

**RELIGION AS AN
HISTORICAL LENS
IN AOTEAROA
(AND ELSEWHERE)**

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Largely due to the efforts of such as Peter Lineham and Allan Davidson, religious history (and specifically Christian history) is alive and well in Aotearoa New Zealand. Peter and Allan's pioneering bibliographic and primary source collections have enabled and encouraged a flourishing of studies in denominational, intercultural, organisational and social aspects of religion. Indeed we are, arguably, in these aspects unusually well served. This is not so obviously true, however, in broader analyses of our collective past. The present article extends its focus beyond New Zealand alone, to the historiography of Britain and its erstwhile colonies. I will endeavour to explore the possibilities and potential for *religious history*. It will become obvious that what I mean by this is something deeper than merely a *history of religion* – as valid and valuable as that remains. Rather, I want to press at the possibility and advisability (or otherwise) of wider history which does not only see religion as a phenomenon to be explained, but employs religion as a key interpretative motif *by which* to explain.

There is no imagining, of course, that this is a new idea. It has been, however, assumed to be dubious, and tarred with associations of special pleading and hagiography. For a century and more, suggestions of this type have only to be greeted with a reference to the chief whipping boy of modernism, Lord Acton, for a stony silence to descend upon the historiographical dinner party. Certainly, to read again Lord Acton's Inaugural Lecture, as he took up the post of Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1895, is to realise how far our assumptions have moved from his Catholic, whiggish, religiously-centred approach. Nevertheless, it is salutary to returning to this landmark text in some detail before simply dismissing it as a signpost of an outmoded (and not-too-lamented) worldview.

Acton is unabashedly presentist in his expectation of what the study of history can deliver.

To men in general I would justify the stress I am laying on Modern History, neither by urging its varied wealth, nor the rupture with precedent, nor the perpetuity of change and increase of pace, nor the growing predominance of opinion over belief, and of knowledge over opinion, but by the argument that it is a narrative told of ourselves, the record of a life which is our own, of efforts not yet abandoned to repose, of problems that still entangle the feet and vex the hearts of men. Every part of it is weighty with inestimable lessons that we must learn by experience and at a great price, if we know not how to profit by the example and teaching of those who have gone before us, in a society largely

resembling the one we live in. Its study fulfils its purpose even if it only makes us wiser, without producing books, and gives us the gift of historical thinking, which is better than historical learning. It is a most powerful ingredient in the formation of character and the training of talent, and our historical judgments have as much to do with hopes of heaven as public or private conduct. Convictions that have been strained through the instances and the comparisons of modern times differ immeasurably in solidity and force from those which every new fact perturbs, and which are often little better than illusions or unsifted prejudice.¹

Acton then turns to religion, which he sees as a key driving force in human affairs.

The first of human concerns is religion, and it is the salient feature of the modern centuries. They are signalised as the scene of Protestant developments. Starting from a time of extreme indifference, ignorance, and decline, they were at once occupied with that conflict which was to rage so long, and of which no man could imagine the infinite consequences. Dogmatic conviction—for I shun to speak of faith in connection with many characters of those days—dogmatic conviction rose to be the centre of universal interest, and remained down to Cromwell the supreme influence and motive of public policy.²

And then a telling phrase:

Out of these controversies proceeded political as well as historical science.³

Certainly few would now claim the confidence and certainties of Acton. Nevertheless it is clear that, as far as British historiography at least is concerned, Acton-like elements have persisted. Michael Bentley, in a fascinating study of self-consciously “modernist” historiography, has shown that Christian (specifically, Anglican, then morphing to free church/social gospel interpretations of the British state) outlived Acton, lasting until well after World War II. Church interpretations in fact remained remarkably robust, much longer than expected. They didn't merely fade away with the Victorian age. Rather, they had to be beaten to death by dismissive secularists who themselves often held only a peripheral role on the historiographical stage. In a delightfully combative passage, Bentley cites, for instance, Lytton Strachey whose

1 F. E. E. Acton, *Lectures in Modern History* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1906), 7–8.

2 *Ibid.*, 8.

