

An Argument for More, Not Less, Religion in Australian Politics

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Abstract

Liberals, and others, have conventionally maintained that religion–state separation is the best guarantee of religious freedom. Many have also argued that religion–state separation entails keeping religion out of politics. But trying to quarantine religion and politics from one another is often counter-productive, keeping important questions off-limits. A more inclusive approach would be to treat religion as a normal part of political debate, open, like everything else, to public discussion and contestation.

God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics (Maddox 2005a) was motivated by concern about the particular ways in which religion and politics were becoming intertwined during the prime ministership of John Howard (1996–2007).

The author was immediately invited to participate in numerous public forums about the relationship between religion and politics. Sometimes, I was invited to ‘put the case for why religion should be kept out of politics’. Organisers expressed surprise when I replied that keeping religion out of politics was neither possible nor desirable. Some critics, accepting that the book was not a plea for removing religion from political debate, accused it of hypocritically defending a political role only for religion which lends moral legitimisation to progressive causes.

Here, I argue that religion can play a positive role in political debate, without assuming a uniform faith on the part of voters or assuming religion’s general benignity in the public square. Of course, many voters do have religious convictions; and many people (including me) see religion as a potentially beneficial component of public debate. But here I defend

the idea that even those sceptical of the second item need not embark on a fruitless effort to exclude religion from public debate altogether. The effort is fruitless for reasons outlined by a number of scholars, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff (in Audi and Wolterstorff 1996) and Steven Shiffrin (2009), who maintain that it is unreasonable, and unfairly burdensome, to require the devout, for whom every aspect of life is refracted through their faith, to see one area—the political—differently.

During the decade from the mid-1990s, while both church attendances and the numbers of people self-identifying as Christian continued to fall, Australia's politicians increased their use of Christian references, peaking in the 2004 election campaign (Crabb 2009). Howard and several of his senior ministers regularly invoked religious themes (Australia as a 'Christian', or sometimes 'Judaeo-Christian', nation; Islam as a potential threat to Australian values; the Ten Commandments as the best basis of social order) and religiously inflected tropes ('family values', construed as a family model based on a heterosexual couple of male breadwinner and stay-at-home mother). Howard also outsourced previously government welfare services to church agencies and encouraged the growth of religious—overwhelmingly, Christian—schools (Maddox 2005a). In Australia's relatively non-religious political climate, such moves were not intended to appeal to a large religious right voter base; no such base (comparable, for example, to the American religious right) exists. Instead, they bestowed an aura of religious and moral legitimacy upon policies whose effects—such as increasing social inequality, reducing women's and other workers' rights, and brutal treatment of asylum-seekers—could otherwise seem merely self-interested, cynical or racist. Although around eighty per cent of Australians seldom or never attend church, many responded not to specific theological ideas but to a general, nostalgic sense of religion as character building and conducive to social order. Many voters perceived these qualities as necessary not for themselves, but for other people.

Many commentators responded by maintaining that religion should be kept out of politics. In 2006, the Australian Democrats party launched a discussion paper, 'Separation of Church and State: Politics, Religion, Policy and Law in Australia', decrying 'the exploitation of religion, and religious differences, for political purposes' and pressing for a constitutional commission to 'carry forward' a debate on the place of religion in politics. The same year, the Secular Party of Australia formed, with a platform of more rigorous religion–state separation.

A hardline stance in favour of keeping religion out of politics is not merely unnecessarily restrictive, but often based on conceptual confusions. Australia's polity would be better served by a more flexible, but more carefully thought-out, approach. A more accommodating stance

towards religion in politics requires challenging some usual ways of thinking about such issues. I consider examples from Australia and from the United States whose longer and more intense history of litigating the dilemmas involved in religion and politics has generated a substantial amount of political philosophy.

The present approach stands in the tradition of comparative politics studies using a small number of cases, as classically outlined by Lijphart (1971). It aims to benefit from what Ragin (1987: 35) calls the strength of case-oriented (as opposed to statistical) studies, in being 'both historically interpretative and causally analytic'. Its further goal is 'lesson-drawing', which, as Rose (1991: 446-62) explains, is policy-oriented, with 'the motive...to introduce change'—or at least, in the more modest scope of this paper, to set out robust observations, comparisons and guidelines to assist those who aim to introduce change.

What is a Secular Society?

Debates about the proper relationship between religion and politics in Australia frequently centre on the issue of whether or not Australia is a secular society. Proponents of strict separation appeal to a combination of historical and legal sources to argue that Australia is secular; but defenders of a political role for religion often draw on a similar set of sources to argue either that it is not, or that it is so only in some limited sense.

The two incompatible conclusions are only partly a consequence of the sources' ambiguity. They are also due to the various protagonists drawing on contradictory or confused interpretations of what it means for a society to be secular, sometimes slipping between different interpretations within a single argument. So, critics of former Prime Minister John Howard's conservative government (1996–2007) regularly accused him of undermining Australia's secular foundation (e.g. Irving 2004), while Howard himself declared his respect for Australia's 'secular heritage' even as he asserted the nation's 'Judaic-Christian ethic' (cited in Sunderland 2007).

