Anzacism: Assembling Our National Religion

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My prep son walked towards his school's gymnasium in a line with the rest of his class. It was Friday, 24 April 2015, and he and his friends were on their way to a special assembly.

My son was playful and laughing; he looked innocent and his broad-brimmed hat was too big for him. My wife tried to get his attention with a wave. He saw her but pretended otherwise. He was a cool primary school kid now.

Inside, he settled among his peers in the front rows, while we weaved our way through a

gaggle of kids to the back of the gym.

A teacher grabbed a microphone and told the crowd that staff and middle primary school kids had worked hard the last couple of weeks to create what we were about to witness: a celebration of Anzac Day.

In the lead up to the Anzac Centenary, pundits' use of the word *celebration* had troubled me, along with what appeared to be the sudden invention of celebratory quilts of poppies. Smiling students now dragged one into view at the front of the gym. There was connection between the quilts and the red poppy's history. That soldiers had viewed these flowers, the first to spring from a number of World War I's European battlefields, as soaked in the blood of their fallen comrades. This made the sight of a smiling five-year-old girl I knew photographed during "Anzac Week" in a bonnet made of red poppies uncomfortable rather than celebratory.

When I was her age, in the decade after Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, only Anzacs wore poppies. And their day was just a holiday. If at school or at home we did discuss its meaning, we learnt it was a day for mourning the lives of Australians lost to what was often dubbed the "futility of war."

The poppy quilt was moved aside and the student MCs told us we were gathered to celebrate the courage, mateship, self-sacrifice and heroic values the Anzacs had demonstrated. There was no mention then, or later, of the horror, futility or violence of war, beyond the numbers (of Australians) killed in them. Whatever history might say, we were told that in World War I the Anzacs at Gallipoli were fighting for our nation's freedom. As were World War II Anzacs and those in Vietnam. The assembly's set pieces continued and it became clear what we were there to celebrate: an ideal for how people should live, exemplified in the life of the Anzac.

"People don't want compulsory religious instruction," my wife said, "but they let their kids come to this." She has a more than full-time job. The only reason she was there was to assess whether the assembly would be a threat to our child's well being. Now she felt she had the answer. "Should we pull him out?" I shrugged. There would be high-level embarrassment for everyone if we marched to the front and escorted our kid from the gym. Neither of us moved. We just stood and listened, though I found myself withdrawing towards the gym's back wall.

One of our MCs told us who the Anzacs had fought in World War II: "The Germans, the Italians, the Austrians and the Turks," she said at a great a clip. There was no mention of Australia's relationship with these countries now. I knew two of those races were represented in the assembly hall, but the others may have been. My son is at the age where he sees only good guys and bad guys. Choose your side of the trench and stay there. He was likely to come home and ask, "Will an Italian shoot me?" It was going to be a fun night of explanation.

The MC moved us onto the Anzac Day Hero Creative Writing Competition. Students had been asked during the week if they had a hero in their family. Now I understood what my son had been on about when we'd walked to the servo to get milk. "Did Grandpoppy fight in the war?" he asked. "No," I told him. "He was too old." I didn't ask what war he meant. The topic had obviously come up at school. And I had the feeling all he had understood was that Australia wasn't at war now (debatable), but had been in "The War" sometime before he was born.

"Your great-grandfathers both fought in World War II. Your Nanna's Dad fought from 1941 to 1943 in Crete and the Middle East." I probably gave him this specific detail because Bill's war service dominates mum's family history. My son said nothing more, but on Thursday

war service dominates mum's family history. My son said nothing more, but on Thursday brought home from school a piece of butcher's paper covered with crayon-drawn stick figure soldiers and the words, "My great-grandfather was a hero because he died in the war in 1946." I smiled. Maybe I shouldn't have. "Well," I told him, "your great-grandfather didn't die in the war. He actually died in 1994." He looked at me strangely. Like I was distorting history.

At the assembly, students won prizes for similar pieces of creative writing about heroes in their families. Not Anzacs in their families. Or soldiers who had died. Or who had returned, maimed or otherwise. Just heroes. My wife turned to me. "It's just myth-making. I don't want him hearing this," she said, now anxious to find our son's blond head again among the mops in the front rows. "He's probably not taking it in," I suggested. "Maybe. But he'll come home and say *6,000 soldiers died*!"

