

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

PART ONE

GENERAL FOUNDATIONS: CHRISTIAN IDEALISM

1. Idealism

CHAPTER ONE IDEALISM AND CIVIC OBLIGATION

In 1927, A. P. Elkin, PhD in Anthropology and priest of the Anglican church, was about to undertake a ‘before it’s too late’ research program organised by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney.¹ Radcliffe-Brown had recently described Aborigines as ‘a highly specialised variety of our species rapidly approaching extinction.’² A few years later, without refuting that fatalism, Elkin would be leading Australia’s first sustained national reform movement in Aboriginal affairs. He aimed to equip governments to approach Aborigines as a distinct and, for the foreseeable future, enduring race and culture. Relentlessly, he committed himself to what he still believed was probably a hopeless cause.

What motivated Elkin? He was 38 when he first ventured into Aboriginal communities, and he carried a complex intellectual and spiritual heritage that has not been well understood.³ Elkin’s Christian Idealist sense of purpose, laid out in this and following chapters, prefigured his failures and limitations; but also his drive to understand, and his belief that social understanding came only when detached analysis of moral and political problems both issued from and returned to participation in the practical working out of solutions.

In 1915, a thesis he wrote for his Honours degree expressed a blend of racialism and social obligation characteristic of the era, and of the culture of imperialism generally

¹ For a fuller account of the fieldwork, see Ch. 4.

² AR Radcliffe-Browne, ‘Applied Anthropology’, *Report of ANZAAS*, 20 (Brisbane, 1930), 267–80, cited in DJ Mulvaney, *Australasian Anthropology and ANZAAS: ‘Strictly Scientific and Critical’*, in Roy Macleod, (ed.), *The Commonwealth of Science: ANZAAS and the Scientific Enterprise on Australasia 1888–1988* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 208.

³ Russell McGregor has mentioned the importance of religion as a motivator and as an early field in which Elkin developed his thinking about policy, see his ‘“From Old Testament to New”: AP Elkin on Christian Conversion and Cultural Assimilation’, *Journal of Religious History*, 25 (1), February 2001, 39–55. Tigger Wise has touched on the personal problematic of scholarly idealism vs. religious faith, but conflated them as public intellectual motivators; see Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A Life of AP Elkin* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 16–24.

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(as sketched by Edward Said, for example). But Elkin's thinking was as anti-racialist as it was racialist. Elkin confounds Said's terms: even as he projected a structural 'wish to dominate' the colonised, he also 'projected ... the energy to comprehend and engage with other societies, traditions, histories.'⁴

In this chapter, we will consider the concept of civic obligation that a younger Elkin, the undergraduate, studied and hoped to emulate, as modelled and argued by liberal Idealists in Australia and Britain; and the relation of the Idealist project to other conceptions of the national interest. In the next chapter, we will explore the relation in Elkin's thinking and willing between Idealism and Anglicanism. In the third and fourth chapters, we will study how these civic and religious purposes shaped and were shaped by Elkin's postgraduate studies. Our aim is to understand his sense of purpose in the round: as scholar, communicant, and citizen.

Civic obligation

A common culture, more than taxation, a coastline, or race, was what united white Australians, Elkin believed. On his way to the Kimberley communities in 1927, commenting off-the-cuff to the journalist in Perth, Elkin rated the Aborigines an abstract standard – 'our level'; that is, a norm common to the readership of a quality newspaper in Australia.⁵ Elkin told the journalist that he was concerned whether Aborigines would 'come up to our level', and of 'our obligation to try to raise them'. The pronoun 'our' shed humanitarian tropes, such as concern for Aborigines' special needs and the unique wrongs they suffered. The pronoun also dropped the anthropological consensus pertaining to 1920s Australia – scientists agreed Aborigines were chiefly of interest because they were so unlike British Australians (even if they were closely related genetically, see Ch. 5). He spoke not of a separate group ripe for study, philanthropy or conversion, but of possible fellow citizens.⁶

⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), xxii.

⁵ Interview with A. P. Elkin: *The West Australian* 29 October 1927, 18.

⁶ The distinction goes back to two streams of new liberal reformism: one collaborative and focussed on the citizenship of the disadvantaged, the other paternalistic and focussed on the citizenship of the reformers. See Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and his Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London, 1964), 230–236, 293–342.

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Scholars have focussed, rightly, on Elkin's limited expectations of a 'lower' race. He hoped to build for the Aborigines a ladder that would almost reach the British Empire.⁷ But it was hardly novel, in 1927, to say that Aborigines might not come up to the level of British Australia. That they might approach it was the newsworthy opinion. So it is important to flesh out the more original point, the one Elkin wanted to make: British Australians stood in a normal, general, and ongoing relationship of *nationally inclusive obligation* towards Aborigines. Very few white Australians conceded such a relationship at that stage. Cecil Cook, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, had not yet publicised his intention to absorb Aborigines into the mainstream by selective marriage. But by 1937, he and other would-be benevolent administrators believed they were pursuing the national interest in the 'inevitable' elimination of Aboriginality by 'breeding out the black' (Ch. 5).⁸ Elkin, by contrast, sought to establish ongoing, improving relations between the races, within the one nation.

In contrast, Elkin had in mind British citizenship as experienced (to varying degrees, we must qualify) by 'the dark Indian and the Dutch Boer as well as the young British races'.⁹ The rule of law, the franchise, the political and industrial organization of labour, religious tolerance, a say in the British Commonwealth's leading influence in the affairs of the world – these comprised 'our level'.¹⁰ Most saliently, 'our level' suggested an enhanced, Australian standard of social democracy. Elkin believed that the Australian achievement and ideal was 'equality of conditions and opportunities for all'.¹¹ Beneath his expectation of persistent Aboriginal disadvantage was an aspiration towards full Aboriginal citizenship and full Aboriginal equality. His evocation of a common level –

⁷ Gray focuses on the racialism he sees in phrases Elkin used such as 'move Aborigines along the scale of civilization'; see Gray, 'AP Elkin, AO Neville', and Geoffrey Gray, '[The Sydney school] seem[s] to view the Aborigines as forever unchanging': southeastern Australia and Australian anthropology', *Aboriginal History*, 24, 2000: 175-199, at 176. McGregor argued that in the 1930s, Elkin loosened but nevertheless remained in a racist, social evolutionist mindset; see *Imagined Destinies*, 195–205.

⁸ AO Neville, in Western Australia, and Cecil Cook, in the Northern Territory. John Bleakley, Queensland, differed. See Chs 4–6.

⁹ AP Elkin, *Nation and National Consciousness: Australian National Consciousness*, (University of Sydney: Honours Thesis, 1915), Fisher Rare Books Library, Elkin 003, p. 3.

¹⁰ 'The idea of 'progress' was for Green, as it had been for Kant, a regulative idea for making our history intelligible to ourselves, as well as a postulate to be validated through practical action. It was not a dogma from which one could derive standards of right and wrong.' see John R. Rodman (ed.), Green, T. H., *The Political Theory of T. H. Green* (New York: Meredith, 1964), 11.

