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Church and State: What the past tells us about the present and the future

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The phrase 'Church and State' represents two thousand years of complex history across every continent and literally thousands of language and cultural groups and political national states.

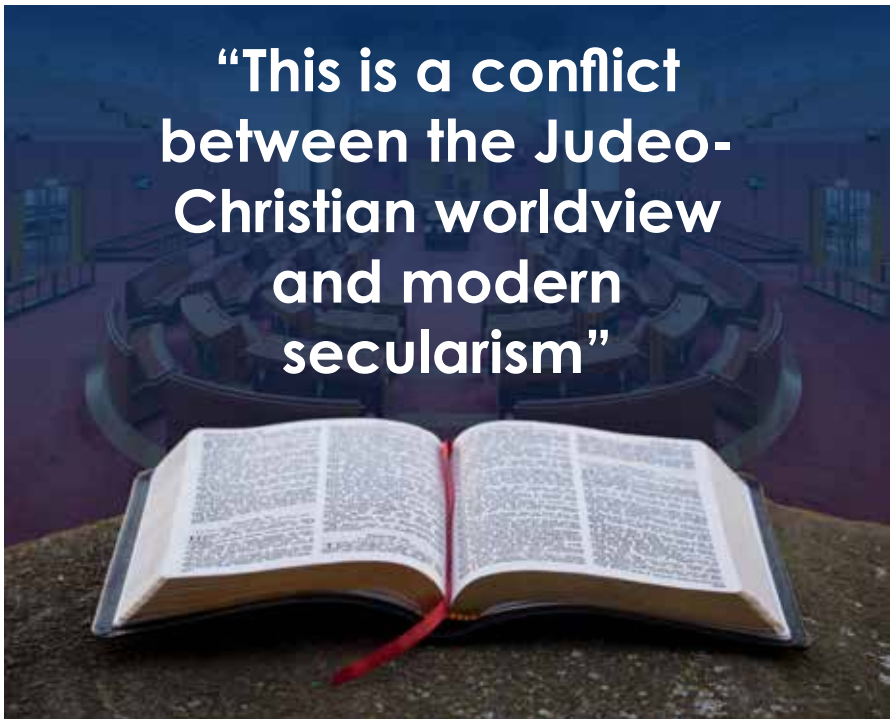
The effect of this relationship is evident in our language, our institutions and even the architecture of our cities and towns. It is fundamental to who we are as a people.

This long relationship forms the background to what is happening in Australia today, not just in the religious freedom debate but at almost every other point of difference in the cultural transition.

The cultural shift in Australia away from our Judeo-Christian heritage is following a very similar pattern to other countries with a nominal Christian background. What is happening in the US and Europe – this rejection and denial of our spiritual heritage is happening here also.

At several points the relationship between Church and State is under strain in Australia. Apart from the issues raised by the Religious Freedom Bill (Exposure Draft), other issues such as abortion, euthanasia, prostitution, and the various diverse expressions of sexuality are the obvious areas of concern in shifting cultural values.

The less obvious but more troubling issues have to do with shifting attitudes toward the sanctity of life, the nature of the family, the institution of marriage and the loss of care for truth in private and public life. How is it that society accepts that women's right over their sexuality and fertility should come at the cost of truth about the unborn child? How can a society accept voluntary assisted suicide and care so little about adequate palliative care? How is it that society seems to ignore the biological realities of family connectedness? How can it be acceptable that the life-long, commitment to one's heterosexual spouse is so seldom a sacred trust and so poorly understood in terms of the long-term benefit to family and society?



This is not actually a conflict between the institutions of Church and State (as in government). It is a conflict between the Judeo-Christian worldview and modern secularism. These two worldviews camp and skirmish in the minds of people in all sectors of Church and State – and it is important to view the State not just as government but in the broadest sense. The democratic State is the entire society served by its institutions but directed by the will of the people.

In this sense, the Church in its various forms is very much a part of the State, with every right and responsibility of citizenship. In this country, the greater church has been mindful of its societal responsibilities as reflected in its institutions of care and education. It has not always wrapped itself in glory, but it has generally been brought to account and makes attempt at repentance and restitution.

When people say that government is downstream of culture, they mean that government responds to social pressure by legislating change. What drives change is the flux of ideological and political worldview within society. This is shaped intentionally by many people in different fields of influence who share a common big picture understanding of what it is to be human and how society is to be shaped and directed.

