

New College Lectures – The Hon John Anderson MP

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Church and State:

The role that people of faith have and should play in politics

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INTRODUCTION

The recent appointment of Professor Ian Harper to the new Fair Pay Commission prompted another round of media posturing about Church and State. It was the latest in a series of comments from both Church and State on the separation of Church and State. If it is not Professor Harper's appointment, it was that of Peter Hollingsworth or the comments of Alexander Downer in a recent Playford Lecture or the comments of Eric Abetz on the role of the Church in public life or even the comments of Archbishop Jensen on IR reform. On a wider scale, the actions of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair have prompted comments within the context of the Church-State arena.

It seems that debate over the relationship between Church and State is alive and well within the Western world. It has long been, and will no doubt continue, thus. The issues are difficult, they create real tensions and there are in the end no definitive, final, neat, formulas. Nonetheless, they are very important and I believe it is timely for a new and better informed debate. We are indebted to the organisers of this event.

Let me state at the outset that I approach these questions as a believing and practicing Christian, who has as you may be aware, had some involvement in public life.

I would also note at the outset that it is usually the case that the calls for "religion to be kept out of politics" reflect firstly a limited understanding of the real issues involved and secondly – and this is important – the reality that we are essentially, by our very nature, keen to escape the notion of accountability to God. The Bible tells us we will be, and in the West, this has particularly been the case since the Enlightenment, which we imagine, I think some what fancifully, has given us a set of respectable intellectual defenses against that concept of accountability to a higher order.

Often modern comments in this area are framed within the question of 'what role does the Church have within the State?' That is, does the Church have a right, even the expertise, to be involved in the public life of the State?

A recent article by English commentator and opponent of Christianity, John Gray, suggests that this question might be more fruitfully phrased in a very different manner. I quote:

When thinking about the idea that we live in a post-religious era, it is worth remembering that the secular realm is a Christian invention. The biblical root of the secular state is the passage in the New Testament where Jesus tells his disciples to give to God what is God's and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Refined by Augustine and given a modern formulation with the Reformation, this early Christian commandment is the ultimate origin of the liberal attempt to separate religion from politics.

Gray's comment phrases the debate within a wider historical framework, leading to the obvious, and far more provocative, question: Can the State survive without the Church?

Those of a liberal secular humanist perspective would loudly state, ‘YES’. Their argument emphasises the fact that religion has no role in public affairs – that is the realm of human endeavor and progress.

Others, of whom I am one, would loudly state, ‘NO’.

It is very much my view that Church and State should be institutionally separated in the interest of both, and on the way through let me note that I think that our forefathers got it about right in the Australian Constitution. Since then, in our own very pragmatically and sensible Australian way, we’ve evolved a pretty good balance in the formal relationship between the two. Attempts to merge Church and State do not have a happy history – in part, I suspect because the Church when it has an opportunity to exercise temporal power has seemed unable to resist the temptation to attempt to “Christianise” society by enforcing outward behavioral standards rather than meeting the harder but much more scriptural challenge of winning hearts and souls.

But my belief in the formal separation of Church and State does not mean that I see it as either legitimate or wise to try and force the voice of Christianity out of the public square. Just as a failure to understand the separate roles of the Church and State has a sorry history, so to do attempts to suppress or cancel out responsibility to a higher order.

I became finally converted at University when I pondered the end results that what I see as the religion of secular humanism is capable of delivering. For example, Fascism in its denial of any form of transcendent authority and its conviction that the only remaining morality is found in the struggle for power saw those who won power seeking to implement their view of an ideal society. The Third Reich, which was as you’ll remember to last for a thousand years, seemed to me a truly frightening illustration of the price we can pay personally and collectively when we push to a logical end the idea that we are not accountable to a higher authority. I turned, I have to say reluctantly at the time, back to Christian faith.

As an aside, I’ve never had much respect for the lazy view that it is Christianity that has started wars – the “religion” of secular humanism specifically putting man in God’s place gave us the horrors’ of the final solution and of 60 million dead. Real Christianity by contrast has been a truly civilising influence whenever it has been deployed.

It is also my belief that historically, and theologically, the Western liberal-democratic State, in which I am a very great believer, is reliant upon the Church – perhaps, more specifically, Christianity expressed institutionally – for its formation and substance.