¹¹ Elkin, *Australian National Consciousness*, 14.

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normative, even if unachievable – for Aboriginal and settler Australians challenged the primary Australian domestic and foreign policy: social and political equality through homogeneity, as protected by the white Australia policy. Aborigines would persist in their difference, and in their social and economic disadvantage, Elkin foresaw: the white Australia policy would have to bend in each direction to accommodate them.

It is my argument in coming chapters that Elkin worked to question the white Australian ‘means’, racial homogeneity, to the enduring Australian ideal, equality. That is, he signalled in 1927 his intention to look beyond the ethnic Australian project, to a civic Australian ideal, continuous in its egalitarianism. For Elkin, as the following pages will show, an ideal was a unifying meld of aspiration and obligation. ‘Our level’ was a standard to which each Australian was obliged to aspire, personally and as part of an interdependent collective – which would have to include Aborigines.

Thought as an aspect of personality: the moral philosophy of liberal Idealism

Elkin was an Idealist. Idealism’s basic premise was that relationship and volition preceded thought.¹² As an undergraduate, Elkin learned that ‘to know we must live, to know the right we must live the right.’¹³ Just as morality could not be detached from relationship, scholarship could not be detached from citizenship. When Elkin addressed the mouthpiece of informed Australian opinion – the journalist from the *West Australian* – he spoke to the broad, secular Australian public that he had aspired thus to understand when writing for the professor publicists of his undergraduate years, Francis Anderson (Philosophy), and George Arnold Wood, (History).

Elkin singled out Anderson and Wood as ‘great men’ of the time.¹⁴ For three years from 1912, Elkin majored in both Philosophy and History. Behind the concepts he later used to develop his sociology moved the thinking of these most influential of his teachers. And behind them stood the British Idealists, led and typified by T. H. Green.

¹² The following synthesis draws on the Idealist literature outlined in the Introduction.

¹³ GA Wood, ‘A Great Historian. The Letters of John Richard Green’, *Daily Telegraph* 18 January 1902, cited in Crawford, *A Bit of a Rebel*, 131. For an account of Anderson’s espousal of this principle, see Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism*, 88.

¹⁴ AP Elkin, Autobiographical Transcript, taped 18 May 1965, p. 10, EP 5/1/10. Wood’s influence rose to the front of Elkin’s mind in wartime, when he listed Wood’s pageant of great books in a metonymy for England, ‘in the pages of Shakespeare and John Bunyan, of the Areopagitica and the Authorized Version.’ See his ‘Alcheringa: Steps into the Dreamtime’ *Meanjin*, 58 (2), Winter 1943, pp. 14–17.

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Wood emphasised the political aspect of Green's teaching; Anderson its ethical aspect; they each applied its practical ethos.

Green had sought to show the unity of social obligation and individual freedom.¹⁵ The link he found between the social 'ought' and the 'is' of individual freedom was basic to Christianity: Green based his philosophy on willing service motivated by love of the good in one's own experience, which, as love, extended to a desire to work in practical ways for the greater good of others. The 'new liberalism' his teaching initiated flowed most directly to Elkin in Australia through Green's Oxford College, Balliol, in which both Anderson and Wood had resided. The work of Green, Anderson, Wood, and Elkin shared Idealist premises. Each made normative claims closely associated intellectually, culturally, and historically with Christianity: we can label them 'Christian Idealists'. I will also use the term 'liberal idealists' (as explained in the introduction) to draw out their commitment to individual freedom as the beginning and end of social theory (in contrast to Hegelian Idealism). Their thinking shared three premises:

Firstly, the sense of purpose that rendered an individual's consciousness continuous was a spiritual principle: it was Mind, capable of a permanence that separated it from the mortal body.¹⁶

Secondly, collective purpose was higher, because more complex, than individual purpose. Collective purpose was capable of permanent growth through consensus, carried across generations by language, custom, law, and institution. Elkin's idealist vocabulary – he wrote of progressive legislation such as the guarantee of a living wage as 'spiritual fact and growth' – was Idealist in that he accorded a spiritual reality to civic affairs.¹⁷

Thirdly, the liberal Idealists believed that morality had the contingent and historical aspect it wore in cultural obligation, as well as a necessary and universal aspect. The latter Anderson expressed as the principle of 'Personality', that the true self is the self-for-others.¹⁸ Again, 'morality' could denote contingent fact as well as universal norm: A national consciousness – the product of a particular people's history – was a

¹⁵ Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, 191–221.

¹⁶ For a concise summary of Green's metaphysics, see Rodman, *Political Theory*, 19.

¹⁷ Elkin, *Australian National Consciousness*, 19.

¹⁸ Francis Anderson, 'Lectures on Ethics', from unpaginated notes taken by Miss Burns, Burgmann Papers, NLA, Box 32; cited in Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism*, 94.

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moral and spiritual fact; the willing sacrifice, to a higher, collective interest, of contrary personal interests, was the universal moral and spiritual norm.

Morality coincided with cultural obligation but also exceeded it. Elkin undertook to meet a cultural obligation, to work towards the consensus through which his culture imagined it could realise the conditions that supported each individual's personality. He also acknowledged a moral obligation, of universal range, to work towards the common good of humanity. That is, morality had a double aspect in relation to one's own society: in its specific aspect it comprised social norms, but as a general principle it provided a critical perspective upon those norms. Of course, people fell short of Idealist standards, and culture tended to circumscribe rather than spur on morality. For this reason, Green identified complacency as the Idealist's enemy. Richter, in his masterly biography of Green, argued that Green harvested the zeal of Methodism and Evangelical enthusiasm (the intellectual aspects of which he completely reconstrued).

Green tried to render spiritual enthusiasm liberal and rational. In the 1950s, Elkin put it like this:

Green insisted that each individual and each group was and should be free to work out his and its code of conduct, but that self-realization was fully reached by doing so in the light of the moral idea, that is, in co-operation for the attainment of a common good ... Green said that underlying the idea of good was 'the rational nature common to all men', and that the idea of the common good and the duties involved in it, increase in range through generations of discipline It is not the sense of duty to a neighbour which varies but the practical answer to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?'¹⁹

In European history, 'generations of discipline' had converted the raw material of rationality into historical products: variously realised, more or less inclusive social ideals. But how did the process work? How could it be advanced? How applied to non-European peoples?

At different times, Elkin answered different aspects of these related questions. His mature thinking grappled with a most difficult iteration: How might Aborigines develop from a tribal ideal based in a subsistence economy, to a civic ideal based in industrial capitalism? As an undergraduate, he sought in his honours thesis to explain how

¹⁹ AP Elkin, 'Social Change: A Review', *Oceania* 29 (4), June 1959, 302–307, at 306.

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Australians could reconceive their notion of the 'common good and the duties involved in it', to fit a British continent south of Asia.

