

Report on the Workshop on Politics and Religion Held at Macquarie University on 22-23 September 2008

During the Howard decade religion took on an importance in Australian politics that it had not had since the split in the Australian Labor Party over fifty years ago. Kevin Rudd had publicised a pair of articles about the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to illustrate his own beliefs. Once elected his government marked its opening with a quasi-liturgical national apology to Australia's indigenous people.

Partly in response to all this, religious studies scholars, political scientists, sociologists, theologians and cultural critics, met at Macquarie University in September, 2008, to discuss and analyse the significance of religion in Australian public life over the more recent and more distant past. A further concern was to contemplate the future religious-political interactions in multicultural, multifaith Australia. Particular strengths of the workshop included its interdisciplinary and inter-religious diversity, with Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims and non-believers presenting papers. The workshop was jointly funded by an Academy grant and by the ARC Discovery grant (DP0663997) 'The Social Role of Religion in Australia'. Convenors were Marion Maddox (Macquarie) and James Jupp (ANU).

One group of papers dealt with specific religious communities – Catholics, Anglicans, Jews and Orthodox. John Warhurst's analysis of 'The Catholic Lobby since the 1950s' examined the successes and failures of the Catholic Church efforts to maintain its voice in Australian politics on issues from school funding to human rights. Rather than portraying the Church as a single entity or as incredibly complex, the paper disentangled the various strand of theology and institutional practice, examining how each has been played out in politics since the 1950s. Muriel Porter looked at the similarly elaborate divisions within global – and Australian – Anglicanism, with detailed examination of what many outsiders see as fairly obscure debates – what has lay presidency at the eucharist to do with opposition to gay and lesbian clergy. Both reflect the curious theological and ecclesiastical history which had distinguished the Sydney Diocese from most others in Australia, North America and England, and

created an unlikely alliance between Sydney and some of the world's poorest Anglicans.

Dealing with perhaps less familiar faiths, Suzanne Rutland and Colin Tatz both considered the Australian Jewish community, with Tatz paying particular attention to the often-noted involvement of some Jewish experts in opposing racial discrimination and prejudice – while disagreeing with the significance sometimes read into this phenomenon. James Jupp gave a seldom-heard insight into the half million Orthodox Christians of Australia, through the internal and external experience of the Serbian Orthodox diaspora and the complexities of its role in post-Communist politics.

Another group of papers dealt with religious diversity in multicultural, multifaith Australia. Andrew Markus examined the social cohesion surveys conducted at Monash University with the support of the Scanlon Foundation, with a special emphasis on diverse values and attitudes as a possible threat to stability. Andrew Jakubowicz explored the media's treatment of religious and cultural diversity. It would be hard to think of a more telling case study of media treatment of religion than the long-running 'Catch the Fire' case between two Asian Pentecostal pastors and three Muslim converts, which tested Victoria's new religious vilification law. Hanifa Deen, in the midst of releasing her book on the case (*The Jihad Seminar*, University of WA Press, 2008), asked what the various sides hoped to gain from the marathon, and concluded that from the Muslim side it had little to do with religion, while from the pastors' side every extra day before the tribunal meant another day using the media to spread their version of the truth.

A further three papers considered the relationship between religion and the state from various perspectives. Holly Randell-Moon, having just completed her PhD on religion in Australian politics, examined Australian state-religion relationships through the lens of the Constitutional section 116, which prevents the Commonwealth from making any law for establishing a religion or imposing a religious test for office. Marion Maddox recalled several recent controversies about the place of religious ideas in political debate. She proposed that, rather than trying to exclude religion from the public sphere, we should treat it as part of the legitimate matter of public debate. Religion would become part of public discourse in the same way as economic, sociological or political arguments which influence public policies affecting us all.

Rodney Smith contrasted the prominence of religion in the 2004 federal election with its very different, and much quieter role in the 2007 campaign. He pointed out that the movement often given the short-hand name of the Christian Right has, in Australia, usually represented a triumph of imaginative publicity rather than a genuine mass movement. A relatively small number of activists has succeeded in creating the impression of a conservative religious groundswell. This retreated in the face of Rudd's determined effort to argue that "God is not a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Liberal Party".

These varied papers will be available on the Macquarie Centre for Research on Social Inclusion website in 2009. The convenors are interested in pursuing wider avenues for publication in the belief that they deal with major issues which have often been neglected. The papers summarised the research efforts of many scholars from different disciplines and religious backgrounds. They have substantially increased the attention paid to religion and the need for systematic study of its social and political role. They also marked out the directions for a continued research role. The same will be true for a product of the ARC Discovery grant – a major encyclopedia of religion in Australia being published in 2009, to which many of the paper-givers have contributed. Hopefully this area of study is now free from the influence of the conservative Bush-Howard mobilisation of the "Judeo-Christian ethic". Rudd's approach finds itself in an international climate where the dominant super power now has a president shaped by a more liberal and reforming interpretation of the social role of religion.

MARION MADDOX (Macquarie University)

JAMES JUPP (Australian National University)