

New College Lectures – Rev Dr Andrew Cameron

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Separating Australia: *Church, State and recent Aussie thought*

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I want to thank the Master of New College and his Board for the opportunity to contribute tonight. I've been looking forward to hearing the contributions by John Anderson and Kevin Rudd, and for my part, have been very stimulated by my preparation for these lectures.

I think we're going to have an enjoyable time, because I am sure there will be a range of people here tonight.

- You may be terrified and disgusted by the so-called 'rise of the religious right' in Australia. You want to reclaim Australia for secular liberalism.
- Or, you may be terrified and disgusted by the so-called 'decline and moral rot' in Australia. You want to reclaim Australia for the Lord Jesus.

The hostility of both you groups to each other typifies Manning Clarke's depiction of Australia as an ongoing fight between Christianity and the Enlightenment.

But there is also a much larger group here tonight. You are terrified by how helpless you feel when this topic comes up, and you don't have anything to reclaim because you haven't got a clue what to think in the first place. You probably nod vigorously when you hear the phrase 'separation of Church and State', yet you break into a sweat when any of a number of questions comes up:

- 'Should an office-bearer of the State exhibit religious faith and/or allow it to influence their actions at all?'
- 'Can a Church criticise government policies, or should it just shut up and get on with the job of helping people?'
- 'When should the State ever legislate over the Church's life? When may it assist the Church's goals?'
- 'Should religious leaders ever hold office in the State?'

We might recall controversies from the past five years over:

- Archbishop Peter Jensen's comment that the PM was 'out of step with God';
- Catholic Tony Abbott's horror at Australia's high abortion rate;
- the PM's appointment of an Anglican Archbishop to Governor General;
- the PM's appointment of an evangelical Anglican as head of Fair Pay Commission
- a NSW private member's bill opposing Church employment policies;
- the then Deputy PM John Anderson's call for Australians to examine their relationship with God;

- Alexander Downer's attack on an Anglican primate's comments on Iraq and Bali as inappropriate; and
- Kevin Andrew's rebuff to Church leaders who question industrial relations reforms.

I won't pretend to you that we can solve all this tonight and tomorrow. We are cracking open the door to a roaring, cacophonous debate spanning every continent over many centuries. Don't imagine that recent Australian discussion is due to some strange, new, 'unAustralian' rise of the religious right. Rather, to be a member of a Western nation since the time of Christ has been to navigate some very rugged terrain:

Few themes have been more constant in European history than that of 'Church and State.' The problem of defining the relation between these two powerful but diverse social institutions is one which, though often below the surface of things, has always been liable to recur, and in recurring to arouse long and bitter dispute.¹

Unfortunately for us, Australians have lazily presumed on many centuries of theology, philosophy and tradition, without bothering to teach or learn it. We are a little like Alisdair MacIntyre's picture of peasants in a Mad-Max landscape, picking up bits of ruined wreckage of moral and political ideas, and arguing about them, with little idea of where they've come from, and how they once fit into a whole.²

Nevertheless, I hope that that these New College lectures can give us pause for breath. Instead of the 'Church-and-State' discussion being some angry, half-baked quarrel that takes place on the run, whenever a church leader comments or whenever a religious politician is honest, I hope we can use this time to begin to map the contours of the problem.

The area that I actually know anything about is evangelical Christianity. My omission of other religions is, in part, a form of respect for them. I don't like it when people talk about Christianity as if they are experts when they are not, so I'll be very limited in what I have to say about other religions. However, I think we'll still discover points along the way that will mean something for our relationships with those of other religions, and in tomorrow's lecture, I will offer a small note on Islam.

Tonight's lecture from me will be in four main sections.

- Firstly, I'll examine the origins of the idea of a 'wall of separation' between Church and State
- Secondly, I'll outline what I think Christianity makes of the difference between the two.
- Thirdly, I'll consider the more general interaction between religion and political life; and
- Fourthly, what Christianity makes of their interconnection.

1. Origins of the 'wall of separation'

a) Constitutions

The United States may as well come up sooner as later. Given our cultural links with this nation fifteen times more populous and much older, some of their words were always going to spill over us. Like everything there, this area is another colossus—a mountain-range of seething animosities, confusions, advances, retreats, militants, moderates and extremists, an ocean of

¹ J.S. Gregory, *Church and State* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1973), 1

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1-2.

millions of words that I have dipped my toe in. (Indeed when I told my U.S.-studied friend that I was speaking on Church and State, he just groaned and walked away! There's a warning in that about going too far with this topic—although I don't think Australia is in danger of that quite yet!)