Already in 1915, Elkin worked with more than one answer to the question 'who is my neighbour'. Personally, he aspired to treat every human as his neighbour. Publicly, he sought to fulfil the not very neighbourly cultural conventions of white Australia, by seeing beyond them. His commitment to expanding human freedom obliged him ultimately to affirm the universal morality – but the convergence of cultural and universal morality ran through open-ended 'generations of discipline.' So inter-cultural and international neighbourly relations could be a long time coming.

Idealism: Limits and Complicity

It is, at best, an open question in any intellectual history how the opposite but often indistinguishable motives of altruistic aspiration and selfish opportunism combined. Elkin was ambitious and self-promoting, as even a cursory scan of his own writings and acts shows. Elkin used his knowledge of Aboriginal culture to advance his own fortunes. However, less obvious than the pretension is the motive power of the Idealist traditions Elkin emulated, by which I mean both the scholarly ethos and the moral philosophy.²⁰ Each prompted Elkin to fulfil his intellectual heritage by direct engagement not only in public debate but also in the imperfect compromises the liberal Idealists believed necessary to achieve broadly consensual, voluntary reform of the status quo.

A similar blend of self-interest and altruism pertains, with more serious implication, to the study of Idealists as a political interest group. Idealists, we can generalise, had their own collective interests. Foremost among these was the complex of associations amongst the concepts property, merit, status, and opportunity – associations that tied them into the existing property regime, characteristically as reformists pursuing a meritocracy.²¹ They affirmed core conditions of capitalism. They did not credit any alternative except the unknown one they sought through the reform from within the system that their moral philosophy required of them.

²⁰ For the relation between these two aspects, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 124–125.

²¹ Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19, Ch. 2. See also AP Elkin, 'Primitive Peoples: What They Teach', 12 June 1923, *The Newcastle Sun*, clipping in NLA, MS 9834/2/1.

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Similarly, on the whole, Australian Idealists complied with the Crown's seizure of Aboriginal land. They late and only gradually began to apply effective critical and reformist strategies to invite Aboriginal reconciliation with that fundamental problem. In 1915, the unconscious racialism behind Elkin's thinking about the national ideal was gross. In self-serving ignorance of the history of Aboriginal Australia – stunning but typical of his day – Elkin cited respected sources of the time to the effect that Australia was settled peacefully. He stated that Australians attained [citing an Australian history] 'a common national consciousness founded on ... a common destiny in the peaceful conquest and colonisation of a virgin continent'; [and citing the *Federalist Papers*] 'which Providence had been pleased to entrust to them.'²²

These lines of history and theology would not survive Elkin's exposure to Aboriginal culture three years later. In 1929, Elkin declared that the right to visit and camp at sacred sites was a vital Aboriginal interest.²³ He sought to convince settler Australians on this point.²⁴ Subordinate Aboriginal title on pastoral leases only became feasible as an Australian point of consensus after a 1997 High Court decision – even then, the Commonwealth government legislated to ensure that the new title was extinguished wherever it seriously compromised non-Indigenous interests.

Such were the limits to the practical achievement of Elkin's kind of Idealism. While bearing them in mind, it is important also to recapture Idealism's motivational force for early twentieth century adherents who maintained an optimism that has come to seem naïve, but had real effects in its time.

Moral histories: 'Personality' as synoptic principle, and a British civic religion

Idealist commitment shaped the great historical narratives into which Elkin's professors led him. Anderson taught synoptic history as a dialectic of cultural and universal morality.²⁵ The Christian reconciliation of the two he called 'Personality'. Personality denoted an individual's possession of his cultural heritage in such a way that he fulfilled

²² Elkin, *Australian National Consciousness*, 17.

²³ AP Elkin, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (10) 1929, 45.

²⁴ For a more complex assessment, concerning the influence of Elkin's anthropology in the 1930s upon later thinking about land rights, see Ch. 9.

²⁵ Francis Anderson, *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity* (Sydney: Australasian Association of Psychology and Philosophy, 1922).

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its 'spiritual facts' (to use Elkin's phrase), or contingent ideals, by co-ordinating them in a still wider communion. Christ modelled spiritual fulfilment in his complete personal commitment to, and alignment of, both a fraught (colonial) Jewish cultural obligation and a trans-cultural morality.²⁶ Through this dual commitment, he modelled 'a system of positive social duties.'²⁷ But Anderson did not raise Christ above other historical agents, or place him outside history. He taught that Buddha first discovered the fundamental truths of individual morality, but did not adequately express their social corollaries. Through stoicism and other cross-cultural currents, the early Christians imbibed the lessons of Buddhism and developed from them a social gospel.

Anderson taught that the Christian idea was spiritually adequate for the fulfilment of human freedom but its practical realisation waited upon the political gains of the French revolution and the material gains of the ongoing commercial, agricultural, and industrial revolutions. Humanity aspired to Christian 'personality', as its best hope – but only until someone discovered a higher revelation.²⁸

Eurocentric as his synoptic history was, Anderson taught, and Elkin embraced, an open-ended liberalism. No principle could finalise the human impulse to co-operation and mutual betterment, Anderson wrote. The idea of God the father, from which the ideal of universal brotherhood derived, was beyond reason.²⁹ Moral evolution was ongoing and words could not indicate its destination.³⁰ Anderson supervised and marked 'magna cum laude' the Honours thesis we will examine below, in which Elkin developed similarly grandiose universalist ideas about moral evolution, as they pertained to the white Australia policy.³¹

As an undergraduate, Elkin daily crossed the quadrangle at the University of Sydney from Anderson's lecture hall to George Arnold Wood's. Wood's progressive

²⁶ As in such parables as 'render unto Caesar'; the Good Samaritan; controversial teachings concerning the law regarding the Sabbath.

²⁷ Anderson, *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19–20. See also Elkin, 'Jesus and the Ethics of his Day', undated manuscript, EP 5/3/24, 5-6, 21–28.

²⁹ 'Until we can form a higher and purer conception of the nature of God than that contained in the person and teaching of Jesus, his gospel will remain the supreme revelation,' see Francis Anderson, *Christian Liberty and Ecclesiastical Union: An Examination of the Proposed 'Basis of Union of the United Church of Australia'* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1923).

³⁰ Anderson *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*, 22–25.

³¹ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', see handwritten copy, also at Fisher Rare Books, Elkin 006, for Wood's comments.

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history had a national rather than a synoptic focus, but his argument recalled Anderson's. Wood argued that in English political culture and institutions, human progress towards society-wide neighbourliness had reached a new height.

Wood conflated culture – contingent and political – with the universal aspiration of monotheistic religion. He wrote that for the British peoples, 'national history is God's Scripture, a religious history, a history of spiritual adventure and achievement, a history of great service rendered to mankind.'³² 'Spiritual adventure' occurred through the clash of interests, rendered progressive by a national genius for adjusting events and principles one to another.

