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THE VALUE OF THE SECULAR



Pious or even merely church-going people seldom realise how much good will, one might even say wilfulness, it requires nowadays for a German scholar to take the problem of religion seriously ... [Aphorism 58]

... religion is one more means of overcoming resistance so as to be able to rule ... [Aphorism 61]
... it costs dear and terribly when religions hold sway ... in their own right and as sovereign, when they themselves want to be final ends and not means beside other means. [Aphorism 61]

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

SECULARITY IS NOT a canvas for an impressive civic display of religion; it is a substantive value, the freedom to choose beyond the limitations of religious loyalties. This, importantly, also marks the limits for any religiously-based civic activism.

In conversations on religion, too rarely is it accompanied with consideration to the value of the secular. Reading the contributions of Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd, along with Paul Kelly's recent Acton Lecture, we are presented with perspectives where religion is the focus of the discussion, and no serious contrast is made between religiously-based civic activism and its secular counterpart. Such a contrast would demonstrate limitations on both sides, but it would also reveal what is momentarily gained in our modern non-religious environment.

Historically the brakes have been put on civic influences from religious bodies in Western societies for good reasons. We come closer to seeing the value of secularity when we reflect on what has been gained since the days when sabbatarianism and "temperance" represented the apex of religiously-based civic activism in Australia.

With serious reflection it can be seen that, for democracies like Australia, renewed religiously-based civic activism will not change much on the political and social

landscape of the country. The problem is that the rhetoric from Abbott and Rudd raises the false promise for the politically-naïve faithful that their religion could make significant policy differences. Abbott and Rudd are astute enough not to make such a promise directly, but the rhetoric talks up the place of religion in such a way that, even when there is an emphatic denial that religiously-based civic activism can produce a policy framework, there is still a powerful suggestion that it can be revolutionary at this level. Rudd states:

Do these [Rudd's Christian or social justice] principles of themselves provide a universal moral precept from which all elements of social and economic policy can be derived? Of course not. But they do provide an illuminating principle—even a "light on the hill", to borrow Chifley's phrase, which he in turn had consciously borrowed from Christ's Sermon on the Mount—that can help to shape our view of what constitutes appropriate policy for the community, the nation and the world.

There are two messages that are getting confusingly tangled. The first is that religionists' views ought to be heard and taken into account in policy debates within a pluralistic secular society. The second message is that it is actually *true* that such views "help to shape our view"—that is, the collective views of the wider society—"of what constitutes appropriate policy for the community, the nation and the world". Having agreement with the first message along with a disagreement with the second message is not a contradiction. It can be argued that the religionists' views help to inform the policy debate but do not help to constitute the view of appropriate policy. Furthermore, where it may be agreed that the religionists' views have *weight* in constituting appropriate policy, it could be held that such agreement is based on the particular perspectives not being specifically religionist in the way religionists think that their views are.

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To be able to disentangle the two different messages, and to understand the secularist stance which severely questions the capacity of religionists to make important changes in policy direction for a pluralistic secular state, we need to consider what I call "the problem of religion": finding what religion means in the modern world. The definition of religion has been the main challenge in formal studies in religion. The main contenders are religion as sets of doctrines, as groups of rituals, as a type of language game, or some transcendent reality separate from the doctrines, rituals, language that allude to these forms (for example, mystical sacredness, unknown void).

The problem is understanding what distinguishes the secular versions from the religious, what makes the predicate meaningful. Traditionally it was the transcendent reality—the unusual world expressed in mythological literature, a philosophically-defined God, nirvana, Otherness, and so forth. With the arrival of the modern world, sceptics not only opposed the idea of transcendent reality but shifted the definitional problem to another level. In particular, we could ask: If a philosophically-defined God could merely be understood as an unspiritual device within human thought, and morality would be better understood as a worldly code of behaviour, where does that leave the idea of religion? In the case of a religiously-based civic activism, we can ask rather critically whether the *contemporary* idea of religion contributes anything worthwhile to the advocacy of social justice or moral values. Whereas there is no argument about the existence of a historical contribution, the problem of religion is that its meaning for civil society today is adrift in a secular sea, no longer able to blow sufficiently against the sails of state.

The modern secular argument is to state that the meaning of religion was shaped in the ancient world using concepts that we no longer understand in the same way, and new concepts have arisen to replace the old elementary notions that the idea of religion evoked (for example, deities, kingdoms, souls, sin, sacrifice, replaced by more diverse formulations in the natural sciences, democracies, psychology, sociology). For example, if we accept the etymology of religion derived from Latin *religio* as "to bind or to connect", what binds or connects can now be many things—community, family, culture—and these things are not tied to the place of religion. Other etymologies of religion have similar problems. In other words, except as tradition, religion is intellectually impotent. Theology is impotent before secular theorisation on justice and ethical value. As Walter Kaufmann pointed out many years ago:

Of course, romanticism has roots in the Gospels and Pauline Epistles ... But it usually takes secular movements to remind theologians of their religious

heritage, which they then develop in accordance with the fashion of the day.

