

Exploring Religion and Politics: Introduction

During the decade of conservative government under Prime Minister John Howard, religion acquired a political importance long absent from Australian public life. Those who looked to the election of a Labor government to change the situation might have been disappointed: incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who had launched his bid for the Labor leadership by writing a widely discussed pair of articles about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, spoke regularly about his faith. His government's first formal act in the new Parliament was a quasi-liturgical national apology to the Stolen Generation of Indigenous children taken from their families.

In September 2008, the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian Research Council (DP0663997, 'The Social Role of Religion in Australia') co-sponsored a workshop at Macquarie University to analyse religion's significance in Australian public life. Several of the presenters also contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Religion in Australia* (Cambridge 2009), edited by one of the workshop convenors, James Jupp.

The workshop heard from numerous disciplinary perspectives, including religious studies, political science, sociology, theology and cultural criticism. Presenters came from numerous religious traditions and from no religious tradition, and took a range of political and philosophical stances.

Australian Religion Studies Review presents two of the workshop papers, dealing with the place of religion in Australian political debate. Holly Randell-Moon attended the workshop fresh from completing doctoral research on religion in Australian politics. She argued that the assumptions underpinning conventions about secular neutrality can in fact mask instances of religious inequality and discrimination. By focusing state attention upon religion understood as individual practice, neutrality conventions enable the historical and institutional privileges which some religious traditions enjoy over others to be overlooked.

Marion Maddox was the other workshop convenor (with James Jupp), and here challenges the widespread liberal assumption that religious views should remain private. She contends that others who have similarly

challenged the liberal consensus (usually in North American contexts) propose to supplant it with forms of religious accommodation which would be unacceptable to a large part of Australia's highly secular electorate. In their place, she suggests a minimal case for including religion in public debate—one which need not assume a religious commitment on the part of most participants.

Both articles make the case that, in a multicultural and multifaith society such as Australia, true inclusion requires moving beyond supposedly 'religion-blind' liberal habits. Once held more directly into public view, religion can contribute to political and policy discussions, while also being held to account against the same democratic principles which constrain other kinds of public debate.

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