One of the three undergraduate essays Elkin kept, which he wrote for Wood, illustrates the point. In 'Social and Economic Troubles, 1500–1550', Elkin showed how the English people turned chaotic events into a new principle of the public good. In early fifteenth century England, the King led the enclosure movement instead of restraining it.³³ Landowner greed escalated. At the same time, the bubonic plague reduced the labour pool, and many workers were also able to profit from the economic turmoil. A new spirit of individual gain arose. Attempts to reimpose feudal restraints upon new modes of self-interest failed. Eventually moralists understood that efficiency through free and mutual competition worked in the national interest. 'As always happens, the theory of the facts follows the facts', Elkin observed.³⁴ A reactionary political culture focussed on social norms was reluctantly abandoned, and the stage was set for 'a real sense of nationality': political reform in the national interest.³⁵ Elkin appreciated Wood's faith in English nationality as the pragmatic evolution of a spiritual, but contingent, ideal. A notable feature of his essay was that aggressive self-interest, followed by moralists' interpretive work, produced a new ideal. In Wood's school, amoral forces drove history; Idealism was a matter of continual adjustment and moral resettlement.

³² G. A. Wood, 'The Interest of British History', *Hermes*, vol. 24 (new series) no. 1, June 1918, 10–13, quoted in Brian Fletcher, 'History as a Moral Force: George Arnold Wood at Sydney University, 1898–1928', in *The Discovery of Australian History 1890–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 14.

³³ AP Elkin, 'The Social and Economic Trouble of the First Half of the Sixteenth Century', 1913 History I Honours Essay, unpublished, Fisher Rare Books Library, Elkin 002.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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Wood believed that British freedom justified the Empire. The most recent chapter in English spiritual progress was, Wood taught, the self-liberation of organised labour. Unionists' genius for organization heralded new hope for the working majority, and 'a better humanity.'³⁶ Wood believed that Britain deserved her empire and the world was lucky to have it. Yet the ideal was vulnerable to recurring abuses of power, and his opposition to a British imperial war nearly cost Wood his career.³⁷

Ethos

The Idealist ethos was politically interventionist. Like Wood and Anderson, Elkin celebrated politics as 'the noblest calling, as long as there is a great aim.'³⁸ The Greenian scholar aspired to realise, in practical ways, the promise of millennia of moral progress. Anderson taught that Green was a 'practical philosopher', for whom the worth of philosophy consisted in its efficacy in enriching and improving lives.³⁹ Green had inspired students such as Arnold Toynbee to attempt the elimination of the causes of the 'unconscious insolence' of class.⁴⁰ Offshoots of Green's thinking included renewed commitment to the goal of universal education, the mainstreaming of the campaign for progressive taxation, and public drives for social minimums of environmental amenity, especially housing.⁴¹

In practice, it was impossible to realise Green's philosophical reconciliation of individual freedom and social obligation. The problems that marked the welfare state – compromised incentive, bureaucratisation, the decline of individual responsibility – germinated along with the gains.⁴² Yet the ever imperfect realisation of freedom, seen in the light of the social gospel, had always been thought's grist; 'the wants of the age ... set the minds of thinking men in motion, they know not whither, till at last [one] reaches the

³⁶ G. A. Wood, *Syllabus of a Course of Six Lectures on Industry in England (1770–1875)*, Sydney, 1906, first presented to an audience of trade-unionists at the Trades Hall. At the end of the course a gift from the unionists declared was 'the first exponent of the Sydney University to impart instruction at the Trades Hall.' Cited in Crawford, *A Bit of a Rebel*, 254–258. For 'better humanity' see *ibid.*, 141, note 23: Crawford cites Wood's manuscript lecture on the American Declaration of Independence.

³⁷ Crawford devotes a chapter to the controversy, see *A Bit of a Rebel*.

³⁸ G. A. Wood, 'The Value of a Vote', manuscript, 1897, cited in Crawford, *A Bit of a Rebel*, 138.

³⁹ Francis Anderson, 'A Modern Philosopher – Green of Balliol', *Union Book of 1902*, 180.

⁴⁰ TH Green, 'Lecture on the work to be done by the new Oxford high school for boys', in RL Nettleship (ed.) *Works of Thomas Hill Green III*, 460.

⁴¹ Weiler, *New Liberalism*, 1–24.

⁴² Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, 212.

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wished-for light, and reflects it on his fellows.’⁴³ For the Idealists, the elite individual had a direct hand in the working out of history, even though he could only react to the incessant return of injustice, corruption, and want.

In his public intellectual work, Anderson sought to orient cultural institutions towards an inclusive conception of progress. He strove to liberalise and modernise both religion and education. With Charles Strong he founded the Australian Church, as a new and independent Christian denomination, and was an eloquent exponent of that denomination’s radically liberal theology. Anderson also played a leading role in liberalising the education system in New South Wales at primary and secondary levels. Elkin later recounted that in 1901 Anderson’s ‘arrowed words hit their mark ... “the men in charge of the administration have been trained within the system and are apparently unable to go beyond it; their minds move within a closed circle.”’⁴⁴ Largely on Anderson’s initiative, the pedagogy of Froebels, Pestalozzi, and Herbart leavened a complacent educational culture of rote learning, and raised the standards and aspiration of teacher training in New South Wales.⁴⁵ Anderson similarly attempted to import European scholarship into the university system, campaigning for a school of sociology, but with less success.⁴⁶ Like Green, Anderson wielded ideals as keys to unlock individuals’ improving ethic. Thought was an end in itself, but also always a stimulant for better conduct.

As mentioned, Wood almost sacrificed his career opposing the Boer war, which he condemned as unjust, and Australia’s participation in it, which he considered servile. A relevant aftermath of the controversy was London’s sanctioning of the importation by South African capitalists of Chinese indentured labour. Writing in the *Manchester Guardian*, Wood challenged English liberals to heed Australians’ disgust that gold mines on the Rand were being worked by ‘a labour class consisting not of British trade

⁴³ TH Green, ‘The force of circumstance’, Nettleship, *Works of Green* III, 10.

⁴⁴ AP Elkin, ‘The Emergence of Psychology, Anthropology and Education’, University of Sydney, *One Hundred Years of the Faculty of Arts: A Series of commemorative lectures given in the Great Hall, University of Sydney, during April and May 1952* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1952), 26. See also Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 207.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 223–225.

⁴⁶ Elkin, ‘Emergence of Psychology’, 26. In 1924, Elkin described his Honours graduation as in ‘sociology’. See clipping from *The Church Standard*, May 24 1924, Papers of Elkin, NLA, MS9834/2/1. In August 1, 1925 the WEA journal *The Australian Highway* farewelled ‘our Tutor in sociology’, *ibid.* Elkin later fulfilled his teacher’s hope by founding Australia’s first sociological journal: *Social Horizons*.