In order to make sense of these debates, we need first to clarify the key terms. One fundamental distinction is between secularism as a principle in political theory and secularisation as it is used in sociology. The first, often more overtly normative, has to do with the way relationships between religion and state are managed, and the idea that they should be kept independent of one another, by removing religious questions from the authority of the state and questions of state from church authority. This version might be called 'political secularism'. The second claims only to be descriptive, having to do with the prevalence and status of religion

in a given society (although it often carries a normative subtext suggesting that religion's declining pervasiveness and falling status are either to be applauded or deplored). Let us call this sense 'social secularism'. The adjective 'secular' applies in both. So, 'Z is a secular society' might mean that Z has official church–state separation (the first sense); but could equally mean that few Zians practice a religion (the second sense).

Confounding the ambiguity, societies can be secular in either sense without being so in the other. For example, the United Kingdom has official establishment (the antithesis of secularism at the level of political institutions) but low religious attendance (making it a textbook case of secularisation in the sociological sense; see, e.g., Brown 2001). By contrast, the USA is a textbook case of formal church–state separation, but unique in the industrialised West for its high levels of personal religiosity. Indeed, one influential analysis has proposed a causal connection, suggesting that the more secular a society is in the sense of church–state separation, the less socially secular it is likely to be (Finke and Stark 1992). Australia, where less than one-tenth of the population attends church weekly and less than a quarter monthly, surely qualifies as a secular society in the social sense. To what extent it is politically secular is a matter of more debate.

A further confusion comes from an assumed association between political secularism and unbelief. While proponents of religion–state separation have often been motivated by anticlericalism or atheism, religious minorities can equally feel constrained by religious establishment. European Dissenters, and their colonial offshoots, often combined deep devotion with a deep commitment to removing official patronage for one tradition at the expense of others. The most common historical justification for political secularism is that it best preserves religious freedom, particularly for those who dissent from the majority religious tradition, whether by adhering to a minority religious tradition or to no religious tradition. The historical background to political secularism included the experiences of reciprocal repression of Catholics under Protestant rule and Protestants under Catholic rule in post-Reformation Europe, as well as the suffering of Dissenting groups under both Catholic and Protestant establishments.

A third necessary clarification is between, on one hand, debates about church–state relations and, on the other, debates about the relationship between religion and politics. The two are often conflated. In Australia, for example, critics often argued that the Howard government's political uses of religion violated 'separation of church and state'. While several Howard initiatives, such as diverting government revenue into church schools and welfare agencies, raised echoes of establishment, the criticism was also applied to the more rhetorical uses of Christian discourse. To

many proponents of keeping religion out of politics, the principle of religion–state separation is a compelling justification for avoiding the rhetorical as well as financial interpenetration. A classic exposition of this position, speaking to the American context, was developed by Audi (1989) following Rawls. An Australian interpretation is proposed by Meyerson (2008). Yet a relationship between institutions of religion and the state is not the same thing as religious involvement in politics. Even if it were, critics wanting to invoke church–state separation to justify quarantining religion from politics would have to demonstrate that Australia in fact enshrines church–state separation. The matter is less clear-cut than some commentators suppose.

Does Australia Separate Church and State?

Debate about the extent to which Australia is secular in the political sense has tended to focus on interpreting Section 116 of the Constitution:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

The wording echoes the religion clauses in the American Constitution's First Amendment, which was extensively discussed in the Australasian Conventions that debated and drafted Australia's Constitution prior to Federation. The US version begins: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. A long line of American jurisprudence has stimulated and reflected robust debate about religious freedom and church–state separation. One strand insists that a citizen's obligation to obey the law trumps religious loyalties (e.g. *Employment Division v. Smith* 494 U.S. 872 [1990]). A second strand encourages the law to accommodate religious commitments, providing greater protection against laws which have the indirect effect of curtailing religious freedom, even if that was not their intention (e.g. *Wisconsin v. Yoder* 406 U.S. 205 [1972]).

Australia's apparently more comprehensive wording has received only occasional attention from the High Court. The historically dominant interpretation has been that enshrined in Quick and Garran's *Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1901). Seeing s. 116 as an unnecessary addition to the Constitution, they interpreted it so narrowly as to leave a substantial range of ways in which religion and state might interact without constitutional headaches. When religious commitments conflict with a citizen's obligations to the state, the state's interests prevail (*Krygger v. Williams* 15 CLR 366 [1912]).

A further line of interpretation maintains that Australia's Constitution prevents the Commonwealth from making laws 'for' the various specified purposes, while the US Constitution uses the potentially broader 'respecting'. The majority in the *Defence of Government Schools* (often called 'DOGS') case (*Attorney-General [Vic]; Ex Rel Black v. Commonwealth* [HCA 2 1981]) concluded that allowing state aid to church schools did not amount to a law 'for establishing' a religion. Indeed, several commentators (e.g. Blackshield 2005) maintain that the majority DOGS argument produced a still narrower interpretation than Quick and Garran. The pattern continued in *Kruger v. Commonwealth* (HCA 27 [1997]), when a majority of the High Court declined to consider the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as a violation of s. 116. Part of the reason was that, although limiting the children's religious freedom might have been a *consequence* of their removal, that was not the policy's *purpose*.

