NO GOLDEN AGE OF CHURCHGOING

We sometimes hear laments over the decline of churchgoing, with today's diminished congregations compared to the numbers that supposedly filled churches up until the 1950s. But were churches all that well attended in that comfortable era? Some were, but an informal assessment of church attendance in one Melbourne suburb in my childhood suggests that there was wide indifference to religion even then.

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Census statistics and everyday observation indicate that institutional Christianity, especially of the Anglican and Protestant sort, is slowly – or not so slowly, recent figures suggest – declining in Australia. It is becoming more rare to meet people who regularly go to church. Those who do tend to be elderly. Most congregations include a high proportion of older people, although it is worth noting that this has always been so. I have attended many churches over many years, and, although there were and are notable exceptions, in my experience Australian congregations have always been largely elderly, as though the supply of older churchgoers replenishes itself from one generation to the next.

Nevertheless it is true that in most places congregations were larger in the past in all churches, not excepting Roman Catholics (the catastrophic decline in Catholic congregations in the years since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s deserves to be examined as a separate case and has been compounded by the failure of the Catholic establishment to try to arrest it). But even if churches used to be better attended, there was never the golden age of churchgoing in Australia that is sometimes implied in memoirs and sociological treatises, a time when the community more or less as a whole turned out to services on Sundays. Most people were Christian believers of a passive sort – they knew who Jesus was and they expected Heaven to be the reward of a virtuous life and religion formed the basis of their morality: they even had their children christened in numbers far greater than today. But actually attending church on Sunday seems to have been regarded as optional, for those who "liked that sort of thing".

Many people stepped inside a church only for funerals and weddings. Nowadays funerals, except for Roman Catholics, are generally held in the spiritually sterile establishments of undertakers, where efforts are made to keep death at bay by the desperate phony cheerfulness of a "celebration of

life". Non-Catholic church weddings have all but disappeared. This is largely since the Whitlam revolution of the early 1970s when Gough's secularist government decided that a good way to shaft the churches was to break the near-monopoly on weddings they had in those days. People wanted a bit of ceremony on their big day and the only place they could get it then was a church, even if they weren't themselves regular churchgoers. The alternative was to thread your way among the filing cabinets and get married in the registrar's office. On the Soviet palace of marriages principle, the Whitlam regime invented civil celebrants and the opportunity to have a marriage ceremony with flowers and organza in a vineyard or on the beach. You could even write your own vows, which continues to yield some pretty excruciating efforts, as anyone who has attended secular weddings will know. The monopoly was broken and church weddings are now well under a quarter of the national total.

My own family, in my grandparents' and parents' generation, were churchgoers on one side and mixed on the other. My father's parents were observant Anglicans and his brother and two sisters and their families all went to church, if not every Sunday certainly once a month and at Christmas and Easter. My mother's family was Methodist. Her mother went to church fairly often (once, reeking like a brewery, after a bottle of beer my father was opening for his future father-in-law sprayed over her as she was about to go out the door). An uncle, who had "married money", had moved upmarket in his spiritual life and was an Anglican synodsman. Her father as far as I know never went to church, though he considered himself a Christian man. Her brothers and sisters were all occasional churchgoers and, when younger, attached to Methodist social and sports clubs. Among the children of the two families – my first cousins – churchgoing has with one exception been totally abandoned. In the case of their children, the once *de rigueur* family rituals of baptism (with a family christening robe, now heaven knows where) and church marriage have gone too.

For the first ten years of my life we lived in a quiet (though there was always a radio on somewhere) middle-class suburb called Glenhuntly which I think was typical of whole tracts of eastern and southern Melbourne. When I say middle-class it was rather mixed in socio-economic terms and I suppose what you would call "culturally". None of the neighbours were upper-middle, some were a sort of middle-middle and quite a number lower-middle. Some of these last lived in the only block of flats in the streets near us or in a half of a "villa pair". Few of any of these neighbours were churchgoers, though one or two of the non-RC parents sent their children to Sunday School, and as far as I can tell, apart from the

fact that none of the lower-middles ever went to church, there was no obvious class-based pattern of church affiliation among those who did. This was a time, between 1942 and 1954, when just over 40 per cent of the Australian population claimed in the census to be members of the Anglican, Presbyterian or Methodist churches and around 20 per cent Roman Catholic.

