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Abstract

Hugh Jackson's *Australians and the Christian God* is a valuable first attempt to articulate the historical relationship of Australians to the Christian God. Although this book contains some discussions that may serve to stimulate further investigation, its major shortcoming is that it is simply too short and therefore covers its subject matter only superficially.

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HUGH JACKSON: *Australians and the Christian God: An Historical Study*. Melbourne, Victoria: Mosaic Press, 2013; pp.214 + notes, bibliography and index.

Hugh Jackson's *Australians and the Christian God* is a valuable first attempt to articulate the historical relationship of Australians to the Christian. There are sections that could be valuable to researchers in that they could stimulate ideas. The greatest recommendation that can be given is that the work is simply too short and therefore covers the subject matter superficially.

Jackson's commendations include that throughout his work he uses several different kinds of sources for primary and secondary sources. These include newspapers, letters, memoirs, short stories, poetry, and even statistics. Jackson also completes the goal he set himself at the beginning of his book. Jackson wrote that the book's goal was threefold: to undertake the subject of belief in God; to do so in regards to all Australians and not specific groups or institutions; and to do so from the Enlightenment until today (17). Jackson acknowledges that no one before him has attempted to do all three things in the one work, and it is true. For this he has to be commended despite the criticisms that follow.

The first criticism concerns the scale of the project, the space given to the subject, and the subsequent poor organisation of topics and the 'jumping' between topics. It is unquestionable that a book on the subject of Australians and their idea of a Christian God is long overdue; however such an endeavour is too ambitious for a book that is a little over 200 pages in length. Thirteen designated chapters ensure that many subjects and topics are covered, even if at times, only in passing. These chapters cover the intellectual environment in Europe as a background to European settlement in Australia, and move chronologically to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

While the chapters proceed more or less chronologically, it says nothing for the organisation of the topics and information within chapters. A common feature, and a common frustration was the ‘jumping’ from one topic to another, at times with no clear logical thread. At times, this simply involves one paragraph devoted to one topic, and the subsequent paragraph on a different topic, while within the same section of a chapter.

There are two examples towards the end of the book which exemplify this feature. In the section ‘Autonomy since the sixties’ in the last chapter (‘Forgetting God’), Jackson simply lists the ways in which individuals may be able to practice personal individual autonomy in religious matters. In one paragraph he cites Muriel Porter’s experience of a man’s funeral in 2008 who had grown up in a church-going family, and who valued the associations with the church, but whose funeral was devoid of these associations (202-203). The next paragraph, with no linking sentence from the previous paragraph, detailed Sister Elizabeth Nowotny’s survey in the late 1970s of 300 final year students about their feelings towards God and their beliefs (203). While these may be instances in which individuals were able to express their personal individual autonomy in regards to religion, this is to be inferred from the text since it is not explicitly expressed. It does not help that the examples are geographically and temporally unconnected and ‘jump around’.

The space that is given to topics is another frustration, often leading to only superficial overviews of the topic. This resulted in such topics as certain revivals or issues to do with convicts receiving a few pages each. The prime example of this is that divorce is discussed in three paragraphs (151), despite it being one of the most significant social changes to have

occurred in the last 50 years. The discussion is immediately followed by several pages discussing the issue of God at Federation (151-154).

The author took 150 pages or three-quarters of the book to discuss the nineteenth century and arrive to the twentieth century. For a book dealing with the relationship of Australians to God since 1788, it is unfortunate that approximately half of the timespan is seemingly dealt in passing towards the end.

A final criticism of the work is its reference system. Understandably, this may have been the result of a requirement by the publisher, and not a decision by the author. Nevertheless, with no citations or references in the text, and all the notes placed at the back of the book, the result is a mistaken sense that at times the book may not be well referenced. A good example is when Jackson cites William Martin in his letter home to Ireland in the nineteenth century. Jackson is discussing the nineteenth century craze in the colonies for making money and becoming rich at all costs. Martin responds to his relatives about a prospective marriage partner that he is more interested in making money (92). The only reference that appears for this is that it came from Patrick O'Farrell's *The Irish in Australia* page 150 (244). However nothing furthermore was mentioned pertaining to who or what William Martin did and why his case was important enough to be cited.

As it was mentioned at the beginning of this review, Jackson's *Australians and the Christian God* is a valuable first attempt in researching the attitudes of Australians towards the Christian God.