

MARK BROLLY

The dry continent

As Britain is recovering from the effects of abnormally high rainfall, Australia is suffering from its worst drought in more than two centuries. The weather is forcing farmers, town dwellers, politicians and the Church itself to rethink radically their attitude towards 'the gift of water'

"If we don't get three inches, man,
Or four to break this drought,
We'll all be 'rooned', said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out."

Mgr Patrick Hartigan, the Australian priest-poet who wrote under the pen name "John O'Brien", knew drought well enough, having spent more than 60 of his 74 years in the dry inland areas of southern New South Wales, where drought has been a regular, and at times, serious affliction. But Hanrahan's foreboding – the lines above are from "Said Hanrahan" published in 1921 in *Around the Boree Log and Other Verses* – rarely would have seemed more prophetic than in the past 11 years. Since 1996, Australia has endured the most severe drought since the British settled the continent nearly 220 years ago.

The drought has opened up cracks in more than just the land. Old divisions in Australia between the six states and between the states and the federal Government in Canberra, between the city and the bush – and even between neighbours over domestic water use as restrictions have been tightened – have been supplemented by broader concern about the effects of global climate change.

The Church has not been prominent in the public debate but nor has it been idle. In a 2002 statement, bishops whose dioceses cover the Murray-Darling river system, Australia's largest, said: "We need to model respect for the gift of water in our church and school buildings and gardens as well as in our individual homes ... Responding to this call is one of the great challenges facing the Christian community and the wider human community of the twenty-first century."

Catholic Earthcare Australia, for instance, has released an environmental audit CD to assist parishes, schools and church agencies with their environmental practices, ministry and spirituality; to help them develop priorities for more sustainable practices; and to aid communication with other Churches and environmental agencies to promote "ecological conversion".

Last November, as Australians prepared to face the hot summer months after poor spring rains, the heads of 21 Australian Churches called for a national day of prayer for rain and for people severely affected by



the drought. Two weeks later, the Catholic bishops, at their bi-annual meeting in Sydney, issued a pastoral letter to those suffering from the drought. "At times like this we realise that we are not the master of the forces of nature," the letter said. "This can be deeply unsettling. Yet our faith provides us with a reason to hope and trust in God who cares for us and loves us."

Two years earlier, on 4 October 2004 – the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology – 11 bishops whose dioceses cover the Murray-Darling endorsed a statement on the crisis, "The Gift of Water". In it, they called for a "renewed spirituality of water that recognises its centrality for all life" and made practical suggestions to restore the health of the river system.

"We Australians live in the driest continent on Earth, experience unpredictable droughts and face the further uncertainty of global climate change," the bishops said in a statement prepared by Catholic Earthcare Australia, an agency the bishops' conference had established in 2002. "In this context, the health of the Murray and the other rivers of the Basin is a matter of great concern. The success of agriculture in the Murray-Darling Basin has come at a largely unforeseen cost. We can now see that there are physical and ecological constraints to agriculture in Australia that are far more severe than those that operate in Europe and many other parts of the world."

The Murray-Darling, the main focus of the environmentalists' concerns, waters four of Australia's six states in the south-eastern quarter of the continent. The Murray-Darling Basin

covers more than a million square kilometres (386,000 square miles) – almost twice the size of mainland France – about 14 per cent of Australia's total area. From the headwaters of the Darling River in southern Queensland to the mouth of the Murray River at Goolwa, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-east of the South Australian capital, Adelaide, the river system extends 3,750 kilometres (2,330 miles) at its greatest extent.

But in the past decade, the drought has added to problems that have reduced the Darling to little more than a collection of pools in some parts of western New South Wales, while Murray waters have struggled to reach the sea at Goolwa. As much as 80 per cent of Murray waters have been diverted for human use, and the Murray now needs human assistance through dredging to reach the sea.

The lands watered by the two main rivers and their tributaries comprise half the land in Australia under cultivation and produce more than 40 per cent of the country's agricultural output – much of it only possible through irrigation. Ten per cent of Australia's 20 million people are directly supported by the river system.

Adelaide, the driest state capital and principal city of Australia's driest state, is peculiarly vulnerable to changes in the Murray-Darling. The Murray supplies about 40 per cent of the water to Australia's fifth-biggest city – which has a population of more than 1.1 million people – in normal years but this can rise to more than 85 per cent in drought.

A combination of deepening drought, increased awareness of global climate change and an impending general election has heightened the public debate. In January, the Prime Minister, John Howard, proposed a A\$10 billion (£4bn) plan to the states and farmers to take federal control of the river system. Three of the states affected directly have agreed but Victoria's government and its farmers are still resisting – endangering the plan as the Murray forms most of Victoria's northern border.

On 20 April, Mr Howard warned that without significant rainfall in the next six to eight weeks, there would be no water available for irrigation at the start of the water year on 1 July. (The water year is the irrigation season. Farmers are told how much water they can

take from rivers during a given 12-month period.) What water there was in the storages would be needed to provide a critical minimum supply for towns and communities within the Murray-Darling system, he said, and called for prayers to end the drought. As the Prime Minister warned farmers to prepare for “the high likelihood” of a zero irrigation allocation, the president of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, echoed his concerns. “Our hope is that the Lord will grant us adequate rains for our urgent needs,” he said on the same day. “The power of prayer is very strong and we have every hope in asking for the Lord’s intervention and help at this time of great difficulty.”

