

DRAFT ONLY

'Secularism and Religious Politics: An Australian exception?'

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The phrase 'religion and politics' conjures fiery-eyed zealots, whether of the US Protestant or middle-eastern Muslim kind. We expect to find religiously-inspired political activity in societies where religion is prominent in national and cultural life.

Such passions are often regarded as an alien intrusion, unsettling to established political processes, and even threatening to democracy.

The presumed antidote, particularly from a European point of view, has been secularisation: surely, if people in general cared less about religion, religious politics would fade from public life and its threatened disruptions would disappear.

I argue that this view rests too much on historical specificities. Very secular societies can foster their own varieties of extremism, which require different explanations and responses.

Australia is demographically very secular, with weekly church attenders less than ten per cent of the population. Yet religion has become increasingly prominent in public life over the last decade. A form of politics closely resembling US-style religious right campaigns has met with substantial success.

Encouraged by the historically secular Liberal (conservative) party, it has struck a chord most noticeably among voters with little religious background and few present religious commitments. Rather than speaking to directly theological concerns, this form of religious politics has proved a neat fit for a political climate significantly shaped by Australia's involvement in the 'coalition of the willing' and the 'war on terror'. A Christianity of which most voters know little has come to stand as a code for a reassuring, nostalgic nationalism; a delineator of national identity against a perceived Muslim 'other'; and a justifying discourse for calls to greater 'self-reliance' and 'individual responsibility' in the face of increasing privatization of the previously government-based welfare sector.

This paper seeks to explain the success of religiously-inflected politics in such a secular environment, in the process rethinking some common assumptions about the relationship between secularism and religious toleration.

Once the domain almost entirely of political philosophers and the occasional lawyer, the relationship between religion and state now enjoys front-page currency in many countries used to thinking of themselves as secular. While fears of Islamic theocracy infuse western perceptions of international affairs, controversies such as America's debates over the Pledge of Allegiance's admissibility in state schools, France's 'Islamic veil affair' and the American-derived but now more widespread 'Christmas wars'¹ bring questions of religious freedom and state intervention closer to home.

Arguably, the long-drawn-out nature of such controversies attests to their efficacy as markers in ideological debates which are only partly to do with the presenting issue. But, even accepting that, the fact that they extend (or are able to be extended) over such long periods suggests, also, that they point to genuine uncertainties and areas of strain within the various liberal and democratic accounts of the relationship between state and social groups which informs the various societies concerned.

One important argument for the removal of religion from the mechanisms of the state is the Lockean view that too close an entanglement is likely to result in diminution of basic freedoms. The most common historical justification for that normative sense of secularism is that removing religious questions from the authority of the state and removing questions of state from the authority of the church best preserves religious freedom, particularly for those who dissent from the majority religious tradition—the idea most famously summed up in Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which he assured his Dissenting correspondents that he shared their conviction that there should be 'a wall of separation between church and state'. As Locke noted, members of minority groups are often all in favour of religious freedom; it is only when they get to be the majority that the burden of enforcing the truth on the less-enlightened begins to weigh upon them, while their commitment to preserving others' freedoms wanes. The reason for this concern was 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 establishment. When religion gets too close to government, each is likely to make use of the proximity to exceed its proper boundaries, with government trying to enforce faith and religion trying to dictate policy.

A common assumption in much modern literature on secularization, too, is that religion and government are safest at arms length from one another. Part of the program often said to safeguard this distance is treating religion as a private matter. Religious commitments, it is often assumed, are (or can be) so intense that, unless kept well out of public business, they are likely to spill over in destabilizing ways. And the more intensely religious people feel, the more likely religiously-charged politics—at least as it is manifested among major parties

¹ For a brief survey of 'Christmas wars' developments in Europe, see Jane Little, 'Christmas Edges Back to America', BBC News, 25, December 2006. For discussion of their Australian manifestation, see Geoffrey Brahm Levey, "Symbolic Recognition, Multicultural Citizens, and Acknowledgement: Negotiating the Christmas Wars," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 40(4) 2006, 355-70.

and in such culturally mainstream fora as mass media political commentary—is restricted to those societies in which religious institutions command widespread adherence and individuals report high religiosity. The phrase ‘American exceptionalism’ invokes the twin ideas that America, as contrasted with Europe, has citizens who are unusually religiously committed (with unusually high rates of belief in God, church attendance, expectation of an afterlife and so on), and an unusually religiously-charged public life (with recent evidence including legislative moves such as the *Constitution Restoration Act*, litigation such as the long-running Newdow action over the Pledge of Allegiance and numerous local skirmishes over the teaching of evolution, and policy departures such as the Faith Based Institutions initiative).

