

Alienated Neighbours: Interpreting the Cronulla Race Riots For Christ's Sake

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Abstract

On December 11, 2005 the Sydney beach-side suburb of Cronulla was subject to the worst race riot and 'revenge raids' in Australian history. Its origins lay in the mutual suspicion of an Anglo-Celtic surfing culture espousing 'Australian values' and Lebanese youths of 'Middle Eastern appearance'. The explosive outburst had been fed for some time by the politics of fear and suspicion with respect to the Muslim / Middle Eastern other, public concern about attitudes towards women, and media populism. Those Australian values being defended were at times linked with a residual Christian influence.

The purpose of this article is to explore the response of a public theology and consider how it might play its part in the nurturing of the public good, a civil society, and 'human flourishing'. The nature of a public theology is that it must be interdisciplinary and embedded in praxis. The case for a public theology is thus set within coverage of what transpired and interpretations emerging out of diverse forms of cultural studies.

Introduction: Casing Cronulla:

The media headlines had carried expressions of 'bad blood', 'hate' and 'revenge raids'. The reports testified to incidents of assault, smashed shops, wrecked cars, mobs of young men armed with guns and crowbars, and isolated stabbings. The television images were often those of young male Anglo-Celts seeking to protect their patch in a predominantly white area of Sydney known as 'The Shire'. The SMS messages and the radio shock jocks had declared that this was only 'the start of the war'. It was now time to 'reclaim the beach' at Cronulla from those caricatured as 'Lebs' and 'wogs' from nearby suburbs.¹

The Australian flag was pictured curled around bare chested bodies adorned with slogans like: 'we crew here; you flew here, Cronulla 2230'. Some T-shirts were altogether more blasphemous: 'love 'nulla; f..k Allah'. Others declared their owners belonged to an 'ethnic cleansing unit'.² Here and there were bursts of Waltzing Matilda, the national anthem, and the familiar sports chant, 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi, oi, oi'³. The megaphones screamed 'Get the Lebs off the beach'. Right wing groups like Australia First, the Patriotic Youth League and a skinhead group, Blood and Honour, appeared in order to grab a soundbyte and solicit new recruits. Convoys of Lebanese youth armed with baseball bats, stones and iron bars headed for Cronulla. The level of police presence was unprecedented. The state government was called back in order to extend police powers to include the locking down of trouble spots, the authority to seize cars, and shut down access to alcohol.

The enveloping rhetoric of the fortnight in question was sufficient to shock the city out of any complacency. How could this turn of events happen in what Jock Collins described as 'one of

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, December 7, 2005, printed the following SMS message: 'This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and wog bashing day. Bring your mates and let's show them that this is our beach and they are never welcome. . .let's kill these boys'. The radio talkback host most to the forefront was the popular Alan Jones .on radio station 2GB carried this message. Later Jones would boast, 'I led the charge'.

² Scott Poynting, "What Caused the Cronulla Riot?", *Race & Class*, 48 (2006): 88

³ Damien Murphy, "Thugs Ruled the Streets, and the Mob Sang Waltzing Matilda", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 12, 2005.

the great immigrant cities of the world'?⁴ The New South Wales state government was reckoned to be stunned. Ken Moroney, the Police Commissioner, declared the riots were 'amongst the worst violence' that he had seen in forty years of service.⁵ The recurring themes from commentators were of 'shame' and a 'darker, nastier side' of the self-professed 'Lucky Country' being exposed for a wider world to note.⁶ Bernard O'Riordan from *The Observer* (London) reckoned these events would leave a 'nasty blot on Australia's reputation'.⁷ And the tourist operators worried lest overseas visitors cancelled during the high season. Would the beaches now be closed? Would the cafes and restaurants recover lost business? In the midst of this turmoil of anxiety Michael Leunig published a cartoon in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Christmas Eve. The setting was an angel visiting shepherds proclaiming that a saviour was to be born; he would be found lying in a manger. The caption read 'he will be of Middle Eastern appearance'.⁸

Interpreting Cronulla

The Cronulla race riots had their immediate origins in a relatively minor flashpoint. It began with a confrontation between two or three teenage lifeguards and a Lebanese gang on the 4th December. There was a mix of racist taunting, bad language, and serious injury to one of the lifesavers. The actual details of what transpired would subsequently become contested and confused in the bid to assign blame. Within the span of one week the situation had escalated to become the worst such incident in Australian history.

The dilemma this kind of effusion of feeling and practice of violence presents is how should it then be interpreted. It was evidently not like a race riot in the way in which this designation has been applied in the United Kingdom, the United States and France. For Scott Poynting Cronulla 'represented a violent attack by members of a dominant ethnic group against a minority, in order to put them back in their place'.⁹ For John Hartley and Joshua Green it was, likewise, not a riot in the more normal manner of being 'directed against establishment institutions or state forces'. It was rather an expression of 'straightforward communal violence', but even then with a variation. The conflict was only marginally indebted to the more common causes of interracial strife—that is, economic competition for land and jobs. For Hartley and Green Cronulla was a 'fight about different ways of being Australian'.¹⁰

For those caught up in the heat of moment Cronulla was difficult to read. Was Morris Iemma, the state Premier, right in his immediate response saying that the riots had presented the 'ugly face of racism'?¹¹ Was the Prime Minister, John Howard more plausible in arguing that the

⁴ Jock Collins, "The Landmark of Cronulla", in *Social Cohesion in Australia*, ed. James Jupp, Joseph Niuewenhuysen, and Emma Dawson, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61. On the basis of the percentage resident of first or second-generation immigrants, Sydney is the 'seventh greatest immigrant city in the world', See, Jock Collins, "Ethnic Gangs, Ethnic Youth and the Cronulla Beach Riots", *National Symposium: Responding to Cronulla: Rethinking Multiculturalism*, (Sippy Downs: University of the Sunshine Coast, 2006), 18.