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1791) begins:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...

These two clauses seems deceptively straightforward at first glance.

The concept of the 'establishment' of religion is a bit hard to pin down. Very roughly, it is about the governing authority giving legal advantage to one religion over another, whether by financing it, coercively enforcing its belief and practice, or privileging its adherents in some way. Some European churches remain 'established', such as the Church of England. But in the 17 & 18th centuries a much 'harder' version of it was on the table than what we might call the 'weak establishment' of the current Church of England.

You are probably aware, though, that contemporary U.S. discussion rages about every conceivable aspect of these two clauses. Even what I just said about establishment would be disputed by many. The first clause does not say 'a religion' or 'any religion', just 'religion', so for these critics, the founders meant that there is to be no contact at all between government and religion in any form.

Many Australians are unaware of the similarity between this U.S. Amendment and §116 of the Australian Constitution:

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 religion ...³

(I'm glossing over the fact that in both countries, the States had more immediate law-making power over their people. For the moment we're pretending that these Federal constitutions sum up each country's position.)

The Australian Constitution is broader than the U.S. Amendment when it prohibits 'imposing any religious observance', and more fine-grained when it specifies 'any' religion'. These differences look like nothing to us punters, but to legal folk they make a huge difference. Partly due to these differences, the Australian experience of Church and State has been less controversial. We've had more of a tradition of the government being able to extend some help impartially to all religions, rather than having to have the fight about whether government is permitted to extend any help to religion at all.

But you will have noticed that in neither the U.S. nor the Australian formulation is there a reference to a 'separation' of Church and State. So let me turn to what most consider to be the origin of that term.

b) Jefferson

The Third U.S. President and Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, wrote an important letter in 1802 in reply to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I

³ Constitutional Centenary Foundation, *The Australian Constitution (1900)* (Carlton, Vic.: Constitutional Centenary Foundation, 1997), 113, §116.

contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that *their* legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.⁴

I assure you, this little letter has become its own mountain range on the U.S. scene. The discussions over it are endless and intense. Many think of it as the perfect summation of the First Amendment, and almost as important as the First Amendment itself. So for example it has found its way into U.S. Supreme Court judgments:

That wall must be kept high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach.⁵

But suffice for us to note that the 'wall' is a metaphor, and that the term 'separation' does not appear in either country's constitution. Note also that it is part of the *American* story; we'd need to have good reasons for accepting it as part of our own, and I'll go on to explain why I think this metaphor is sometimes helpful, and sometimes not. But let's go a little further back for its origins.

c) *Locke*

The 1648 Peace of Westphalia settled the Thirty Years War in Europe, and introduced the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, which is the idea that a territory's religion will be that of its ruler. That enabled Europe to stop fighting about what religion held sway where, but it didn't solve the problem of how to treat those in a territory whose beliefs were not that of the ruler.⁶ Hence at around the same time as Thomas Aikenhead, an Edinburgh divinity student, could be executed for heresy,⁷ John Locke found it necessary to write his 1689 *Letter Concerning Toleration*. We find there the same concept as Jefferson's 'wall' (and indeed we know that Locke was an important influence upon the U.S. Founding Fathers):

I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.

The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests. ... [T]he Church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies, which are in their original, end, business, and in everything perfectly distinct and infinitely different from each other.⁸

2. A Christian account of the difference

Locke's reasoning was, in fact, heavily informed by Christian theology, and was another stage in a fabulous theological discussion that lasted over 1300 years. But I'm just going to dash to

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to the Danbury Baptists (1802)," (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress); online: <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html> (accessed 17/10/2005).

⁵ U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947); cited in Daniel L. Driesbach, "Mr. Jefferson, a Mammoth Cheese, and the 'Wall of Separation Between Church and State': A Bicentennial Commemoration," *Journal of Church and State* 43 no. 4 (2001), 733 n.24.