Rejecting arguments about parallels between Australia's s. 116 and the US First Amendment, proponents of the narrow interpretation have either disregarded the Constitutional Conventions' evidence about what the founders thought they were instituting (e.g. Frame 2006) or argued that the founders' intentions are irrelevant because only the words of the Constitution matter (the majority position in the DOGS case, in which several judges noted the then-current convention of not referring to the founders' debates [see Kirby 2003]). Political scientist Michael Hogan (2006) argued that the resemblance between Australia's s. 116 and the US First Amendment merely 'confused' a situation best understood by way of Australia's colonial heritage. For Hogan, the most relevant comparison was with British establishment rather than American separation. In the context of longstanding cooperation between churches and government, he maintained, s. 116 codifies not separation but neutrality. That interpretation allows the Commonwealth to give assistance to religion in general (the justification for state aid to religious schools) but not to favour one religion over another (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish schools all benefit).

A minority tradition has defended a more strongly separationist interpretation. Dissenting in the DOGS case, Justice Murphy, who did refer to the federation debates, argued that the intent of s. 116 was to give Australia an American-style separation principle. To him, 'there is no doubt that the "separation" meaning of the clause as authoritatively declared in *Reynolds v. United States* was well-known to the framers of our Constitution' and that they intended a similar separation to apply in Australia.

This view was shared by commentators such as Richard Ely (1976) and Helen Irving (2004). Ely's detailed analysis of the debates at the

Constitutional Conventions leading up to Federation found extensive evidence that the framers understood s. 116 as deliberately modelled on and echoing US-style separation; the debate was between those who welcomed that imitation (the eventual victors) and those who either considered US-style separation undesirable or thought that, though desirable, it should be achieved by other means (Ely 1976: 86-87).

Irving (2004) argued that s. 116, by adding the prohibition on imposing a religious observance, was intended not merely to echo but to extend the American principle. Even that extension, however, had an indirect American origin. Henry Bournes Higgins warned Australian delegates of the possibility that future activist courts might seek to enforce Sunday observance by invoking the 'recognition clause'—'Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God'—in the Australian constitution's Preamble. His concern was sparked by a US decision, *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* (1892) and an 1892 law making federal funding for the Chicago World's Fair conditional upon the fair closing on Sundays. Both relied on the conclusion that, as Justice Brewer put it in his coda to the court's opinion in *Holy Trinity*, 'this is a Christian nation'. That an American court could come to such a conclusion even with a separation clause and without a recognition clause only heightened Australia's need for a constitutional protection to balance out the Preamble's recognition of 'Almighty God', Higgins argued (Australasian Federal Convention 1898: 1735). Consequently, both Ely and Irving maintained that s. 116 should be broadly interpreted, so as to minimise state support for religion in any form.

Not only has s. 116 proved ineffective at preventing state aid to religion; it also offers only limited protection of individuals' religious freedom (Hogan 1981; Eburn 1995). Under the court's consistently minimalist interpretations, if an individual's right to religious freedom conflicts with the interests of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth wins. Moreover, despite s. 116 falling in the Constitution's chapter on the powers of the States, it constrains only Federal government. Referenda in 1944 and 1988 sought unsuccessfully to extend it to the States. Alone among the States, Tasmania's *Constitution Act* (1934) protects religious freedom (s. 46[1]) and prohibits the imposition of a religious test (s. 46[2]). South Australia's Supreme Court found in *Grace Bible Church v. Reedman* (1984) that 'there is no legal remedy available to any person who believes that his or her right to freedom of religion or belief has been violated by that State's Parliament or Government'. Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, as well as the Northern Territory and ACT, have laws prohibiting religious discrimination. The New South Wales *Anti-Discrimination Act* (1977) covers discrimination on the basis of 'ethno-religious

background' under its prohibition of racial discrimination. Tasmania (*Anti-Discrimination Act 1998*), Queensland (*Anti-Discrimination Amendment Act 2001*) and Victoria (*Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001*) prohibit incitement to religious hatred, the Victorian Act becoming the basis of a controversial complaint against Catch the Fire ministries for a 2002 seminar said to have vilified Muslims (Deen 2008).

Beyond s. 116, too, religion–state questions have attracted only a modest amount of either legal contestation or normative debate in Australia, compared to in the USA. Australia's founders, considering such matters as the Constitution's recognition of 'Almighty God' and the practice of parliament opening with prayer (Maddox 2001: 56-67, 109-12), relied less on considered philosophical positions than on populism and partly articulated assumptions about English establishment and American church–state separation. The Constitution itself, with a religiously framed Preamble preceding a minimally separationist s. 116, reflects their eclecticism.