⁵ "Neo-Nazis in Race Riots, Police", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 12, 2005.

⁶ Damien Murphy, "Angry Ride into the Dark Side of Mateship", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 13, 2005.

⁷ Bernard O'Riordan, "When the Sands Run Red", *The Observer*, December 18, 2005.

⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 24, 2005.

⁹ Scott Poynting, "Cronulla: Understanding the Violence and Conflict", *National Symposium: Responding to Cronulla: Rethinking Multiculturalism*, (Sippy Downs: University of the Sunshine Coast, 2006), 34..

¹⁰ John Hartley and Joshua Green, "The Public Sphere on the Beach", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9:3, (2006) 351-352.

¹¹ "Cars Smashed in Cronulla", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 12, 2005.

issue at stake was ‘incredibly bad behaviour fuelled by too much drink’?¹² Other questions quickly tumbled over one another. Was it unique, a one-off? Or, did Cronulla represent a new form of emerging racism that, in the future, would be marked by ‘overt, violent incidents’? Should Cronulla then be seen as a law and order issue? Was its most telling legacy the subsequent report prepared by the retired Assistant Police Commissioner, Norm Hazzard which identified a series of police failings along with a lack of preparedness?¹³ Or, should we heed the counsel of Slavoj Žižek and resist the ‘hermeneutic temptation’ to find some deeper meaning in such outbursts.¹⁴ The Cronulla riots have initiated a considerable industry in seeking to work out what happened, why, and what might be the consequences.

Here and there were allusions to a Christian culture somehow tied to the Australian way of life. It was assumed that this compact was under threat but, surprisingly, the Christian reference point was never addressed in subsequent discussions. The Cronulla riots, nevertheless, are a fertile field for a Christian public theologian to demonstrate what this particular discipline can contribute to the quest for a civil society. Cronulla. One route into the debate is for a public theology to be placed inside the web of other discursive interpretations.

Conflicting ‘safety maps’

For Clifton Evers the Cronulla race riots had to do with a conflict of ‘safety maps’.¹⁵ This particular term had its origins in his reading of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu mixed with his own research on patterns of masculinities and surf culture. Of seminal significance was Bourdieu’s idea of a social space being a field and how our embodied history within that field creates a habitus of repetition and custom. For Evers this idea of a safety map furnished the best lens through which to read a complex set of interactions and discourses which made Cronulla the ugly incident it was. For a surfing culture like Cronulla this theory of fields and a habitus cohered well initially with what is known as localism. The egalitarian claims made on behalf of the beach—that it is ‘a space shared by all those who turn up’¹⁶ - are more apparent than real. Over the course of time hierarchies are established; expectations are set about how best to read the waves and the way in which they ‘break, rise, warp, peel and mutate’. Experience and expertise determine priority. Evers’ newcomer is often unaware of this localism and can violate the existing safety maps. The line between the recognition of a habitus and the need to dominate, protect and police the territory made up here of sand and surf is thin.

In the case of Cronulla Evers argued that the practice of this localism was accentuated. The beach had a history of being a contested space ever since the 1950s.. What was different about December 2005 was the way in which differences in class had been compounded with

¹² *The Australian*, December 13, 2005. Poynting noted that the ‘sole word which must *not* be uttered by our public figures in “racism”’. See, “Cronulla: Understanding the Violence and Conflict”, 34.

¹³ “Police Misjudged Cronulla Race Tension: Report”, *The Australian*, October 20, 2006.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek argued that there was no vision in the Paris disturbances—‘just an outburst’ and ‘a desire to be recognized’. And, while he was dismissive of those who strove to find reasons, Žižek himself drew upon Jacques Lacan’s idea of a *passage a l’acte*—“an impulsive movement into action which can’t be translated into speech or thought and carries within it an intolerable weight of frustration”. Žižek then likened the violence in Paris to Roman Jakobson’s use of the phatic function of communication. See, Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, (New York: Picador, 2008), 74-77.

¹⁵ Clifton Evers, “The Cronulla Race Riots: Safety Maps on an Australian Beach”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 107.2 (2008): 411-429.

¹⁶ Ryan Barclay and Peter West, “Racism or Patriotism? An Eyewitness Account of the Cronulla Demonstration of 11 December, 2005,” *People and Place* 14.1 (2006) 76.

the arrival of ethnicity. Here now was the presence of an alien neighbour whose mode of conduct was at a significant remove from the habitus of Cronulla, ‘an exceptionally white area’,¹⁷ and deemed to be an ‘Anglo-Celtic Christian heartland’.¹⁸ Evers noted that the beach had become demarcated in practice; the sand had been colonized. The locals knew what to expect on their ‘turf’; the Middle Eastern outsider did not.¹⁹

The practices of the Cronulla beach did not stand in isolation apart from a wider set of discourses to do with identity. The beach as a generic site was ‘already invested with national myths and littered with national icons’.²⁰ According to Meaghan Mason, the beach has often been the ‘stage upon which national dramas, big and small, are played out’.²¹ On the basis of her reading of Australian history and culture, Leone Huntsman reckons that Australians have sand in their souls.²²

The Cronulla riots sat within this wider discourse to do with the beach. The occasional text message made explicit connections between the rally to reclaim the beach and the plight of the Australian digger on the beaches of Gallipoli during the First World War, for instance.²³ What made this rather unlikely link possible was the manner in which the beach had become more susceptible to the politics of a fear which had wrapped race and religion more closely together. In the wake of 9/11, the Bali bombings, and the July bombings in London, the shoreline had been ‘reimagined as the homeland in the context of the war on terror’.²⁴ The Howard Government had been returned at the seemingly unwinnable 2001 election on the back of the slogan that ‘we shall determine who we let into the country’. It was a very small step to argue that we shall determine who we let onto the beach.

