

# The social and political context of Jewish mission in Australia

By Bob Mendelsohn  
Given at LCJE CEO conference  
Basel, Switzerland  
28 May 2013

Shalom friends. Today I'm going to speak to you about the context of Jewish missions related to society in Australia. Let me break that down into 7 national contextual factors and then some Jewish contextual factors highlighted in the two main Jewish centers in Melbourne and Sydney.

A bit of history. Aborigines have lived on the continent for thousands of years. The white settlers began coming en masse to Australia under the Dutch, French and British most significantly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *First Fleet* as it is called arrived in 1788 on what now is known as Australia Day. 26 January. Unlike other free colonies, there was no immediate religious ceremony to mark the landing, and although the first religious service was held only eight days later, they founded no common Australian religion.

## ***NATIONAL CONTEXTUAL FACTORS***

### **1. CONSTANTINIANISM: RELIGION AND POLITICS AS ONE**

The preachers of the early days of the colonies (Australia federated in 1901) often functioned as magistrates and thus religion and politics were merged into one power base. The preacher who spoke to the colonists on Sundays was also the lawmaker to the initial and continual convict base of society. Convicts generally don't have high regard for law, and especially lawgivers, so the populace often despised, or at least rejected, the religious leadership.

### **2. IMPORTED RELIGIONS: CULTURE**

As other settlers came through the decades, they brought their civic and religious devotion or rejection from their former homes. The Irish brought the Catholic tradition; the Greeks brought their Orthodox heritage. But as Mark McCrindle, my favorite Aussie sociologist, as well as the Australian census (taken every five years) regularly report, mainline religion is continuing on the decline. This is taking place not only in Australia, as many Western countries are seeing this as well, but when you start with a low number and shrink, the results are remarkable.

McCrindle reported some months back, "Australia's population has doubled since 1966 (11.5 million), and at that time 1 in 4 Aussies attended church (2.6 million). These days, with double the population, our church attendance has actually dwindled to less than 1 in 14 (1.6 million).

Looking at the ABS religious statistics might give some false positives for Christian leaders, showing that just under 64% of Australians check the

Christianity box. However, we certainly don't see those numbers at church. In our research, we gave Australians the option to select both spirituality and religion. The findings showed that Australians identifying with the Christian faith dropped from 6 in 10, to 4 in 10. Overall, only 9% were actively practicing and regularly attending at a place of worship.”

### **3. SPORT: WHERE'S THE BEACH?**

Sport is huge in many countries, not only during Olympics or World Cups, but also in ordinary society. This seems to be even larger here in Australia. 90% of the population (22 million at this point) lives within 100 miles of the coasts. The country, although the same size as continental USA, is largely uninhabited in the centre. Thus beach culture, flesh, and sun 'worship' dominates. Surfing joins cricket, the four codes of football, netball and just about any other sport as a national pastime. Some churches are buying facilities that operate as sport centres, and allow competitions and practices for sport during the week, but their regional (and certainly national) impact is yet to be seen.

When churches have Grand Final and Church as a mixture ('come and watch the game on our big screen') the people generally prefer their home, their mates' homes and the attending liquor and food. We are often seen as killjoys.

Some individual pastors are also local sport chaplains and that's useful, but no major impact is made nationally.

### **4. SYMPATHY FOR THE NATIVES**

Although there is a fascination with the land, bush, animals and the native peoples, the Christian church has basically avoided both. Notable exceptions are Mission Aviation Fellowship, the Lutherans who missionized the Aborigines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Australia and Northern Territory, and the Anglican Church Bush Aid society. This typical domination by the Christianizing white man of the native peoples of a country leads to further separation of Christian mission from general society. Especially after 2007 when then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd led the country in apology to the Aborigines. The Church did not take that baton from government and make a major difference.

### **5. TWO MAJOR FACTORS IN THE XX CENTURY: WELFARE AND MORALS**

The Church at large moved to increased insignificance when it made itself more of a social welfare organization by shirking its evangelistic mandate. This was a function of the 1900 and 1910 global missionary conferences in New York City and Edinburgh. Thus "Faith and Order" replaced historical missions in most mainline denominations and led to the formation of the World Council of Churches. When the government took on this welfare role, albeit not to everyone's satisfaction, the church was sidelined.

The other issue that has defined the church is the nickname "Moral Conscience" of the country. With the decline of the belief in morality, which seriously began in the 1960s, the church's irrelevance has increased each

year. In one generation feminism, gay rights, partnering and not marriage, has so dominated the field of ethics that the church when it does weigh in, is seen as dinosaur-like and unworthy of continued conversation. And not to be missed is the regular media coverage of church and synagogue sex scandals. By becoming both the moral compass and a welfare club, the church gave up its power and its authority. When the church proclaims the Gospel of the Crucified and Risen Saviour, it reclaims both.