How did that statistic correspond to the reality in Glenhuntly at that time and the neighbours I knew? I think we might have been below the national average in terms of church membership. To test this surmise, I have returned autobiographically to the street where I used to live as I remember it *circa* 1950. I have described the neighbours as I remember them, changing their surnames but retaining the initial. I hope that apart from its observations on religious observance, this article might have some interest as a survey of a microcosm of suburban life. You will notice no Italian names, no Greek, no Jewish or Asian. Nor was there anyone from the British Isles. Multiculturalism was still some years away in Glenhuntly, although at Port Melbourne the big boats were bringing "new Australians" in thousands to our shores.

Our house was half of a "villa pair" in Augusta Street which my parents had lived in since 1942 and considered themselves lucky to have found during the wartime housing shortage. In our part of the street there were three neighbouring families living in villa pairs, semi-detached single-storey bungalows of uniform plan with stuccoed façades and exposed brick sides and back – individuality was achieved by some having gabled fronts and others hipped roofs. In the northernmost, on the corner of Beverley Street, were Mr and Mrs Carman and their curly-headed Shirley Templish daughter Faye, with no church connection, not even Sunday School for Faye. Mrs Carman was always worried-looking. Mr Carman, I believe, drank. I can picture him as a short sallow man in a grey hat. Hats seemed to my childish mind to be generally worn by men who were known for drinking. Pub bars in six o'clock swill photographs of the era are a sea of hats. The thing I remember most clearly about the Carmans was their brass front-door knocker in the form of the façade of Bath Abbey with the sculpted angels going up and down on the ladder to Heaven as dreamt by Jacob (Genesis 28 10-19). This image was the Carmans' sole visible association with religion.

Between them and us were the O'Tooles, who you would think from the name might be Roman Catholics but if so never went to Mass. Mr O'Toole was a barber in Glenhuntly Road, South Caulfield, with two teenage sons,

one of whom I think I heard had been an altar server at St Agnes's, the Anglican parish church in Booran Road not far away, whose tinkling single bell high in its red-brick neo-Romanesque tower could be heard over the rooftops three times each Sunday. St Agnes's was chronically under-attended, badly enough to have been commented on by our churchgoing relations. The sparseness of its congregation might have been attributable to St Agnes's being quite "High" when most Anglicans, from the archbishop down, were "Low". Indeed, my parents knew an Anglican family who lived almost opposite St Agnes's but never went to it, preferring to travel several miles away to St Mary's in Caulfield, which was resolutely Low (and thriving). Or perhaps the thin attendance at St Agnes's had something to do with the vicar, Mr Harwood, who was mumbling and scholarly and not much of what we would now call a "communicator" whereas Canon Cooper, the genial incumbent of St Mary's, was silver-tongued. Mr Harwood was the only Anglican cleric I have ever encountered who was a punter at the races. Caulfield Racecourse was within the parish, and he was to be seen there many a weekend. He began my brother's baptism with the words, "No more talking about races now till after the service, then if you'll come to the vestry I'll give you my tips for Saturday. Dearly beloved …" His cat used to wander up the aisle of the church and sit gazing at him from the sanctuary step when he was officiating at the altar.

Next to the O'Tooles came us, and next to us, in the southernmost half of the "pair" we occupied, were the Sinclairs. Mr Sinclair, a middle-aged stocky rather gruff man, was a projectionist at the Hoyts Esquire cinema in Bourke Street. He was prickly, and once asked my father who he thought he was when my father, urged by my mother, asked him to make less noise chopping wood late in his backyard because the children couldn't sleep. Since he was usually busy showing movies day and night, we never saw much of him. Mrs Sinclair was large in flowing diaphanous garments like a literary "Soul" and gave the impression of having come down in the world. She told me that they were related to the Earl of Wemyss, a Scottish peer whose territorial title was their daughter Valerie's second name. She didn't say how they were related but I have looked up *Debrett* and in the seventeenth century a Wemyss married a Miss Sinclair, so perhaps it was through her. The Sinclairs also had a son called Graham. The family had no church connection.