The iconic status of the Australian beach was also woven into the high public esteem in which the surf lifesaver is held. Here the ideal of a safety map was seemingly embodied in bronze. The lifesaver represented the virtues of humanitarianism, mateship, able-bodiedness, service, self sacrifice and a commitment to public well-being. To attack this icon was ‘to commit a very provocative act’.²⁵ The prospect of a strong reaction was enhanced further insofar as the lifesaver was looked upon as ‘an ideal type of manhood’.²⁶

This conjunction of the role of the lifesaver and masculine pride lent itself easily to a rhetoric of protection. The SMS messages, the chants, the T-shirt slogans spoke not only of the need to reclaim the beach, but also to ‘protect our women’. There is need for great care at this point. The riots escalated partly through rumour and misperception which was often aided and abetted by the radio shock jocks. Some local women at Cronulla were intimidated; one ‘Sarah’ lamented that she felt like she could no longer wear ‘a bikini in my own shire’. And

¹⁷ Poynting, “What Caused the Cronulla Riots?”: 87.

¹⁸ James Forrest and Kevin Dunn, “‘Racism and Intolerance in Eastern Australia: A Geographic Perspective,” *Australian Geographer* 37.2 (2006): 167-186.

¹⁹ Evers, “The Cronulla Race Riots”: 417.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 424. Also, see: Robert Drewe, *The Picador Book of the Beach*, (Sydney: Picador, 1993); Keith Moore, *Australian Beach Culture :The History of Sun, Sand and Surf*, (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

²¹ Meaghan Mason, “On the Beach”, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1992), 450-478.

²² Leone Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History and Culture*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

²³ Evers, “The Cronulla Race Riots”, 418-419.

²⁴ Suvendrini Perera, “Race, Terror, Sydney, December 2001”, *Borderlands*, 51 (2006)

²⁵ Barclay and West, “Racism or Patriotism?”: 77. Also, see; Evers, “The Cronulla Race Riots”: 418-421.

²⁶ Richard White *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1981) 155.

yet the evidence seems to suggest that veiled women of Middle Eastern descent were more often the objects of harassment, name calling and spitting.²⁷

The tenor of Evers' argument was to focus upon the local and the beach interpreted through the lens of safety maps. The strength of his case lay in the close attention paid especially to one sub-culture and a conflict of often hidden but assumed codes of conduct. Its chief merit lay in the desire to take the events and peoples of Cronulla on their own terms and not allow them to be 'supine' in the face of various meta-theories of politics, race and religion. The intersection of politics and religious conflict are played out in social spaces that are local and into which established histories and complex sets of fears and hopes are fed. And yet, it is these strengths which are also potential weaknesses. The horizon of interpretation can become limited and not explore how other discourses can inform what is going on in this field or social space.

Dog-whistle politics

What Evers' reading of the Cronulla riots did not do was concentrate upon the role of political leaders in creating a climate of fear and suspicion. This was the core thesis advanced by Scott Poynting whose earlier collaborative work on *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* had been designed to expose how the Arab 'Other' had become demonized in contemporary Australia.²⁸ From this vantage point the Cronulla riots should be seen as 'the culmination of populist incitement waged in the media and by the state'.²⁹ The rhetoric of reclaiming the beach for white Australia was a mirror of how the Howard Government had set out to protect the nation from asylum seekers and the Muslim / Middle Eastern 'enemy'.

The pivot upon which this reading turns is the effective sanctioning of a permission to hate. The underlying assumption is that violent outbreaks like Cronulla do not just happen. Poynting preferred to set the immediate causes inside the practice of what he calls 'dog-whistle politics'. What is meant by this turn of phrase is the 'sending [of] a particularly sharp message which clearly calls to those intended and goes unheard by the rest of the population.'³⁰ The irony is how such a strategy can possess a capacity to send a seemingly 'inaudible' message into the wider public domain which can then construct a particular way of seeing things. Because of its cumulative and relatively slow release the signal is not always easily heard as a whole. It can be denied if necessary and responsibility looked for elsewhere.³¹

For Poynting the origins of this permission to hate lay with the dog-whistle politics of the Howard Government. He had already exposed how fertile a soil contemporary Australia could be for such a reaction, despite the repeated invocations of 'the Australian way' being one of tolerance. The Arab Other had easily morphed into the Muslim Other and become a folk demon. From the mid to late 1990s onwards the caricature had been of this Other being 'backward, uncivilized, irrational, violent, criminally inclined, misogynistic and a terrorist threat'.³² Poynting had also identified how the ethnic descriptor to be found in Leunig's cartoon, 'of Middle Eastern appearance', could be easily employed to single out a cluster of

²⁷ Evers, "The Cronulla Race Riots", 422-423.

²⁸ Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, editors, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs*, (Leichhardt: Federation Press, 2004).

²⁹ Poynting, "What Caused the Cronulla Riot", .85.

³⁰ Poynting *et al*, *Bin Laden*: 153.

³¹ Poynting, observes that neither the federal and state governments, nor the mainstream media have been willing to accept any responsibility for Cronulla. "Race and Class",90. For a more extensive discussion on 'dog-whistle politics', see Poynting *et al*, *Bin Laden*, 153-178.