3 *Ibid.*, 9.

languorous eye looked on religion as a form of cholera which modern sanitation would surely eradicate. He hated Christians of all kinds, which gives his social thought a pleasing symmetry, but reserved the lowest shelf of his hell for those whom he called ‘wobblers’: intellectuals who knew that they ought to know better but continued believing out of fraud, fabrication or fear. A. L. Rowse once pointed out that Strachey did not merely dislike religion but had no idea of what it might be like to have a religious experience. One may be moved to add that it takes one to know one....⁴

Historians are familiar, of course, with Herbert Butterfield as an apparent stand-out for the significance of religion in wider affairs. Moreover, (importantly for the present study) the strand persists – at least in the case of British historiography, right up to the present. It may be observed in David Bebbington’s fine work on Gladstone and his age.⁵

It also appears, in more aggressive form, in the proposals of J. C. D. Clark.

Clark, onetime a fellow at Butterworth’s college – Peterhouse – at Cambridge, is justly renowned for his a study of the long eighteenth century in which he places religion, in particular the Church of England, at the centre of affairs. He is nowadays at the University of Kansas where, according to his website (and I quote), that he is “at work on the first ever book on the Enlightenment.”⁶

As that somewhat audacious claim suggests Clark is embodiment of the Pieter Geyl’s dictum that “history is argument without end.” Indeed Clark picks up that very line in his introduction to the edited volume *A World by Itself: A History of the British Isles*.⁷ In this 2010 work Clark, with others, interprets the British narrative since the Romans through the triple lenses of Material, Religious and Political Cultures. One of his arguments is that the very uncertainty, the contingency, the conflictedness of British history makes aspects, including the religious aspects, all the more remarkable. Here is Clark in his Introduction, showing that you don’t have to be an Actonian whig to take religion seriously.

4 Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England’s Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

5 See David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

6 <https://history.ku.edu/jonathan-clark> accessed 7 April 2016.

7 Jonathan Clark (Ed) *A World By Itself: A History of the British Isles* (London: Heinemann, 2010.)

Because history is argument about what is potentially verifiable, it is able to rescue the past from polemical misuse, and several such misuses are implicitly confronted here. It may have become recently fashionable to be too fastidious to confront questions of power, too queasy to mention war, too idealistic to grapple with law, too secularly self-righteous to mention religion. This volume respects none of these inhibitions.

...‘secularisation’ (conventionally, the other side of the coin of ‘modernisation’) can now be understood as a recent project, not a timeless process, and despite that project religion here assumes a major salience as a framework of social life.⁸

In his own chapter, covering the period Restoration in 1660 to Reform in 1832, Clark directly challenges the discourse of enlightenment secularisation.

Much evidence for a powerful mainstream religiosity is now being uncovered, and the receptiveness of English-speaking

populations to revivalism can be interpreted as a manifestation of this mainstream religiosity rather than a disproof of it: from Methodism through to early nineteenth-century evangelicalism, religion was the common coin of mass discourse.

The popular mind of the eighteenth century was shaped less by rationalism than by a growing evangelicalism.⁹

William Rubinstein, writing in the same volume of the Victorian era, is even clearer.

Religion was arguably the most fundamental mode of individual self-identity in nineteenth-century Britain,...Certainly we look at Victorian Britain as a religious society, with evangelical Christianity at the heart of our image of it.¹⁰

Thus, in a volume that one reviewer (Tristram Hunt, in *The Guardian*) shrewdly points out in an essay on British identity, religion is placed at the core.

So what, then, of the British colonies? Here, I contend, there remains much to do. The field is not empty of course. In South Africa, the significance of Exodus themes – especially, with deleterious effects, the theme of conquest and of being chosen people – has long been recognised in Afrikaners

8 Clark, *A World By Itself*, xix–xx.

9 *Ibid.*, 382–383.

