Theories of Engagement: Religion on the Public and Political Stage

by

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Abstract

Recent national and international events have reinforced the significance of religion in the twenty-first century. As religion remains an actor on the public and political stage, the practice of church and state relations remains broad and ambiguous in Australia. Religious and liberal theories of engagement between the church and state underlie current debate on the practice of church and state relations. This paper shows that in practice, Australia supports a unique blend of liberal and religious theories of engagement. A party-politics theory of engagement between church and state is then proposed and discussed. Under this theory, the role of religion in society and public policy is determined by the government in power. The analysis shows that certain Christian denominations receive favorable treatment to the detriment of other denominations and other religions. It is concluded that the party politics theory of engagement has the potential to significantly contribute to debates on political representation and religious rights in Australia. It is hoped that this theory can be used to improve the management of religious diversity in the future.
Introduction

Religion has been central to political debates, public policy and party politics since European settlement in Australia (Hogan 1987; Carey 1996; Maddox 2001). In the mid to late twentieth century, the Liberal party was closely associated with Protestantism and the Labor Party with Roman Catholicism (Brett 2002). Church-state issues were particularly prominent during the life of the Democratic Labor Party from 1955-1974 (Warhurst 2004). Those who attend church more often are more likely to vote conservatively (Bean 1999). In the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, religious alliances changed in both major parties. During the Howard government, Catholic MPs in the Liberal Party (Tony Abbott, Brendan Nelson, Joe Hockey, Kevin Andrews) played a prominent role, while the Catholic influence in the Labor party significantly declined (Warhurst 2004, 2007). Additionally liberal politicians, like Peter Costello, have begun to appeal to evangelical Christian voters. Warhurst (2007:23) contends that ‘more than any other federal government, the senior members of the Howard government have been active, in word and deed, in emphasising the positive contribution of Christian values to Australian society.’ Since the 2004 federal election, commentators have become attuned to the rising ‘Christian vote’ and its influence in Australian society and public policy (Mercer 2007; Crawford; Bouma 2004)

In response to the rise of religion under Howard, Kevin Rudd, then opposition leader of the Labor party, publicly canvassed his private religious views in *The Monthly* magazine in October 2006. Inspired by a social gospel that calls him to action, Rudd argued that he
feels called to work with churches, and those on the edges of society. Although Mercer (2007) has argued that the Christian vote is fragmented, religion has become revitalised on the public and political stage, and its’ influence cannot be ignored. From 2004 to 2007 journalists produced various commentaries on religion under the Howard and Labor opposition. For example, Crawford (2006) compared the two styles of leadership, and observed that Howard promotes conservative Christianity, while Rudd calls himself both a ‘social democrat’ and a ‘Christian socialist.’ Other journalists such as Bolt (2005) have noted the hypocritical nature of the ALP in opposing close relationships between the Liberal government and Christians, whilst supporting close relationships with Christian voters themselves.

International challenges to inherited church-state models reveal that policy makers cannot ignore religious revitalisation in the twenty-first century (Bouma 2004; Nesbitt 2001; Monsma & Soper 1997). Religious revitalisation in Australian politics is consistent with international political trends in the US and Britain; and yet curiously at odds with wider processes of secularisation. Despite a strict separation between church and state in the US constitution, evangelical Christians and the Exclusive Brethren donate millions of dollars to republican campaigns, and influence Republican agendas (Denton 2006; ABC 2007). US case law also reflects the political climate. In the past, US case law showed that strict separation meant no aid to religion. In the twenty-first century, church and state issues are now being resolved through a principle of state neutrality, which involves the provision of state funding to religious and secular institutions in an ‘equal way’ (Monsma 2002). In Britain, the Church of England is established, and the former British PM Tony Blair,
once said that the British ‘don’t do God.’ However, in the 2005 UK general elections, the Bishop of London, Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of Hull were active political campaigners (Majendie 2008). In 2008, Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister of Britain, is said to have a ‘moral compass’ that supports religious minorities (Wynne-Jones 2008).

Global events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the Bali bombings, have reinforced the relevance of religion to western policy agendas (Pollack & Olsen 2008). According to Bouma (2004, 2006) policy makers are ignorant of the differences and similarities that define various religions, and have minimal personal experiences of the religious. As government policy can affect levels of religious belief and practice, it is important to understand how social policies can be developed to promote inter-group harmony and cooperation between different religious groups (Pollack & Olsen 2008; Almond et al. 2000). To date the role of religion in federal politics remains topical, influential to public policy, and understudied in the Australian context (Nesbitt 2001; Maddox 2001; Melleuish 2000; Horin 2007; Anderson 2005; Henderson 2006; Preston 2006; Kelly 2006; Allison 2006). Commentators have observed that the question is not about the relationship between church and state but about the terms of engagement. What can the church expect from the state? What can the state expect from the church? (Sullivan and Lebbert 2004:19).