Many commentators see these two American characteristics as causally linked: attribute the growth and public acceptance of religiously-inflected politics to Americans’ unusually high—by Western standards—levels of religiosity. The rest of the West might roll its eyes when the President announces a crusade against terrorism, wince at ‘God bless America’ civil religiosity and throw up its hands when the *Constitution Restoration Act* proposes to make recognition of God as the source of law a ground for putting certain cases beyond appeal; but what, observers resignedly ask, can you expect from a country where over half the population claim to be regular churchgoers and some 40 per cent claim to be evangelical or born again?

The conventional contrast is with Europe, where religion is much less prominent both personally and publicly. Private religiosity is far lower; established churches, where they exist, take a quiet back seat or function as an unobtrusive arm of the civil service (eliciting little more personal devotion from citizens than the tax department or transport authority); and religion, if it enters politics at all, does so through the aging and comfortably institutionalised Christian Democrat parties. A number of analyses² attribute this pattern to the continued existence (at least until very recently) of established Christian churches in many European nations, their position of social and relative political power eliciting a successful mobilization of the Enlightenment critique of religion against them, with the result that, though the establishment forms may endure, belief and practice fades.

Recognising the complexities and regional specificities involved, we can nevertheless helpfully illuminate western versions of formal church-state separation we by considering two ideal types: the American and the French. Both draw on Enlightenment sensibilities and were propelled, in part, by the observation that the state, with its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, cannot help acting arbitrarily and therefore unjustly when it tries to enforce one answer to ultimately undecidable questions of faith. As early as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville drew on the US model as potential inspiration for France, then a couple of generations on from the Revolution but still several more from the formal

² Casanova 1994; David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society* London: Ahsgate 2003

disentangling of the church from areas such as health and education which only achieved final expression with the Separation Law of 1905³.

De Tocqueville noted that formal separation in the US, far from suppressing or restricting private religiosity, encouraged an elaborate flowering of faiths, while imbuing private religious practice with an intensity absent in the more formalised and ritualistic public faith fostered by a state religion. He regarded this intensity positively, as allowing religion to act not just as the guarantor of civic virtue on the part of individuals but also, paradoxically, as ‘the first of [America’s] political institutions’, because, ‘if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it.’⁴ In a similar vein, though with a different evaluation, Karl Marx argued in *On the Jewish Question* that America’s strict church-state separation makes religion

only the abstract avowal of specific perversity, *private whimsy*, and arbitrariness. The endless fragmentation of religion in North America, for example, gives it even *externally* the form of a purely individual affair’.⁵

Ultimately, religion becomes merely the latest face of ‘*bellum omnium contra omnes*’. The claim of a causal relationship between formal separation and flourishing private—and increasingly individualised—religiosity remained influential in late twentieth-century theorising about American religiosity.⁶

American church-state separation allows not only for private commitment but also for a significant degree of public religiosity. Though God is arguably more invoked in national politics under the current President than ever before, nevertheless the difference is of degree, not kind: God has been invoked, in more or less personal terms and with varying degrees of fervour, by every President since Independence, making it very difficult to imagine American public life stripped of its religious references. Similarly, though American courts have so far considered school prayer beyond the constitutional pale, continued use of the Pledge of Allegiance, with its controversial cold war insertion ‘under God’, reflects a national imaginary in which God, though perhaps more onlooker than active participant, is nevertheless a crucial part of the picture⁷. The public sphere is secular, we might say, in the sense that God is the audience to whom the drama of national life is directed and, like any audience (as successive Presidential ‘God Bless

³ In fact, heavily state-subsidized religious schools still educate about one-fifth of all French children, conforming to the principle of *laïcité* by their brief to form ‘secular’ citizens.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols) Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1953 [v. 1 1835, v. 2 1840] vol. 2 pp 305-6

⁵ *On the Jewish Question*

⁶ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* Rutgers University Press 1992.