10 *Ibid.*, 484.

self-identity. F. A. van Jaarsveld in his influential 1962 work *The Afrikaaners' Interpretation of South African History* notes that this had a profound effect. As John Newton puts it “after the great Trek, the Boers increasingly hardened in their attitude to the Black People, whom they saw as “Naatsies”, the nations without the law, Canaanites or Philistines.”¹¹ The Afrikaaners religious sense of identity can thus readily be seen to drive colonisation and, moreover, to set the scene for the eventual rise of Apartheid.

Such insights might have provided a rich vein for Jamie Belich’s 2009 book *Replenishing the Earth*, but Belich in this instance provides a poignant illustration of the failure to see the religious questions with enough clarity. Belich identifies a “settler revolution” which engendered the spread of the Anglo world. This was the product of the combined coincident forces of “the birth of the Anglo-world, the rise of mass transfer, and the settler transition”. This last, “the settler transition”, was “the cultural dimension: a great shift in attitudes to emigration that took place around 1815 on both sides of the Atlantic.”¹² Belich’s study spans the periods analysed by Clark and Rubenstein, yet religious factors barely enter into his understanding of Anglo “settlerism”. He somewhat crudely concedes that “it may be that religious and secular Utopianism, and migration and millennialism, were both partners and alternatives.”¹³ If Clark and Rubenstein are even half right, a richer analysis remains.

There is a fascinating, if flawed, contrast example across the Tasman. No name is more prominent in Australian historiography than Manning Clark. Clark set out in his multi-volume *A History of Australia* not to write a new textbook or analytical study, but to pen a religio-historical myth for his country. This is particularly evident in the first volume, where the story of European discovery and settlement is laid out as an existential flood of tension between Catholic, Protestant and (though often unacknowledged by Clark) enlightenment sensibilities. To all intents and purposes, for Europeans, this was an open, empty new world. How under God were they to create it, and be created by it?

Manning Clark’s is an astonishing attempt at a national history with religion irreducibly at its core. It is inspiring in its sheer audacity and in

¹¹ John Newton “Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements” *Concilium: Exodus – A Lasting Paradigm* (Edinburgh:T&TClark Ltd, 1987), 56–62, 60.

¹² James Belich *Replenishing the Earth: the Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World 1783–1939* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 145.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164.

suggesting what might be possible if religion is taken seriously in the round. It is also a cautionary tale which shows, yet again, that if you are going to do this you actually have to write good history. Clark was rightly censured for sloppy documentation and selective interpretation. (Perhaps he forgot that history is argument without end!) Nevertheless, his project remains a monument to the possibilities of a religious history of a colony.

There is nothing like it for New Zealand. Nevertheless, elements exist which suggest what such a project might produce. Aotearoa New Zealand has the remarkable elements of early missionary engagement, the Treaty of Waitangi and the later Māori conversion. The role of religion here is complex and profound. This is increasingly being recovered as more sophisticated treatments of the Māori/missionary encounters, for instance, emerge to qualify the simplistic denials of early postcolonial historiography. Tony Ballantyne, in his

recent study of *Missionaries, Māori and the Question of the Body* gives a glimpse of just one aspect of this mutual impact. He argues that the missionaries’ acceptance of the necessity to engage with Māori using

the local language, and in particular the project of translating the scripture into Māori “not only reshaped the linguistic underpinnings of Māori mentalities and transformed Māori political idioms, but also changed the missionaries themselves.” This intimate connection was profound enough to make the missionaries suspect in the eyes of advocates of colonisation who feared such “philo-Māoris” “were intent on preventing the extension of colonial authority”.¹⁴

For a country now firmly in a pathway of biculturalism, such insights gained by taking religion seriously should be natural parts of explaining the story. There are potentially many others. I want to follow three threads.