³² Poynting, "Race and Class": 88-89.

ethnicities with respect to crime and thus be named as an ever-present risk to public safety. The isolated but high profile incidents of ‘horrendous’ race-based ‘gang rapes’ of 2001-2002 had helped fuel suspicion and reinforced the impression that Lebanese Muslim migrants were disrespectful of women in general.³³

In order to make the connection between this practice of demonization with the permission to hate Poynting drew upon the work of the Canadian criminologist, Barbara Perry. In her judgment this permission can be conferred by the state in one of two ways. The first is not to intervene in naming race and hate crimes. The state becomes complicit in a sense through what it does not do, its silence, or the way it imposes upon critical events an alternative reading. Howard was adamant: Cronulla was about law and order and criminal activity. The second strategy is to put into place targeted policies and programs. Poynting identified the practices of covert surveillance, harassment, secret police monitoring, dawn raids, arrest and detention without proper trial.³⁴ This kind of politics allows citizens to feel justified in personally attacking the enemy, the demonized other. It provides a licence, even though those responsible for releasing the ‘inaudible’ message will have no compunction in denying that this was ever their intention.³⁵

This line of interpretation by Poynting resonated strongly with the history of Muslim/Middle Eastern perspectives on life in Australia. Nahid Afrose Kabir has highlighted how a relatively lower level sense of suspicion had intensified since 1990-1991.³⁶ It was not difficult to focus on a sequence of events which were, in effect, a catalyst: the Gulf War of 1990-1991, 9/11, the war on terror, and the Bali bombings. Had Kabir been writing a couple of years later he could have included the London Underground and bus bombings as well as the Paris riots. These incidents and crises were all overseas but, such is the nature of the global flows of people and information, the shock waves are felt in suburban sites far from the point of origin.³⁷ In so doing they mix and mingle with domestic sore points.³⁸

Here Kabir identified the controversies surrounding the desire of the Muslim community to convert the former Presbyterian Church in Sefton into a mosque, the drive-by shooting of the Lakemba police station, and the manner in which a series of rapes had been linked with Lebanese gangs. Kabir’s research of recent history mapped the extent to which the possibility of a demonization [or at the very least a fear of other] came into being. Kabir preferred the language of stereotyping and the ease with which this could be done on the basis of names

³³ Poynting *et al*, *Bin Laden*, 116-152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁵ Poynting, “Cronulla: Understanding the Violence and Conflict”, 38.

³⁶ Nahid Afrose Kabir, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*, (London, New York, Bahrain: Routledge, 2004).

³⁷ The adverse way in which ‘international factors’ could affect Muslim self-esteem and sense of well-being first became evident through the 1990s. It intensified through the opening years of the new millennium. Two weeks out from the Cronulla riots, Robert Wainwright wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* how Muslim had been reeling from the London bombings and were seemingly unable to ‘appease the media outcry’. Wainwright declared there to be a ‘palpable hatred in Australia’s biggest city’. He cited Dr. Jamal Rifi who referred to a “communal lack of self-esteem due to local and international event”. See, “Finding a Voice”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 26, 2005

³⁸ This mix was running the risk of heightening a sense of rejection and victimhood. It could lend itself to a default position “you’re the victims, Australia is racist”. See, Andrew Stephenson and Edmund Tadros, “Years of Rejection Erupted in Open Rebellion”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17-18, 2005. See, also: Neil McMahon, “A Tribe Apart, In Search of a Way to Belong”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 23-25, 2005.

and dress codes. Kabir's reading of the Howard Government's dealing with illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, detention centres, and the setting up of a hotline for national security where suspicious behaviour was to be reported coheres well with the way in which Poynting argued the permission to hate is established at the highest political level.

The one further merit of Poynting's interpretation is how it opened up the need to consider what else might have been happening in the months leading up to the riots themselves. Cronulla did not happen in a vacuum. In the wake of the London bombings Howard had set about the task of setting up a Muslim advisory council—the membership for which was subject to intense debate. Howard had determined that there should be no 'extremists'. The concern for security was converted into an increasing level of surveillance and, shortly before Cronulla, the arrests of 16 young Muslim men aged between 18 and 25 on the suspicion of their being a terrorist cell.³⁹ The media was also carrying worrying news items such as The feeling was beginning to surface that the whole Muslim community was being targeted for extra scrutiny One month before Cronulla the eirenic Trad observed that the 'atmosphere is making Muslims who have nothing to hide very nervous'.⁴⁰

The failure of multiculturalism?

The tendency of Poynting's theory leads into almost inevitably into a consideration of what kind of society Australia aspires to be. For Jock Collins the most appropriate lens for interpretation revolved around concerns for social cohesion. Was Cronulla proof of Australian immigration and multiculturalism policies not working? Was integration and assimilation a better option? Should there be limits to the level of respect and tolerance of diversity? Should the quest to maintain separate ethnic identities be subsumed into the rhetoric of 'we are all Australians now'?

The London bombings had already sparked some recent debate on the extent to which the Muslim presence compromised the prospect of a 'more integrated, assimilated society with broadly understood common values'. One of the architects of Australian multiculturalism, George Zubrzycki, conceded that it had never been anticipated that future migrants might, in some way, be opposed to the central tenets of a Western society. It was evident that some Muslim leaders were now becoming deeply concerned at the prospect of divisions further opening up between them and the rest of the country.⁴¹ The dog-whistle politics of the federal election of 2001 had arguably seen the Howard Government co-opt the energy generated by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party and set a stage for a campaign on sovereignty and the limits of cultural inclusion. That 'sharp message' was being sent to those who saw the 'multicultural industry' as the product of 'politically correct' cosmopolitan elites. Those susceptible to this brand of populism looked back to a more 'comfortable Australia' where 'barriers' might discriminate against the 'unassimilable' and 'irrevocably different races or cultures'—in practice, the non-Christian, the non-white, the non-western.⁴²

Contrary to Zizek's idea of the Paris riots being an impulsive, phatic act, Collins was convinced that the ramifications of Cronulla should not be dealt with lightly. Like Poynting he situated the causes inside a web of national and international effects; he likewise cited

³⁹ John Stapleton, "Mufti Condemns Raids as Race-Driven", *The Weekend Australian*, November 12-13, 2005. Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Wynhausen, "Peeking Under the Prayer Mats", *The Weekend Australian*, November, 12-13, 2005.

