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feature article

god, caesar & alexander

By Marion Maddox

Recent world events have ensured religion permanent billing at the forefront of public attention. While the main glare picks up explosions and conflagrations, the quieter questions of religion's place in democratic debate have also received increasing attention. In the United States of America, the constitutional history of church-state separation intensifies such questions. Courts agonise over the Pledge of Allegiance, 'Ten Commandments' plaques outside court buildings and how many reindeer qualify a nativity scene to stand on public land. At the same time, White House staff find that morning Bible study is, in David Frum's memorable phrase, 'not compulsory, but not quite un compulsory either'¹ and the President launches a 'crusade' against 'evil'.

In Australia, the issue of church-government relations never achieves quite the US fire-and-brimstone quality, but from time to time gains its own share of the limelight. In an early foray beyond Treasury issues, federal Treasurer Peter Costello blamed declining faith in the churches partly on church leaders speaking out on 'what they perceive to be moral issues', including the GST and war, while overlooking 'people who really had engaged in moral failure' within their own ranks². Two months later, Foreign Minister

and Member for Mayo Alexander Downer delivered a still more blistering damnation of church comments on foreign policy³. The speeches' themes were readily picked up by conservative commentators⁴.

While applauding the 'central role' that 'the Christian churches [and] ... other great religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism' have in 'providing a moral compass to an increasing[ly] materialistic world', Downer lamented the 'partisan politicking' which, he felt, had seduced church leaders in recent years. He argued that people were losing 'much-needed spiritual sustenance' as their religious leaders succumbed to the temptation to 'be amateur commentators on all manner of secular issues on which they inevitably lack expertise'. He went further, accusing clergy of 'hogging the limelight' (presumably from its rightful occupants on Capital Hill) and taking on 'complex political issues' in quest of 'cheap headlines'—travesties which, he declared, 'would have been inconceivable in the Playford era'.

Downer's is a recent statement of a well-tryed position: in the past, church leaders stuck to spiritual matters, and now venture into politics as a result of inadequate theology, misguided priorities or reckless publicity-seeking⁵. The complaint has appeared at regular intervals through the Howard ascendancy.

Industrial relations proved a flashpoint between the Liberals and the churches even before the Howard government was elected. On 21 February 1996, in the final weeks of the election campaign, one hundred members of religious organisations signed an open letter endorsing the then Labor Government's approach over the Coalition's. Prime Minister Paul Keating further invoked the Pope in his party's support, leading Opposition Leader John Howard to cite a papal encyclical, *Centessimus Annus*, in defence of voluntary unionism, while retorting:

I don't want His Holiness involved in the election campaign ... I don't think Catholics or non-Catholics in the Australian community want His Holiness involved ... I'll be very happy to argue the Christian credentials of anything I put forward in this election campaign.⁶

Theological pressure kept up, the Uniting Church in Australia New South Wales Synod's Board for Social

Marion Maddox is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, where she teaches and publishes regularly in the area of religion-politics intersections.

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Responsibility in April 1998 calling the proposed Multi-lateral Agreement on Investment 'from a Christian point of view ... idolatrous'⁷. The following year, the National Council of Churches drew on statements by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, Orthodox bishops and Salvation Army founder William Booth to conclude that Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith's employment proposals fell 'far short of what is required'⁸.

The *Native Title Amendment Bill 1997* drew substantial church attention in the Government's first term. The Uniting Church New South Wales Council of Synod passed a resolution declaring 'that extinguishment or diminution of currently existing native title would be discriminatory and unacceptable on moral, legal and financial grounds'. It exhorted the Government 'to abandon the amendments proposed' and 'to enter into negotiations in good faith with Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders' to produce a replacement Bill⁹. Indeed, church reaction was so widespread that Anglican Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn George Browning observed:

I can't remember any other issue in recent times which has gained such a broad consensus of opinion amongst church leaders. We're very difficult to get on with in many ways! We argue about ... a host of other issues, but on this one the unanimity of mind is quite extraordinary.¹⁰

That unanimity led the Executive of the National Council of Churches in 1997 to call on the federal Parliament 'to refrain from treating the rights of Native Title holders in a discriminatory way'¹¹. That was mild, compared, for example, with Anglican Archbishop Peter Carnley's 1993 comparison between the Coalition's Native Title response and 'Adolf Hitler's strategies to deprive Jews of their properties', which prompted West Australian Liberal front-bencher Wilson Tuckey to threaten resignation from the church. Similarly affronted was Queensland National Party Senator Ron Boswell at the time of the *Native Title Amendment Bill*:

The churches ... have been very negligent ... in their promotion of one side of the Wik debate. They have alienated their flock ... They are driving people away from Christ.¹²

For two centuries, church leaders have been often outspoken participants in public debate. Often, this was in their best-known roles as co-enforcers (with the state) of colonial authority and wowsers opponents of secular pleasure¹⁶

Reconciliation has also attracted many church interventions. For example, on 6 April 2000, four national church leaders¹³ co-signed an open letter urging the Prime Minister to 'think again' about an apology to members of the stolen generation and not 'allow his minister to trivialise the pain, documented so well in the *Bringing Them Home* report, by arguing about statistics'¹⁴.

Welfare has been another a hot-spot, with, for example, two Uniting Church bodies, UnitingCare Australia and National Social Responsibility and Justice, calling aspects of mutual obligation 'unacceptable' and 'inappropriate', and extending the activity test to people with disabilities 'morally repugnant'¹⁵. The waterfront dispute, tax reform, border protection and the Iraq war (Downer's immediate concern) are other high-profile areas in which church criticism of government has been particularly stringent.

But, contrary to Downer's view, such exchanges are not modern aberrations, unthinkable to his political forebears. In fact, they are older than the Commonwealth. For two centuries, church leaders have been often outspoken participants in public debate. Often, this was in their best-known roles as co-enforcers (with the state) of colonial authority and wowsers opponents of secular pleasure¹⁶. For almost as long¹⁷, however, church leaders have played a contrary part, as irritants to the political establishment.

At first, such interventions tended to be by individuals, rather than on behalf of any still embryonic church structure. Nevertheless, in books, pamphlets, journalism, letters to the authorities and presentations to government committees, they did not hesitate to state their arguments' religious foundation. Thus Australia's first Roman Catholic vicar-general, Rev. Dr William Ullathorne, fought against transportation in pamphlets

entitled *The Catholic Mission in Australia*¹⁸ and *The Horrors of Transportation*¹⁹. On the strength of that campaign, he was invited to give evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Transportation, chaired by Sir William Molesworth²⁰.

Opposition to the treatment of transported felons politically united doctrinal foes Ullathorne and the vehemently anti-Catholic Presbyterian, Rev. Dr John Dunmore Lang, who similarly published on the subject and also gave evidence to the Molesworth Committee²¹. Lang was then just beginning his political transition from Tory bourgeois moralist to the radical republican who eventually took his seat in the New South Wales Legislative Council on a platform of no transportation, no gerrymander and greatly extended franchise²². The constant through his public career was representations, letters, petitions, newspaper articles, books and pamphlets, aimed at the public and at government officials in Australia and the United Kingdom. These regularly invoked his authority as 'senior minister of Scots Church'²³. The Costellos and Downers of his day urged that 'a professed minister of religion' should not 'meddle' with politics but 'mind your own proper business and leave these things to other people'²⁴. Lang replied that politics was as much the clergy's business as anybody's. For example, he claimed republicanism, underpinned by political equality, universal suffrage and popular election, as the only biblically-endorsed form of government²⁵. When detractors labelled his ideas '*Chartism, Communism and Socialism*', he replied that in that case, those 'isms' must, like his own 'objectionable principles', have originated in 'that *Word of God which endureth for ever*'²⁶.

Nineteenth century churchmen also took the state to task on matters of race. Henry Reynolds has recently drawn attention to the role of Australian and English evangelicals in campaigns for Indigenous rights. Lang's efforts at loosening the restrictions on Chinese immigration brought five hundred Chinese mourners to the head of his funeral procession²⁷. Similarly, Congregationalist Rev. Dr James Jefferis argued in the 1870s for equal wages for Chinese and Australian workers.

The 1890 Maritime Strike kept clerical political interventions in the public eye. The formation of ecumenical Councils of Churches in that decade enabled the churches to speak with the added authority

Catholic opposition to conscription in World War I is well-documented³¹, whereas, the Methodist Church of South Australia not only campaigned vigorously for the 'yes' case in the two conscription referenda, but directly attacked the Roman Catholic anti-conscription stance

of a shared position²⁸. The qualified pro-unionism of Roman Catholic Cardinal Moran, the moderate socialism of Anglican Bishop Barry and the full-blown Christian socialism of Congregationalist Rev. Dr Thomas Roseby and Anglo-Catholic Rev. H. L. Jackson alike drew the charge that social questions do not belong in the pulpit²⁹.