She was probably right. He loves maths. That he would come home plagued by our joint concern, a religious understanding of what he'd witnessed, seemed less likely. But not impossible. After all, children attend churches, mosques, temples and synagogues every week in Australia. They must be learning something, even if only by osmosis. I wondered if our son was soaking up more than we realised.

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It's not a new idea that religious impulses influence the way in which Anzac Day and the Anzacs themselves are commemorated. Weary Dunlop's biographer, Sue Ebury, used the Italian phrase *Via Dolorosa* (Christ's "way of sorrows" as he carried his cross through Jerusalem) to head one of the chapters on her subject. Stephen Garton noted that there is "a complex tension between Christian and Classical symbolism" in Australia's war memorials.

Ahenk Yilmaz, writing about Gallipoli's war memorials, made the point that even in its infancy the narrative Australia constructed about the events at Gallipoli had the characteristics of a secular religion. He added that civilian Australian and New Zealanders who first visited Gallipoli in 1925, long before interest revived in the 1990s, did so on what were dubbed "pilgrim ships."

For secular Australians used to accepting that organized religion is on the wane, it may come as a surprise that, in *Anzacism*, we could be dozily participating in an organised national religion. But it seems Anzacism is one component, likely the strongest, in what Jean-Jacques Rousseau would call Australia's civil religion. As he pointed out in his eighteenth-century work *The Social Contract*, civil religion provides nations with a unifying force.

American sociologist Robert Bellah built on Rousseau's initial ideas and suggested that civil religion could include many practices, including adoration bordering on worship for war veterans, and mythologized tales of their deeds and values. It's not surprising then that *The Australian*'s editor-at-large Paul Kelly, in his analysis of the Anzac centennial commemorations at Gallipoli, spoke of "Anzac's power" having a "deeply unifying force."

The term "Anzac Spirit" (often capitalized, *a la* the "Holy Spirit"), invoked to encourage us to live out the values that dead soldiers are deemed to have embodied *en masse*, is religious language *par excellence*, an oral version of Catholicism's *Lives of the Saints*. Although Peter FitzSimons is working hard to inscribe it, television commentators voice this oral tradition in guttural tones during the Anzac Day football match, and officials

voice it with a priestly tenor at Dawn Services around the nation and, of course, at Gallipoli.

Even if we leave aside the religious connotations associated with the blood sacrifice Australians made at Gallipoli, which numerous historians say resulted in our birth as a nation, it seems Manning Clark's notion of Australian religious yearning being "a shy hope in the heart" doesn't square with Anzacism. It is a bold reality in the public sphere. Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the aforementioned Paul Kelly, like zealous prophets, recently voiced the importance of our civil religion, the former in his Centenary of Anzac speech at Anzac Cove, the latter in his coverage of the speech and event.

Abbott said we must do more than remember the Anzacs; we must, in Kelly's words, "emulate their spirit." recalling St. Paul's New Testament encouragement for Christians to emulate him as he emulates Christ. The Anzacs, Abbott said, help "us to be better than we would otherwise be," and Gallipoli, according to Kelly's rendering of Abbott's speech, is about "perseverance, duty, compassion, conquering fear, and sacrifice for one's friends." Kelly summed up Australians' duty to emulate theses 'lives of the saints' by saying Abbott's set of values "invests Anzac with a spiritual essence relevant to any age," before pointing out that the "originating sacrifice" was "available from a visit to the beaches, cliffs and the Lone Pine memorial" - as the site of Christ's death is available for Christians who visit Jerusalem.

Our civil religion is powerful and we will evoke its adherents' fury if we confront it. SBS journalist Scott McIntyre knows this. Whatever we think of the historical accuracy or moral rectitude of his Anzac Day tweets, they challenged the official view. His sacking and virulent responses to his tweets on social media demonstrate that you denigrate Australia's saints at your peril, especially on Anzacism's equivalent of Easter.