⁷ The passage in the House of Representatives on 19 July 2006 of the *Pledge Protection Act*, whose aim is to put the Pledge of Allegiance beyond Supreme Court scrutiny, is one of a series of recent moves which further entrench that picture (though the Senate is expected to reject it—such legislation arguably works more at a symbolic level than in actually making law).

America's remind us), provides the *raison d'être* for the performance. (Of course, one could credibly claim that the divine is often invoked with cynicism or self-interest; but I am talking at the moment about the way the narrative presents itself).

Where America developed its church-state separation model in the absence of a national church (though some colonies had establishment prior to Independence), separation in France meant the end of state sponsorship of the Catholic church, and the triumph of the anticlericalism whose roots lie in the French Enlightenment. For a recent example of French secularism in action, accompanied by fairly broad public discussion of what that entails, we might look to the 2004 ban on school students wearing identifiable religious clothing or ornaments (such as headscarves or crosses) to school. Defending the move, President Jacques Chirac said that France felt 'in a certain way under attack as result of the display of ostentatious religious signs, which is totally contrary to its secular tradition'. Where American church-state separation is said to produce a flowering of private religiosities, including many expressed through 'ostentatious religious signs', the French version regards God as a persistent and nagging would-be intruder into national life, who might at any moment go on the 'attack' and therefore must be vigilantly excluded in the interests of public peace and safety⁸.

Here again, political hard-heads might cavil that the national narrative is not exactly as it seems. The law banning 'ostentatious religious signs' initially targeted hijab-wearing Muslim schoolgirls, and only belatedly acquired a patina of impartiality by including other 'conspicuous' [*ostensible*] signs, such as crucifix jewelry (and even then, one might argue that 'ostentation' to some degree is in the eye of the beholder—a scarf whose job is to cover one's head is by nature bound to be bigger, and therefore more conspicuous than even the most flamboyant crucifix necklet, for example). As with the American example, such concerns are certainly important, but the point at the moment is the form that the narrative takes (whatever its 'real' motivations may be), and what it tells us about the version of secularism, in the sense of ground rules governing religion-state relations in either instance.

An alternative to seeing religiously-inflected politics as a consequence of America's exceptionally religious citizenry is to locate a cause (perhaps one among several) for the rise of religious fundamentalism in politics in over-emphatic separationism⁹. The more stringently the religiously-committed are (or feel themselves to be) excluded from the processes of political decision making, the louder they feel the need to knock on the closed gates; the more forcefully they feel they need to make their claims to being heard; the greater the probability that they will be perceived by the wider society as being, or perhaps feel a need themselves to adopt strategies which they themselves perceive as being, extreme or even violent.

⁸ Talal Asad offers a different metaphor, seeing *laïcité* as an aspect of the French Republic's 'personality', and any religious intrusion into the public sphere as a corruption of that personality. See Asad, 'Trying to Understand French Secularism' in Hent de Vries (ed.) *Political Theologies*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006

⁹ An argument advanced, from quite different standpoints, by William Connolly and Stephen Carter.

A corollary is to seek an antidote to fundamentalist politics in a relatively deregulated constitutional environment. After examining various possible patterns of alignment and separation between church and state, Veit Bader proposes his 'Non-Constitutional Pluralism (NCP)' as the most promising model of religion-state relations, including for its potential to 'prevent the development of religious fundamentalism in politics'¹⁰. He holds up Australia, along with Belgium, India, Germany and post-1983 Netherlands as examples which 'approximate this ideal type'¹¹.

Lacking any religious establishment, Australia looks, demographically, in many ways like the Europe of conventional sociological wisdom. Though around three-quarters of Australians claim to believe in a God of some sort, only about nine per cent claim to be weekly church attenders, and perhaps half of those would identify with the evangelical-Pentecostalist-fundamentalist conservative end of the Christian spectrum. Australians are used to thinking of themselves, at least since the 1970s, as thoroughly secular¹². Historically, government leaders have tended to play down their religious allegiances and, although churches have often been active participants in public debate, frequently as critics of government policy on behalf of the poorest and most marginalised, they have—sensibly, given the demographic realities—avoided doing so in ways which could imply any sense of divine right or automatically privileged position in public debate¹³.