Church services focussing on social issues—and promoting a particular view on those issues—remained common after Federation. For example, A. E. Talbot, Dean of Sydney's St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral from 1912 to 1937, made the Cathedral the venue for an annual Eight Hour Day Service³⁰. Not that churches always agreed on social questions. Catholic opposition to conscription in World War I is well-documented³¹, whereas, the Methodist Church of South Australia not only campaigned vigorously for the 'yes' case in the two conscription referenda, but directly attacked the Roman Catholic anti-conscription stance. The editor of the denominational newspaper at times found mere prose inadequate to convey the strength of Methodist passions:

Speak plain at the next Referendum,

Reply by a thunderous 'Yes!'

And show Dr Mannix' Sinn Feiners Z

They cannot—yet—answer for us.

Show those who would hoodwink the workers,

The manifold pro-German crew,

That tricks for betraying the soldiers

Have no inch of quarter with you.³²

If such poetic outbursts are rare, churches have always



used whatever means were available to make their points, including books³³, the religious press³⁴, and columns in the secular press³⁵, supplemented by radio and television appearances³⁶ when those media developed. The staging of a 'media event' to attract the attention of the wider public as well as a church's own members is also not a new phenomenon. From 1940, the Catholic bishops issued annual Social Justice Statements aiming to shape public attitudes and policy, as well as to inform lay Catholics³⁷. In the process, they developed publicity techniques taken up with exemplary force by the ecumenical coalition responsible for the *Call to the People of Australia*, read out in radio news bulletins on Remembrance Day 1951, with 1.5 million copies circulated within a year³⁸. In turn, the *Call's* success (at least in PR terms) influenced subsequent efforts such as the Methodist church's Mission to the Nation, a highly-organised and media-focused evangelistic program with a prominent element of political commentary, much of it critical of the Menzies government's position, especially on economic and racial issues.³⁹

The church interventions in public debate repeatedly drew the same charge from their political targets that Lang rebuffed and that Downer recently re-issued. They were told not to meddle in matters to complex for

their understanding, accused of political grandstanding and warned against abandoning their real responsibilities (whatever those may be—political critics are typically very ready to tell clergy what their role is not, but much hazier on what they should be doing instead).

However, the Howard government's version of these claims has a particular irony. As one friend recently emailed:

When it comes to euthanasia, they invoke religious morality

When it comes to war, they want religion to poke its nose out

When it comes to homosexuality, they invoke religious morality!

Just as the Menzies government, though objecting to church criticism of its own position⁴⁰, was ready to accept support from the Catholic-based Democratic Labor Party, so more recent opponents of church political involvement lay themselves open to charges of double standards when they are ready to capitalise politically on religious 'pro-family', 'anti-euthanasia' and 'pro-censorship' sentiment⁴¹.

Moreover, at the same time as various members of the Howard Government have declared themselves under siege from ecclesiastical meddling, they have also presided over an increasing blurring of the lines between church and government. One example is the contracting-out of what was previously government social services.

One of the longest-standing strands of churches' public activity in Australia is social welfare services. For almost as long, Australian churches and statesmen have debated whether responsibility for welfare belongs more to religious organisations or to the state.

In practice, expanding government welfare activity has never absorbed all of those whose needs are not adequately taken care of by the market; although the state share increased dramatically with the rise of the 'welfare state', non-government organisations have remained important. In neoliberal times, religious organisations have been encouraged to take up much of the void left by shrinking government⁴². The trend towards increasing involvement of 'faith based' organisations in delivering previously government services has subsequently been taken up in the social policies of US Republican President George Bush⁴³ and British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair⁴⁴.