## **6. MATESHIP VS ISOLATION: ALL ALONE**

Even though there is a national belief in mateship, evidenced in sitting in the front seat of the taxi, or calling your father or son by the title 'mate,' a major Australian value is individualism, seen in making it in the bush. The rugged individualism engendered in the bush, is seen in Aussie pride in such larrikins as Ned Kelly (the consummate bush ranger) and men like Steve Irwin (Crocodile Hunter) and Paul Hogan (Crocodile Dundee). That lone nature of life actually plays out in religion as most Australians consider themselves spiritual, even believing in 'someone out there', but unable to declare the Christian message. This lack of articulation is a function of loneliness, and rejecting the gathered church community.

Many cities gather for National Thanksgiving Day or Church Together, but the major cities of Melbourne and certainly the worst is Sydney, would be often more tribal than communal in this regard.

This leads me to the final factor, and the hardest to overcome.

## **7. THE TALL POPPY SYNDROME**

Many of you would have heard of this. It's a national characteristic of lopping off the top of any flower that rises above any other flower in a field. It's a commitment to non-showiness. In practice this means that moderation rather than excellence or rising above your fellows is the norm. When a religious group starts making waves or being noticed, the others in their sphere might call them on it. Take your neighbor down, rather than encouraging others to succeed, that's the ordinary way of life Down Under.

Consider an American politician running for president. This may change, but until now, unless you are a Christian and attend church and carry a Bible, you won't be elected president. If however you are running for Prime Minister in Australia and carry a Bible you will lose points in the polls.

Peter Hartcher in the Sydney Morning Herald defined the Tall Poppy Syndrome in this way. "Citizens know that some among them will have more power and money than others... But according to the unspoken national ethos, no Australian is permitted to assume that he or she is better than any other Australian. How is this enforced? By the prompt corrective of levelling derision. It has a name - The "Tall Poppy Syndrome." The tallest flowers in the field will be cut down to the same size as all the others. This is sometimes misunderstood... It isn't *success* that offends Australians. It's the affront committed by anyone who starts to put on superior airs."

To be sure there are many other national contextual factors about the role or I should say roles of religion, but in the prescribed time limit, I've chosen these seven.

## ***SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR JEWISH MISSION IN***

### ***AUSTRALIA***

As for Jewish missions those seven factors exist to be sure. And our distinctive as a separate people also yield other factors that we have to battle to bring the Gospel to the 100,000 Jews in the sunburnt country.

### **JEWISH COMMUNITY PERSONALITY**

Jews first came to Australia on First Fleet and have had a continuing presence since then. The oldest continuing-running synagogue in the Southern Hemisphere is in Hobart, Tasmania, and barely ekes out a minyan each week. The major Jewish centers in Melbourne and Sydney boast approximately 90% of the Jews of the entire country. Immigrants helped fill that number after World War II. Yet the influx of immigrants led to a split among the urban Jewish centers. Most of the Jews who lived in Sydney were from Western and Central Europe. These Jews tended to be more secular than their Eastern European counterparts, who, by and large, settled in Melbourne. As a result, Sydney became known for its secular Jewish population, and Melbourne for its Orthodox community. At the same time, Perth also became primarily Orthodox as thousands of observant South Africans arrived. In the early 1990s Russian Jews moved. Smart British Jews move for the weather. (I felt a need to include that.)

Since the population is relatively small, [97,335 Australians identified as Jewish in the 2011 census] the Jewish community holds itself in proximity and a natural tightness. There are Jewish day schools in both cities and others have tried in other capitals. The Orthodox are the most observable, but hardly the most in population. Observance and Hebrew language usage among the Liberal Jews is significantly higher than Reform Judaism in the US and Europe. One Jewish newspaper serves the country. The Jewish Board of rabbis is extremely effective in watching for anti-Semitism and other problems against Jews. Poverty is not a significant issue for most Jewish people in Australia as compared to Russia or Israel. So a social outreach including jobs training and food distribution is hardly necessary although on a limited scale among Russian Jews has been successful at times.

### **EITHER/OR: YOU CAN'T BE JEWISH AND BELIEVE IN JESUS**

Jewish believers number about 1,000 in country. That's not very many. The Church has perpetrated for decades that once a Jew finds Messiah he no longer is a Jew. My own GP believes that. He 'used to be' a Jew. The synagogue perpetrates that falsehood also. It's therefore a major uphill battle to get a Jewish believer to identify as a Jew and a believer. Seems so natural for some of you, but for an Aussie Jew, that's not easy.

## **JEWISH TALL POPPY**

Religion itself is mocked in our world, and certainly so in Australia, so the identification of a Jew as a Jew who is not orthopractic is something most won't do. Showiness is not an Aussie tradition, in fact the 'tall poppy syndrome' is much more visible. Consider the new immigrant in 1956. The last time someone asked him if he were a Jew, and he said 'yes' his family would have been put in the camps, so this time he would be less inclined to do so. That is played out over and over in our conversations. We have no 'bumper sticker' people in Australia and certainly not in the religious world. With all these factors at work sociologically and religiously the task of reaching Jews is as hard as it is for you in your circumstance. We have distinctives, which don't make it harder for us than you, but might help you see some of the differences. Thank you for praying for us to be faithful. Thank you for helping us with volunteers you might send our way to intern with us. Let us keep praying for each other and for the work and the workers who are doing it tough and proclaiming Y'shua as Messiah to our own people worldwide.