Over the next few minutes, I want to explore the basis for this answer. Historically, I want to suggest that the liberal-democratic State can be seen to have emerged from Protestant Christianity. Furthermore, I think that Protestantism has shown the value of an active Christianity involved in public affairs. Then, theologically, I want to examine a framework through which the Church might think more clearly about its involvement with the State. Finally, I want to pose three challenges as to the nature of this interaction in a tangible sense.

1. HISTORY – FORMATION OF THE LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC STATE

In a recent interview on Radio National’s ‘The Religion Report’, on the growth of Protestantism – Evangelicalism – within China, David Aikman (the former bureau chief for ‘Time’ magazine in Beijing’), stated:

Protestantism historically has been the source of dramatic political change. I mean you only have to look at the Puritan revolution in England and in the Netherlands and so forth to see that ultimately Protestantism spawns democracy

... I mean, if you look at the history of the emergence of political participation and democracy in the Netherlands and then in England during the Puritan revival, leading up to the English Civil War, and then of course in the United States itself, you find that religious sentiment based upon a conviction of the sovereignty of the individual conscience is a vital ingredient in the emergence of political consciousness at the political level.

Essentially, the Protestant view of the individual, Aikman argues, is the cornerstone of the development of democracy. Each individual, because of their created status ('in the image of God'), has a conscience and dignity that must be valued and recognised.

A strong argument can be made for seeing this view of the individual emerging out of the Reformation – Luther's understanding of the universal sin of humanity, the universal need for one grace from God and the consequent notion of the 'priesthood of all believers'.

Within the public sphere, the consequences are immediately recognizable.

First, the opinions of all must be recognised. The king must recognize the inherent worth of the most insignificant serf, and vice versa. As Geoff Gitney stated last year in the 'Sydney Morning Herald':

The essence of any democracy is that everyone is qualified to say whatever they think and the essence of a healthy democracy is that they are encouraged to do so with vigour.

Second, these individuals exist alongside other individuals – recognition of worth leads inexorably to community. Real individualism operates within the relationships that exist between individuals, forming community.

Third, individuals operate within a matrix of responsibilities. These responsibilities recognise the worth of others within the community. In fact, when responsibilities operate successfully, the rights of everyone – to be respected and valued – are ensured. And, so, mutual responsibility and obligations emerge as foundational to both the life of the individual and the community.

The overall political framework that emerges is one that holds a balanced tension between freedom and constraint. The inherent worth of each individual creates a freedom within which each conscience and opinion is recognised, respected and, hopefully, expressed. The nature of community – responsible relationship between individuals – creates a sense of constraint as responsibilities are fulfilled. In this sense, democracy – for that is what this is – is the political system that best balances the need to recognise individual worth and rein in individual sin.

And all this from a humble recognition of God as Creator and we as his creation!

2. HISTORY – CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT

What I have just painted is a view of political history that sees the Church – or, at least Protestant Christianity – as integral to the development of the foundation for the Western liberal democratic State.

I want to emphasize that the involvement of Christianity does not end there. Some have suggested that a Christian worldview has no place in the public arena. For example, Senator Amanda Vanstone commented some time ago to the effect that Christians should leave their beliefs outside when they walk into the cabinet room.

I was never able to see how it would be possible, let alone wise, to do so.

Logically, the presence of a worldview through which any individual assesses and understands the world is inevitable. All of us have a worldview and the nature of individual worth means that each must, at least, be recognised and acknowledged. To suggest that a Christian worldview is inappropriate in the public arena is foolish.

Surely – it also flies in the face of history.

Whilst we could trace such a history from Constantine onwards, I want to focus briefly on the 1700s and early 1800s. The public action of the Clapham Sect, and principally, William Wilberforce, highlights the way in which a (Protestant) Christian view of the individual lays not only a foundation for democracy but also enables critical and influential involvement in public affairs.

The Clapham Sect was a coterie of Evangelical Christians who were active within England's public affairs during the 1700s. They held closely to four Evangelical principles (see: D. Bebbington) –

- conversionism (that individual lives must be changed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus)
- crucicentrism (the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus)
- biblicism (that the Bible was/is the word of God)
- activism (that the spiritual change wrought by the Gospel needed to be expressed in pastoral and social action)

At the heart of this understanding of Christianity was an understanding of humanity as both full of worth (created in God's image) and inherently in need of God's help.