⁴¹ Roy Eccleston and Kate Legg, "Cracks in the Melting Pot", *The Weekend Australian*, July 23-24, 2005.

⁴² Poynting *et al*, *Bin Laden*, 153-154.

dog-whistle politics and gave examples of escalating prejudice;⁴³ he also indicted the media and populist political leadership for the rhetoric surrounding Middle Eastern crime and youth gangs. In common with Poynting Collins was especially sensitive to matters of policing and the reporting of crime. The moral panic associated with 'race rapes' had led to youth crimes having been racialized in a particular way. The criminality of individuals become the criminality of cultures. The media were much more likely to communicate the race of criminal offenders than the race of crime victims. There had been scarcely any public discussion on violence committed against members of Muslim migrant communities. And, what Collins found most disturbing was the way in which the language of what constituted a gang was being confined to Lebanese and those of Middle Eastern appearance; such descriptors were not used with reference to other notable recent violent events in Redfern and Macquarie Fields. This language was not used of young white males at Cronulla.⁴⁴ The use of such description effectively robbed those of Middle Eastern appearance of their Australian identity.

Where Collins differed was in his attention to sociological detail. Where Evers, Barclay and West had concentrated on Cronulla's surfing localism his focus was on the Lebanese immigrant community. What was it like to be one of the Others? What was its habitus? For empirical data Collins drew upon the 2001 census and various federal and state government reports on cultural diversity. The belief that suburbs like Bankstown, Canterbury and Lakemba were Lebanese 'no go' enclaves was quickly dispelled. It was true that nearly ¾ of the Lebanese population in Australia lived in Sydney but, in no suburb, was the percentage of Lebanese to others greater than 13.2%. The suburbs with the highest concentration were multicultural rather than monocultural.⁴⁵ In order to present a more balanced estimate of the Lebanese community Collins needed to negotiate a particular tension: how should he explain the alienation of a distinct section of younger males while demonstrating the responsibility and aspiration of others? The statistics exposed how the Lebanese were well represented in small business and over-represented among the unemployed; the second generation had more opportunities for professional employment.⁴⁶

This turn to statistics and close attention to labels led to call for a revitalized multiculturalism. There were two basic assumptions lying behind this tactic. The first was his conviction that the roots of much disquiet among Middle Eastern minority youth in Australia lay in the realm of socio-economic disadvantage, not cultural disaffection. The most appropriate strategies were those related to education, employment, the provision of local neighbourhood facilities and infrastructures. There was need for a more multicultural police force. The other side to this general conviction was the belief that the Howard Government had been dismantling the institutional structure of multiculturalism since it took office in 1996. The key word was now integration. What Cronulla highlighted was not merely what can happen if these initiatives are downgraded; what was new was the belief that antiracism must now become a central plank of Australian multiculturalism

⁴³ Collins makes particular reference to the 2001 election and the children overboard incident associated with the M.V. Tampa. Of all the boats carrying asylum seekers, which have set out for Australia, the Tampa was the first to be turned back. Collins, "Ethnic Gangs", 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 29

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19-20

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

In praise of public theology:

It is evident that the role of religion in the interpretations above was relatively incidental. It was mainly expressed through talk of the Middle Eastern Other and Muslim to slip into one another. The focus was primarily on race and culture, crime and politics. And this is no surprise. There was no talk of *jihād* on the beaches of Cronulla. Now and then Cronulla was referred to as white Anglo-Celtic Christian heartland; Poynting had asserted that those who had succumbed to Howard's dog-whistle politics had, in effect, become the 'outraged self-appointed guardians of white, Christian Australianness'.⁴⁷ But these descriptions were more ones of a residual cultural background than of actual religious practice. It might seem as if a Christian theology should keep its distance and mind its own business.

Would this self-imposed silence be the best option, then? In the wake of 9/11 Douglas John Hall posed the disturbing question: what part had a triumphant Christology played in the emergence of an Islamic extremism? Had the manner in which Christ was professed over several centuries enabled a cultural habitus to emerge that aided and abetted the extension of empire and effectively left Islam humiliated and shamed? Hall warned that the 'foundational beliefs of a religious faith will find expression, one way or another, in the deeds and deportment of its membership'.⁴⁸

There is food for thought here with respect to Cronulla. The political leadership Poynting indicted was formed in its ways of looking at the world by the Christian faith to a surprising degree in a secular western democracy. Writing in her *God Under Howard* Marion Maddox has mapped the extent of a conservative Christian faith upon persons and policies and the manner in which this could easily find its way into the discourse on Australian values.⁴⁹ Quite a number of political leaders at the time were also professing Christians in private and occasionally linked in public the Judeo-Christian tradition with the core Australian imaginary.⁵⁰

This political background begs the question concerning what kind of Christian theology of other faiths is at work in the civic marketplace of ideas. How is the Christian faith informally presenting its structures of belief in the public domain when this [or any other] type of public issue arises? The presupposition here is that there is likely to be a gap between the academic study of theology and what passes for a Christian point of view in everyday society and politics. The public theologian needs to be realistic. The standard discussion on typologies of interfaith encounters and a Christian theology of other faiths is scarcely known inside the churches, let alone beyond.⁵¹ In the absence of such basic knowledge we are often left with default positions which rely upon the 'impossible public virtue of tolerance'.⁵² It is indeed

⁴⁷ Poynting, "Cronulla: Understanding the Violence and Conflict", 34.

⁴⁸ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 3-4

⁴⁹ Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*, (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin), 2005.