So far, then, that's one family (us) that I know went to church out of four.

Augusta Street was a dead end (agents would have called it a *cul-de-sac*). At right angles to the Sinclairs were the back gates of two substantial houses

in Hawson Avenue, brick Californian bungalows of a type once seen all over Melbourne, many of which in more "desirable" areas have been replaced with "luxury" residences in ersatz Classical or French Provincial. One of these belonged to an elderly couple called Mr and Mrs Davies. Mr Davies was a carrier with a leather apron and truck. Mrs Davies was slight, shrivelled and nervous-looking. She was also unusual in being a parishioner of St Agnes's. Every Sunday morning you could see her pass our front gate *en route* to the 8 o'clock service, never accompanied by her husband. Next to the Davies' were the Trewhellas. To "the man on the land" this was once a very familiar name. The Trewhella family were the inventors and patenters of a jack used across Australia for grubbing up obstinate tree roots. They had a foundry which was a principal source of employment in the small town of Trentham, between Woodend and Daylesford, where I was born when my father was working at the garage there, and where the Trewhellas, like the snooty family in the big house on the hill whose son falls for the girl from the wrong side of the tracks in a 1940s Hollywood film, had the most imposing house in the town.

Not that the Glenhuntly Trewhellas were snooty. Jack Trewhella, who I imagine was a cousin of the foundry-owning Trewhellas, was in his sixties and did odd jobs as a carpenter. The sound of his hammer and saw joined the distant radio as, to me, local natural noises. I think Jack was a widower, and his sister, Miss Trewhella – I never knew her Christian name – the sweetest and kindest old lady I have ever met, kept house for him. She befriended me and used to reminisce about Trentham while going about such old-fashioned pursuits as cutting green beans into wedges and laying them out to dry in the sun on wide tin trays. She was very old-fashioned in dress, always in a long skirt and apron like a cottager in Thomas Hardy. There were two other members of the household, who were either Jack Trewhella's daughters or nieces, I never knew. One, Gladys, left to get married and I had little to do with her. The other, Jean, who lived in her own little cabin, or "sleepout", among the orange trees in the backyard, was headmistress of the school for children with "special needs" in Montague Street, South Melbourne.

Jack Trewhella was a bowling companion of my maternal grandfather, who had an eclectic variety of friends in all sorts of places, and it was through him that my parents learned about the villa pair to rent in Augusta Street. We had to come to Melbourne from Trentham when I was three months old because my father took an "essential war job" repairing aircraft engines at Essendon aerodrome. The house in Glenhuntly was a godsend. It meant my mother could be close to her family while also being far from Essendon,

with consequently less chance of being bombed in the Japanese air raids that, in early 1942, my mother and everyone else were convinced would start at any time. (I don't remember anyone worrying that the bombs might have fallen on my father in Essendon during the day. Presumably that risk was part of the job).

None of the Trewhellas. as far as I know, ever went to church, though I imagine Gladys, like most brides at the time, was married in one.

At right angles to the Trewhellas' back fence, facing our villa across Augusta Street, was a handsome weatherboard Edwardian house with verandahs and high-pitched roofs, lived in by Mrs Baker-Smith and her son Robbie Bobbie. I never saw a Mr Baker-Smith but I suppose he was there somewhere. Their name made them sound English and classy, but although Mrs Baker-Smith was glamorous, or my idea of glamorous, with a cascade of dark hair and a figure like a buxom film star, they were conventional Aussie. There was no indication that Mrs Baker-Smith went to church nor Robbie Bobbie to Sunday School. Next to them, in another Edwardian house – these would have been the original houses in the street, when Glenhuntly was market gardens and before spec. builders in the 1930s began lining the rest of the street with villa pairs – was a Miss Nichols. Every Melbourne suburban street in those days had at least one elderly single lady living alone in a family house, left to herself after years of having looked after an aged parent (few people went "into care" then) who died only when all marriage prospects for the daughter had gone beyond recall. I don't think Miss Nichols was a churchgoer, even though single elderly women were the mainstay of many a congregation, and of many a Sunday School as voluntary teachers.