⁶ David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689)* tr. William Popple, (Public domain); online: <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm> (accessed 23/10/2005).

the end of that discussion, and outline why many Christians today deeply approve of the attempt to distinguish Church and State. I'll give a *theological* account of the distinction. If you're not religious, please stick with me, because it is very important for you to hear why some of us have overwhelming theological reasons for doing something like what Locke said. Even if you need to roll your eyes when I mention the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, you also need to understand how powerfully these beliefs *protect* you against encroaching Christian theocracy. I'll put this theology as provocatively as I can, so that even in evangelical theology's sharpest form, you can see how it is that evangelicals like me have no program for the Church to rule Australia. In other words, I'll be asking you to deal with Christianity *in its particularity*, rather than as part of some generality called 'religion'.

One more point for the uninitiated: I represent a theological method that understands the Bible to have an overall story-arc from beginning to end. The first half of the Bible is very important to me, but I can't simply point to the ancient kings of Israel to justify a Christian theocracy, because that would not take into account the whole Bible story. That's why I'd argue against other Christians who do that, and is also why caricatures of Christians as mere quoters of ancient Old Testament texts often have no force: many of us just don't think that's the way it works.

There are two big Christian reasons why the ministry of the Church must be differentiated from government by the State.

a) The King called the Christ

Firstly, Christ became revealed to be the King of Kings. Every ruler is under him; every ruler will one day bow their knee to him and cast their crowns before him. Not very reassuring, you say—theocracy looks like a done deal! But no.

Christians think that the kingly role of Christ, and his role as saviour of the world, can **only** be joined together in him. Christians think that these roles

were combined uniquely by Christ and that it is thereafter impossible for anyone else to hold both offices. Their reunion awaits the coming of Christ again. Therefore, a separation of the two is an eschatological sign that acknowledges the fallibility of human beings and the need for the division of power.⁹

That is, no one human or institution should try to be a fake Christ. Any attempt for a Church to rule in the here and now, or any attempt for a State to build a pure Church, is a false Messiah, and many Christians would fight against it. 'Eschatological' in that quotation refers to our belief that Christ's kingdom is coming *in his good time*. If Christ had wanted his Church to rule, he would have set that up the first time he was here.

Christians therefore believe in what Oxford professor Oliver O'Donovan describes as *differentiated authority*:¹⁰

- The Church only has authority to state the Word of God in its teaching and preaching. It points to the future kingdom of Christ, and to the way that kingdom impacts the present.
- The State only has authority to rule the present, with laws, judgments and sentences. It defends what is right in this age, but is passing away, and must never think that it will somehow trump the kingdom to come.

⁹ Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, 30-31.

¹⁰ Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 193-242.

So in Christian thought, the State that acts as if it is permanent or ultimate, or the Church that acts as if it rules the present, has become that most blasphemous of God's opponents: the Antichrist. It is 'Anti-Christ' because it imitates and usurps him whose judgments will be faultless and enduring.

Did John Howard therefore unmask as the Antichrist when he reminded us all that "our common values as Australians transcend any other allegiances or commitments"¹¹? Probably not! In this case, I am willing to believe that he (unhelpfully) chose 'transcend' as a way of trying to remind us that we are all co-tenants on this beautiful island. Indeed, on that occasion he had a tough job to do, and we can very easily forgive him for picking the wrong word. But Christians will be vigilant when language of 'transcendence' is used by government officials to describe what they're about.

b) The Spirit of the King

For the second big reason why the ministry of the Church must be differentiated from government by the State, I'll have to share some Bible verses. Although some won't enjoy that, it is the startling audacity of these texts that is the non-religious person's *strongest* guarantee as to why we have no interest to rule them by force of law.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of the sinful person is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. [Romans 8:5-7]

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. [1 Corinthians 2:14]

In Christian thought, you can only respond to God when the Spirit of God miraculously invades you. And that invasion happens in very specific circumstances—when you hear the Word of God, which is also called 'the sword of the Spirit' [Ephesians 6:17]. So Paul says to those he calls the 'foolish Galatians', "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" [Galatians 3:1-2] – meaning that the Spirit of God comes when the word of God is heard and received.