As is the way of constitutional debate, both those who hold that Australia's Constitution does provide formal separation and those who hold that it does not tend to argue in descriptive terms ('this is what the Constitution says'), with a normative subtext ('this is how we ought to behave'). Both sides agree that the Constitution precludes formal establishment (presumably along the lines of the Church of England), and that it is right to do so. They disagree on how much the concept of establishment should be held to encompass, and therefore on how closely church and state should be allowed to interact.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, both the empirical question of whether or not Australia has religion–state separation in the US sense and the normative question of whether it ought to be, at least, controversial. Those seeking to make an argument for keeping religion out of politics on the basis that Australia's constitution separates church and state need first to persuade that it does so, a reading which is at least contestable and which, in fact, runs contrary to the stream of High Court interpretation. While critics like Ely and Irving put forward several grounds upon which to criticise the court's interpretation (and several of these grounds are compelling), nevertheless it would be difficult to maintain that so contested an account of Australia's constitutional arrangements presents a strong foundation for keeping religion out of politics.

The divergent strands within Australian political thought help explain how the constitutional regulation of the relationship between religion and state has accommodated religious pressure groups from time to time. Thus, the state has sometimes proved itself ready to interest itself in religion both actively (for example, by providing financial aid to church

schools) and passively (for example, by exempting religious bodies from aspects of anti-discrimination law). The conventional 'pragmatic liberalism' view of Australian political thought is to see such instances as momentary aberrations or populist accommodations, triumphs of pragmatism over theory. However, high-profile controversies such as the state aid debates are better understood as the sharp end of a series of religion-state interpenetrations which suffuse Australian political life.

Yet, even if we were to set Australia's history of constitutional interpretation aside, in favour of a separationist view, it does not necessarily follow (as many critics assume) that religion-state separation precludes religious involvement in politics. The problems become apparent when considering the arguments of one of its most famous proponents. Robert Audi's *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (2000) built on the philosophy of John Rawls to argue that, though religiously committed citizens may take part in public debate like everyone else, the principle of church-state separation means that they should do so only using secular grounds. Even if their true motivation is religious, the Rawlsian principle of public reason based on overlapping consensus requires that they should seek relevant non-religious grounds and frame public arguments in those terms.

Critics see Audi's view placing an unfair burden on the religiously committed. If a particular political position is motivated by their religious commitment, Audi's proposal requires them—but not their secular colleagues—to seek out, and then limit their public statements to, grounds for their arguments additional to the ones which actually move them. Some have also suggested that the requirement to find additional, secular grounds invites dissimulation on the part of religiously committed citizens, pretending to be motivated by other arguments than those that really drive them—hardly the standard of transparency toward which democratic debate supposedly strives (e.g. Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff 1996; Weithman 2002).

Such philosophical problems are just the start. A host of practical questions arises in their wake. Does separation of church and state preclude clergy's political activism? And if clergy, what about religiously active lay people who are also closely identified with their church? What level of political involvement does the principle constrain—organising a demonstration? Marching in a demonstration? Distributing leaflets announcing a demonstration? Praying for the participants in a demonstration? And if these kinds of political involvement are precluded, what about voting? This is just one place where attempts to institute a sharp religion-state division become impossible to police—and one reason why the nation which first described a 'Wall of Separation' has such a long and involved history of litigation to determine just where that wall might stand.

Audi developed his argument first with respect to the ‘obligations of citizenship’ (1989), meaning how individual religiously committed citizens (whether voters or candidates for office) should conduct themselves in public debate. But similar questions arise in relation to collective religious participation in politics, for example, by churches or by specially convened religious lobby groups. Indeed, one of the features which makes the United States such a distinctive example is that it combines formal separation with very high levels of both individual and collective religious involvement in politics—so that presidential candidates are routinely asked to identify their favourite books of the bible and highly organised religious lobby groups (from Focus on the Family to the Catholic Bishops Conference) present policy commentary on everything from abortion to the environmental crisis.

Much debate centres on lobbying by church groups; and, indeed, Australian churches and church agencies have been regular participants in public debate since colonisation (Maddox 2001: 160-67). Occasional attempts to codify the boundaries between religious and political activity show up further difficulties (e.g. Maddox 2008). Less often addressed is the separate, but related, question about whether politicians can legitimately use religious arguments, or draw on their religious beliefs, in formulating or defending particular policy positions. In Australia, a historical consensus, since broadly the 1950s, held that politicians’ religious beliefs are best kept to themselves, at risk of alienating a generally secular electorate (Maddox 2001). The breakdown of this consensus, documented by Maddox (2005a) and Crabb (2009), poses distinctive questions in the Australian instance that, once again, can be most clearly approached via an international comparison.

When is the Private Private?

A candidate’s religious convictions can perform a variety of roles in the political process. In some of those roles, the Audian presumption that religion should be kept out of politics actually makes democratic accountability harder. The issue was thrown into relief by Alaskan governor Sarah Palin’s vice-presidential campaign in the 2008 US election. Her selection accorded Republican candidate John McCain an immediate, although shortlived, boost. Even after the McCain–Palin team’s decisive loss, Palin remained a key figure in US conservative politics. Polling through 2009 found her at, or close to the top of lists of preferred Republican presidential candidates for 2012 (e.g. PRC 2009; Steinhauser 2009). She was included in the list of 2009’s most influential people by *Time Magazine* (2009). In May 2009, HarperCollins announced its contract to publish

her autobiography, the rumoured US\$7 million advance covering co-publication by Harper, and, for the Christian market, by HarperCollins subsidiary Zondervan (Flood 2009).