Inevitably, this drove its members – who included the Wesley brothers, John Newton, William Wilberforce, and others – to interact with public affairs. The work of Wilberforce to abolish slavery and the slave trade, to campaign for a return to a moral society and to 'civilise' the work of the British East India Company are the best known actions. Personally I doubt that India would be a functioning democracy today if it hadn't been for Wilberforce. The work of John Wesley to establish 'Sunday schools' to educate the children of the poor, and Lord Shaftesbury's success in freeing poor women and children from the virtual slavery in mines and other dangerous occupations are other examples of a distinctly Christian worldview influencing compassionate and effective involvement in public affairs.

Some of you might well point out that you don't have to be a Christian to be a positive reformer or to make a positive contribution and of course you would be right. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice the recent commentary by the well known English Atheist commentator Roy Hattersley. Following Hurricane Katrina's trail of devastation in the United States he wrote in the left wing English Guardian Weekly that, and I quote, "the monotonous performance of the unpleasant tasks that relieve the pain and anguish of the old, the sick and the homeless" was been headed up by the Salvation Army and "augmented by all sorts of other groups, almost all of them of a religious origin and character".

He went on to say, and again I quote "notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers clubs and Atheist associations" The article was sub – headed "We atheists have to accept that most believers are better human beings."

If more 'better' human beings will make a better world we would surely do well to accord them, at the very least, their democratic right to be heard.

Would anyone really argue on the basis of the need to separate church from State that the above mentioned Christians should have left their world view in the living room every time they walked out the front door?

It is interesting to note that the Protestant value of the inherent worth of the individual, the individual in community and individual responsibility – these are all evident in the actions just described. They assert the value of the slave as a human, the value of decent behavior, the responsibility of companies for those they employ, the value of educating the poor, the list could go on.

It is important to observe that the Clapham Sect worked through a distinctly Christian worldview. If you want, the Gospel informed their view of the world and those around them. They recognized the reality of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), understood the change that this demanded, recognized the framework it established for human relationships – and then lived this out.

I began by asking whether the State could survive without the Church. I asserted that I thought not. In historical terms, the history of development and involvement supports such an assertion. Developmentally, the Western liberal democratic State is inherently indebted to Biblical conceptions of the individual and, thus, community and responsibility and interaction. In terms of interaction, the Clapham Sect highlights the significant contribution that thoughtful Christian involvement in public affairs can make.

3. A FRAMEWORK FOR INVOLVEMENT

I want to focus, now, on what this ‘thoughtful Christian involvement’ means – to flesh out a worldview through which Christians might interact with the State.

You see, the very same Gospel that informed the Clapham Sect, that informed the Reformers, should inform Christian action today. Reflecting on some of the New Testament passages in which politics is mentioned, I want to offer four reflections which might form the basis of a helpful worldview for Christian interaction with the State.

First, God has a specific relationship with the State. Romans 13:107 and Mark 12 and Matthew 22 and Luke 20 all clearly state that God is sovereign over all political authorities; in fact, they are his creation.

Second, as the creation of God, political authorities have a distinctly temporal role. As Romans 13 makes clear, they serve to bring temporary order into a disorderly world, punishing wrong and rewarding right. Their role is temporal and limited.

Third, Christians have a responsibility to obey political authorities. Romans 13 calls for obedience because they are instituted by God. Acts 4 and 5 and the Passion narratives place this obedience within the wider framework of the need to obey God first.

Fourth, 1 Timothy 2 places Christian relationships with the State within the framework of God’s eternal plans – bringing humanity back to him. And, so, Christians are called to pray for political authorities so that they govern an orderly society so that the Gospel can be preached.

These four reflections offer a broad worldview through which to understand the necessary Christian involvement with the State. As democratic citizens, Christians have a ‘right’ to be involved in the democracy within which they live. Yet, as Christians, they have a responsibility to pray, to obey God and, in obedience to the State, be actively involved in the public arena.

4. SOME CHALLENGES

So what should such an involvement look like? Well, I want to suggest three challenges that might help in thinking this through.

(a) Know what you believe

To have a thoughtful involvement in public affairs, Christians must know what they believe. First, they must actually understand the Gospel. To fail to hold onto that is to fail to hold onto the label of 'Christian'. Second, they must have a distinct world view. There is nothing distinct about a worldview that takes the language of the Right or the Left and dresses it up in religious language and calls it 'Christian'.