The famous theologians come after the great original thinkers and try to defend their religious heritage against the competition of the latest developments. As soon as another great philosopher or a new intellectual fashion comes along, a theology is usually dated.

The challenge of tradition is that its elementary notions can never be now as they actually were, and it needs to continually translate itself and its parts for modern living. This is what the idea of tradition means for us. It does not, though, work very well for religion; for finding what religion is in the modern world. Different attempts at translation of religion into the modern form are what we refer to as liberal theology, but it is an exercise that has failed to be persuasive. If it had been persuasive, we would not be confronted with the challenges of fundamentalism in one direction, and post-modernism in the other, to say nothing of its fall from grace at the hands of the mid-twentieth-century neo-orthodox movement. It is quite uncontroversial to say that these three movements have gained strength from the perceived failures of liberalism.

WITH THE DEMISE of the older theological liberalism, there are at least five broad ideological schemas in the market for defining religion. Within these larger frameworks, we find specific programs, such as Rudd's comparatively modern social justice tradition and Abbott's more traditional Catholic model, all trying to become a particular religious tradition as translated into a viable religiously-based civic activism. The following is a short description of the broad ideological schemas.

Conventional traditionalism. The more general acceptance of dogmas, precepts, the basic teachings of the institutions. In the background there are usually more sophisticated sets of philosophical arguments, but what is hoped to be distinctively religious for civic activism are simply the pronouncements of religious authorities. It is not necessary for the underlying arguments to be understood, and in fact, in some places this is discouraged.

Fundamentalism. It is an unconventional traditionalism. It encourages a personal discipline for taking arguments for institutional dogmas more seriously. What is hoped to be distinctively religious for civic activism is the devotion of the believer to religious doctrines.

Neo-orthodoxy. If subscription to this movement is not reduced to a conventional traditionalism (which does happen), it requires a greater commitment to philosophical theology. It believes itself to be the recovery of orthodoxy for modern times without being compro-

mised. It does this by rejecting dogmas as cultural artefacts of the past while at the same time embracing dogmas as the theology of transcendence. What is hoped to be distinctively religious (in its true sense as oppose to religion as an artefact) for civic activism is a *revelation*—in the Christian tradition, the Word of God, a kind of platonic form that escapes all textual criticism. Rudd's Dietrich Bonhoeffer belonged to this movement.

Liberal religion. What began as Christian liberalism finally implodes all orthodoxy to become a religious universalism. It is a strange institutionalised collection of heresy combined with religiously-felt unbelief (for example, Unitarian-Universalist Association). Its universalism leads it into contradictions. It inherits the older liberalism's emphasis on religious feeling and so is emotionally very anti-institutional. Yet at the same time it is forced, organisationally, to forge a structured identity out of the jumble of unrelated doctrines. What is hoped to be distinctively religious for civic activism is a description like Paul Tillich's Ground of Being.

Religious postmodernism. A very recent loose movement that takes in different philosophical directions; small fragmented groups of intellectuals with promises for a postmodern future where religion will have a significant role. It speaks the language of neo-orthodoxy or liberal religion but it disdains any need for clear argument or sharp identity. The pragmatics, the language or conversation is all that is needed, without any metaphysical concerns. It takes my purpose in the search for the meaning for religion in modernity as ill-conceived. The secular-religion dichotomy is one that should be discarded as much as the error in the dichotomy of subject-object. And yet it hopes too for a distinctively religious basis for civic activism.

EACH OF THESE POSITIONS deserves detailed treatment, but a few observations should demonstrate the deeper problems that exist. All turn on distaste for modernity, and this is important to understand for two reasons. First, the value of the secular is the ability to have a modern lifestyle, one where the integrity of the individual person is paramount, and from that, where persons can enjoy civic and political freedoms that are not there under regimes heavily influenced by religious institutions. Second, if a modern lifestyle is not totally rejected, all positions are, in the end, compromised by modernity.

Fundamentalism is obviously compromised. As an unconventional traditionalism, it has led in the religious use of modern technology. Its successes have been on

the back of modern commerce and business theories, and its greatest failure has been to use what it erroneously thinks are the methods of modern science against evolutionary science. Conventional traditionalism, when pushed to its purest version, must result in small closed communities. It is an option (unlike militant fundamentalism) a pluralistic secular society can sustain, but there lies the significant fact that closed communities are not *completely* self-sustaining. Such communities ultimately rely on the good graces of their secular host states. If they want more independence than this, they have to put up their negotiations in the realm of modern politics, and are therefore compromised from the start.