Yet, since the election of the conservative government of John Howard in 1996, but especially over its last two terms (2001-4 and 2004-7), Australians have begun looking politically much more American. American-sounding fundamentalist politics has managed to gain a foothold in the party politics of this very secular electorate. I hope that understanding this phenomenon will cast light not only on present Australian realities, but also more generally on our understanding of the variety of ways in which religions can operate in the public sphere in secular societies.

Australia has a written constitution which includes a statement about religion-state relations, s. 116:

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

¹⁰ 'Religious Diversity and Democratic Institutional Pluralism' *Political Theory* 31 (2) 2003, 265-294, p 272

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 271

¹² See eg Ian Breward, *Australia: The Most Godless Place Under Heaven?* Melbourne: Beacon Hill Books, 1988

¹³ Examples of such interventions include the Catholic church's annual Social Justice statements through the 1970s and 1980s, statements by the National Council of Churches and contributions on specific issues by the Uniting Church and Anglican Church.

religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

S. 116 has received only occasional judicial elaboration, with the courts inclining in each instance to a minimalist interpretation of what separation requires¹⁴. Earlier cases covered the rights of conscientious objectors to resist conscription on religious grounds and whether the Commonwealth can protect victims of religious discrimination by a State government. In each case, the High Court concluded that s. 116 does not offer the sought protections of individual rights. The most recent case in which the meaning of s. 116 was seriously tested was the Defence of Government Schools case in 1981, which challenged the constitutional validity of federal and State government funding to Catholic schools. Close to one-third of Australian school children attend non-government schools, about seventy per cent of which are Catholic. Catholic schools rely on governments for about eighty per cent of their costs. The High Court decided, in a 6-1 judgment, that the funding arrangements did not breach s. 116 because providing government support to a range of schools from different churches did not amount to 'establishing' a religion. Constitutional expert Helen Irving concludes, indeed, that 'the High Court of Australia has interpreted the constitutional provision in such a way as virtually to deplete it of meaning'¹⁵.

Bader's characterisation of Australia as embodying 'Non-Constitutional Pluralism', seems, then, consistent with the constitutional history. Nevertheless, religiously-inflected politics, much of it with a fundamentalist tinge, has become an increasingly-noted feature of national life.

Prime Minister John Howard has repeatedly Australia as a 'Christian nation', and as founded on 'Judeo-Christian principles', and as looking to 'Jesus of Nazareth' as 'the most significant person in human history'.

Then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson declared Christianity synonymous with western civilisation, so that to dissent from one was to undermine the other:

If you look at the secularisation of the West, if you're going to say no there's no higher authority you're going to end up where the fascists did if you're logical about it. You're going to say there's no morality that can be proven to be right or wrong or have any great claim to substance other than the struggle for power, and I can't go there ... what I really can believe, because it's so incredible it has a ring of truth about it, is the Christian message.¹⁶

¹⁴ For discussion, see Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics* Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library 2001

¹⁵ Irving, Helen 'Same difference? Separation of Church and State in the United States and the Australian Constitutions', <http://www.ihcu.org/node/2306> accessed 2 May 2007

¹⁶ ABC TV *Compass*, 'What Our Leaders Believe', Sunday 3 October 2004

Appeals to 'Christian government' and the idea of Australia as a 'Christian nation' goes with ambiguously-religious discussion about 'values' which, decoded, seems always to mean Christian values of the most repressive and grimly nationalistic kind. This was accompanied, especially during 2004 and 2005, by an increasing explicitly-Christian public rhetoric on the part of some political leaders, whether or not they themselves are practising Christians¹⁷. Examples of this are recent ministerial statements about welfare and about abortion.

Governments can only give money, Treasurer Peter Costello told successive church charity launches, but poverty stems from spiritual causes such as drug and alcohol addiction or marital breakdown. Churches, the bearers of not just charity but also values, are best placed to address those spiritual deficits. For that reason, his government favoured 'outsourcing' of many previously state welfare activities to church agencies, a move which anticipated US President George W. Bush's more widely-known 'Faith Based Initiatives' program. Addressing the inaugural National Day of Thanksgiving in May 2004, Costello went further, arguing that social problems on all manner of fronts are best addressed not by government effort but by a national return to the Ten Commandments. The National Day of Thanksgiving (a new event in Australia's religious calendar, promoted by no mainline churches but by a coalition of Pentecostal, Christian Zionist and religious right parachurch groups) included in its list of sponsors a Pentecostal group called Catch the Fire Ministries, two of whose pastors were, at the time, answering allegations before the Supreme Court of Victoria of religious vilification against Muslims. Anticipating that his presence might therefore arouse controversy, Costello argued that not only social problems such as moral decay and family breakdown were best addressed by religious means, but that interreligious tensions themselves were best solved by a return to the values which spring from 'our Judeo-Christian tradition'¹⁸.