⁵⁰ See Clive Pearson, "The Public Comeback of God" in *Reimagining God in Mission: Perspectives from Australia*, ed. Ross Langmead, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), 83-98.

⁵¹ For a description of the standard pattern of a three-fold typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism), see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, (Maryknoll: Orbis; 1983), and *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press; 2001). In his survey on theories to do with 'The Finality of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism', Daniel Migliore noted seven 'types'. See, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 306-316.

⁵² Bernard Williams, 'Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?' in *Toleration: A Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996), 18-27 The basic problem Williams discern is the "call

not uncommon for social commentators to laud the virtue of tolerance and declare it to be ‘the Australian way’. The alternative is for the most immediately accessible Christian perspective to be a sensational, attention-seeking headline.

Something more is required. Over the past decade the discipline of a public theology has been emerging around the world. The idea of such an expression of faith looks back to the case Martin Marty made on behalf of the public church in 1981.⁵³ The term was then a protest against the practice of the church becoming introverted and concerned with privatism and withdrawn from the public domain. Now, in a new millennium, the agenda for a public theology has arguably changed. Marty’s public ecumenism was essentially directed towards an ecclesia coming to terms with its vocation in a democratic secular field and the necessity for a civil society. The comparison can be made with the thinking of David Ford for whom the prospect of a ‘simply secular future’ has given way to a world which is ‘simultaneously both religious and secular in complex ways’.⁵⁴ These days this discipline is often concerned with how theology is to be done in a multi-faith/culturally diverse, western democracy which, in public, presents itself as secular—and which cannot separate itself from the effects of being in a world of globalization.

It is within this shift of purpose that Sebastian Kim locates his reading of what constitutes a public theology. Here the presenting public issue was the controversy surrounding the publication of the Danish cartoon of Muhammad which then caused great offence around the Muslim world. The matter did not need to involve the public witness of the Christian faith. Kim has accurately described how the polarized positions in this volatile vortex can be seen in terms of a secular media’s advocacy for freedom of the press being in conflict with an Islamic concern for respect for the prophet—such respect being a key tenet of faith and Muslim identity. There is a tensions then to do with core, seemingly competing, virtues. The local and the global quickly feed each other in an escalating manner.

For Kim one of the tasks of a Christian public theology is to engage in dialogue with those outside church circles and converse with citizens on issues in the wider society. Its interest is not confined to ‘religious matters’.⁵⁵ The calling of a Christian public theology is rather to play its part in ‘creating a common space’, a ‘shared meeting point’, ‘a common ground’ and, following M.M. Thomas, a ‘secular fellowship’.⁵⁶ The role of a public theology is to stand in the gap between those most directly involved in the clash; it should seek to engage with critical solidarity on both sides of that gap -and posit, if possible, an alternative view.

The prospect for a public theology in Australia is even more demanding than Kim’s admirably reconciling vocation indicates, however. The era of media deference to the Christian faith and ecclesial misdemeanours is over. The recent controversies surrounding the high profile mishandling of cases of sexual misconduct undermine the plausibility of the ecclesial / theological public voice.⁵⁷ What kind of contribution can theology make to the

for restraint when encountering apparently wrong beliefs and actions versus the good reasons for interfering with the lives of the subjects of these beliefs and actions”. How should one tolerate the intolerable?

⁵³ Martin Marty, *The Public Church*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981)..

⁵⁴ David Ford, “God and Our Public Life”, in *Liberating Texts? Sacred Scriptures in Public Life*, ed. Sebastian C.H. Kim and Jonathan Draper, (London: SPCK, 2008), 33.

⁵⁵ Sebastian Kim, “Freedom or Respect? Public Theology and the Debate over the Danish Cartoon”, *The International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:2 (2007),250.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 263-267.

⁵⁷ The public integrity of the Christian faith has been especially called into question by media exposés over how two leading churchmen handled complex matters of sexual abuse under their jurisdiction. Peter Hollingworth’s

public good in a socio-political location where the integrity of the Christian faith is compromised?

The hard realities facing a Christian public theology is that it must earn the right to be heard. It cannot rely on dogmatism. John de Gruchy echoes the now standard position of a public theology: the Christian faith cannot lay claim in this arena to privileged position. It is one voice among many in the public forum and de Gruchy has devised a set of theses for good praxis accordingly. Of critical significance is the 'doing of theology in a way that is interdisciplinary in character'. What is required is a 'language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition and convincing in its own right'. The task of a public theology is to find a way into the public forum. It should seek to assist a Christian constituency to recognize how public debates can be related to that tradition of faith. It should seek to address public issues and explore the public consequences of core Christian beliefs. The intention of a public theology carries a desire to relate the cost of discipleship with the call to citizenship in the service of the public good and 'human flourishing'.⁵⁸

The practice of a public theology.

In terms of a public theology the Cronulla riots represent a subversion of the quest for a civil society. Their occurrence was occasional. There was no theological script written in advance that would have spoken intimately into what actually transpired. Here the more prophetic edge to a public theology is constructed instead by taking a step backwards from the immediacy of the presenting disturbance. The focus should be more on caring for the equivalent of Kim's gap and the need to work upon the foundations of the habitus for a public good. The assumption is that what happens in ordinary time can help us in times of difficulty and conflict.