One consequence is that, as churches become increasingly built into government activity through receiving government funds, they find it harder to criticise government policy⁴⁵. Indeed, refraining from criticism is increasingly one of the terms of a contract⁴⁶. In the view of Melbourne City Mission Chief Executive Ray Cleary, such restraint:

eats at the very heart of the mission and the value base of church-based agencies, which are there to demonstrate God's preferential or special interest for the marginalised and those at risk.⁴⁷

Even without explicit 'no-criticism' clauses, fear of losing future contracts can restrain criticism. Either way, church agencies, being increasingly built into the same set of mechanisms as the government departments they previously challenged, may find it harder to distinguish government's goals from their own. Recent proposed changes to tax law have intensified the pressure. Organisations face losing their tax-deductible status if they have a 'disqualifying purpose' which is more than 'ancillary or incidental' to their main purpose. One disqualifying category is 'attempting to change the law or Government policy'⁴⁸.

Another consequence of tendering out government services to church agencies has been to harness those agencies into furthering non-welfare related aspects of government policy. One example of the ironies inherent in being willing to build church agencies into a wider policy agenda, while at the same time exhorting them to keep out of politics, is the Jobs Network. In late 1999, Employment Services Minister Tony Abbott announced the results of the second round of tenders for job placement services: \$700 million worth of contracts had been won by church employment services, out of a total of three billion dollars awarded⁴⁹. One of the grounds for awarding tenders was price⁵⁰. One likely reason for church tenders' success is that, as not-for-profit organisations, they could provide

cheaper services than private enterprise. Churches and charities, offering much-needed services on tight and unpredictable budgets, have historically relied heavily on the labour of volunteers, while paid workers have often been employed at lower rates than they could command in comparable secular employment. A sense of vocation is, in some ways, the unofficial trade-off for reduced pay and conditions, to the extent that, in many areas, 'volunteerism and amateurism are two hallmarks of church life'⁵¹. Indeed, that, according to the Minister concerned, was one key to the religious tenderers' success:

The fact is, these agencies do an extremely good job and why shouldn't people who work for organisations like the Salvation Army and Mission Australia be expected to uphold that ethos of love and compassion and the brotherhood of man, which helps to give them their very unique and special and magnificent identity.⁵²

Similarly, Alan Cadman, Liberal Member for Mitchell, argued that Christian agencies had been successful because they were the ones 'prepared to go the extra miles and spend the extra time'⁵³ to see results.

The government's view is that such willingness makes for better service, the implication being high staff input—'extra miles' gone and 'extra time' spent. But the issue in tendering is not quality alone, but a relationship between quality and cost. One way to offer high quality for a low cost is to make some of that staff input unpaid. Translating 'extra miles' out of Cadman's New Testament phraseology⁵⁴, it is hard to see what it means other than that the successful religious agencies were the ones whose employees did more work than they were paid for.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with individuals choosing, out of a sense of vocation or for personal fulfilment, to undertake extra, unpaid work in their paid position. However, if that choice becomes a requirement, either explicitly or as a result of the transformation of an entire sector through the competitive advantage of agencies staffed by people who have taken such a choice, then we would surely see workers experiencing substantial personal and family pressures.

One traditional bastion against such pressures has been trade unions. Church agencies' mix of volunteer

A sense of vocation is, in some ways, the unofficial trade-off for reduced pay and conditions, to the extent that, in many areas, 'volunteerism and amateurism are two hallmarks of church life'⁵¹

workers and paid workers organised around a volunteer ethos means that church employees are among the least unionised in the Australian workforce. One effect of the church-state blurring engendered by the Commonwealth Employment Service's replacement by the Jobs Network has been to reduce substantially the rate of unionisation among job placement workers. Anecdotal reports suggest that up to eighty per cent of CES employees were union members, making CES the Community and Public Sector Union's 'flagship portfolio'⁵⁵. By contrast, the parcelling out of job placement services has led to many being redirected to church-based agencies, in which unionisation is estimated at a fraction of that rate⁵⁶. If that effect did not stand out in public commentary, it did to the move's initiators: according to Abbott, one of the Jobs Network's achievements was its departure from 'the ... union-dominated, bureaucratic monolith of the CES'⁵⁷. One result is that religious agencies are open to being construed as having been used by government in a political agenda beyond the immediate question of delivering job placement services.

Downer's wistful musing that current forms of church criticism of government activity would have been 'inconceivable in the Playford era' flies in the face of history. Many clergy have regarded an active, even controversial, role in Australian public debate to be part of their core responsibility for almost as long as they have been here. Those who contend that it is not have the burden of proof on their side as regards spelling out why such commentary is wrong. Moreover, a government which makes a regular practice of binding churches and their agencies closer to itself for political gain is in a dicey position for telling them to keep out of politics. *AQ*

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