Palin's political experience was limited and, as her performance on the campaign trail made increasingly clear, her policy knowledge was thin. Her enlivening effect on McCain's polling and her continuing political influence were not due to her views on foreign policy or the economy. Instead, the factors which attracted the most media attention, and which became key aspects of her presentation to American voters, included Palin's experiences as a mother of five; as a mother who decided to proceed with the pregnancy of a child whose disabilities had been diagnosed prenatally; even as mother of a pregnant teen, who might have stood as an emblem of the failed policy of abstinence-only sex education but who became an icon of conservative values because of her decision to reject abortion and raise the baby. These personal characteristics not only exemplified Sarah Palin's policy stance—opposition to abortion in all circumstances, opposition to school sex education—but also became a metonym, in official Republican discourse, of another important aspect of Palin's candidacy, her religious faith. Seldom directly alluded to in campaign appearances, her particular kind of Pentecostal Christianity was central to her appeal to the Republican Party's influential Christian right. Metonymic allusion rather than direct reference allowed her faith to remain almost inaudible in public debate, yet also central.

The problem that the story of Palin's candidacy and continuing impact presents for discussion about religion–state relations becomes apparent when measured against liberal norms about political etiquette. I have taken the work of Robert Audi as a reference point, because Audi presents an exceptionally detailed and systematic account of a liberal argument for religion–state separation, at both personal and institutional levels, grounded in the impeccably liberal soil of Rawlsian political philosophy. While Audi represents a particularly strong version of the separationist argument, the general position is shared by a majority of liberal theorists, and by many others. As Bader (2003: 265) notes: 'Strict separation of church from a presumed "religion-blind" and "neutral" state is still the preferred model in liberal, democratic, feminist, and socialist political theory'.

Such a high-minded position has distinct limitations when addressing something like the Palin phenomenon. The liberal conclusion about what church–state separation means for individual conduct has a reverse side, carrying assumptions about what can, and cannot, be publicly debated. During the 2008 campaign, Republican strategists lost no time in confirming that Governor Palin's demonstrably political religious beliefs are a

private matter and should not be held up for public scrutiny. But the aspects of Palin's candidacy that captured voters' imaginations were just the things which longstanding conventions of political good behaviour declared beyond discussion: her family life and her religious faith.

Americans might reasonably think it relevant that the person who might eventually oversee the country's contribution to the global effort to combat climate change expects to see Jesus' second-coming, and the end of this world, within her lifetime. They might ponder whether it really is irrelevant that someone opposed to abortion in all circumstances, including rape and incest, would oversee Supreme Court appointments. They might even wonder whether someone who grew up in, and still identifies with, a movement that maintains that the world is destined to be ruled by Christians, with political authority in the hands of modern day apostles and prophets, is really the right person to prosecute a war in which most opponents are Muslim and which she herself has suggested is 'God's will'. When the candidate's faith has seemingly direct public policy implications, it is difficult to maintain that it is off-limits for public debate.

Religion also plays an important role in the political biographies of many Australia politicians. A number learned political skills in church organisations (Maddox 2001: 9-10). Many still find their politics informed by religious reflection (2001: 26-27, 134-38). Historically, and still today, churches have offered one avenue for civic involvement, leading some church members into more direct political engagement. Religious convictions do not lead to a common political result, but inform economic positions from dry neo-liberal through interventionist wet to socialist; and social policies ranging from conservative 'family values' social engineering to libertarian cosmopolitanism. At times, religion has produced solidarity across party divisions; at others, it has provided a base for intra-party factionalism.

In interviews of some fifty present and past politicians during 1999 and 2000, about their views on the relationship between religion and politics, one question was about their reaction to people basing political positions on religious arguments. Among memorable responses was from then Employment Services Minister (and conservative Catholic) Tony Abbott that, while he did not see religion and politics as 'entirely separate':

I have never made a political decision on religious grounds, and I wouldn't... Anyone who approached a political issue from a religious perspective, that would be as foolish as approaching a religious issue from a political perspective (Maddox 2001: 133).

Kevin Rudd, then a first-term backbencher (and long-standing Anglican), answered the question, 'What about when other people call on a theological position in public debate—do you think that's legitimate?' still

more forcefully: 'It makes me vomit. Would you like me to be more graphic?' (Maddox 2001: 141). But, within a few years, Abbott was exhorting Catholic constituents to lobby him about Australia's rate of abortion, and Rudd launched his successful push for the Labor leadership by writing a pair of articles, in current affairs magazine *The Monthly*, about Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Rather than hypocrisy, Abbott's and Rudd's newly religious public personae reflected a significantly changed political landscape. In 1999–2000, interview respondents overwhelmingly said they either saw no political advantage in identifying with a religious community or that, depending on the electorate, to be identified as 'religious' might actually be an electoral liability. By the 2004 election, the climate had so altered that politicians, particularly on the conservative side, enthusiastically endorsed church charities over government welfare, had themselves photographed coming out of churches or on the stage at Sydney's pentecostal Hillsong megachurch and talked at length about 'Christian values' (see, e.g., Maddox 2005a: 164, 257–59; 2005b). The new member for Bass, Michael Ferguson, told ABC journalist Maxine McKew in an election-night interview that 'I love the Lord' and that his victory was partly due to being 'blessed' with an exceptional campaign team. Even usually secular-sounding politicians laced their maiden speeches with religious references. So the new Member for Wentworth, Malcolm Turnbull, introduced himself and his electorate: 'Our prayers fly heavenward, not just in English but in the language of the New Testament at St George's Greek church, of the Old Testament at Central Synagogue and our many other shuls...' (Turnbull 2004). Former Liberal Party organisational hard man Andrew Robb (2004), turned Member for Goldstein, used his first speech to assure Australia's young people that, if they use their 'God-given talents' then 'success and security will follow'.