You'll want to have many standard fights with me at this point, but that is not our task today. The point is that in evangelical Christian thought, there is no *substitute* for this work of God's Spirit—*least of all* the operation of State law. 'Law', in all its various forms, is found to be *an ineffective and often counter-productive means* to make 'spiritual' people. The Bible speaks elsewhere about regulations that "lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." [Colossians 2:23]

So the Church must be free to declare the word of God, which is why we will quite literally die if we have to, to defend free speech. And people *must* be free to gather in various groups to argue about various accounts of truth. Sneer if you will about the way Christians argue; the point is that it was theologically crucial to our ancestors, and also to us, to make sure states never mess with that free assembly.

Hence the 'freedom of religion': an acknowledgement that the Holy Spirit is free, as Jesus puts it, to blow wherever he will. The State is simply not competent to serve the Word of God to people, that they might enjoy his Spirit.

¹¹ AAP, "PM set for radical talks with Muslims," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 22 2005; online: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Howard-to-urge-Muslims-to-take-lead/2005/08/22/1124562782889.html> (accessed 24/10/2005).

We could almost say that people are free from *Christian* coercion exactly to the extent that Christians remember the work of the Spirit through the Word.

Not all Christians agree with the account I've given. Some advocate theocracy. But I don't, and nor do many Christians, for reasons that are entirely consistent with our fundamental confessions of faith. I hope that atheists and others *will now understand* that the so-called rise of the religious right simply cannot entail the eradication of the Church-State distinction: many of us won't stand for it, and would fight against it. **In that respect, Jefferson's 'wall of separation' is not a bad metaphor.**

3. Religion, politics, and separating the inseparable

When Locke wrote in 1689, the point of dispute was that religious leaders were using power over body and property to punish unbelief.

When Jefferson wrote in 1802, the point of dispute was that Connecticut Baptists automatically had to pay a State tax to the legally established Congregational Church of that state, and although Baptists could be exempted, they found it undignified to have to claim the exemption.

Given what I've just said about theology, both of these historical states of affairs were a problem, and theology impels me to side with Locke and Jefferson.

But neither problem is on the table in Australia now. There is no hint of any legal compulsion to believe, and no chance of a legally established State religion. Those matters are settled for the foreseeable future.

But as if to give the First Amendment and §116 some new work to do now that the matter has been settled, the 'separation of Church and State' has become code for a quite different concept: to 'keep religion out of politics', whatever this means.

Consider the 2005 advertisement by the Humanist Society of NSW.¹² A smiling John Howard stands in front of an Australian flag with the national anthem playing in the background. The Society's John Goldbaum then states in voiceover:

The Liberal Party platform says 'we believe in choice' – yet many Liberals oppose a woman's right to choose an abortion. The Liberal Party platform says 'we believe in giving *all* citizens equal rights under the law' – yet the Howard Government refuses to recognise and respect the existence of same sex relationships. Next, some extremists will want to ban contraception and sex education. [Visuals: JUST SAY NO, then the following words also in voiceover:] Don't let the Church govern Australia. Keep religion OUT of politics.

Like much political commentary in Australia, this advertisement relies upon what philosophers politely call a set of 'enthymematic' arguments, in which most of the ingredients are missing, and heavy doses of fear. The point of the advertisement is to equate religiously motivated comment in political life with the total coalescence of Church and State.

Dr Samuel Gregg has described what he calls 'doctrinaire secularism' (of which this advertisement is, I think, an example) where:

"... even mentioning God in the public square is questionable. It further maintains that any religious-motivated [*sic*] action is unacceptable in the public square."¹³

¹² John Goldbaum, *Keep Religion Out Of Politics* (Humanist Society of NSW, 2005); online: http://www.hsnsw.asn.au/political_relig.html (accessed 25/10/2005).

¹³ Samuel Gregg, "Rendering Unto Caesar: New Challenges for Church and State," (Fourth Acton Lecture: Centre for Independent Studies, Tuesday 18 May 2004); online: <http://www.cis.org.au/Events/acton/acton04.htm>.