A new, A\$51 million government-funded pregnancy counseling program, is the centrepiece of Health Minister Tony Abbott's plan to lower the national abortion rate, which he has called a 'national tragedy'. The government has appointed two Catholic agencies, but no pro-choice counterpart, to advise on the program. Its introduction has been accompanied by numerous complaints of the agencies which provide the counseling misrepresenting their services, so that women in crisis did not realise that their supposedly neutral counseling was by anti-abortion organisations.

Other federal government moves which seem designed to appeal to the most conservative end of the Christian community include:

- Passing an amendment to the *Marriage Act* to ensure that marriage can only be between a man and a woman, and vowing to overturn the Australian Capital

¹⁷ For discussion see *God Under Howard* op. cit.

¹⁸ Peter Costello, Address to National Day of Thanksgiving Commemoration, Scots Church, Melbourne, 29 May 2004

Territory's plan for civil unions available to gay and lesbian, as well as heterosexual, couple;

- Reshaping the arrangements for school funding and accreditation so that an increased proportion of the federal government's education funding goes to small, often non-denominational, Christian schools who require their teachers to believe and teach that all non-Christians are eternally damned and whose curricula often include so-called 'creation science' in addition to, or instead of, evolution.
- Altering the tax system so that two-parent families with one breadwinner and one full-time stay-at-home parent (almost always the mother) are significantly financially advantaged compared to a two-parent family on the same income where the parents share both the income-earning and care responsibilities.

A further feature of this elevation of (a particular, exclusivist and supremacist version of) Christianity in public rhetoric and policy has been a sustained rhetorical attack on Muslims. From the Howard government's notoriously punitive response to mainly Muslim asylum seekers (portrayed as potential terrorists, though they were often fleeing the very regimes with which the Australian government associated them) to a rhetoric counterposing 'our values' against 'their values', the flip-side of conservative Christianity's new public prominence has been the creation of a feared religious 'other'.

To take just one example of the rhetorical shifts by which such slips from 'our values' to Christian supremacism became possible, consider a speech by Federal Treasurer Peter Costello's address to the 2003 National Student Leadership Forum on Faith and Values:

[N]ot all values are equal. ... You would have seen yesterday, the big explosion in Jerusalem, maybe like me you watched the TV and you have seen video of the suicide bomber who did that. He was holding a rifle in one hand and a Koran in another. He had faith and he had values, you can't deny that. He probably had more faith than all of us put together. But were they the right values? ... That's an extreme case, but I am trying to illustrate that not all values are the right values. One of the values that we like to start off with, particularly in our society with the ethic and the faith background that we come from is the value of life over death.¹⁹

Costello stopped just short of saying that the bomber, who had the wrong values, also had the wrong faith; but that was surely implied by Costello's pairing of faith and values, followed immediately by the supposed contrast with 'the faith background that *we* come from' (emphasis added).

These developments appear superficially very similar to the religious right activism which has been such a prominent part of the George W. Bush presidencies in America. But the contexts are very different. Compared to the United States, very few Australians actually hold a deep religious identification or engage in any regular religious practice. Where Republican strategists calculate that enough American voters identify with

¹⁹ Peter Costello, address to the 2003 National Student Leadership Forum on Faith and Values

conservative evangelicalism to, on their own, determine an election outcome, no silent Christian majority (or even significant voting block) waits to chastise Australian governments. Of the nine or so per cent of Australians who claim to attend church weekly, perhaps half (at most) would identify with the socially-conservative, religiously-inflected policies sketched above.

Just as important as religious demographics is the fact that voting in Australia is compulsory. Unlike in America, where ‘values’ issues such as gay marriage and abortion proved key to turning out evangelical voters who might otherwise have stayed home, turning out the numbers is not the issue. Evangelicals, like almost everyone else in Australia, were always going to vote—because they have to; and the conservatively-inclined among them (which is by no means all of them) were surely already going to vote (if not immediately, then eventually, given the delayed gratifications of preferential voting), for the Liberal-National coalition. Evidently, the appeal of religiously-inflected politics in recent years is targeted towards a much wider section of voters than those who sway to Pentecostal choruses Sunday by Sunday.