In such an atmosphere, Abbott's exhortations about the 'national tragedy' of abortion seemed unremarkable, while Rudd's *Monthly* articles were a direct attack on the conservative parties' perceived monopolisation of a claim to 'Christian values'. He warned against 'those who would seek today to traduce Christianity by turning it into the political handmaiden of the conservative political establishment' (Rudd 2006) or, as he put it in repeated sound bites: 'God is not a wholly owned subsidiary of the Liberal Party' and 'Jesus Christ is not the Liberal Member for Nazareth Central'.

Both Abbott and Rudd attracted plenty of criticism for their religious advocacy, if not all as dramatic as Greens Senator Kerry Nettle's appearance in the chamber in a T-shirt reading 'Mr Abbott, get your rosaries off my ovaries'. Several critics read Rudd's essay as a call for a still closer

association between church and government. Yet the critics themselves were not immune from criticism, for personalising the attack by improperly dragging a politician's faith into political debate. Both Prime Minister John Howard and then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, decried Nettle's T-shirt as 'offensive' to Catholics. We might say that such responses reflect a political etiquette grounded in the separationist version of the obligations of citizenship: religion is a private matter and, just as it behoves religious people to keep it to themselves, so too it behoves others not to pry too closely into a politician's religious beliefs. Indeed, Nettle, defending her T-shirt, agreed that 'religion has no place in politics' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2006).

A comparable controversy arose in 2009 when satirical television comedians from *The Chaser's War on Everything* made a segment lampooning the refusal by Rudd, by then Prime Minister, to ban tourists climbing Uluru (formerly known as Ayers Rock). The ban was sought by the site's Indigenous owners, on grounds which included the monolith's sacred status. Julian Morrow, a member of the *Chaser* team, arrived on a Sunday morning, dressed in mountaineering gear, at the Rudd family's regular Canberra place of worship. Morrow attempted to climb the spire during the morning service. Police intervention, before he had set foot on the building, underlined the *Chaser's* point that Australian institutions are quick to defend urban, Christian sacred places from perceived desecration while ignoring long-standing claims for comparable respect from remote Indigenous communities. Yet public response centred on the stunt's alleged offensiveness. Noting that the Prime Minister was expected, after the service, to comment on a recent Australian death in Afghanistan, the Australian Defence Association head described the sketch as 'off' (Kerr 2009). Several commentators interpreted attention to the Prime Minister's religious practice, even in order to make a point about his government's response to a minority religious tradition, as a serious lapse of taste.

A further example of the way in which unexamined religious assumptions filter into the public sphere was the increasing public acceptance during the late 1990s and early 2000s of a spurious 'lost' verse of the Australian National Anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*. The verse's first documented public performance was the 1998 Global March for Jesus in Canberra:

With Christ our head and cornerstone
 We'll build our nation's might
 Whose way and truth and light alone
 Can guide our path aright.
 Our lives a sacrifice of love reflect our Master's care.
 With eyes upturned to heaven above advance Australia fair.

Organisers of a Christian rally in 2000 claimed that it had been sung as far back as the 1930s, explaining, 'The verse we are using was passed onto us by a woman in Queensland who believed it to have been in the original version. While we have been unable to verify that with any historic documents, we have been unable to say she is wrong either' (Awakening 2000). The National Library holds various nineteenth- and early twentieth-century versions of 'Advance Australia Fair', but none containing the Christian verse. No one has claimed authorship or produced a copy dating earlier than the 1990s. The grammatical error is also inconsistent with the other stanzas' style (the author presumably intending that Christ, rather than the nation's might, is the way, truth and light).

The Federal government protocols for use of the National Anthem state that it 'should not be modified and alternative words should not be used'. Nevertheless, the verse achieved a measure of semi-official acceptance, being sung in the presence of the then Prime Minister on at least two occasions—at Hillsong Church in October 2002 and at St Andrew's Cathedral on 10 July 2005—affording a further instance of the way a 'Christian nation' narrative moved closer to the centre of Australian self-representation during the Howard decade.