I begin this paper by examining different theories of engagement between the church and state. Liberal and religious theories will be discussed. I will then show that in practice, Australia supports a unique blend of liberal and religious theories of engagement. A
party-politics theory of engagement between the church and state is then proposed and discussed. I conclude by discussing the sociological significance of religion in the twenty-first century. The paper is focused on the federal government as opposed to state and local governments.

**Religious and Liberal Theories of Engagement**

In Australia, the church and state relationship is defined under section 116 of the Australian Constitution. A *de facto* relationship exists, where the government can provide financial support to all religious and secular organisations. In recent times, federal politicians have expressed their views on the practice of church and state relations in Australia. For liberal shadow minister Tony Abbott, people of faith can contribute to politics if their arguments are based on reason, and expressed in terms that are accessible to all Australians (Uhlmann 2006). Other prominent liberals, such as Peter Costello, contend that a government should remain religion-neutral and support religious freedom, as all people of faith have a contribution to make to society (Stewart 2006). During the Democrats era, Allison (2006) argued that the Australian government could remain religion-neutral through a stronger separation of church and state. Labor politicians, such as Gillard (2007) and Swan (2005) support engagement with the church going community; while the latter has acknowledged a strong tradition of Christian socialism in the Labor party. Kevin Rudd (2006) has commented that for him, churches play a continuing role in ‘applying an ethical yardstick to the practical decision making
processes of the state.’ These views can be understood within a broader context of liberal and religious theories of engagement between church and state.

Liberal theorists and religious leaders contend that the church and state relationship can be practiced in two different ways. For Ahdar and Leigh (2005), modern liberalism has four salient features: individualism, rationalisation, neutrality and the privatisation of religion. Under this framework, individual rights are supported to the detriment of community. Decision making occurs on rational grounds, where arguments contain secular, not religious overtones. Rorty (2003), a known atheist, argues that competing interests between secular governments and ecclesiastical organisations are reconciled under this model as religion remains a private matter. Researchers such as Crowe (2004) reinforce the benefits of secular discourse by stating that secular arguments, unlike religious arguments, are readily accepted by all citizens. In this way individualism, rationalisation and privatisation are said to produce religious neutrality.

In contrast, Australian religious leaders advocate for inclusive models of engagement between the church and the state. Henderson (2006) a Lutheran pastor, believes it is important for churches to engage in public debate, and to present united Christian opinions. Henderson (2006) cites examples of how different Christian denominations have worked together to present a united front on issues such as Work Choices, Refugees, Reconciliation and the Iraq war. As religious leaders and lawyers, Brennan (2005, 2006, 2007) and Costello (2006) promote Catholic and Evangelical perspectives. In a series of lectures, Brennan contends that religious leaders should be involved in political debate
and be heard by the government on matters of principle (Brennan 2005). At the same
time, religious leaders should not pretend to speak on behalf of all Australian Catholics,
or all members of their religion (Brennan 2005). Brennan (2006) advocates for a greater
system of fairness, where Christians and Muslims are treated in an equal way. In a similar
way to Brennan, Costello (2006, 2007) invites evangelicals to follow their calling, and to
stand up for what they believe in. In particular, Costello (2007) contends that politicians
should have a moral compass, and should practice religion in an ideologically free and
nonpartisan manner. Anglicans such as the Rev Dr. Andrew Cameron (2005:11) have
argued that Christians need to be prepared to make compromises for the common good.
Moreover, religious differences need to be respected and doctrinaire secularism rejected,
as it can be likened to establishment (Cameron, 2005).

Party-Politics Theory of Engagement

In the context of liberal and religious theories of engagement, Australia has shown that in
practice, it supports a party-politics theory of engagement which is a unique blend of
liberal and religious theories combined. Under this theory, the practice of church and
state relations is influenced by the political party that is in government. Religion is a
private and public matter. Public discussions are couched in secular and religious
language. For example, Kevin Rudd has linked Christian principles with Labor industrial
relations policies (Rudd 2005). In contrast to liberal and religious theories of engagement,
this theory shows that religion is public and political, and unable to be practiced in a
‘neutral’ or inclusive way in federal legislation. In recent times, Liberals have condemned
the hijab, linked the ALP to Muslim extremism, and promoted tougher immigration laws for those coming from countries with ‘anti-Christian behaviour’ (Cannold 2005; Taylor 2007; Yusuf 2007). Under the party-politics model, different political parties favor or discriminate against religious groups at different times. Religion is also a numbers game for the astute politician.

In the 1947 census the Church of England was considered to be the proxy established Church in Australia as 39% of the population supported the church, compared to 20.7% for the Catholic Church, the second largest denomination at the time (Bouma, 2006). In the 1960s, those identifying with the Catholic Church increased significantly, while those identifying with the Church of England declined. As a result, state and federal elections in the 1960s focused on the provision of state aid to independent and Catholic schools (Negus, 2004). In the twenty-first century, weekly church attendance figures are significantly higher in Pentecostal churches compared to all other Christian denominations (Evans & Kelley, 2004). In the lead up to the 2007 federal election the Howard Government and Rudd opposition appealed to the denomination that was politically active, and had the highest weekly church attendance figures in the nation – the Pentecostals and Hillsong Church. During the election campaign some politicians, such as Rudd, gave the impression that a particular policy, such as industrial relations, reflected the unified voice of Christianity (Rudd 2005, 2006). When religion is on the public and political stage, inclusive models of church and state interaction are unable to be implemented (Brennan 2006). John Faulkner (2006), an ALP senator from New South...
Wales has observed that a ‘new sectarianism is beginning to emerge’ between Muslims and the wider society in Australia.