The voters Australian politicians need to shift are not firmly-committed religious conservatives, but the ‘swinging’ centre, who most likely do not hold strong religious beliefs (at least, not in statistically-significant proportions) but who respond to political rhetoric which speaks to their fears and insecurities.

Paradoxically, one reason why religiously-inflected politics has worked so well in Australia for the last two election campaigns is not in spite of, but because of, the electorate’s overwhelming secularity. With eighty per cent of Australians attending church irregularly or never, and many being second- or third-generation unchurched, ‘Christian’ refers not to any body of belief or doctrine, but to a general and variable sense of nostalgia and assumed familiarity. ‘Our’ values (which we know, at least historically, to be derived from Christian sources) seem more familiar and therefore safer than ‘theirs’.

Election-shifting support for the measures sketched above comes not so much from conservative Christian voters (though they, too, may support them) but from secular voters who repeatedly tell opinion pollsters that they feel Australia is short on ‘values’. Unsure even what ‘values’ might be or where they come from, these people nevertheless sense that values and religion seem to go together. So, for example, the Christian schools currently enjoying generous government funding and record parental support report that many of their students come from nonreligious families. Parents who seldom or never go to church report enrolling their children because they see such schools as a source of ‘values’, ‘discipline’ and ‘morality’.

The pattern evident in parents’ choices to send their children to church schools is reflected in public support for outsourcing of previously government services to church charities. The unemployed, prisoners, single parents and other targets of this shift can be similarly conceived, as Treasurer Peter Costello most directly expressed it, as in danger not just of material poverty but of moral lapse. They need not just goods, but values—

and, it is implied, religion is the system of ideas and practice best suited to deliver. So Australia's overwhelmingly secular voters can applaud an increasing religious—even fundamentalist—presence in politics, by making the mental reservation that it does not apply to themselves. Religion, in this picture, works as a source of individual values and motivations—not necessarily for 'us', but rather, as a disciplinary technique which we wish on those at greater risk of moral lapse than ourselves—school children, the unemployed, single mothers, welfare recipients, victims of drug abuse or family breakdown.

In the French model, the vigilant policing of cultural boundaries leaves less room for this kind of default Christian supremacism. Once you ban headscarves, you have to go on and ban crosses (at least conspicuous ones), as soon as the inconsistency of doing otherwise is pointed out. Religion itself, rather than any particular religion, is what the state needs to fear. But such vigilance exacts a cost: the prospects for achieving a successful sense of democratic inclusion for those whose identity is closely bound up with religion (perhaps even 'ostentatious' religion) are drastically reduced.

In the US model, religion is both the threat and the solution. Increasingly finessed court decisions over everything from the Pledge of Allegiance in classrooms to school prayer to the display of Christmas decorations on public land. But, through most of the George W. Bush presidency, such moves co-existed with an increasingly religiously charged public discourse. Faith-based welfare delivery, attempts to wind back *Roe v Wade*, nods to Intelligent Design in the schools and a war perceived by much of the Muslim world as a 'crusade' saw even so sober an organ as the *New York Times* regularly waving the word 'theocracy' during 2005 and 2006. Such controversies suggest that, even as a spectator, God can wreak potentially destabilizing effects on secular democracy.

In this paper, I hope to have demonstrated that there are good reasons to question the common assumption of a necessary connection between religious right politics of the kind now prominent in the USA and the USA's exceptional (by western standards) levels of religiosity. The fact that a similar kind of religiously-inflected conservative politics, albeit by no means so outspoken in its rhetoric nor, yet, so far-reaching in its aspirations, has also taken root in the much more secular soil of Australia suggests that secularisation—both in the sense of a fading of religious belief and practice and in the sense of religion's retreat into the private sphere—is little defence against fundamentalist politics.

Australia also challenges the argument put forward by thinkers as diverse as William Connolly and Stephen Carter, that an over-rigid separationism can be blamed for the resurgence of fundamentalist politics. Perhaps that argument holds in America, but Australia's recent experience suggests that its more laid-back constitutional arrangements are also insufficient defence.