The feminist social critic, Eva Cox, has argued that a co-operative civil society relied upon the quality of its 'thin relationships'.⁵⁹ Such a relationship refers to a quality of encounter between peoples who do not know each other except in and through a casual meeting. The distinction between thick and thin is further developed by Marek Kohn. The thicker variety grows out of personal familiarity and the observation over how 'another's actions are competently performed and consistently meet accepted moral standards'. The comparison is with the thin version which relies on 'reputations, norms, and assessments based on signals such as appearance and demeanour'.⁶⁰ For the noted theorist of associational life, Robert Putnam, this thin trust is more useful for funding social capital. By its very nature it extends 'the radius of trust beyond the horizon of first hand experience'.⁶¹ The well-being of a civil society requires its rich presence for a thin trust assumes levels of confidence in expertise, in impersonal systems, reciprocity and the expectation of kindness. It offers as such an alternative to the politics of fear and demonization Poynting identified.

term as Governor General was cut short in the wake of relentless coverage over his dealings with incidents which occurred during his time as the Archbishop of Sydney. The Papal visit to Sydney in July 2008 was shrouded in controversy over homosexual misconduct which Cardinal Pell misjudged.,

⁵⁸ John de Gruchy, "Public Theology and Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre", *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1, (2007), 39-41.

⁵⁹ Eva Cox, "Faith in the Public Forum?", in *Faith in the Public Forum*, eds. Neil Brown and Robert Gascoigne, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 1999), 74

⁶⁰ Marek Kohn, *Trust: Self-Interest and the Common Good*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89.

⁶¹ Robert F. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century" *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30: 2 (2007), 137-174.

Ever since 9/11 the architecture of fear has been subject to much needed critical inquiry. Its pervasive presence and the ‘relentless publicity’ fear attracts is recognized as leaving everyday living susceptible to political, religious and marketing manipulation. Through his study of film, advertising, politics and social habits, Scott Bader-Saye has identified how fear releases the shadow virtues of suspicion, preemption and accumulation.⁶² For Frank Furedi fear transforms safety into one of the main virtues of society.⁶³ It lends itself to a ‘world view which equates the good life with self-limitation and risk aversion’.⁶⁴ Fear is not always inappropriate and can seemingly be rightly ‘formed’⁶⁵ But, an unexamined fear, a ‘disordered fear’, and a climate of fear creates a culture of disconnection that slips too easily into a polarization of insiders and outsiders and which is the very antithesis of a thin trust. Making use of Zygmunt Bauman’s work on *Community*, Bader-Saye exposes how the practice of community can become a threat to the public good and the possibility of hospitality. In a fearful society, communities often sustain their unity and the equivalent of Evers’ safety-nets through their distinctiveness. Bauman warns that strangers then become ‘unsafety incarnate ... they embody by proxy that insecurity which haunts’ our lives.⁶⁶ It becomes clear who is one of us and who is not. ‘There is no muddle and no cause for confusion—no cognitive ambiguity, and so no behavioural ambivalence’.⁶⁷

The Cronulla riots demonstrated how small a step it can be from fear and suspicion to hate. For Robert and Karin Sternberg fear and anger are passions that can be component parts of hate. How one should define hate (and thus distinguish it from fear) and understand its origins is now the subject of relatively recent competing theory. The present interest is due to the desire to make sense of how does fear and suspicion lead into forms of hatred which then become the motive force behind outbursts of terrorism, genocide and massacres. What role does it also play in converting rhetoric and propaganda (like those SMS messages) into violent deed? The Sternbergs have proposed a duplex theory of hate which resonates strongly with the work of Poynting, Collins, and Evers. The first part consists of a triangular model of hate. The active ingredients or ‘components’ are the negation of intimacy (disgust), the presence of passion which expresses itself as intense anger or fear towards a perceived threat, and a commitment to the diminution and devaluating of the target group. From their studies of particular incidents the Sternbergs place alongside this first part of their theory a number of models of stories fabricated to incite hate. The properties of several of these stories were at work before Cronulla, as well as during and after. Those identified of relevance are stories and rumours to do with the stranger, the impure other, the morally bankrupt, the barbarian, the criminal, and the seducer / rapist. The Sternbergs are under no illusions: ‘there is no complete cure for hate’. It is possible, though, to put into practice strategies which seek to counter the stories, the propaganda and that triangle of disgust, anger and diminution. Of critical importance they argue is a tacit knowledge of wisdom. What is required is not so much cognitive understanding but the capacity for discernment and a willingness to care

⁶² Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

⁶³ Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear*, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 147

⁶⁴ Bader-Saye, 69

⁶⁵ Bader-Saye is quick to point out that fearlessness is ‘a bad idea’. In order to put ‘fear in its place, he draws initially upon Aquinas’ understanding of fear arising from the imagination of a future evil and creates a diagnostic schema to test the likely imminence and magnitude of a fear. Bader-Saye is conscious of the positive effects of a ‘right fear’ and how such a fear should be formed, named and expressed and tested in community. See, Bader-Saye, 39-74

⁶⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2001), 145

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2

about the well-being of the others' group as much as caring about one's own. The praxis of wisdom will require an infusion of values and one eye on the long term.⁶⁸

For thin trust to offer a route other than one of fear, suspicion and hate what happens in ordinary time matters. The cutting edge to Poynting's thesis was that the dog-whistle politics of fear practiced by the Howard Government legitimized a mob to act in the way it did. The task of a public theology is to play its part in exposing this institutional and structural tendency. It has little option but do so because of the very nature of faith and, in the words of Bader-Saye, the shape of the call to follow Jesus in a culture of a fear. The life of Christian discipleship is not an invitation to security. The love of neighbour as oneself and hospitality towards the stranger anticipates courage and the capacity for risk and vulnerability. What a public theology should also commit itself to is the construction of a public habitus which weaves together trust, peacemaking, and making room for the other in the living of everyday life. Here the invitation of Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Cole on behalf of the radical ordinary is most apposite. Instead of a focus on the big-picture theories of democracy, globalism and government, this concern for the ordinary falls on the 'texture of relational care'. It is more local, face to face, associational. It seeks transformation through attentive practices of listening, relationship-building, and a careful reading of places and what allows for the flourishing of peoples.⁶⁹