The first has to do with both constitutional and social history. New Zealand is a late colony, the last significant British attempt at mass colonisation (as opposed to extractive Empire). The Treaty of Waitangi came in 1840, eight years after the 1832 reform and of course after the rise of Tractarianism. The odds were against establishment in the colony anyway, but, as Allan Davidson has noted in a number of places, Selwyn’s High Church suspicion of state interference in Church affairs made the pragmatic decision for Voluntary Compact as the

¹⁴ Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of Empire: Missionaries, Maori, and the Question of the Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 5–6.

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basis for the Church constitution more logical. Now, the significance for the Church of the 1857 Constitution has been well noted. The long-run implications for the state constitution have been less explored. Changing patterns of legislation, the relation of the state to the Crown, the function and eventual demise of the Upper legislature – each of these is likely to have a history which would benefit from an analysis in the light of being an attempt to replicate in this colony the English Constitution minus one of its key elements.

Then there is the much more amorphous social factor. Although not *officially* established, the Anglican Church in New Zealand nonetheless carries with it a certain “afterglow”. It is common to experience official recognition of Bishops, retired or active, at public, even secular events – honour which is not matched for leaders of non-episcopal denominations. In addition, this will have a regional aspect. Denominational prominence for instance changes dramatically south of the Waitaki. On the other hand anyone who has lived in Canterbury, or who has observed the recent disputes over the Christchurch cathedral will wonder what non-establishment actually looks like. Once mapped, what might such insights say of New Zealand society – especially Pākehā society? What British assumptions persist? Was the clothing of memories of “Home” in clerical garb a significant force in community shaping? Is there a significant spirituality at play here?

My second thread is closer to the nonconformist heart. John Stenhouse has pointed us to the religious context of settler society and its impact on questions of land, in particular disputes over Māori land. Those who came to a free country, a place of opportunity found land to be not as freely available as they imagined. If the Church was seen by such colonists to be siding with the Iwi, the landowners, then this seemed like the constrictions of the Old Country all over again.

This of course forms the opening narrative in John’s excellent chapter in the Giselle Byrnes-edited *New Oxford History of New Zealand*. Sadly, despite John’s poignant reminder, this volume is exhibit one in the case that the relegation of religion remains a problem in New Zealand historiography. In her “Introduction”, Giselle Burns declares that the approach is to eschew Nationalist approaches, “to complicate, rather than simplify” the picture.¹⁵ However, one declaration does not a summer make.

15 G. Byrnes (Ed), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

What emerges is that the stated goal of not having a single interpretative framework such as Nationalism is far from achieved. Indeed it is evident that utopian nationalist approaches are merely replaced with a dystopian post-colonial interpretation. Most remarkable for the themes of this gathering, however, is the following manifesto:

The New Oxford History of New Zealand suggests that history and identity are more likely to have been made (and remade along the lines of culture, community, family, class, region, sexuality and gender...and that these are more important than ideas of evolving nationhood and appeals to national exceptionability.¹⁶

The omission of religion in this list of factors shaping history and identity is telling. John Stenhouse’s chapter, good, even subversive as it is, remains the ghettoed treatment of a subject that the other chapters hardly visit. This represents an enormous historiographical dissonance with the types of interpretation quoted earlier of J. C. D. Clark and William Rubinstein. This is all the more disquieting given that this recent New Zealand approach gathers work widely representative of the professional discipline. If religion, and specifically evangelical religion, can be even argued to be central to identity formation in Britain in the 19th century, then it is time for the historians of former British colonies to revisit their assumptions and consider anew its impact in the wider empire.

A third thread has to do with legal and judicial history, the example being the appointment and rulings of the first permanent bench of the Court of Appeal. Until the late 1950s New Zealand did not operate a separate bench of Appeal judges. The appellate function was covered by Supreme Court justices drawn together for the purpose. This arena may perhaps be assumed to be a far country from religious history. That, however is the very historiographical assumption which I wish to challenge. Indeed it is the principal contention of this study that the question of underlying religious dynamics should be asked in fields of historical enquiry. Obviously the extent to which such factors will be found to be significant will vary considerably. In the case of the New Zealand Court of Appeal, I contend, the significance is marked.