In Australia, religion–state relations are far less formalised than in the heavily litigated US atmosphere, and religion–politics interactions less dramatic. The expectation that politicians' religious beliefs should be off public limits has been far stronger in Australia. During the last decades of the twentieth century, religion was scarcely visible as a political force. Australians might well be relieved at our lack of the endless American wrangling over 'church and state'. Religion has often been sidelined in Australian political life, seen as a curiosity in an essentially secular polity. But this brushing aside served neither religious interests nor political life well. Politically significant religion neither emerged with nor disappeared after the sectarianism of the 1954 ALP Split. In particular, the Howard decade saw a rise, albeit muted, of fundamentalist politics and a marked increase in religiously inflected tension and religiously charged political advocacy (see, e.g., Maddox 2005a: 109-39, 166-83, 185-92). What had disappeared were the skills and alertness to be able to identify and understand religion's political impact, leaving a dangerous ignorance.

Bringing Religion Back In

The separationist stance has been the subject of substantial philosophical critique, particularly in the USA; but it is also open to a more practical objection. It *might* work, as long as everyone agreed to keep religion off-limits in public debate (though several of the foregoing examples suggest

that that is a much more complicated undertaking than its proponents often suppose; while democratic arguments such as Wolterstorff's imply that such strict quarantine is not desirable, even if it were possible). But once some bring religion in, the don't-ask-don't-tell compact, such as it is, breaks down. If politicians decide to tell—or, even more, if they just hint—about their religious commitments, then voters have not merely a right, but an obligation, to ask for more detail.

Some international observers (e.g. Monsma and Soper 2009; Bader 2003) have held up Australia's comparatively uncodified, pragmatic approach to religious involvement in politics as a model for tolerance. On the other hand, it can also mean that some important debates simply don't take place. The increase in Federal government funding to religious schools during the Howard era, and proportional decline in Federal support of public schools, continuing under Rudd, raises questions about, for example, whether tax-payers' funds should be used to teach scientifically dubious theories (like creationism), or to promote potentially religiously intolerant doctrines (like the idea that non-Christians are destined for hell) (Maddox 2005a: 188-90).

Of those scholars who dissent from the Rawlsian/Audian view of keeping religion out of public debate, many contend that, far from being a threat to the public square, religion has a substantial positive role. So, Mark Cladis (2008: 883) summarises the religion-state compromise offered by those he calls 'Rawlsian liberals':

You may hold all the religious beliefs you want so long as they remain irrelevant, or at least silent, to many of the things that matter most, for example, to public discussion and policy on war, social services, and environmental policies.

'Lived religion', Cladis (2008: 884) retorts, 'seldom runs along [such] facile public/private lines', tending instead to 'saturate...our entire day' in the effort to 'make sense of complex lives in a complex world'. While opposing attempts to co-opt religion into a government agenda, as he identifies in George W. Bush's faith-based programs, Cladis advocates what he calls 'spiritual democracy', which would 'welcome religious voices in public and political life while disallowing state funding and action that promote religion' (2008: 896). He explains that, 'while I appreciate why many are wary of religion in public, the risk of allowing religion in public and political exchange' is outweighed by the benefits its involvement can bestow (2008: 902).

Cladis's critique of Rawlsian liberalism is attractive, as is his vision of a maximally diverse 'spiritual democracy'. However, his proposal is devised for 'the world's most religious diverse nation', and is unlikely to prove much of a unifying concept or to be able to translate its appeal into

Australia's similarly diverse, but much less religious, environment. Moreover, Australia's very inarticulateness in matters of religion amplifies the risks of covert religiosity seeping, unacknowledged and unproblematised, into public life, as several instances discussed above suggest happened in the Howard era.

Nonetheless, even those unconvinced of the positive promise of 'inviting [religion] in' to public and political exchange at least need not seek to exclude it. So, I want to defend a more modest version of the argument, allowing space for religion in public debate without necessarily assuming acceptance of its positive potential. That is not to say that religion cannot have a positive role in public deliberation—as a matter of fact I am convinced that it does. However, my proposal takes seriously that the highly secular Australian electorate is unlikely to be swayed by Cladis's optimism.

I am not arguing for keeping religion out of politics, a task which is neither achievable nor desirable, for reasons upon which I have only been able to touch here. Instead, we should treat religion as a more normal part of the political discussion. All sorts of values feed into a political position, and most are accepted as a legitimate part of political debate. Different economic schools of thought, for example, contribute to different kinds of economic policy. Different beliefs about the nature, causes and consequences of climate change contribute (albeit perhaps less than economic interests or susceptibility to lobbying) to different stances on emissions reduction. Different ideological orientations nurture different approaches to international relations. Consequently, we expect to be able to ask about what beliefs leaders hold in each of those areas. When we disagree, we challenge and debate them.

Why don't we include religion in that process? Partly, because of the fear of where that kind of debate can lead. No sensible person could desire the sort of public inquiry into individuals' faith which, in past centuries, has led to religious tests for public office, to torture and executions for heresy and to wars of religion. This is, of course, the basis of the liberal tradition of political secularism. Social secularism also plays a role: the reluctance to enter into public theological debate also reflects a largely secular electorate's squeamishness about what might emerge. In a culture whose underlying assumption is that religion ranges from benignly irrational to dangerously weird and is always slightly embarrassing, we would rather not know too much about our leaders' religious idiosyncrasies. These two tendencies reflect the two senses in which Australia is a secular nation, outlined above. At the level of political theory, our reluctance to probe politicians' religious beliefs reflects a liberal conviction that our leaders should be left to enjoy their faith in private. Our embarrassment at how such a debate should be conducted and feelings of

awkwardness about what might emerge reflect Australia's social secularism—theological debate is not something with which many of us are familiar or comfortable.