For a public faith, in the kind of context the Cronulla riots present, this thin trust can also be expressed theologically in terms of hospitality. Some hard work is required. The awkward dilemma is that the public façade of a Christian theology in Sydney is often inclined towards being one which is best located inside an exclusivist model. The most striking example of such was Pell's lecture, delivered in Florida in February, 2006, but subsequently reported back in Australia. Through a reading of the Qu'ran, and being conversant with the Islamic doctrine of abrogation, Pell expressed a deep-seated scepticism as to whether Islam could shed its violence. Here he was calling into question those Muslims who interpret *jihad* as a spiritual striving and who are quick to privilege *sura* which emphasize peace and non-retaliation. For journalist Paul Kelly the primary benefit of Pell's 'muscular' Catholicism is that it furnished a theological engagement with Islam which the usual discourses of a secular western democracy cannot do. Pell's lecture opens up then the prospect of a 'genuine dialogue' conducted on religious grounds.⁷⁰ The model selected, though—not to mention its tone—is only one of several theological options available to the Christian faith; it is not the one most likely to promote thin trust and its natural tendency is to run the risk of becoming a monologue. It is an overriding current imperative to broaden this particular debate and employ a range of typologies.

What is at issue here is a matter of praxis and not simply another cognitive theory. In his theory of *Improvisation* Samuel Wells argued that how we respond to moments of crisis and difficulty, when wise discernment is required, the pivotal period lies back in the time of preparation and the cultivation of character. How we conduct ourselves should become second nature, an act of improvisation on what we have been rehearsing in ordinary time. This thesis of improvisation is rather apt for the praxis of a public theology. The Cronulla riots occurred seemingly out of nowhere. They have been the subject of disputed

⁶⁸ Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Sternberg, *The Nature of Hate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2008).

⁶⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008).

⁷⁰ Paul Kelly, "Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword", *The Australian*, September 23, 2006.,

interdisciplinary meaning. The immediate rhetoric is of gangs, drink, law and order, reclaiming the beach and the failure of multiculturalism. Where is the rehearsal of inclusion, hospitality, attentive listening and thin trust which allows a civil society to negotiate its way though fault-finding, cloying localism, patriotism and racism, alienation and bad behaviour?

The construction of such a public habitus is far from straightforward. It can mean individuals coming to terms with those personal liminal and ‘companion experiences’ which Jurgen Moltmann identifies as having shaped and moulded who we are. The dilemma riots like Cronulla present is that the violence, hatred and ‘bad blood’ become embedded in personal and cultural memory, as well as the ‘folklore’ of the city.⁷¹ The most graphic acts of violation and humiliation remained captured on websites: the photojournalism of printed and television media made accessible a stunning gallery of brutal encounters. They can complement personal experience.

Conclusion: For Christ’s Sake

The purpose of a public theology in the light of the Cronulla riots is variegated. Its task is not to furnish a definitive reading of what took place. The interdisciplinary nature of a public theology must always respect the pluralism of the public forum and critically recognize the merits of what alternative disciplines have asserted. Its particular vocation in this instance is most likely a call to stand in the gap and proclaim the importance of thin relationships and what happens in ordinary time. Part of its task is to draw upon the inheritance of the Christian faith’s traditions and release a rhetoric of hospitality and love of neighbour. It stands as such within the scope of Miroslav Volf’s pursuit of double vision—by which he means

letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives.⁷²

Here the neighbour can be the enemy. There is a utopian dimension to a public theology as de Gruchy especially well appreciated. In the mix of hard edged realities a public theology can hold up the possibilities of what might be because it lays claim to another citizenship as well. The fact of the matter is that a public theology is not just concerned for the public good or the civil society; it yearns also for the ‘city of God’.

The praxis of any theology should loop back into core Christian convictions. In the case of Cronulla the Leunig cartoon offers a hook through its description of the infant Jesus being of Middle Eastern appearance. For those of an Anglo-Celtic background it is a telling reminder of the otherness of Jesus, not simply in terms of time and the claims made about him, but also with reference to ethnicity. Here the cartoon Christ also wears the label of police description. The designated outsider is included at the heart of a confessional faith.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to identify the presence of Christ in the public domain of the here and now. Perhaps a further hook lies in the thinking of Clive Marsh in his *Christ in Practice*. The sub-title reads *A Christology of Everyday Life*.⁷³ For Marsh the key consideration is not ‘who’ but ‘where’ is Jesus Christ to be found. The underlying intention is

⁷¹ Collins, “Ethnic Gangs”, 18

⁷² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 213.

⁷³ Clive Marsh, *Christ in Practice: A Christology of Everyday Life*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

to look for intimations of presence beyond the institutional church and embedded claims. Marsh relies upon ‘resonances’ of the Jesus narrative—Bader-Saye would call them ‘figurations’. Those Marsh suggests include: when solidarity is shown with those who are mistreated, wherever forgiveness occurs, whenever people discover what they believe to be their true identity, and whenever truth is told, however painful truth-telling may sometimes prove. The constructive rhetoric that often surrounds racism, the other and a civil society is one of the neighbour, forgiveness and reconciliation, hospitality and peacemaking. Those theologians and Christian ethicists—like Bader-Saye, Hauerwas, Mitchell and Marsh—who engage with the media, the everyday, and the radical ordinary—all use this kind of language and weave it back into the public ministry of Jesus. The capacity for this kind of connection testifies to the bilateral nature of a public theology. It is not just about addressing public issues in the light of a faithful professing and aspiration to construct an appropriate habitus. One of the critical responsibilities of a public theology is to help a congregational audience ‘in heartland Australia’ recognize that matters like Cronulla have to do with the practice of ordinary everyday faith—for Christ’s sake.

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