**Religion, Party-Politics and Public Policy**

Since the 1970s, it has been legally recognised that Australia is a multicultural country that supports religious and ethic tolerance, openness and diversity. The litmus test for a successful multicultural society is not about whether the rights of the majority are upheld, but whether those in the minority are able to receive the same rights and privileges as those in the majority. As the church and state relationship is influenced by the government in power, its practice continually varies, which leads to favoritism and discrimination against certain religious groups. In most instances, a preference for Christianity is promoted to the detriment of minority rights and secular interests. I will now provide examples on how the church and state relationship is practiced through the party politics theory of engagement. I will examine welfare services, funding to religious schools and religious tests required for public office.

In the late twentieth century, the Howard government privatised the Commonwealth Employment Service and replaced it with the Job Network Program, where government and church organisations could tender for employment services (Maddox 2001:10). In December 1999-2000 controversy arose in relation to this change (Warhurst 2007). For example, equity concerns arose about the legitimacy of churches winning tenders and then positively discriminating against those who were not practicing Christians (Maddox
Jewish representatives expressed arguments against government money being used to support faith based criterion, while others expressed concern about the growing closeness between church and state, and the ability of the church to maintain their independence (Maddox 2001). In 2000, the ALP called for a public inquiry into the tendering process, while the Democrats campaigned for a private members bill to stop religious discrimination.

Another example relates to the practice of church and state relations in the education system. Until the early 1960s, private schools were substantially self-funded and received minimal, if any, federal government funds (Aulich & Aulich 2003:4). As the 1960s progressed, the Menzies, then Whitlam government began to provide small amounts of funding to private schools (Aulich & Aulich 2003). In the twenty-first century, Australian private schools now receive more than $5.13 billion from state and federal budgets across the country (Aulich & Aulich 2003). In March 2004, the Howard government gave Catholic schools a 36% increase in funding for the next four years (Doherty 2004). In the lead up to the 2004 election, the then opposition leader, Mark Latham, stated that if Labor won office, Catholic schools would receive an unspecified amount of federal government funding (Doherty 2004). To date, Australia provides one of the highest levels of government funding to private schools in OECD countries, and one of the lowest levels of accountability (Aulich & Aulich 2003). The lack of accountability and transparency means that different governments are able to favour and discriminate against private schools with minimal, if any recourse to legal sanction.
Religious tests required for public office is another case in point. In Australia, it is legally recognised that politicians do not need to satisfy a religious test to stand for public office. However, in practice it seems that politicians need to support Christian values. In the 2004 federal election, Ed Husic contested the federal state of Greenway for the ALP. Although his religion was not the main reason why he lost the election, his Muslim background was highlighted in negative ways throughout the campaign. For example, questions were raised as to whether a Muslim could adequately represent a diverse community, and whether he was a ‘real dinkum Aussie’ (Husic 2006:94). In contrast, supporters of the Liberal candidate stated that they supported her because she was a ‘good Christian’ (Husic 2006:94). In the lead up to the 2007 federal election, Kevin Rudd was asked whether he ‘believed Jesus was the Son of God?’ (Masanauskas 2007). Moreover, Prime Minister Howard, and then opposition leader Kevin Rudd made a point of linking Christianity with Liberal and Labor party policies.

In a multicultural country, the terms of engagement between church and state are important to understand, as the government is elected to represent a diverse range of interests. Clear evidence of favouritism raises serious questions for the successful management of diversity in the future. The seriousness of this issue is highlighted by the fact that political parties can change the boundaries of an acceptable and unacceptable religion at any given time, and in subtle yet influential ways.
Conclusion

Religion remains sociologically significant in Australia and other western nations in the twenty-first century. The influence of religion in Australian society and public policy continues to increase, and to remain important and understudied in the Australian context. The party-politics theory of engagement aims to enhance the way Australians understand political representation and religious rights in Australia. This paper showed that different political parties play a significant role in influencing the practice of church and state relations at a national level. Future policy makers need to understand the differences and similarities between various religions so that all religious groups can be treated in an equal way. Although religion can create division, it can also be used to promote inclusion. It is concluded that the party politics theory of engagement has the potential to significantly contribute to debates on political representation and religious rights in Australia. It is hoped that this theory can be used to improve the management of religious diversity in the future.

Further research is needed in this area. The above analysis raises an important question—how can the practice of church and state relations be improved? Future research might consider whether increased regulation improves the rights of religious minorities. Other studies could consider the strengths and weaknesses of research methods used to understand religious and ethnic diversity within Australia.
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