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unionists but of Chinese servants or slaves.’ His more thoughtful compatriots had belatedly realised that ‘Australians have shed their blood in order to establish a political society which differs from the Australian ideal as darkness from light.’⁴⁷

Wood’s account of that ideal is worth quoting because it parallels Elkin’s own and illustrates the student’s debt to his teacher.⁴⁸ Wood wrote that the Australian ideal was of a continent held

as an everlasting home for an untainted European and dominantly English community, composed of men of essential equality both in politics and in society, governed by a ‘one man one vote’ democracy, with industries carefully organised and regulated with a view to securing to the workers the reasonable reward of their labour, and even to the most helpless and incompetent the minimum of material comfort necessary to enable Englishmen to live decent lives and to act as good citizens.⁴⁹

The qualifier ‘untainted’ reminds us that the omission of Aborigines, Asians, and Islanders from this account was not innocent. But the national significance Wood attributed to equality’s practical conditions transcended the racialist context. As Elkin would make more explicit, once consolidated within Australia, an egalitarian dispensation of English freedoms would, the liberal Idealists believed, eventually benefit all peoples.

To summarise the legacy of Elkin’s liberal Idealist teachers: each cast the intellectual as the exemplary citizen, who by public commitments as well as exhortatory scholarship led national culture in its progress towards ‘a better humanity’. This theme is fully expressed in Elkin’s Honours thesis of 1915, ‘Australian National Consciousness’. The thesis, Elkin’s most significant piece of writing prior to 1929 outside of discretely anthropological or religious discourses, is our central source for understanding how Elkin understood the Idealist concept of civic obligation.

⁴⁷ GA Wood, ‘Chinese labour in the Transvaal’, *Manchester Guardian* 13 May 1904, cited in Crawford, *Bit of a Rebel*, 241–242.

⁴⁸ In 1923 another of Wood’s students published *A History of the White Australia Policy* that elaborated and propagated Wood’s view, doubtless refreshing Elkin’s own. Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920* first ed. 1923 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967).

⁴⁹ GA Wood, ‘Chinese labour in the Transvaal’, *Manchester Guardian* 13 May 1904, cited in Crawford, *Bit of a Rebel*, 241–242.

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Elkin on civic obligation

Elkin sought to discover the uniquely Australian cultural obligation. By analysing 'Australia's National Consciousness', he aimed firstly to assess the extent of Australia's moral or spiritual unity. He also wanted to set out his version of the 'Australian ideal' we saw Wood define above. Free settlement produced 'the democratic ideal ... a place where all will have equality of conditions and opportunities,' he argued. In their new country, 'all alike were new men.' Drawing on his family history of farming in the Hunter since the 1860s, he wrote,

To have fought against the bush, its loneliness and its droughts, and not to have been conquered gave the individual a strength of purpose and power of resource which were totally new characteristics to men who in the Home land, had been dependents of those in a higher social sphere.⁵⁰

The pioneering spirit carried over and constituted itself politically in 'experimental legislation' that pursued 'social Progress [sic]' rather than 'material advance'. Parliaments legislated to facilitate widespread [white] land ownership, and to avoid the emergence of 'a sweated and submerged class'. The living wage, and 'the early closing of shops, which is a marked characteristic of Australia', intended to protect workers' rights to the thinking time necessary to democratic citizenship – indicated a refusal of the capitalistic tendency to treat people as means rather than ends.⁵¹

The individual's free exercise of his conscience produced this Australian national ideal, Elkin argued. He counterposed political socialism and liberal morality.⁵² This distinction was topical; the Labor pledge, and its suppression of the individual conscience was a central topic of political debate both within and without the Australian Labor Party.⁵³ The labour movement, which led the way in experimental legislation, had socialistic tendencies, but labour success ensured that they associated with 'men of truly liberal ideas' and developed a 'middle point of outlook', conducive to egalitarian

⁵⁰ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19. For the rationale of early closing hours, see Elkin's source: Bernhard R. Wise, *The Commonwealth of Australia* (2nd ed., London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1913), 288–289.

⁵² Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 20–21.

⁵³ Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40.

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liberalism.⁵⁴ Vaguely, perhaps with the pledge in mind, or perhaps thinking of the ‘new liberal’ principle that a just portion of private property was a prerequisite for individual moral development, Elkin claimed that ‘the extreme socialistic point of view would seem to deprive the individual of the necessary means to the true realization of his capacities as a person.’⁵⁵

‘True’ for Elkin meant moral: ‘The true function of a state, namely, to remove all obstacles that might prevent the individual from fully realising his capacities ... is a moral function ... the State should secure to the individual his rights, a right can only serve the moral end.’⁵⁶ Here, Elkin projected onto the Australian people his Greenian rejection of natural rights. Green had argued that a right existed only as voluntarily constituted, by agreement and the practical good faith that realised the agreement. Political entitlement rested upon broadly diffused social expectation. The ideal of equality of conditions and opportunities was not a good in itself: it was a good only inasmuch as it reflected a shared will, a freely undertaken obligation. Elkin’s imagined Australian committed himself to egalitarian social policy because he believed that was the means by which each citizen could best expand his freedom.

By describing the ‘true function’ of the state as moral, Elkin meant that the state was the focus for each individual’s commitment to the common interest. According to this principle, the ‘spiritual fact’ of mutually respected compromise, leading in time to consensus, was as important as its material consequences. For example, the role of the labour movement in including the workers’ participation in the national consciousness was as important as workers’ material gains. National defence required increased immigration. But workers feared immigration would increase unemployment. Their point of view dictated the way in which immigration policy could be consensual, and so become an enduring shared idea: a spiritual fact.

Sound national growth implies more than increase in numbers. It implies advancement in the condition of living and social organization. And this, to be permanent, can only be decided by consent within the state. Hence the bringing in of immigrants to terminate by their presence a dispute – that is, to leave the cause of

⁵⁴ Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

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the dispute still unsettled and to throw one party to it out of employment – must in the interest of the nation be stopped.⁵⁷

Material advance had its place in expanding the conditions of freedom, but to be permanent, advance must be consensual, and hence spiritual. It needs to be recalled that, following Green, Elkin located consensus in society-wide commitment to a principle. Political agreements might become social consensus over time, or they might be revoked. Australians, he argued, had proven by innovative industrial relations and restrictive immigration a shared commitment to the honour of work and ‘a minimum standard of comfort’ for all workers.⁵⁸

Race and nation

Australian egalitarianism had a racial dimension that Elkin embraced as a necessary national expedient. He wrote of ‘that morality which the white man sets before himself’.⁵⁹ In one sense, this conception betrayed an irrational racialism, because the opposite of ‘white morality’ – ‘wealth at any [social] price’ – he found typified in the English conditions against which Australian settlers reacted to create their own national ideal. But in another sense, the term signified the practical measure he and fellow new liberals believed necessary to sustain egalitarianism: employers had to be denied access to cheap, non-union labour – ‘coloured’ labour from Asia, Africa, or the Pacific Islands. Race marked off unsuitable sources of immigrants, ‘lower in the scale of living ... who make impossible the conditions of a free morality [which it is] the chief duty of a state to promote.’ Elkin’s earlier argument against strike-breaking immigrant labour explained the way in which ‘coloured races’ precluded ‘free morality.’ Racial exclusion protected social and industrial inclusion. The achievement of the latter, as Professors Wood and Anderson had taught in their different ways, was the vanguard of higher civilization. Hence, ‘It was [Australia’s] national duty as a member of the world system, to fulfil her opportunity of developing a white continent, and one, not only white, but also

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24, 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

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as far as possible, British-Australian.⁶⁰ Thus Elkin attempted to align a racially exclusive cultural obligation and a higher, universal morality.