At the very base in any worldview is the question framed nearly three thousand years ago by the Psalmist: "What is man (humankind) that you (God) are mindful of us?"[1] The view of humankind as having evolved in a meaningless universe without any Creator's involvement may sound very progressive and liberating. In actuality, it breeds nihilism and gives permission to live as if there is no moral accountability other than the shiftable sands of popular

opinion. Just take a walk through any gallery of modern art to observe this.

My purpose then is to reflect on a few seminal scenarios in the long relationship of Church and State (Society), seeking to capture the big picture and to identify issues with serious implications for our current situation.

Start at the beginning

The crucifixion of Jesus was much more than a political act, but there was a powerful political dimension. We could describe it as a consequence of two political worldviews in collision.

The Roman Empire reserved crucifixion for enemies of its order and authority. At the trial of Jesus, the Roman Governor Pilate identified two timeless elements which continue to shape the relationship between Church and State.

Firstly, in response to interrogation, Jesus said that he had entered into public life (the world) to provide evidence of the truth. Pilate responded: "What is truth?"[2] This question remains current in every age and society. In this case Pilate was weighing up the political cost of condemning Jesus. Pilate attempted to save Jesus from the mob, but at the end of the day at what cost to his own political power and influence?

In the relationship of Church and State, how is any government to respond to a religion like Christianity which makes truth claims such as the belief in the physical resurrection of its founder? And even more complicated is the uneasy association created by the Church serving as the keeper of society's conscience.

What secular government looks for is not evidence for the veracity of a religion's beliefs but the social and economic impact of the religion on society at large: Does it solve or create social problems? Does it strengthen or weaken the government's electability? Does it grow or shrink the economy? A modern government may wish to paraphrase the letter of James back to Christians: "Show me your faith by your deeds"[3] and by that it means, "How do your deeds help me and my government?"

Individual politicians may fight to hold onto principle but in today's rapid-fire world, the political group mind is focused on retaining power. Too often the Church is understandably focused on the timeless truth of its faith but not on the pressing realities of its engagement with government and society. The question for the Church is "How to build rapprochement without selling out on conscience, identity and mission?"

The second contribution of Pilate is toward the end of Jesus' trial. As the crowd became restive, "'He took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'"[4] This imagery and language of hand-washing remains with us as a symbol of being unwilling to take moral responsibility for an injustice or untruth.

This is pragmatism of a very low kind. When a difficult issue has been over-simplified by a crowd baying for blood, too often power abandons justice and gives the shouters what they want. The false hope of power is that the crowd will be won over by the gesture. The reality is that the crowd now knows they are dealing with a weak, unprincipled leader who can be intimidated. How often since have we seen leaders even judges and juries wash their hands of truth and justice because the shouters on streets and social media have made principle seem untenable?



Apologists provide alternatives not excuses

In the era before the emperor Constantine (early fourth century AD) there were apologists like Justin Martyr and Tertullian. Their task was to make sense of Christianity for people who assumed the gods were manifest in their idols. To them Christians were atheists because they had no idols. This made them incomprehensible and unwelcome neighbours. It was Tertullian who first used the term 'religious freedom' and his words in his letter *To Scapula*, have a timeless ring, "It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions … It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion."[5]

The work of apologetics is necessary again as more and more people have little personal experience of the Christian faith. This includes not only proposing more valuable laws, but also explaining how they make for a better world. As in Tertullian's time some people ignore the apologists, but others are listening.

The task now however is to explain faith to secularists who think faith is foolish and God is irrelevant.

Over one hundred years after Tertullian the emperor Constantine expressed his support for religious freedom in the Edict of Milan in 313 AD.[6] This edict arose because of the response of lower levels of government to his previous statements about freedom of religion. He wrote, "many and various conditions clearly appeared to have been added, (and) it may perhaps be the case that some of these (Christian) persons … became reluctant to practise their religious observances."[7]

How much like Australia today when attempts to accommodate moral sensibilities at the federal level are met with resistance at the State level.

A difference between Tertullian's task and ours is that now Christians make explicit what Tertullian only implied: that faith is not only expressed in forms of liturgy but in faith-directed acts of conscience. Christians are expressing what they believe is more fully truthful and just about marriage and sexual expression, about the care of the unborn and the dying, about what's right for those working in factories, offices, on sports fields and in brothels.

This is the current expression of the ancient and central work of the Church - births, deaths and marriages and the care of the poor and powerless.

Almost missing the moment

The Church is made of people and so has many sins. One is division, which makes dealing with government more difficult. It is not uncommon for governments to dismiss the approaches of the Church because there is no consensus.