On 20 June, in a joint statement with the premiers of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the chief minister of the Australian capital territory (Canberra), Mr Howard said an official report showed that “the water situation has not changed significantly in the southern part of the Murray-Darling Basin” since April, and that final opening allocations for the 2007-08 irrigation season would be announced by state water resource management agencies early this month. “Water availability will be reviewed at least monthly by state and territory government authorities,” he said.

To date, there has been at best a partial answer to the prayers for rain. The New South Wales Hunter Valley, including Newcastle, and the eastern Victorian region of Gippsland, have received heavy flooding in recent weeks. But much of the rest of Australia, including the Murray-Darling, still awaits an end to the drought.

On the other side of the continent, in Western Australia, the struggles of farmers with the drought have coincided with one of the state’s periodic resources booms, as iron ore, coal and gas are exported in unprecedented quantities to a resource-hungry China. Yet in Perth, the state capital, the West Australian government has become the first in the country to desalinate seawater to supplement the city’s fresh-water supply. Other governments and water authorities are encouraging the use of “grey water” (mainly residential waste water), which has been used previously, for non-drinking purposes. The water crisis has been sobering for many Australians. A country that celebrates itself as one of boundless opportunity has been forced to discover its natural limits.

“Australians all, let us rejoice” are the opening words of the national anthem, “Advance Australia Fair”; but Australians might well echo St Francis of Assisi’s “The Canticle of Brother Sun”, cited by Australia’s Catholic bishops in their 2002 Social Justice Sunday Statement, “A New Earth – The Environmental Challenge”:

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
Which is very useful and humble and
precious and chaste.

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MONA SIDDIQUI

‘Faith requires voices and action to pull it back from the clutches of hateful ideologies’



I admit I never thought Glasgow would be hit by terrorism. I was in Windsor at the weekend at a closed conference on religion and public life when I heard the news. I knew trying to catch a plane back was futile and decided to step on the train – a five-hour journey gave me plenty to think about.

I have lived in Glasgow for 16 years now and, just as Yorkshire was home before, so Glasgow is home now. There was a sense that my city had been violated with this latest attack but there was also a sense of horror over the possibility of Scottish Muslims having been involved.

So what does this say about Muslim attitudes in the UK? A few weeks ago, a friend of mine who runs a business in Glasgow told me that many Muslims had decided to return to Pakistan or migrate elsewhere in Europe because they felt betrayed at being placed under the spotlight when they had spent their lives working hard and being loyal British citizens.

I was surprised. How can people just up and leave? How does migrating elsewhere reduce the feeling of displacement? I don’t think for one minute that it is the duty of every Muslim to voice their opinion on extremism but I do think that in such times Muslim communities can play a constructive role in ensuring that their religion does not continue to be judged by violence and through the prism of terrorism. After all, those people involved in jihadist websites and promulgating extremist ideologies are not doing this in some social or cultural vacuum. They work, they have friends and families, social lives and they do normal things; they are connected to the wider, mainstream Muslim communities. For too long we have heard the rhetoric that alienation has caused this radicalisation; but this is simply not true. I have always claimed that whereas violent acts may be perpetrated by a few, extremism is not a marginal phenomenon.

Most Muslims in the UK enjoy their peaceful and free lives here. They have no intention of living anywhere

else even if their roots lie in the sub-continent. However, some have made Islam the fundamental essence of their identity and they struggle to find an Islam that provides them with a spiritual, social and cultural fulfilment. It becomes easy to divert their allegiance to the notion of an *umma* which transcends boundaries and makes them feel part of a global entity, an ideal and imaginary state of brotherhood. A conviction that Islam is the only true faith combined with a call for revenge against the West then becomes potently seductive.

When images of Muslims suffering in Muslim countries are used to draw attention to Western control and power, the desire for recapturing some of the former glories of the Islamic empires becomes a tipping point. And when martyrdom and paradise are offered as crowning glories, for some there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. But within such communities are many who, while they remain averse to committing violence, resent the West; the West can never really be home. This sentiment is damaging because it perpetuates a victim mentality, the mentality of displacement and loss.

This is why we should tackle the issue of extremism not just at the point it translates into violence. We have to be sensitive to the theologies of prejudice and dogmatism that permeate a range of issues, on gender, on pluralism and civil society. These conversations are as much part of polite society as they are part of extremist ideologies. We have to be aware that those who defend traditional views on punishments in Islam will very often find a way of justifying violence or bigotry in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies.

On hearing about the attack at Glasgow airport, for a brief moment I too thought of leaving the UK, fearful for my children and their futures. But this is my home; if I took them anywhere else they would feel displaced and the problem would still remain. In the end we don’t represent anything or anyone else but ourselves. The obligation to “enjoin what is good” should not be confined to the pages of the Qur’an but made into a living reality. Faith is not static: it requires ongoing voices and action to give it meaning, to pull it back from the clutches of hateful ideologies. We do not require complex theology here, nor do we need government policies or statements – all we require is compassion and belief in self-worth for all.