The white Australia policy, Elkin argued, ‘implied sacrifice’ (presumably for capitalists and liberal nationalists, not workers).⁶¹ It had already cost the Commonwealth money when indentured labourers were repatriated from Queensland sugar plantations. Greater sacrifices lay ahead. Informed opinion had it that Caucasians could not develop tropical Australia. Profit and security in the north must wait until technology equipped whites for that climate or social and industrial conditions changed so that coloured labour presented no threat to the national ideal. Moreover, the policy offended neighbours and even fellow British subjects. Australians had shown themselves willing to risk expulsion from the Empire rather than compromise on racial exclusion. White Australia was their ‘object of chief importance’, corresponding to the American rejection of taxation without representation in 1776. Yet what Elkin, from a nationalist perspective claimed to be a noble sacrifice, appeared to outsiders, he recognised, as chauvinism or greed.

Compounding this problem of perception, race also had an illiberal national meaning, obvious to domestic and foreign observers, but, Elkin believed, ultimately illusory. At a basic level, citizens were conscious of an urge for permanence – something they shared and worked for that ought to survive them. Some Australians found that sort of grounding in the idea (perhaps fantasy) of white Australia.⁶² They were confused, Elkin believed: the nation was a spiritual entity, and race was merely a physical element, analogous to the landscape, upon which the spirit worked.⁶³ Landscape and race were alike non-spiritual; race was not even permanent, as it evolved through blending far more quickly than landscape altered. Race was a distraction from the inner reality upon which education and religion worked. Elkin held that the Idealism he shared with his teachers and most intellectuals was a true insight into a singular spiritual and moral reality. Everyone experienced the same reality, and had the same, moral interests; but not everyone apprehended reality, or even their own interests, fully:

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Here Elkin followed Bernhard R. Wise, *The Commonwealth of Australia* (2nd ed., London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1913), 271–278. See below for a discussion of Wise’s work.

⁶² For an account of collective racial identity as fantasy, which though concerned with contemporary Australia can be read for historical insights, including into Idealism as wish-fulfilment, see Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney : Pluto Press, 1998).

⁶³ Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 3.

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It may be only to the brighter intellects and to the best statesmen that the nation will be the motive to, or the criterion of the value of, acts; just as it is comparatively few who are aware of the action of a spiritual principle in them which because of its self-manifestation, urges them on to a higher morality.⁶⁴

A few leading citizens were conscious of a collective aspiration of permanent value: the shared purpose, the ‘spiritual fact and growth’, of liberal egalitarianism. Illiberal racialism was an error, and ephemeral; the liberal impulse towards industrial democracy was true morality, and ought to endure.

Elkin was amongst the Australian liberals who proposed that race ought to play a self-effacing part in the making of a moral community. He acknowledged that race was more than a generic indicator of suitable immigrants. It provided the ‘tribal’ loyalty from which a higher could grow. ‘Civilization owes its advance to the transformation and expansion of ... loyalty.’⁶⁵ ‘Coloured races, *as they are*’ hindered free morality.⁶⁶ White Australia, he implied, was a temporary expedient. From a chrysalis of racial exclusion would emerge the Australian contribution to civilization: permanent, spiritual, inter-racial – and uniquely egalitarian.

That Elkin believed liberal principles would endure, racial ones fall away is supported by his later words and actions. In 1934, he wrote in a *Church* review that Indians, Chinese, and Japanese did not accept Australian claims of *cultural* superiority, and could easily overcome their present material inferiority; Australians could only legitimate their demographically tenuous claim to a continent by making ‘a positive contribution to the changing world by expressing our highest beliefs in all our ... affairs, and so prove to the East that we are sincere.’⁶⁷ In 1946, he was accused of heresy for suggesting that the time approached when Australia ought to accept Asian immigrants and abandon the white Australia policy.⁶⁸ He did not resile from his controversial opinion.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁷ AP Elkin, ‘The Changing World’, *Morpeth Review* III (27), April 1934, 88–91.

⁶⁸ AP Elkin, ‘Is White Australia Doomed?’, in WD Borrie (ed.), *A White Australia? Australia’s Population Problem* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1947), 174–214. He proposed gradual reform: a quota of

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But in 1915, Elkin's racialism contained elements that portended quite another direction. Writing one month before the Gallipoli landing, Elkin hungered for national greatness. It was an appetite he recognised in the political leaders of Federation. From 1903, in all the debates on taking responsibility for British New Guinea, Parliamentarians had been unanimous, 'that Australia needed a field for realising its capacities as a nation and as a ruling power.'⁶⁹ Elkin explained why: 'The first civilisers of Australia and the main flow of future immigrants were of British blood, that is, of a race which was strong enough to claim sole ownership of the vast continent.'⁷⁰ He measured national greatness on a racial index.

This strand in Elkin's thinking contradicted liberal Idealism. The conflict goes back to his sources. Elkin's major sources were 'new liberals': they each proposed that progressive thinking should issue in improved social, moral, and intellectual conditions for all citizens. But within the new liberal political orthodoxy, we can separate the Idealists from the racial realists.⁷¹ The clearest line between them was the race idea. The pure Idealists, Green and Anderson, ignored it; Wood, straddling the fence, was troubled by it, and provided Elkin with arguments that supported his reconciliation of racialism and Idealism; the realists of the day represented racial difference as if it represented a permanent and fundamental reality. Chief amongst these sources was Bernhard Wise.

Wise was a leading Australian new liberal. As a member of the NSW Legislative Assembly, he drafted the Old Age pensions Act (1900), the Women's Franchise Act (1902), and the Industrial Arbitration Act (1901). Writing for an international audience, he praised Australian Parliaments generally as 'a laboratory of experiments in industrial

Asian immigrants, 'purely symbolic, to show that we did not refuse Asians as Asians.' See 'Some Problems of Australian-Asian Relations', EP B1/17/152 incomplete manuscript, n.d., 3. See also his 'Re-thinking the White Australia Policy', *Australian Quarterly Review*, 17 (3), 1945, 6-34. For the public reaction, see Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 175.

⁶⁹ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷¹ A 'realist' scientist combined reductionism (the belief that all true knowledge is reducible to predictable factors) and a pragmatic preference for impersonal explanations of human issues, supposed to be more predictable. By 'realist', I invoke the contrast made in international relations between normative and realist analyses, wherein realism denotes the view that in a milieu of international competition, aggression and the possibility of war, only material self-interest renders any nation's foreign affairs predictable. By this view, morally aspirant social projects are self-deluding; projects that strictly observe (alleged) rules of self-interest are reliable. Elkin's idea of nationalist intellectual leadership framed a realist worldview in terms of an idealist sociology. JH Oldham, Elkin's contemporary in Anglican mission circles, made the tension explicit; see *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1925 (1924)), 27.