I have already outlined some objections to the erasure of religion based on political secularism. I also think we need to get over the anxieties generated by social secularism. Religious studies scholars can here make an important contribution, born of the fact that we do not see religion as embarrassing or awkward, but as an important aspect both of individuals and of societies, worth inquiring into and with consequences that matter.

Talking Theology in Public

Discussions of religion and politics typically skirt theology, concentrating instead on institutional or sociological aspects. But establishing religion's legitimate place in public debate gives rise to the possibly more controversial claim that theology, too, forms a permissible—indeed, necessary—part of debate, once religion has entered the picture. The controversy, of course, arises from theology's alleged reliance on unverifiable absolutes, which Rawlsians, and many other liberals, find inappropriate to public debate because inaccessible to (using Rawls's term) public reason based on overlapping consensus. Theology cannot be other than a toxic intervention in public debate, the argument goes, because it can only be discussed by those who share its fundamental propositions; and, in a modern, culturally and intellectually diverse society, that condition is extremely unlikely to be met.

Without disagreeing that Australia always will be (and should be) religiously, culturally and intellectually diverse, I would like to challenge the idea that only believers can discuss theology. If a politician brings his or her religious beliefs into public debate, agreeing with those beliefs should not, and need not, be a condition for discussing them. Australians could approach a healthier relation between religion and politics if we were to regard theology as being much like any other discipline: not only does it come in many schools (as other disciplines do), but (like sociology, say, or engineering) it can be done well, or done badly. Religious ideas can be more coherent, or less coherent. They can be esoteric and jargon-ridden, or they can be clearly explained. They can be creatively grounded in a venerable tradition, or rigidly stuck in stultifying tradition, or usefully critical of tradition, or merely kooky; and persuasive criteria help discern which is which. Needless to say, the criteria are not always universally agreed; but, as anyone knows who has examined a contested doctoral thesis or taken part in a divided dissertation committee, the same

is true for any discipline. That does not exclude other disciplines from public discussion; and neither need it exclude theology. You don't need to be a believer to enter into this kind of discussion, any more (though the analogy is admittedly inexact) than you need to be an economist to form an opinion about the budget.

An example of this kind of positive engagement occurred in late 2009. Kevin Rudd's Labor Party had swept to power in November 2007 on a promise to repudiate the punitive attitudes toward asylum-seekers which had characterised its predecessor. Detaining asylum-seekers in offshore facilities at Nauru (the 'Pacific solution') or in camps on the mainland (Marr and Wilkinson 2003) proved initially popular; but reports emerged of the brutal conditions and the inmates' desperate circumstances. The new Rudd government closed down the Nauru detention centre, accelerated checks for newly arrived asylum-seekers on the mainland and ended the incarceration of children. These moves were accompanied by record approval ratings for Rudd and his government; but a spate of new arrivals in 2009 threatened to upset the more humanitarian policies. Taunted by an Opposition hoping to revive its electoral prospects with a return to the anti-refugee stance, diplomatic efforts endeavoured to prevent any more boatloads from leaving Indonesian waters. In an effort to sound simultaneously compassionate and hardline, Rudd's fiercest rhetoric was trained on the people-smugglers cramming unseaworthy vessels with desperate people.

As the tension between humanitarian policies and a perceived public demand for uncompromising rhetoric became more pronounced, an opinion article in Melbourne's broadsheet daily reframed Rudd's position by recalling the pair of articles with which he had launched his 2006 bid for the Labor leadership. The articles, in current affairs magazine *The Monthly*, not only argued for more humanitarian refugee policies, but grounded Rudd's political principles in the work of German theologian and resistance hero Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the biblical imperative of welcome to strangers. Michael Epis declared that 'Kevin Rudd's hero was a people smuggler. And our Prime Minister knows it'. He continued:

It is the combination of these two assertions—that Bonhoeffer smuggled Jews to safety and the acknowledgement of the obligation owed to the vulnerable stranger—that makes the panic of Rudd's government over the arrival of more asylum seekers so dismaying. For Rudd knows better...on this topic he is failing as a politician and a Christian (Epis 2009).

Epis's intervention marked a maturity, new in Australian politics, in keeping the Prime Minister accountable to the theological principles that Rudd himself had enunciated. This promising step was helped by the fact that Rudd had indeed articulated a coherent theological position, rather than

religio-nationalist posturing (such as emerged with the ‘lost verse’ of *Advance Australia Fair*) or vague religious allusion (or still vaguer ‘family values’ pronouncements).

Far from wanting less religion in politics, I think that, at least in the current climate, we need more. If our leaders identify, and still more if they merely hint at, a religious dimension to their stances on such matters as teen pregnancy, abortion, environmental protection, refugees, industrial relations or tax, we are entitled—indeed, obliged—to ask what that dimension is: from what doctrinal position does it follow; how the politician traces the connection; what sources informed their doctrinal position; and so on. Then, just as with other topics, we can decide how persuasive we find their replies. And vote accordingly.

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