Perhaps because there were no children among them I didn't know the families further up the street from Miss Nichols. But I knew two of those on the other, eastern, side, the Balls and the Jollys. They were very different. They both lived in villa pairs but not in the same circumstances. The Jollys were respectable. The Balls were borderline. The Jollys, Frank and Betty, were not conspicuous churchgoers, though Mrs Jolly was later active in the Mothers' Union at St Agnes's and their elder son Billy became an Anglican priest in Tasmania. Mr Jelbart was an industrial chemist who worked at Sigma. I remember him building, to my envy, a beautiful model steamship in his garage-workshop every weekend. Mr Ball, two doors away, was, like Mr Baker-Smith but somehow, one suspected, not for quite the same reasons, another of those husbands and fathers who were never seen. This was quite common then, though whether it was due to drink or depression

or shyness or long hours of work was never clear. Where the garden and drive of the Jelbarts' house were tidy and well-tended, the Balls' were neglected, with weeds and patches of bare earth in the drive that led to a rickety-looking garage without a car in it (also quite common; less than half the people who lived around us had cars, which were generally Ford Prefects or diminutive English models). Neglected front yards of the time always seemed to include a broken pram or rusting bike, and the Balls had an assortment of such detritus. Mrs Ball had a haunted, uncosmeticised look of the sort you see in photographs of housewives in food queues during the War. Their son Alan had jug ears and, a couple of years older than I, occasionally made himself available for self-pleasuring exhibitions, with me as a pre-pubescent audience, in the empty garage. I am sure the Balls never went near a church.

Suburban life in many manifestations was on display around the corner from Augusta Street in "Otira", the block of flats that took up much of Beverley Street. The tenants had the variety of a TV soap. The ones I knew were those who had children, though there were two women living alone in their flats whom I knew by sight. Miss Lewis had a cake shop in nearby Glenhuntly Road to which my mother sometimes went. She could be described as "quiet and refined" but I have no idea whether she was a churchgoer. And sometimes to be seen with her head out of a first-floor window, surveying the scrappy grass in front of the flats with bulging exophthalmic eyes, was old Mrs Williams. A perpetual invalid, she couldn't have got out to go to church if she'd wanted to. Perhaps she had lived in her upstairs flat since she was ambulant; in the condition that I recall her she was imprisoned in it.

The children belonged to the Mackenzies and the Satchells on the ground floor. Mrs Mackenzie, Leslie, was a milliner, the kind of woman who spoke her own mind, tartly, with no great concern for refinement. She would not have been out of place presiding over a public bar. Her husband, Jock, large, bovine, red-faced and sandy-haired, was a groundsman at the Caulfield racecourse (though I once heard Mrs Mackenzie telling the Watkins door-to-door salesman that he was a plumber, which I imagine she thought more socially acceptable). I was particularly friendly, except on occasions when we fell out and I, weakling that I was, got "bashed up" by him, with their elder son Robert. I induced Robert to come to Sunday School at St Agnes's, and once to church, to which he decided to invite his mother. I heard her in the front yard of the flats recounting this to the ogre-like visage of old Mrs Williams at her upstairs window, making it sound as though Robert had asked her to go to the moon. "You won't believe what Robert wants me to

do now." "Oh?" "Go *to church*," she announced, emphasising the outlandishness of the request with theatrical eye-rollings "Up here?" asked the Williams, nodding in the direction of St Agnes's tower. "I wouldn't be going any further" was the theme of her answer. I think she got out of going by telling Robert that they were Presbyterian. The Presbyterian church in Glenhuntly was safely distant across the railway line.

