoning death. His theology flowed into his experience and his experience coloured his theology. Too often one encounters the weight of predictable rhetoric especially where preachers seemed pressured to provide instant answers. The role of Christian literature:

pamphlets, books, catechisms, hymnals, histories also need attention. Gibb again reminds us of the key role of church leaders engaging in the secular media.

## **DISFUNCTION**

Historians by nature go for what is lively and interesting, (and moreover our sources mostly record that); it is virtually impossible, certainly, much harder to chronicle **pastoral disfunction** and neglect, to measure **incompetence in the pulpit**, insensitivity to the crises of community life, congregational self-absorption and resistance to change. For every inspiring preacher/ teacher/ pastor/ SS/BC leader were there twenty boring ones?

How do we chronicle the **dead weight of institutional drag**, jealousies, narrow power seeking, either of office-bearers or of 'little people' over 'their' world of charity, or kitchen, the way in which chronic problems of finance for buildings and stipend exhausted congregations. cf Gibb on reluctance to give as index of lack of commitment.

Personality patterns: did certain denominations/periods attract 'the brittles', those in flight from a changing society? Were the tools lacking to deal creatively with conflict?

**Linguistic disfunction** may be fatal: churchy language in reports, addresses, sermons, liturgies. To what extent did secondary values such as loyalty sustain mediocrity, while shops or industries or entertainments collapse overnight if they are not creatively responsive to people's needs? Cushioned by legacies, financial and otherwise, including nostalgia, were congregations enabled to stumble on when failure was indicated?

## **DOCTRINAL**

Behind Michael King's overall view of the New Zealander is an extraordinarily optimistic anthropology. Basically, Kiwis are decent, open-minded, caring folk. basically, they don't need religion.

What has Christian theology to say about such anthropology? It is fascinating to see James Gibb's readiness for **ruptures**, revising his theology from traditional Westminster 'Calvinism' to a more humane, social gospel, and at the end of his life his attentiveness

to Barth. He moved from chauvinistic First World War sermons to pacifism, from the Reform Party to Labour. Was he unusual in the depth of his reading, the breadth of his contacts, in a pastoral attentiveness which prompted him to modify his stance? It is not hard to think of many others like him.

Yet on the whole would it be true that we find little evidence of encouragement or availability of resources for innovative, or contextual theology, except in Maori Christianity? Generally was the default position a traditional confessionalism, Biblicism, pietism, Sacramentalism, or, of late, a post-modern relativism? Or is that simply too sweeping and too glib.

How should we evaluate the late 19<sup>th</sup> century debates about evolution, Biblical criticism, confessions, Sabbath observance, or the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Geering controversy: signs of intellectual liveliness or of perceived weakness? Did critical biblical scholarship ever penetrate more than skin deep? Is this true also of the influence of Ritschl, Barth, Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, von Balthazar, Rowan Williams, and Bishop Spong.

Was the base too narrow to encourage creativity? Even where local **seminaries** existed the theological culture seldom had strong indigenous roots. One notes in all denominations the financial and structural frailty of seminaries. Support in the wider church was weak, and sometimes hostility was strong; the main focus was on **practical** Christianity. Until very recent times there was little tertiary interest, which is why the recent emergence of theology and religious studies departments in universities is so significant. As a result there is a general weakness of institutional memory, of a spiritual memory bank. Selwyn, perhaps? Rex?

Fresh thinkers such as Alan Brash, Rita and John England found little resonance. On other hand there was some receptivity to developments overseas: Major, Bates, Rex, Albert Moore, women's theology. We need to look at how strong traditions from overseas, e.g. anglo-catholicism, or evangelicalism or Vatican 2 bedded down in NZ realities.

Would be helpful, too, to look more systematically, at the intellectual literary and academic opposition to the churches, both anticlerical and antichristian? What was its institutional base? One notes the rise of **alternative** sources of values: unions, political



and gender ideologies, the secular school system; alternative belief systems; the media; films, TV etc. ; literati; community or civil religion, secular ministrants.

## **PASTORAL**

### **PIETY AND WORSHIP**

Of late welcome progress has been made in the study of the **churches' rituals** on regular or special occasions, the Sabbath, communion seasons, harvest thanksgiving, Christian ritual in community occasions: school celebrations; anniversary days; celebrations of monarchy; New Year; Anzac Day; Lent; Easter; Christmas; its relation to ethnicity. One notes the ambiguities of the liturgical year in southern hemisphere.

One notes, too, the relative absence of **pilgrimage** sites, and of indigenous saints and mystics. NZers in search of pilgrimage go to Gallipoli, Iona, Taise, Lourdes, Compostella. We need more work on the influence of religious orders, and religious communities, of retreat and spirituality centres. Likewise we know very little about family worship, still significant in Pacific Island homes, about the prevalence of bible-reading guides, disciplines of prayer, lectio divina.

Some work has been done on individuals such as McCahon and Baxter but we need more studies of the relationship with **poets and artists**, musicians, and dramatists and the resources for church music. We are beginning to see some study of how Maori and Pacific Island, and Asian, Christians have developed their own specific brands of spirituality. In a bicultural society it is interesting that Maori ritual appears to be acceptable as a bridge between differing groups and interests. Is the marae the true cathedral in this country?