This is seen in the appointment process itself. Though technically in the hands of the Governor-General on behalf of the Crown, judicial

16 *Ibid.*, 2.

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appointments in practice are driven by Cabinet, specifically the Attorney-General. In 1957 the mandate for appointment was held (and held, it seems, very tightly)¹⁷ by John Marshall, Attorney-General in the National Government and a well-connected conservative Christian. Importantly, the first three appointees to the permanent bench of New Zealand's highest indigenous court (at the time) had significant church backgrounds. Justices Gresson (Anglican), Cleary (Catholic) and North (Baptist) were longstanding and respected active members of their faith communities. North, the first President of the Court, was in fact the son of the first Principal of the New Zealand Baptist Theological College, the combative J. J. North. Strong, though contrasting, Christian convictions were also characteristic of the next two appointments in the early 1960s: Justices Turner and McCarthy. These five men dominated the Court through the 1960s. That they were excellent interpreters of the law is clear, but the likely impact of their religious positions can be illustrated in two important spheres of law.¹⁸

The first relates to matrimonial property. The Justices of the Court under North's Presidency maintained a conservative position on the rights of wives to shares of property. A later Justice – highly respected, though much more clearly of a liberal disposition – Cooke J, reviews the period as follows.

It has to be said that the Court of Appeal of those days was not seen at its best in dealing with the rights of women. Unhelpful decisions under the Matrimonial Property Act 1963 were a large part of the reasons leading to the much more sweeping and detailed Act of 1976.¹⁹

If issues of roles in marriage revealed assumptions and values, questions of public decency are an even more obvious field in which conviction may play a part. This seems indeed to be the case. The 1960 case of *In re Lolita* is especially poignant. This was a test case regarding definitions of indecency. A preliminary hearing of the court crucially in the absence of North, who was temporarily replaced by Trevor Henry J suggested by majority a more liberal position. However by the time a full hearing took place, North had returned and the majority shifted to a designation of the book as indecent. North, held that the Court “was under a ‘solemn duty’ to ensure that books that dealt with sex as if it was

an ‘animal passion’...should not be allowed to enter New Zealand.”²⁰

This was a controversial decision, with far-reaching consequences, as the historian of the Court, Peter Spiller, concludes.

The outcome of the Lolita case prompted considerable dissatisfaction in some quarters. The evident reliance of the decision on the judges’ value judgements was a factor in the repeal of the Indecent Publications Act 1910. The new Act of 1963 constituted the Indecent Publications Tribunal to decide whether books and sound recordings were indecent. One of the first books to be submitted to this committee was *Lolita*. This time the majority decision was to lift the ban on the book, thus allowing its release to the New Zealand public.²¹

Judicial decisions define law. As such they highlight issues of conflict and change in wider society. As the highest New Zealand Court, the Court of Appeal was a times a lightning rod in the clash of expectations as values rapidly changed in post-war society. Much deeper analysis of decisions and

opinions is needed for a full picture, but it seems clear that religious background was reflected in the approaches of the first permanent bench. It is just as likely that the different religious commitments (or the absence of them), were as significant in the markedly contrasting decisions of the second generation of permanent members from the 1970s onwards.

Constitution, national identity shaping, judicial history: these examples I imagine as historiographical threads – not to be pulled from some tattered garment but rather to be woven into our understanding of the past. Religion, as an active interpretative motif, will expose possibilities and suggest questions that materialist or other ideological lenses will miss. It cannot, should not, must not be the only approach. But the tapestry of colonial history will surely be richer in colour and detail for its inclusion.

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17 P. Spiller, *New Zealand Court of Appeal 1958–1996: A History* (Wellington: Brookers, 2002), 19.

18 For biographies of each appointee, see Spiller, *passim*

19 Lord Cooke, “Foreword” in Spiller vii–viii.

20 Spiller, *Court of Appeal*, 323.

21 *Ibid.*