Robert was by tacit consent leader of the "gang" of neighbourhood kids which included his younger brother David and Ken Ritchie from further along Beverley Street. The Jolly children, Billy and his younger brother Edward, were never members, probably because their parents (rightly) thought the gang members "rough" (Billy and Edward were regarded in turn by the gang as a bit "cissy", quite unfairly though Billy was slightly precious. "My teacher dislikes the world 'got' and so do I," he informed me one day after I had committed the solecism of using the participle). The gang's recreations were playing cowboys with cap pistols – the Mackenzie boys always had the largest giltest six-shooters – and going to the Saturday afternoon "matinee" in the cavernous mock-Moorish Hoyts Glenhuntly cinema with its Juliet balconies and barley-sugar columns simulating a palace in Old Spain, and wide blue ceiling in the guise of a starry firmament from which, over the years, the stars had one by one dropped into the stalls. As the only building remotely of interest in the architectural wasteland of the Glenhuntly "shopping centre", this edifice with its Art Deco façade (stylistic coherence was never a characteristic of 1930s cinemas) has, naturally, been pulled down after having suffered the preliminary indignity of unwanted picture theatres of being turned into a bowling alley.

Unlike my companions, my presence at "the pictures" was permitted "only on wet afternoons": on non-wet ones I was supposed to be outside "enjoying the fresh air". Nothing comes without its price and at the Hoyts Glenhuntly the price for me, apart from the ticket money, was the terror I felt at the prospect of being summoned onto the stage when the dinner-jacketed manager called out the ticket numbers of "lucky" girls and boys to answer a quiz question and win a prize. Fortunately my number was never lucky, and once that interruption was safely over I could relax., though the "wet afternoon" restriction meant I missed the continuity of the serials.

Robert used also to go with me each Friday night after tea to visit a curious lady called Mrs Watts who lived in a gloomy Italianate villa around the corner half-way up Augusta Street. She would make tea cake for us and we would sit and chat to her. The three of us were a strange combination. She

was a clergyman's widow and childless; and I would canvass her on churchy matters which then as now interested me, and she would deliver herself of various arcane facts. (I don't remember what Robert's contribution was.) She told us once that the then Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Mowll, had been a missionary in China where he was a prisoner for a time of communists or bandits who "did something odd to his private parts." She was very Low Church. She detested Anglo-Catholicism and thought the Anglican and Presbyterian churches should unite. She also loathed the Labor Party, and when I mentioned once that some of my mother's Methodist family voted Labor she ordered me from the house (the ban was rescinded when I promised that *I* would never vote Labor, whatever they did). I had met Mrs Watts through Sunday School at St Agnes's. She seemed happy to teach there, High Church though the parish was – although she once told the superintendent, Mr Hinneberg, a tailor, that his theology was "up the spout" – but would never go to a service in the church, walking instead all the way across Caulfield Racecourse to the more acceptably Low St John's in East Malvern, where, she said, the vicar and vestry would never countenance the "goings-on in St Agnes's". She would be very upset to know that St John's is now High and has taken over the parish of St Agnes's.

Roman Catholics, even more than Anglo-Catholics, were among her *bêtes-noires*. She regarded them as scarcely Christian. The reason RCs could afford such capacious churches, she explained, was that the priest would approach parishioners who had contributed and say, "I want to see more than that next Sunday or you'll have a front seat in Hell." "She says some odd things, that lady," said my mother when I retailed this *aperçu*.

In Beverley Street the Satchells' flat was next door to the Mackenzies'. Mr Satchell wore a leather jacket and went to whatever his work was loudly on a motorbike. Mrs Satchell was neat and brittle and wore very high heels you could hear some distance away, clacking on the concrete path as she made her way up the street. They had two sons, Barry and Paul, who never went to Sunday School nor their parents to any church. There was an embarrassing incident with Mr Satchell one afternoon after Robert and I, as a change from Alan Ball, had been carrying out an informal and intimate exploration of each other's lower parts in the communal laundry at the back of the flats, unaware that the laundry could be seen into from a bedroom window of the Satchells' flat. A few days later Mr Satchell took me aside in the yard. "I saw what you were doing," he said in a way that to me sounded sinister. He didn't tell my parents but I have occasionally wondered how long he was at the window.