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legislation.’⁷² Elkin relied on Wise for his discussion of a series of Australian legislative achievements.⁷³

Wise was also a race patriot.⁷⁴ In his handbook on Australia, which Elkin cited extensively, he gave three reasons why Britain would remain interested in Australia: her geographic position enabled the Empire ‘to dominate the Pacific’; her resources boosted the Empire’s ‘commercial supremacy’; and she was racially ‘the most British country out of Great Britain.’⁷⁵ The third point underwrote the others:

In truth [white Australia] is a policy of high patriotism, conceived and executed in loyalty to the Empire and calculated to conserve its strength, which is supported with passionate conviction by the majority of native-born Australians, from a belief that they owe it as a duty to civilisation to preserve their land for the white races. ... [U]pon this part of Australian policy there can be no compromise.⁷⁶

These were Wise’s most ringing words in a generally restrained book.

Elkin followed Wise in presenting Australian racialism as a kind of collective manliness. Elkin argued that his race’s virtue was the leading edge of his nation’s independence from Britain. The Colonial Office in London wanted freedom of movement for all British subjects within the Empire; the new Commonwealth wanted to exclude Indians. British allies such as Japan also resented Australia’s exclusion of their nationals. Elkin cited Edmund Burke warning the British Parliament in his *Speech for Conciliation* that as self-governing Britons, Americans had ‘lofty sentiments and ... a strong aversion from whatever tend to deprive them of their object of chief importance.’ Elkin argued that racial unity was Australians’ ‘object of chief importance’.⁷⁷ America split from the mother country over tax; the only cleaving issue in Australia’s case was ‘coloured’ immigration. Elkin argued that one of the key signs of an emerging national

⁷² Wise, *Commonwealth of Australia*, 2.

⁷³ Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 19–21.

⁷⁴ This does not imply chauvinism or prejudice. Wise resisted anti-Asian sentiments, and argued that Australia’s enemy was Germany and not china or Japan. See Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism*, 31–32.

⁷⁵ Wise, *Commonwealth of Australia*, ix–x.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷⁷ Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 24.

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consciousness was that the white Australia policy expressed ‘a conscious relation to those without whose oppositions it may call forth.’⁷⁸

Elkin joined in the Australian enthusiasm to emulate both American national independence from Britain and turn-of-the-century American imperialism. He noted, upon the first visit of an American fleet to Australia, ‘the universal pride in what was felt to be the elevation of Australia into a new phase of nationhood by one of the leading powers of the world.’⁷⁹ If his American ‘cousin’s’ manifest destiny was to spread religious and political freedom across a continent and beyond, the Australian’s was to spread throughout his region social freedom through equality.⁸⁰ The social ideal rested upon a contradictory, racially conceived will to dominate.

Moral perfectionism: as idea, example, and religious practice

To see how Wise’s language of ‘supremacy’ and the ‘high patriotism’ of race meshed with Elkin’s Idealism, we can return to Wood as an intermediary. Writing for Wood, Elkin glossed racial characteristics as historical causes: Henry II and Thomas Beckett had a tumultuous, assertive, creative friendship because ‘they were both Teutons, who were grand big boys in their ways’.⁸¹ In a public address, Wood described the Teutonic strand in British history as a key to her greatness, because its supposed characters of virility and love of liberty complemented the spiritual aspiration, discipline, and constraints of Christianity.⁸² The two ideals combined in a spiritual dialectic that, properly cultivated, edified a people, Wood supposed. This figure of a complementary dualism followed the Victorian fashion exemplified most famously in Matthew Arnold’s Hellenic and Hebraic elements of culture. Like Arnold, Wood meant to paint a picture of spiritual perfection. In contrast with Green and Anderson’s purely intellectual and spiritual idea, Wood’s picture of moral perfection was closer to the figurative iteration of a hero. For Wood, race, with

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁰ For a different interpretation of the relations between masculinized virtue, nationalism, and race as they applied in Australia and the US alike, see Marilyn Lake, ‘White Man’s Country: The Transnational History of a National Project’, *AHS* 34 (122), 2003, 346–363.

⁸¹ AP Elkin, ‘Thomas Becket’, a History Honours essay. Fisher Library, Rare Books, Elkin 001, at p. 11.

⁸² GA Wood, ‘The Value of a Vote’, 1897, MS, Wood Papers; cited in Crawford, *Bit of a Rebel*, 138.

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its connotations of blood loyalty and ‘Teutonic’ self-responsibility, was an aspect of heroism.⁸³

Elkin was also a moral perfectionist. In his 1915 Honours thesis, he celebrated national consciousness as the shared aspiration to ‘one type of excellence’, an aspect of ‘that perfect excellence to which all nations must contribute, each the results of its specialisation.’⁸⁴ He expressed that project sometimes as a matter of ‘spiritual fact’ and ‘spiritual aspiration’; at other times as a matter of personal example. Elkin concluded his thesis with a quotation from Mazzini, which expressed in heroic form the liberal egalitarianism Elkin espoused in the body of the essay. The quotation was doubly appropriate for Elkin’s purpose, given Mazzini’s struggle to lead Italian workers into a liberal nationalism: ‘Let country be incarnated in each of you; each one of you feel and make himself responsible for his brothers; each of you so act that in yourselves men may respect and love your country.’⁸⁵ Mazzini preached, and embodied, nationality as a spiritual and democratic ideal.

Wood had taught that Mazzini, the Jansenist man of God who became also a man of the people, revealed that nationality was a religious idea. Man’s mission, Wood paraphrased was ‘to *grow* in *God*’; this required ‘liberty and *association*, for he must grow into goodness by helping men grow into goodness.’ That growth ought to extend democratically through family, nation, and a League of Nations, Wood argued.⁸⁶ Like Wood, Elkin believed that Australia’s chance of achieving such an ideal depended upon a policy of racial exclusion: ‘Whether the ideal is right or wrong in the light of humanitarian principles, it at any rate does express a strong sentiment of national consciousness.’

In 1915, a bloody sun was setting on national consciousness as, intrinsically, a liberal doctrine – but so it still seemed to be. Mazzini’s ideas and techniques had not yet been co-opted by Fascists. Mazzini struggled to win Italy for the worker, from the French, feudal, and clerical overlords; Elkin wanted to see the Australian nation as if it

⁸³ For Wood’s tendency to write history as a series of heroic vignettes, see *ibid.*, 127–142.

⁸⁴ Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 32–33. Compare Green, in ‘Force of Circumstance’.

⁸⁵ Cited in Elkin, ‘Australian National Consciousness’, 32.

⁸⁶ John Anthony Moses, *Prussian-German militarism, 1914-18 in Australian perspective: the thought of George Arnold Wood* (New York: Bern, 1991).

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had been won by the free settler, despite his past in Britain as a member of a subordinate class, and from nature. Both men wanted to evoke a national spirit that could contribute to a general aspiration – a global ideal of human perfection.