One of the most enduring mechanisms for unifying Christians has been the Nicene Creed. The Creed was developed in the time of the emperor Constantine when a dispute threatened the Church's unity and the empire's coherence.

The Emperor Constantine himself called and funded the Council of Nicea in 325 AD to settle the dispute and was on balance helpful.[8] In historian Philip Schaff's works we read that the rise of Constantine to imperial power "marks for us on the one hand the victory of Christianity over paganism in the Roman empire, and on the other the ominous admixture of foreign, political, and military interests with it."[9]

Constantine then changed the

relationship between the Church and Government and for more than a fifteen hundred years Europe's political power was characterised by a partnership between various iterations of Government and various expressions of the Church, either Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. In many respects, this was not to be a good thing.

This moment is unlike 325 AD except in this: the nation's future must not be lost while the Church is engrossed with its own affairs. The nation is the Church's business – with all its complex social and institutional dynamics. The Church's mission is not filling pews but working to re-light the candle of faith in hearts, minds, homes and institutions because everything depends upon it.

The Church's mission is inextricable from the community at large and not just in the small personal world of the individual believer. This includes the political domain. If the Church's message is losing its effect and relevance it is because the Church has lost sight of the gospel's primacy and power, and its importance to society. Infighting is a sure sign of self-interest and of the vision having fallen from the horizon to the small domain of the church-yard.

As Secularism becomes more assertive and totalitarian, the various sectors of the Church are talking together, looking for what they have in common. Is it just a commonly held fear of losing freedom? The Nicene Creed is still useful in building consensus, but there is also a greater consciousness that the loss of religious freedom affects wider society with the many faith-communities sharing similar concerns.

The loss of religious freedom affects society not just in the denial of formal religion, its liturgies and institutions. True religion said James is the care of widows and orphans[10]. How much poorer would be our society if the religious motivation for the care of those in need was absent? If society silences the Church it is because it means to exile it. And if it does that what will inspire selfless service?

The Church's true vocation and mission ensures that its presence and influence is full of grace and truth. When this is the case, to defend the life-giving role of the church is to defend the horizon of liberty for all.

The Enlightenment and the Reformation

Another historical reference cannot be left out of the background of our picture. Typically, this would be a reference to the Enlightenment through which Western Man is thought to have been liberated from the tyranny of religion.

A strong alternative case has been made that popular access to the Bible, so central to the Reformation, was more influential than generally thought for the enlightenment of Europe.[11]



Through the labours of scholarly translators like Tyndale and Luther and the invention of the printing press, many Christians became acquainted with its message. They noticed the discrepancies with Church belief and practice and chose the difficult pathway to the Protestant Reformation.

The vital contribution of the Bible was that it renewed Christian understanding of the dignity of humankind which would in time be reflected in the end of slavery, improved attitudes to the poor and working conditions, the contribution of Christian scholars to the scientific method [12] and so much more that is assumed to be the Enlightenment's work.

This renewed view of humanity provided moral direction and motivation for the scientific method and for the political process. The list of Enlightenment scientists who were 'Bible Christians' is long and glorious, and includes Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Blasé Pascal (1623-1662), Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Samuel Morse (1791-1872), Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) and Lord Kelvin (1824-1907).[13] The list of political leaders is equally illustrious.

The biblical Reformation view of humanity and society was that on one hand humankind was to be regarded as a special creation with due rights and dignity. On the other hand, humankind's self-interest required restraint and people must be held accountable. [14]

In this balance we see the Judeo-Christian ethic which underlies so much of our society, government and law. The Judeo-Christian ethic is realistic about the flaws in human nature but also hopeful that the individual (and society itself) can be habilitated – in the Merriman-Webster sense – fit and capable for society and as a coherent and mutually beneficial society.[15]

The rejection of the Judeo-Christian ethic since has led to the decline in personal moral responsibility, a culture of victimhood and a loss of the true dignity, value and identity of humankind in the image of God.

Regretfully, I must mention that other consequence of the Reformation: terrible conflict between the Catholic Church and Protestant groups (and even among them). I mention it for two reasons. Firstly, while Roman Catholics and Protestants now generally regard one another as fellow Christians, there is still a deep historical memory that reminds them all how precious religious freedom is. It is not an abstract ideal for those whose history is bruised and scarred. And together they represent a clear majority of all Australians.

For those who have come to Australia in recent years from various arenas of conflict and persecution, religious freedom is a deeply personal aspect of their own story and identity. It seems that virtually all cultures and religions have a history of religious conflict and persecution. The reasons are complex and varied but the fact is that many people of faith value their faith because of its cost to them and their forebears. And together they represent a further 20% of all Australians.