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Liberal religion is also obviously compromised. Liberalism expresses the values of modernity in systematic form. In its purest appearance it must break down all orthodoxies into principles for tolerance and diversity, and this sits uneasily with an understanding of what is distinctly religious. Neo-orthodoxy believes it avoids any compromise in the theology of transcendence. For a theology of transcendence, Kierkegaard's leap of faith excuses the need to substantiate anything in religious terms. Revelation is absurd to human understanding (assuming that there is another understanding via transcendent form, for example Pascal's "The heart has its reasons which reason knows not"), so it needs no justification, its truth merely received. That being the case, we are left puzzled at what it is that is brought to civic activism to make it substantially *religiously* based. "Faith" used in this way is too vacuous to have anything distinctive to contribute to what is outside of philosophical theology.

The promises of postmodernity are proving either very weak or illusory. On one hand, the various critiques from postmodernism must use modern tools. It cannot be taken seriously as a return to an ancient or medieval worldview. On the other hand, its best ideas around cultural and ethical pluralism are impractical for the wider society *if* built on a relativistic incommensurability thesis. This is an argument that paradigms—scientific, cultural or religious—can exist in a completely self-contained manner, isolated from other similar or dissimilar paradigms that come before or after what is currently experienced or observed. Without this thesis, cultural and ethical pluralism looks fairly modern. Hence a post-modern religion that does not isolate itself from the general population is no less compromised.

This leaves religiously-based civic activism well contained within a modern society whose virtues are

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largely secular. Those whose hopes are otherwise draw comfort from arguments that secularisation is reversing. Peter Berger and Rodney Stark have described a re-enchantment rising up from new religious movements. Steve Bruce's detailed treatment of the issue (in *God is Dead*), however, amply demonstrates that these movements (for example, neo-Pentecostal communities and New Age groups) are not reversing the overall demographic trends away from deeply-felt religious commitment in large stable democracies.

The new religious movements are also constrained in their capacities to impact on civil societies. These movements are tied to an anomaly-developed pattern created in the American culture, and exported to other national cultures which don't have the same civic myths which make up the American revivalist traditions.

In this regard it is important to understand that secularisation has already achieved what it is supposed to—an environment where religious doctrine, rituals, languages, and other such demands, do not rule the roost. Democracies are much more likely to retain this environment, but there is nothing inevitable in whether religiously-based states (where they do remain active) will throw off their civic-type religious authorities or not. Out of the recent debate on the subject has emerged a stronger neo-secularisation thesis, which clearly shows that individuals are increasingly looking beyond religion for authoritative positions on different topics. There are many examples of religion's authority declining (for example, birth control, reproductive technologies) and so it is clear that secularisation is taking place.

The difficult position of those whose hopes are in the re-enchantment of civil society is revealed when we ask moderate religionists how far they would like to see the secularisation process reversed. It is easy to comprehend, once the talking up of religion dies down, that moderate Christians, Jews, Muslims or Buddhists would not be at all comfortable with the prospect of a decreased secular environment. A shift to a more intensely religious environment surrenders control to militant religionists. For a modern society, secularisation cannot be reversed without this grim outlook.

There is, therefore, little room for any appropriate policy to shift as a result of a religiously-based civic activism that was overtly religious in a secular society. The only room for a religiously-based civic activism is to ensure that secularists are prepared to make their compromises to the place of religious tradition. Civic tolerance forces secularists to the table to work out policies that allow a voluntary and socially equitable approach to religious phenomena. There is, however, a different relationship at work here.

In Western nations secularists should be secure enough to allow religionists *some* freedom in civic activism. In fact secularists in our environment should feel more secure than religionists, because it is *our* environment that defines the limits on the religionist's freedom. This is not to deny that there are examples of where more concrete matters are not easily resolved. Rowan Williams has a case for arguing that Christian clubs on secular university campuses ought not to be banned. There is a challenge, however, that different grounds for such actions have been reported. Whatever the specific merits of the case, we can observe two important factors. First, the question of religion is somewhat irrelevant since the grounds for determining the merits are all based on secular policies that apply across the board. Second, the Archbishop of Canterbury no longer has any influence on the policies of secular universities.

Therefore we have the crucial point: in Western democracies secularists have the advantage in that it is our game that religionists must play. It is not an evenly balanced game between religionists and secularists. Freedom *for* religion, as well as freedom *from* religion, cannot be achieved satisfactorily in religiously-based regimes. Such freedoms *fully realised* are only possible in secular states. Religiously-based regimes can only offer, at their best, tolerance that modern religionists would find far too constraining. This is a historical lesson repeated in different parts of the world, and is one only the militant religionist refuses to believe.

This unevenly balanced game means that any model for renewed religiously-based civic activism—whether in rhetoric of social justice or traditional morality—is not going to change much, especially for those who believe that their faith attachment makes all the difference. Such expectation is unfortunately still there because conversations on renewed religiously-based civic activism tend to hide the value of the secular. These are conversations that refer to the value in terms of "secularism" rather than, more correctly, in terms of secularisation which has been described in this essay.

Whether it is Abbott's or Rudd's side of politics, let religionists paint on their pretty colours, but in the talk of religiously-based civic activism it should not be forgotten that secularity is not the canvas, it is the art of modern policy formation.

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