RELIGION, SEXUALITY AND RETRIBUTION: PLACING THE ‘OTHER’ IN SYDNEY

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Abstract

Australia is a notably majoritarian society, where the ‘majority’ is defined as white, heterosexual and Christian. At crucial periods in Australian history tensions involving minorities that did not conform to majoritarian expectations have flared up. The late nineteenth century was rife with racist and religionist tensions, particularly focused on the Chinese community, which influenced the Federation (1901) agenda for Australia. This agenda, enshrined in legislation such as the Immigration Restriction Act (1901) and other Acts constituting the White Australia Policy, determined Australian immigration until the late 1960s. Sexual minorities, particularly gays and lesbians, have not generally posed the overt and public challenge to ‘Australian values’ that alien ethnic and religious groups have. However, there are important synergies between the two cases and the challenges they pose for mainstream Australia. What is central to majoritarian Australia is peripheral to them; what is normative is alien. Their communities gather in areas that are ‘undesirable’ or unwanted by the establishment, and their ‘deviant’ practices take place in mysterious, substantially hidden locations.

This paper examines two case studies of communities that challenged majoritarian Australia, and the places and constructed spaces associated with them in Sydney. The first case study is focused on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese community and the two temples in which the Chinese carried on their religious life; Sze Yup in Glebe (1904) and Yui Ming in Alexandria (1909). The witch-hunt against the Chinese culminated in a Royal Commission in 1891, which exonerated them on all counts (opium addiction, sexual immorality, and stealing the jobs of whites). The second case study examines the police raids on Club 80, a gay male venue that was located at various addresses in the inner city suburb of Darlinghurst. This witch-hunt was the last gasp of a long campaign waged by conservative elements of society against homosexuals in Sydney. The first Gay Mardi Gras parade in 1978 and the ultimate failure to close venues like Club 80 signalled profound social change. This research is a significant contribution to scholarship in that it establishes important parallels between deviant ethnic religion and deviant sexuality, and raises questions concerning what is regarded as decent and indecent, central and peripheral, healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal, ‘other’ and ‘same’, and safe and dangerous, in the Australian context. These issues are located within Australia’s emerging multiculturalism and multi-faith, post-Christian religious landscape, and Sydney’s emerging reputation as one of the premier gay cities of the world.
Introduction

A distinctive feature of Sydney’s urban environment in the early twenty-first century is its diversity of cultural expression, and the provision of a multitude of places within it that provide opportunities for and foster a variety of cultural experiences. These places provide minority groups with a certain degree of ontological security, but may reinforce insecurity depending on the places’ perceived permanence or ephemerality. The present diversity of cultural expression within the city has been created out of and in spite of an exclusionary, homogenising and racist past. Sydney has been hailed as ‘a microcosm of the religious life of the world’ (Hartney 2004, 435) and as one of the world’s pace-setting, gay-friendly cities (Marsh and Galbraith 1995). This diversity of life-options within Sydney and its perceived stability or instability is the subject of broader public opinion and concern, in which diverse religions and ethnicities, cultures and sexualities, are interrogated to determine whether they support ways of life that are good, orderly, healthy and safe for the city, or whether they support ways of life that are dangerous, disruptive, unhealthy and disorderly to the city.

Garry Trompf has emphasised the mythic nature of multiculturalism in ways that are relevant to this chapter. He drew attention to the utopic (placeless) quality that any vision of an open, tolerant society possesses, and the difficulties with implementing steps towards such a community (Trompf 1992, 317). This insight, coupled with his proposal that a ‘logic of retribution’ governs human identity construction, particularly in historical and religious contexts (Trompf 1979, 85–106, 155–181, 231–241, 283–291), provides the framework of interpretation for our analysis of the Sze Yup-Yui Ming and Club 80 case studies. We concentrate on the role and significance of cultural identity in the formation of the urban environment to explore how binary oppositions concerning otherness and sameness, periphery and centre, exotic and everyday, normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy, and safe and dangerous, are employed in relation to particular cultural groups. Trompf’s ‘logic of retribution’ immediately reveals the potential for violent witch-hunts to emerge when such binary opposites are encoded with ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ values, setting the majority against minority communities. This is apparent in the intersection between ideas, images, and anxieties concerning the preservation of, and future of, ‘perceived ways of life’ and the way in which their urban form and space are regulated and governed by a variety of techniques, including vice laws, licensing, zoning, and land use planning.