30 years ago Ian Breward was refreshingly self-critical of the work done in religious history. My hunch is that so-called secular historians will turn to us as and when we are seen to assist them in their interpretive dilemma: how to fit the religious dimension into the larger picture, how to avoid reading back into the past the marginalization of the churches in the present. Do we need to devise more sophisticated measures of 'commitment' given the variability of social and religious sanctions? Do we have to depart from thinking in terms of generalised graphs of growth and decline and influence

and spiritual depth and look much more specifically at particular periods, regions, groups? One long term aim might be to discern the bridgings between what the churches offered in terms of theology, spirituality, pastoral care, and ethical guidance and society's own deep needs for meaning and 'geborgenheit', being at home in this land.

## **James Gibb - a brief overview**

Gibb was described towards the end of his life as 'probably the first convinced and outspoken representative in the Church of the fuller life and the more liberal type of theology which were beginning to pulsate in the Home Churches' (NZ Pres. 6 Oct. 1933.)

He was engaged in fierce controversy for much of his life, not least through his advocacy of the Union of the two Presbyterian Churches, his advocacy of the League of Nations and critique of militarism. Like many others, he was also accused at one point of heresy. His correspondence leaves no doubt, however, that he was a very fine pastor, had a remarkable circle of friends, whose forthright comments led him constantly to review his theological and political opinions.

Laurie Barber, in his fine PhD on Gibb, the gist of which is found in the Dictionary of National Biography, sees him primarily as an energetic but abortive social crusader, who read NZ society too much from a British perspective, was carried away by his own rhetoric, and could be quite 'quixotic', as in his support for the League of Nations. Barber is unsympathetic to his early Calvinism and to his later interest in Barth.

In my view, at the heart of Gibb's ministry - and he may be, to date, the most outstanding preacher in the history of the PCANZ - was a strong evangelical emphasis on the atoning work of Christ. He insisted repeatedly that the centre of any Christian preaching is the risen Christ. While he had no patience with those who felt that 'the name of Christ must be dragged into every conversation' his piety and theology were strongly Christocentric, and he had a typically evangelical emphasis on bearing witness to the Gospel. He set the highest standards for living

out the Gospel, and could be quite slashing in his attacks on what we would call today the consumer society.

One key feature of his theology was an impatience with a narrowly individualist, or revivalist approach: 'We have a very full and rich theology for the individual, but what theology have we for the nation.' He felt that if the Church became a recruiting sergeant for the army and the status quo, why should it wonder if for most people it had become irrelevant. Christ's claim was on the whole of the national life, broad social and political issues, as well as those of personal morality: gambling, prostitution, drinking. A more equitable distribution of wealth, for example, became a key issue for him. True Imperialism had to rest on the Kingdom of God. Christus aut nullus!

Secondly, from his bitter hatred of war came a critique of a sort of unacknowledged national Protestantism, with its patriotic and jingoistic undertone. As early as 1916 he was warning against hatred of the Germans and pointing to the need to think about a world after the war. 'Surely the State has no higher duty .... than to devise some way of national and international life which will no longer need the final arbitrament of arms...'

He may sound, like a Social Gospeller, and he certainly shared Waddell's love for literature, but it would appear that his ambitious 'crusades' derived from his theology. Scripture was not a text-book for science or archaeology, but as we read it the truth possesses us. We are aided not by logic but intuition. His confident, and in his own words 'victorious' faith, was marked by a deep reverence for the 'order of eternity'.

## **James Gibb 1857-1935**

**Born** in Aberdeen, of working-class parents, in democratic United Presbyterian Church.

**1881** Poor health suggested emigration to Melbourne. Theological study in Ormond and missionary in working class Footscray. Strong advocate of Calvinist orthodoxy.

**1886 Minister of First Church, Dunedin ( 29 years old!).** Outstanding preacher.

**Theology** Alexander Begg led opposition to use of organ, and Gibb moved to support of reform group around Salmond, Waddell; receptive to biblical criticism, reserved about literalist application of Westminster Confession; personal tragedy of three children dying in infancy; rejected view that unbaptised infants beyond salvation. Himself accused of heresy. 1893 Declaratory Act.

**Church Union.** 1894 Convener of Church Union committee (North and South Island Presbyterianism) and resolutely but diplomatically pushed cause of church union till successful in 1901. Presbyterianism as first national church in NZ. Gibb its first Moderator. Also creative in promoting **Home Mission, Bible in Schools.**

**1903 St John's Wellington.** By now leading Presbyterian, and probably best publicly known clergyman in New Zealand. ( Attendances at Presbyterian churches higher than in Anglican).

**Forceful advocate** of temperance, Bible in Schools, observance of Sunday, opposition to opium trade. Dream of a Christian New Zealand, i.e. a Protestant one. Hoped to unite with Congregational and Methodist Churches. Continued to build network of parishes through convenership of Home Mission Committee. Passionate advocate of education: e.g. founder of Scots College, Turakina Girls College. **But 1903-4** Prime Minister Seddon blocked referendum on Bible in Schools; opposed by Catholics; considerable public suspicion.

**Christianity and War.** Had been cautious about Boer War. Initially unreserved support of Allied cause in First World War. But listened to close friends, such as Charles Murray in Christchurch and horrified at casualties. Moved towards a pacifist position. Strong advocate of League of Nations.

**Christian Socialism.** Like Waddell and many of friends a Christian Socialist, and supported infant Labour Party.

**1926** Resigned from St John's. Theologically, moved towards Barthianism.