



News - Opinion

An uneasy marriage of necessity

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Faith and politics can be unhappy bedfellows, but it is possible for them to coexist.

AFTER years on the periphery of democratic politics, religion, to the astonishment of many, is well and truly back in the centre.

Internationally, militant Islamic terrorism confronts powerful politicians, some of whom claim a direct line to God. Less violently, domestic policy questions on abortion, euthanasia, sexuality, and artificial birth technology have gained renewed political life, partly through religious concerns. Even the fringe religious group the Exclusive Brethren is furtively seeking political influence although their religion forbids them the vote. And now there is a call for an Australian Islamic political party.

There are two major and apparently conflicting truths that must be reconciled in any answer to the question of religion's place in politics. The first is that most religions preach a world view that influences a way of living. This "way" tends to permeate a sincere believer's life, including their politics, either as citizen or politician. The second truth is that the point of religion is essentially different from that of politics. This is encapsulated in Christ's remark that one should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Empirical evidence shows that both religion and politics usually suffer from too close a linkage.

So believers cannot be expected to leave their faith behind at the door of political life, but neither should anyone expect that the tasks of politics can be neatly solved by recourse to spirituality. This is clearest when a political community contains many different religious groups with incompatible doctrines about the right way to live and its appropriate spirituality. Since most modern democracies are in this situation, both civil peace and common good require that no religion or comprehensive explanation of the meaning of life can be given an exclusive or privileged position. Established religions are an intellectual anachronism in democracies even where they still hold a largely symbolic place, as in Norway and Great Britain. Three reasons favour this religious neutrality: the first practical, the second moral, and the third religious.

First, history teaches the dire consequences that tend to accompany religion-dominated politics and the advantages of a secular society in which people of different religions and no religion can co-operate in seeking a common good that is of this world. Second, democracy is founded (in part) on the need for all citizens to afford each other mutual respect for their human standing. Third, religion itself is likely to be profoundly distorted by politicising its message and mission.

This last point is pertinent to Health Minister Tony Abbott's recent claims about B. A. Santamaria's legacy that he located as flourishing in the Coalition Government. Abbott's eulogy of Santamaria ignored several important and ugly features of "the Movement". One was the way its leadership's quasi-religious certainties about its anti-communist project led to secretive, manipulative and unscrupulous tactics against its enemies. Another was its exploitation of clerical authority over basic doctrine to gather support for a complex political agenda and to demonise Catholic and non-Catholic opponents. Moreover, it is significant that Santamaria's Movement not only set Catholic against Catholic, and fanned hostility to the church among outsiders, but eventually split the bishops (as well as the Labor Party) and was condemned by the Vatican. Some legacy!

Traces of the Santamaria mindset certainly survive in Australian politics, mostly in the Coalition ranks. Santamaria, who dedicated himself to anti-capitalist and anti-communist causes, would find it ironic that his successors now serve a Government that encourages unfettered capitalism and cosies up to communist China. Santamaria would have been happier with his latter-day followers' focus on issues of sexual and procreational morality and euthanasia, areas in which the bishops still think they can command obedience. But Catholics and other Christians have increasingly diverse and considered views on these matters, and talk of "the Catholic vote", though still influential in some quarters, is mostly

an anachronism.

Abbott and others with simplistic pictures of the role of religion in public life see politics as an arena in which religion battles "secularism", but this is a dangerous muddle. An anti-religious ideology of secularism must be distinguished from the commitment to secular space for politics. Granting such a space need not indicate contempt for religion, nor relegation of it to the private sphere, since religious people are free to announce and pursue openly their conscientious values and argue for their political implications in the public sphere. They will, however, compromise their religion and weaken the impact of their values if they behave like puppets of their religious leadership or seek to further their ends by devious or surreptitious means.

Some theorists (such as the American philosopher Robert Audi, himself a Christian) hold that liberal democracy cannot allow religious premises a place in the arena of public reasoning, but there seems to me no principled reason for this restriction. The appeal to religious premises may be unwise since it may not convince the non-religious, but some religious values can be acknowledged on other grounds by outsiders, and an open statement of one's deep values is better than offering spurious non-religious arguments as a mere tactic.

One general lesson is that religious people should bring their values into politics with a sense that the complexities of policy will often make the concrete relevance of those values a matter for interpretation and controversy, even among those who share them. Faith, reason and politics can co-habit, but there is no slick formula for their successful marriage.

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