As one doctrinaire secularist letter writer put it,

The reason for keeping religion out of politics ... is a purely pragmatic agreement made by survivors standing on a mountain of bones. If we put religion into politics, we kill each other.¹⁴

To which I respond – no, that’s the reason why we separated Church ministry and State government. Taking religion out of the political life of a community, is of another order entirely. Gregg:

Taken to its logical conclusion, doctrinaire secularism amounts to the promotion of a type of atheism as the unofficial state religion. By this, I mean that that the secularist state insists that anyone contributing to political discussion or acting in the capacity of a state official ought to act as if there is no God, or if there is, this ought to have no bearing whatsoever upon their choices and actions. These are not religiously neutral positions.¹⁵

We need to pause and remember Locke again, because a flaw in his conception of the matter has affected us:

[T]he Church itself is a thing **absolutely separate** and **distinct** from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are **fixed and immovable**. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies, which are in their original, end, business, and in everything **perfectly distinct** and **infinitely different** from each other.

This way of putting it is quite seductive, and would be nice and easy if it were true. But has Locke become a bit carried away? For when has it even been true that churches are ‘absolutely separate and distinct’ from the Commonwealth they inhabit? When has it ever been true that these boundaries are ‘fixed and immovable’? Or churches ‘perfectly distinct’ and ‘infinitely different’ in their business and goals? **Locke has manifestly and obviously overstated the point.**

Indeed, a major problem with his *Letter Concerning Toleration* is that he simply defines churches as people who sit around and talk about eternity. But every Christian I know thinks that the coming kingdom of Jesus has all sorts of impact upon the here and now. Locke stipulates ethics to be something in the domain of the judge only, not of the preacher. But every Christian I know has something Christian to say about ethics. Locke has bequeathed a definition of religion that modern people love to enforce: religion is a set of private beliefs and feelings.¹⁶ But every Christian I know thinks that Christianity has an enormous amount to say about relationships and social structures and wellbeing.

The famous Christian theologian of the fourth century, Augustine, would have disagreed with Locke. Augustine liked to tell the epic story of “two Cities ... mixed indistinguishably together in every earthly State.”¹⁷ It’s not a bad summary of the Bible’s overall depiction of human society:

¹⁴ David Tiley; online: <http://www.tubagooba.com/?p=198> (accessed 19/07/2005). Tiley’s fear is central to what William Cavanaugh thinks of as the founding soteriological myth of the modern West: that political liberalism has saved us all from the horror of religious war. But it is a myth that fails to take into account the aspirations of the emerging nation-state, which, both before and after the Peace of Westphalia, have consistently proven to result in far more violent than any religious conflict ever did. William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical imagination* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 20-31 & passim

¹⁵ Gregg, "Rendering Unto Caesar," n.p.

¹⁶ I have borrowed these complaints about Locke from the argument of John Perry, "Locke's Accidental Church: The Letter Concerning Toleration and the Church's Witness to the State," *Journal of Church and State* 47 no. 2 (2005).

¹⁷ R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 211.

Though there are many great nations throughout the world, living according to different rites and customs, and distinguished by many different forms of language, arms and dress, there nonetheless exists only two orders, as we may call them, of human society: and, following our Scriptures, we may rightly speak of these two as cities. The one is made up of those who live according to the flesh, and the other of those who live according to the spirit. Each desires its own kind of peace, and, when they have found what they sought, each lives its own kind of peace.¹⁸

Now again, there are aspects of Augustine's account that you might hate; but again, I'm asking you to see how evangelical Christians understand what is going on as we go through life alongside each other. The life of these two intermingled 'cities' is a perpetually shifting mosaic of alliance and confrontation about what brings 'peace'. Which means that **the 'wall of separation' metaphor is sometimes more trouble than it's worth**—also well recognised in the U.S. discussion:

The line of separation, far from being a 'wall,' is a blurred, indistinct and variable barrier depending on all the circumstances of a particular relationship. ... No significant segment of our society and no institution within it can exist in a vacuum or in total or absolute isolation from all the other parts, much less from government.¹⁹

Whatever the distinction we want to make between Church and State, it simply can't be a disentanglement of religion from the political life of a community. **Australia simply can't be 'separated' in this way.** A final 'separation' between Christians and the political process can only occur if Christians are rooted out, their literature destroyed and they are killed or expelled (for mere imprisonment can't do the job, since prisoners still affect their society). Doctrinaire secularism is either naïve or tyrannical. It has taken what began as a fight about the freedom of religion and turned it into a demand for total freedom *from* religion. For these purists, that religion might touch their minds is as offensive as unwanted cigarette smoke touching their bodies, and their vendetta is like the one against passive smoking: out of town halls and offices and bars, off the pavements, into homes, then to the catacombs and martyrdom.