Religious freedom may be just a legal and political conundrum for the secularist, but for believers, faith is a deeply held element of their identity and history. It is not a minority concern and it must not be reduced to subtle legalese.

While Christians sometimes hold divergent interpretations of the Bible, its plain teaching is recognised by all true adherents of the Nicene Creed as upholding the sanctity of life, the centrality of the family, the value of male-female marriage, and the need to help people struggling with sexual identity.

The application of Scripture continues to restrain anti-social behaviour and promote selfless action.

Losing faith and finding it again

As reflected in our own census data, Western societies have been losing faith in the Church and its message for various reasons. The loss of faith is more typically affecting the institutional Church; meanwhile there is a modest renewal of faith in the evangelical sector.

In global terms, while historical churches may still have wealth, property and nominal affiliates, the people and the vitality are found in the evangelical churches – and as usual the line between them is not clear



cut: Some historical churches are vital and thriving and some evangelical churches have lost their fervour. Christianity as a global movement is thriving and even Western nations are feeling the impact of this vitality.

In general, it is still the historical churches with their long association with the State that are actively engaged in seeking political rapprochement. The younger evangelical /Pentecostal churches lack this long experience, but the urgency of the time is a good teacher.

The place of conscience in serving two masters

When questioned on the matter of the authority of Caesar to demand taxes, Jesus asked for a sample of the coin used for paying the Imperial tax. It carried the image and inscription of Caesar. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God what is God's," he said.[16]

Jesus' point is clear: that Caesar (government) has legitimate claims upon citizens, but these do not include being regarded as the final authority in all matters. It would be another three hundred years before Caesar (Constantine) agreed that offerings (of prayer) may be made for Caesar rather than to him.

Jesus also said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon."[17 18]

'Mammon' does not refer to politics per se, but more to the desire for material wealth because of the pleasure, (political) power and significance that comes with it. As Satan had said to Jesus, "If you worship me, all this will be yours".[19] Jesus' challenge to all is that if anyone genuinely cares about the integrity of the political process they will not attempt to bribe or intimidate it for self-interest.

This is not a uniquely Christian predicament. It is a human characteristic that we all live in a tension between one principle and another, unless we abandon principle itself (which is the abandonment of conscience). Some political and commercial parties expect their members to abandon their conscience, perhaps knowing that this is asking them to abandon their very souls.

Christians cannot accede to political life without faith-directed conscience because it is the moral compass by which they act in the best interests of all. Christians, and no doubt others, view conscience as the inner witness to God's 'vested interest' in the highest good for all.

By drawing attention to the denial of universal human rights, Christians remind the State that to deny any persons their universal right is an offence against all. All of society is therefore notified that government is crossing the line, assuming the place of God and wanting to recast all minds in its own image.

Jesus' words also give insight into why religion in general seeks to conflate religion and politics - in order to resolve the inner moral tension. If the two become one, then in serving one a person is serving the other also. Jesus highlighted how the demands of competing allegiances will torture the soul. We are to reflect that while government has legitimate claims, the ultimate authority rests with God not Caesar. This may mean that as it has in the past, more than the conscience may be tortured.

It is unreasonable of government, commercial or any other parties to require a person of faith to separate their faith identity from their political identity as a citizen. This after all is the demand of the LGBTI lobby – that their identity defined by their sexuality be amplified in law. The Christian asks that their faith identity be similarly recognised – for as the coin bears the image of Augustus Caesar, so every human being bears the wide image of God rather than the narrower elements of sexual orientation or gender.

That this is being asked of people in our time is the canary in the coal-mine scenario. It is not just a sign of the death of the Judeo-Christian ethic. It is the signal of the dying of a moral culture – and this is by intent not accident. Who will save not just the canary but the miners?

Continued economic prosperity is not a reliable indicator that all is well with the national soul. More and more of that prosperity will be spent on mental health, on compensating for the failure of marriage and family and for banishing faith from the care of souls. While becoming rich we will be increasingly poor in 'shalom' – the true peace and wellbeing for which we long.

The role then of the Christian and the Church is to be guardian of true freedom for all – of religion, of conscience, of speech, of association, of property and of all the other great freedoms that have hallmarked the best aspirations of our society.

Every Christian is a guardian, not just the institutional Church, for if the Christian doesn't stand guard no one else will. However firm the Christian jawline might be, may their faces radiate the confidence of those who know their God and not just have their rights.

References

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