Some people say that in polite conversation one should never mention religion and politics. What’s the point then? In my book they are about the most interesting things to talk about. You get a good argument out of both, and when you put them together — that’s discourse heaven.

NOT A CATHOLIC!

There was a story years ago concerning the predominence of Methodists, the large number of ‘cousin Jacks and Jennys’, descendents of the diaspora of Cornishmen who dominated the social affairs of ‘old Bendigo’.

Do you remember those little identification cards they put over your bed if you were ever in hospital? They showed your name, possibly what was wrong with you, and then a space was reserved for your religion. Well, years ago, patients in Bendigo hospitals would just write ‘NOT METHODIST’, if they were from one of the lesser tribes. It saved them from being visited in hospital by the Cornish god-botherers, who in themselves could be rather dour, earnest and given to rather spirited, if not always tuneful, hymn-singing by the bedside.

I must confess, here, that I am descended from both Cornish and Irish mining migrants, and grew up in the long shadow of the old Methodist Church in Bendigo — and am given to bursting into roaring choruses of *'Faith of Our Fathers'* or *‘O Death Where is The Sting’* when the occasion is right—or not— it’s impossible to forget those early years in the choir stalls.

My grandfather’s name was an Irish one. However, he was an Orangeman to the core, who disliked both the Catholics and the English with equanimity. The nuns on hospital rounds always stopped by his bedside when they read his Irish name on the little chart, he would sit up in bed flailing his arms about to shoo them away as if they were crows attacking an abandoned lamb.

I once asked him why he never fought in the First World War, I guess I fancied having an ANZAC of my own in the family, but he replied ‘I wouldn’t go and fight for that English King’. On the other hand he disliked the Catholic Church so much that he wouldn’t even watch a movie with Bing Crosby in it.

We once went to the drive-in to see ‘*White Christmas’.* Now you all know that the old crooner plays a fairly big role in that much-loved movie, and that the theme song was once the highest selling record in all history, until it was knocked off its perch by Elton John’s tribute to Princess Diana, ‘*Candle in The Wind’* (Grandpa would have hated that as well). Well, my grandfather sat at the wheel of his ’35 Chevy, facing the screen, with his eyes shut and his fingers in his ears whenever Bing appeared on screen. That’s a true story.

You see the result of the battle of the Boyne, 12 July 1690, near Drogheda in Ireland, where the forces of the Orangemen defeated the army of the Green was once the cause of division in the streets, the schools, the social clubs, and even the troubled mixed-marriage beds, not only in the Emerald Isle but also in Bendigo from the goldfields unto the present day.

The story of Bendigo’s tribes can be seen in their architecture. Alongside a plethora of smaller Methodist Churches, Primitive Methos, Presbyterians, Church of Christs, Baptists, Anglicans and Uncle Tom Cobbly an’ all, Bendigo boasts the largest regional Roman Catholic cathedral in Australia.

The Sacred Heart Cathedral was the last example of gothic architecture under construction in the twentieth century and will possibly be the last ever built anywhere in the world. It is a magnificent building, beautifully sighted on the entrance to the city, its soaring spires the most visible feature of Bendigo’s skyline from anywhere outside the city. At times I have watched with awe as the setting sun flushes the stone spires alight, set aflame with an orange glow, and seen their God’s handiwork in Bendigo stone.

But I never went in there. I didn’t even know anyone who did. The Protestants never met with Catholics, didn’t go to school with them, never played games with them, never danced with them, kissed or cuddled them or worst of all married them. The legacy of Drogheda was transported to the diggings, with all enmities intact, to continue the mistrust, and hatreds of the old country into the new.

Thank God, whoever she is, that’s all gone now. Well almost. The world has become more secular. Most people see their neighbours for who they are, not what tribe they were born into. To borrow, and distort, a phrase from Martin Luther King *‘To see people for what in is their hearts, not the colour of their religion’.*

At a funeral service in the Specimen Hill Methodist Church several years ago, (I know it’s called Uniting today, but old habits…), a good friend of ours, a very Catholic lass, born in Dublin, entered the church, dipped and crossed herself as she passed the altar. There was an almost audible murmer that passed around that congregation of Methos, a whispered *‘Who’s the Catholic?’*

Bing Crosby, that’s who!

863 WORDS