Yet might not Idealism, and Wood's heroic perfectionist project alike be mere wishful thinking? T. H. Green's message may have been rationally consistent and morally compelling, but how much did that mean if only a handful of people heard it? If, as Elkin alleged, most people failed to perceive their collective, enduring self within a converging unity of groups; if instead they believed the 'illusion' that nation and race demarcated the rival interests of foreign groups, then how could he believe that ideals represented anything other than pious hopes?⁸⁷ What overarching loyalty, symbol, or social practice could articulate the common sense of contingent, national identity with the vaguer apprehension of a broader solidarity? What alternative was available besides the leader-principle that (in strictly liberal forms) attracted Wood?

Australia's new liberal ambitions had a Realist, biological rationale as well as an Idealist, spiritual one. The Realists rode the wave of biological thinking: race as the evolutionary mechanism, the dimension within which human groups struggled for supremacy and domination, the survival of the fittest (see Ch. 5).⁸⁸ We will see that Elkin adopted evolution as the basic paradigm of social thought (Ch. 3). But in 1915, and recurrently thereafter, he constrained evolutionist arguments within a religious framework. As we will see (particularly in Chs. 5, 7 and 8) the specific commitments of organised Christian denomination, as against the more abstract intellectual alliance of Idealists, countered the lure of hard biological data and associated racialised policy.

A glimpse of religion in an otherwise secular thesis

Except for one anomalous section of Elkin's honours thesis, an ignorant reader of Elkin's undergraduate essays would not suspect that he was studying as an ordinand (Ch. 2). The only specifically religious elements of Elkin's honours thesis were provoked by his mixed admiration and wariness concerning *The Bulletin*: Australia's 'national paper', and

⁸⁷ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 30–31.

⁸⁸ For a long and detailed analysis of the evolutionist and vitalist impulses and ideas in nine Australian intellectuals in this period, see Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought 1890–1960* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1984).

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organ of 'national self-consciousness'. Elkin commended the paper's independent, satirical critique of politics:

[I]t directs its cynicism to national ends. It holds us and our policies up to ourselves in such a way that we are bound to ask ourselves, 'Is that what we really aimed at or will be satisfied with, and are we in earnest about it?' ... [I]t gives ground for reflection.⁸⁹

As Australia's chief reflection of public opinion, the paper performed a national service.

But he rejected *The Bulletin's* racism. Ignoring cruder manifestations, such as the paper's denigration of Chinese people in general, he cited and critiqued the paper's racism at the point where biological Realism presented a threat to Idealism:

We may say, if we choose that the [white Australia] policy is 'due to the instinct against race mixture which nature has implanted to promote her work of evolution', as long as we remember that the end of this evolution is a moral one which may best be served by keeping races apart, not because of difference of colour, but because of their different stages in the scale of moral evolution.⁹⁰

Elkin argued that race ought not to be conceived as a non-negotiable biological reality, but as one of the conditioning factors within which citizens pursued a moral end.

If reflection were to lead to better action, Elkin argued, the thinker needed a positive object to direct self-critique. The *Bulletin* failed, Elkin judged, to fulfil its purpose of being a national paper because in spiritual matters it offered only ridicule. Its admirable campaign for 'physical, intellectual and political well-being', even when pursued with honesty, was inadequate.

The nation has a soul, a spiritual aspect [Elkin wrote] just because the individual has such. ... The recognition of a Divine Being manifesting himself in the life of nations, and of this nation, is the only true source of national development.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. For a recent argument along these lines, see Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox: A Strange Case of Authorship* (Ringwood, Victoria: Allen Lane, 1983), xi, 74.

⁹⁰ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 23–24. He cited the *Bulletin*.

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If this sentiment was unlikely to challenge the journalists at which Elkin aimed (pretending that they might have read it), it had more of a chance than what followed: Elkin argued that the Church's teachings deserved respect 'because they emanate in the light of an ideal of men's moral perfection of his being a manifestation of the All-embracing soul of the Universe.'⁹¹

In Elkin's selective appreciation of the *Bulletin* we find encapsulated key aspects of his Idealism's religious underpinning. Religion was a source of moral clarity, and of personal commitment to the Idealist dynamic of widening solidarity. Religion was also, in Elkin's conception, a partner to all efforts to prompt the free and self-critical exercise of the intellect. Finally, religion was out of joint with the rest of his exposition: his religious language was vague, exhortatory, and unconvincing. In the war years after Elkin submitted his Honours thesis, rationalists such as the *Bulletin* journalists would have a stronger response than satire to religion's increasingly anachronistic-seeming exhortations.

Elkin suffered this intellectual pressure in acute form as a clergyman. Within eighteen months of graduating, he was obliged to urge his congregation, in the name of God, to sacrifice the lives of young men to the British Empire.⁹² Early in the war, Elkin hoped that the Commonwealth might provide a template for a movement towards global unity: 'a practical illustration of the unity in one confederation of what are truly distinct nations.'⁹³ As the trenches filled with bodies, his faith in the spiritual reality furthered by liberal Empire sank. He hoped that the Church's symbolism – made concrete in its psychological, social, and spiritual practices – could leaven the self-interest of all individuals with the principles of brotherhood, fatherhood, and the family bond as humanity-wide.⁹⁴ But his hope was not whole-hearted. He doubted the literal truth claims to which he had assented in his Priestly vows; during several miserable years, he sought a credible basis for Christian Idealism (Chs. 2 and 3).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² A pastoral letter from the Archbishop of Sydney, dated 4 July 1915, urged Anglican clergymen 'to do your utmost to stir up the young men of our communion to offer themselves as soldiers in defence of the Empire.' Reprinted in *The Southern Churchman*, 15 July, 1915, 5. Cited in John A. Moses, 'Australian Anglican leaders and the Great War, 1914–1918: The "Prussian Menace"', *Conscription, and National Solidarity*, *Journal of Religious History* 25 (3), October 2001, 310–323, at 319, note 39.

⁹³ Elkin, 'Australian National Consciousness', 26.

⁹⁴ Elkin, first sermon notebook at p. 4, for example, EP 5/3/12, series 45 box 12.

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For the fortunes of Idealism, like its origins, were bound up with the practices that sustained people's faith in human unity, and relatedly in an image of human perfection. Historically, Christian loyalties had driven thoughtful men to sustain the difficult labours that produced Christian Socialism and Idealism.⁹⁵ Those loyalties were generated within societies that cultivated an altruistic ethos through Church rituals, creeds, associations, organizations, symbols, and heroes. Elkin, for reasons we will investigate next chapter, was particularly interested in the relation between social sources of inspiration and habituation, and the Idealist project of conceiving diverse 'spiritual facts' within an overarching spiritual norm.

Conclusion and prospect

Elkin was an Idealist. He approached knowledge as the discovery of his highest obligation, derived from the tension between a perfectionist morality on the one hand, and on the other, loyal citizenship conditioned by contingent, cultural fact. As we will see in the next two chapters, Elkin's thinking about religion was driven by the conflict he experienced between general (intellectual) and particular (religious and national) conceptions of obligation. He was spurred on by that conflict's personal, existential pinch; but also by the visions of human perfection, and completeness, that he shared with his teachers.

⁹⁵ Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, 12, 15–49; Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 25–181.