But doctrinaire secularists need to understand the way in which Augustine is obviously right. Christian self perception *is never going to change*, and will drive Christian behaviours until either our Lord returns or the sun goes dark, depending on who's right. Doctrinaire secularism can fuss all it likes about the inappropriateness of Christian discourse, but Christians are never going to believe it, and the uneasy jostling about whose version of 'peace' is right will keep emerging in a thousand different ways.

My advice to them is to stop wasting emotional energy over the fact—just as I must come to terms with modern art, football commentators and daytime soaps. *We will keep stating* our account of what brings peace, and if we can't do it publicly, we *will* do it subversively. Better, then, that doctrinaire secularism does business with the *content* of these accounts of peace, rather than continuing with the rather boring project of always reprimanding us for sharing.

4. A Christian account of the inseparable

But what I've just said does sounds too final and confrontational, and my lecture tomorrow will offer some hints about how we *can* move forward in this tangled and messy society. Tonight

¹⁸ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* tr. R.W. Dyson, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 581 (XIV.1).

¹⁹ U.S. Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger in *Lemon vs. Kurtzman* (1971); cited in Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7.

though, I want simply to offer two more moments of Christian theology to show how those who aren't Christians can still make some use of Christian moral discourse.

a) A shared natural environment

Christian moral discourse isn't always that mysterious. We all share together the same natural environment, and certain structures in it constrain how we 'should' live. For example, since we all need water, then any human practices that create drought should change.

What I'm now describing goes by a few names in Christian theology, which I'm deliberately side-stepping; the point is that Christian ethics is, in part, a wisdom that describes who we are. Hence many who aren't Christians can agree, with Christianity, that grudge-holding or favouritism or excessive promiscuity are life-destroying, or that promise-keeping or contentment or humility are attractive and liberating. We share the same reality, which (Christians say) God made and then explains well to us, but which can also sometimes be 'discovered'. And while it might be a tricky business moving from these insights into the high-stakes world of public policy debate, 'tricky' doesn't mean 'impossible', and so there always remains a role for the Church to say its wisdom as well as it can.

Christian discourse, then, can sometimes bring wisdom that is just plain helpful in decoding our place in the environment we all share.

b) 'Objects of love'

But we all know that there are times when our account of what brings peace, and that of others, is in irreconcilable conflict. For Augustine, the 'loves' of each 'city' radically differ sometimes. Professor O'Donovan has picked up on this insight to describe the way societies form around what he calls 'common objects of love'.²⁰ Our failures to agree show that we have these different 'objects' of 'love'.

'Generation X' and 'Y' know this, and despair about the way everyone seems to have different objects of love.

- Some love security, while others love hospitality, so they don't know whom to believe on asylum seekers.
- Some love productivity, while others love to care for the marginalised, so they don't know whom to believe on the economy.
- Some love autonomy, and some love community, so they don't know who to believe about sexual ethics.

That these loves can't seem to be reconciled, and the despair that follows, is part of what we mean by 'postmodernism'. We struggle on by labelling these various loves with that words which I find a very insipid way to try and describe ethics—they are our conflicting 'values'.

Christian moral discourse can help to illuminate who loves what, and why. That might help us to understand each other a little more, and to make allowances.

I realise that not all Christian moral discourse seems either wise or illuminating. I find myself strangely sympathetic to that arch-opponent of Christianity, Richard Rorty, who complains that religion is too often a conversation stopper in public debate,²¹ which is one of his reasons for

²⁰ Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *Common objects of love: moral reflection and the shaping of community: The 2001 Stob lectures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002), 1-24.

²¹ Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31 no. 1 (2003), 148.

being a doctrinaire secularist. I'll offer some thoughts tomorrow on what I think is going wrong there, and how Christians can be different.

For the moment though, can we just observe that Christians have enormously strong reasons for defending the distinction between Church and State, and equally strong reasons for resisting the agenda of doctrinaire secularism. And oddly perhaps, that means we thank God for Australia, which has traditionally kept exactly such a distinction, and maintained exactly such resistance.

This commonwealth is messy, but it's a mess worth living with, and is hard to improve upon. Don't let's wreck it by imagining that some hard-core ideological notion of separation at every level of political life is the way to utopia.



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