Instead, understand the implications of what you believe. If God is sovereign over all, and he has created political authorities, then they serve a temporary role. To think otherwise is to give the State a realm bigger than it is capable of handling and will lead inevitably to disillusion and cynicism.

(b) Know what to address

The nature of the Christian Gospel is relational. God, as described by himself in the Bible, is relational. He desires relationship with humanity. The presence of a vertical relationship between God and humanity will, thus, infuse the horizontal relationships within humanity.

It is interesting, and sobering, that recent political debates have all emphasized the necessity of relationship within society. The historical development I mapped out earlier placed this relational aspect of humanity at the heart of the development of democracy. It is significant that the work of Michael Schluter has been adopted by some within the ALP (Lindsay Tanner) at a time when society is beginning to recognize the need for improved relationships. Well, let me suggest that for Christians, with an understanding of, and relationship with, God who is by definition relationship, this is the place to be speaking within society.

On a wider scale, there must be recognition from all that 'God stuff' is everything. Recently, a colleague and friend of mine Senator Eric Abetz made a speech in which he urged churches to focus solely on the business of God. Given the nature of the God of the Bible, it is ironic that this is everything!

(c) Know how to address issues

That God, and the Gospel, are relational suggests that relationship must also be at the heart of 'how' Christians go about interacting with the State.

Governments are made up of people – as someone once quipped the trouble with politician's is they behave like people- and if you actually want to influence outcomes as opposed to score points it is generally speaking the case that you will do much better if you build relationships of trust and goodwill.

Frankly we have recently seen an example of how to do it well from Archbishop Peter Jensen.

He recently made some much reported observations about the Governments proposed Industrial Relations changes, which were widely and somewhat breathlessly described as an attack on the Government by most of the usual suspects.

The inevitable happened and the Prime Minister was asked a question in the parliament about the Archbishop's comments. John Howard responded by affirming his respect for Peter Jensen, defending his right to speak out, and agreeing with him that relationships are more important than material wealth.

The Archbishop has earned the right to be heard with respect even by those who do not share his beliefs. He is obviously sincere in his beliefs and motivated not by politics but by a general concern for the well being of others – including those elected to govern – and he does his homework before he speaks. Furthermore, he has gone out of his way to develop personal relationships within Government: again I emphasize that politicians are human and they both need and value relationships.

This stands in stark contrast to my experience as Deputy Prime Minister when the first I ever heard from the leader of my Church was when I copped a two page attack in the Bulletin magazine on my position in relation to embryonic stem cell research. I think it far to say that in my role as DPM I was amongst the most prominent Anglicans in the country, yet I had never been asked for a meeting, never had a letter or phone call, never been asked why I was adopting the position that I was. I was left with a distinct impression that scoring an intellectual point was more important than being in fellowship and relationship as part of “the flock”.

I need not ask which approach to government might bear the most fruit.

The necessity of being “media savvy” also arises in this context. Generally speaking, the media is disdainful of real Christianity. Indeed, understanding levels tend to be pretty low and as a measure of that disdain it is apparent that many media organizations don’t think it is important to employ people who understand Christian theology to cover religious matters. By contrast, they usually expect someone who covers cricket to understand the game.

It is therefore very important to recognize that the media will generally show little interest in Christianity unless there is a scandal or they can employ such standing and prestige that the Church might still enjoy to reinforce their own beliefs and prejudices. This very often seems to involve an attack on governments that are seen to be conservative, and alarmist warnings about the “Christian Right”. We never hear about the Christian Left

I have to say that given the very serious problem that we now have with too many people in the media been unable to distinguish between reporting the facts and writing opinion it is doubly important that Christians be very careful in their public utterances.

CLOSE

Too often the relationship of Church and State is discussed from a State-centric point of view – that is, what role has the Church got in the State?

Tonight, we have considered it from the opposite perspective – can the State survive without the Church? In a developmental sense, the Western liberal democratic State is indivisibly reliant upon a Biblical view of humanity, the individual, community and responsibility. Historically, Christians (e.g. the Clapham Sect) have contributed significantly to the State.

For the future, this must continue. The Church must have a distinct world view that allows it to contribute thoughtfully and theologically to public life. It is a world view that must understand the State temporally, contribute widely and have relationship as central. For Christians to fail in this area would neglect the State to which we have a responsibility.