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In the school gymnasium, the recitation of kids' creative writing about heroes finished up. Later, my wife would remind me of the reality behind the man my son had chosen as his hero, a man he'd never met.

Bill fought in World War II as a 16-year-old. He lied about his age to get in on the big adventure. He came home wounded and with post-traumatic stress that he tried to self-medicate with alcohol. It didn't work and the abuse his relatives suffered as a result led one of his offspring to say at his gravesite, "I hope he rots in hell." There were times when Bill's kids - even his grandkids - had likely wished he'd died in 1946 as per son's hagiography.

A girl of Vietnamese origin took the microphone and explained that her father fought with the South Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. Although it had been mentioned earlier that the Anzacs had fought alongside him, it was a relief to hear the account of a kid whose hero wasn't an Anzac.

Then, a moment of beauty. Perhaps she was the only student in the school who could play the trumpet well enough, but it was fitting that another girl of Vietnamese origin played *The Last Post* and we rested our heads with her in the silence that followed.

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Like many religions, Anzacism has had its periods of decline. After Vietnam and Australia's large anti-war protests, it seemed Anzacism - and Anzac Day - were doomed. But in the early 1990s, as is well-documented, young Australian backpackers began to revive the Anzac Spirit, resuscitating it to life like revivalism is said to do in the Christian religion. Brad West said this return to Gallipoli was Australia's foray into a longstanding global tradition of "international civil religious pilgrimage."

It's likely the backpackers were devoid of traditional religious foundations. Perhaps they also unconsciously sensed that the foundation for life that Australia's civil religion could provide had also waned. In visiting the site of what Kelly called our nation's "original sacrifice," these young Australians, many the same age as those who had died, were searching for personal meaning. In the process, they put the meaning back into our civil religion - just in time for the Gulf War, 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Spirit of Anzac, with John Howard initially cheering it along, could take flesh and march again on battlefields around the globe. Our civil religion then supported not just the spiritual lives of the young, but also the political lives of our leaders. As Paul Kelly said in his paraphrase of Tony Abbott's Gallipoli centenary speech, "Anzac cannot be static ... The story's spiritual dimension is about a stronger and better Australia inspired by the greatness and smallness of what these men did on this shore."

That men and women have been engaged in small and large actions in battle since 9/11 in the ongoing War on Terror means that "Anzac" (does that oft-used noun denote our religion's Godhead?) can never be static. Because it is human and fighting around the world, whether we like or not. And if we don't like it, or the civil religion it inspires, then perhaps we best keep quiet if we want to keep our jobs and perhaps some of our friends. Because religious cults - just ask the Scientologists - will cut us off in a heartbeat if we dare cross their holy tenets.

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The school kids, often boisterous in the ceremony, were remarkably quiet in the aftermath of *The Last Post*. The Vietnamese girl remained still, head bowed, trumpet at her side. I wished her item had been the only one in the ceremony, that we could simply have listened to her play and lain some wreaths.

I had often thought of my late grandfathers as I stood in previous Anzac Day silence. Today, I thought of my friend Khanh. When he was less than half the age of the trumpeter, he escaped post-war Vietnam with his father and uncle on a creaky wooden boat. They were lost at sea for weeks. Afraid of pirates. Their boat leaking and young Khanh wondering if he'd ever see his mother again.

The MCs and teachers thanked us for coming and told us the assembly was over. But there were still fifteen minutes before dismissal. Our preppie had to go back to his classroom. I bought some Anzac biscuits from the stall while my wife accompanied him to his room. Later she told me she would likely be dubbed "the weird mum" from now on. She had met parents outside the classroom who hadn't been to the assembly. A friend of my wife's asked how it had panned out. "I didn't really like it, actually," she told her. But a number of other parents had said how wonderful it was, the writing, the speeches, and the poppies. My wife went quiet.

In the car on the way home we asked our son what he thought of it all. What was it about? "I don't know," he said. We asked him if he understood what had been said about the soldiers, the Anzacs and "The War." He squirmed in his car seat, sheepishly. He thought he was in trouble. "I don't know," he repeated. "I was talking to my friends." It's not often I'm glad my son can be just a little disobedient

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