I sometimes heard “the flats” dismissively referred to at home or by neighbours and although my parents were in no way snobbish, nor would have considered themselves to have anything to be snobbish about, the impression was that the flats, particularly the children and particularly the Mackenzies, were a bit “common”. They were too – the Jollys were quite right. The boys didn’t do well at school and would drop the “g” on participles and say “was” instead of “were” as in “we was there yesterday”. This did not apply to the Palmer family, who lived over the Satchells in the flat next to Mrs Williams. They were a breed apart, for they were devout Roman Catholics, or at least Mrs Palmer, a round woman with a bun, was, and their daughter Louise, who attended the local Catholic school, St Anthony’s. Mr Palmer, Dick, was either non-Catholic or non-practising. He was mild in manner, a plumber and a friend of my father. Their flat seemed foreign territory to me. I once gained access and noted, with a *frisson* of awareness of the exotic, something I had never seen before, a picture of the Sacred Heart with a little red electric light in front of it.

Opposite the flats was a substantial 1920s house where the only other Roman Catholics I knew of, the Hale family, lived. They were definitely a cut above the rest of us. Mr Hale was a businessman with a large American car. Their son, Ross, also went to St Anthony’s. The block of land next to the Hales’ was empty for years, with tall grass and dumped bits of junk. Each 5 November we lit a bonfire there to celebrate the then widely observed Guy Fawkes Night, for which we would stack garden rubbish and branches of trees and, once they were ablaze, gather around and risk our fingers and eyesight letting off fireworks and crackers. None of us had any clear idea who Guy Fawkes was, or that this was an anti-Catholic festivity, but as far as I know there were no protests from the Hales.

Beyond the flats in Beverley Street were two detached houses whose occupants, partly by virtue of not living in a flat, were more respectable. They were, respectively, Mr and Mrs Ritchie, parents of Ken, and grumpy old Mr Morgan and his somewhat younger wife. I should say that neither family had any church connection. All the children were terrified of Mr Morgan, the builder, now retired, and owner of the flats, who appeared only occasionally at his front gate in a bad temper to tick them off for no apparent reason than that they were there. He seemed to us *ancient* and I now realise he must have had some debilitating illness which made his existence miserable. To us he was simply sour.

Further on from the Ritchies’ on the corner of James Street was the largest house of our *quartier.* It was moderately grand, its two storeys making it

unique in the neighbourhood, grey roughcast and with a walled garden which contained a fishpond, the unfortunate goldfish in which Robert Mackenzie and others and I sometimes sneaked in through an unlocked side gate to try to catch. The owners, who were called Furneaux, never caught us, little cowards that we were. If they went to church it wasn't locally.

Beyond Beverley and Augusta Streets I knew no one. How many households was I familiar with in the quiet confined area where I felt at home? I have mentioned nineteen. How many had any association with a church? Five that I know of, of whom two were Roman Catholic, four I have no idea about but suspect were not churchgoers and ten with no connection at all. That makes the churchgoers 26.316 per cent, possibly higher but still less than half of the national 60 per cent of the population claimed as a combined membership in those days by the principal Christian denominations. The three non-Catholic households with a church connection were Anglican, a denomination that in 1950 counted 25 per cent of the population as its adherents.

There are three caveats. One is that it is likely that a large proportion of the non-church-attending professed denominational adherence on their census forms. It was unusual in 1950 to put "no religion"; many people who would have been vague about the difference between, say, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists, declared themselves one or the other at census time. This swelled the statistics if it didn't swell the congregations. It is also possible that some had had an association with a church earlier in life, as one of the O'Toole boys possibly had, or – though this is less likely – would acquire one later. Further, when we moved from Glenhuntly to Caulfield I encountered a much higher proportion of churchgoers, particularly Anglicans. St Mary's, the parish church, was crowded every Sunday, and in our own street of twelve houses, three were actively Anglican and a fourth and fifth had an Anglican connection through occasional churchgoing or enrolment in an Anglican school. This was probably typical for a solidly Anglo-Celtic middle-class suburb of that sort at that time, one that was certainly more prosperously "middle" than Glenhuntly. It would not have been typical over a wider area.

22 March 2024