

New College Lectures – Mr Kevin Rudd MP

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Church and State:

Christianity and Politics

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CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

Next year marks the centenary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer found himself at the epicentre of the struggle between Church and State in Germany following the rise of the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer took it upon himself to become a leader of the dissenting church – what he defined as the “confessing” church in Germany at a time when the mainstream Lutheran Church had been suborned to the interests of the Nazi state.

Bonhoeffer did not choose some pietistic or quietistic retreat from politics.

Bonhoeffer’s was an activist dissent. On 30 January 1933 Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. On 1 February, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio broadcast directly attacking the Nazi doctrine of the so-called Leadership Principle. As a result his broadcast was suspended by the Nazi authorities.

Less than three months after taking office, Hitler proclaimed the Arian Clauses which forbade those of Jewish origin from holding offices of the State. On the same day, Bonhoeffer issued a statement condemning this action.

Late in the war, Bonhoeffer sought to confer with the allies in Stockholm on behalf of others in Berlin about the possible political overthrow of Hitler. He was eventually sent to Buchenwald. Because of his alleged complicity in the plot to assassinate Hitler, in the dying days of the regime on 9 April 1945, Hitler ordered that Bonhoeffer, together with other “conspirators”, be hanged.

Bonhoeffer was 39 years old when he died as a Christian martyr.

Bonhoeffer had an acute understanding of the relationship between Christianity and the State – and the ethical actions demanded of Christians when the State embarks upon a policy direction inconsistent with fundamental Christian principles.

Some would argue that the stark nature of the times in which Bonhoeffer lived were such that the delineation between Christian ethical responsibility in relation to the dictates of the State was absolutely clear-cut. No shades of grey.

Some would also argue that the times in which we live today are much less dramatic and therefore there are no such dramatic demands on us as we engage the dictates of the State in our contemporary western democracy.

Of course that is in large part true. Thankfully we do live in less dramatic times.

But the Bonhoeffer principle as it speaks to us today is like this: to work out clearly in our hearts and minds where and when the lines need to be drawn in terms of the actions of the State when those actions breach fundamental Christian principles.

Of course this begs the question of what these indisputable “fundamental Christian principles” might be.

And if these fundamental principles are beyond dispute, then why have debates raged over more than 2000 years about what it actually means to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s”?

What I propose to do in this evening’s lecture is three things:

- First, to reflect on the principles that have governed the relationship between Christianity and the State during their long history of difficult co-habitation.
- Second, to reflect on a number of models of contemporary Christian engagement in Australian politics.
- Third, to make some provocative observations as to how these principles apply now to the debate that will begin in the Commonwealth Parliament next week on the future laws which govern the workplace for every working Australian family.

Christianity and the State in History

During the first three centuries of its history, Christianity did not just preach a Gospel for the oppressed. Christianity itself was in the act of being oppressed.

Christianity began its life as an oppressed minority. Christianity coming from within Judaism and Judaism having in turn its own troubled experience within the confines of the Roman Empire. The New Testament therefore sees the world from that perspective. The later parts of the Old Testament also see the world from that perspective - particularly the literature of the Babylonian Captivity. The same tradition is also evident in the theological doctrines of the early church through the early Patristic writings. Christianity is therefore formed within the mindset of being persecuted by the State in an overt and ruthless fashion.

All this began to change with the Constantinian Settlement at the beginning of the 4th century. Once Christianity became part of the orthodoxy of the later Roman Empire, the greatest challenge of theology and politics was how to translate this “theology of the oppressed” into a new age when the Church was secure and legally protected through the offices of the State in itself. Furthermore, whereas for its first three centuries, Christianity represented an active counter-culture within the Jewish and Roman worlds, what was to be Christianity’s message in a new age in which the

Church had in fact become culturally dominant within the society? This became the continuing challenge of Christianity in the Christian west for the subsequent one and a half thousand years.

Following the unleashing of the radical anti-clericalism of the French Revolution and the determination of the American revolutionaries to maintain an absolute separation between Church and State, for the last two hundred years we have entered a different phase. The impact of independent scientific inquiry, the increasing impact of secular humanism combined with the pervasive influence of modernism and post-modernism have had the cumulative effect of undermining the established culturally dominant positions of the mainstream Catholic and Protestant Churches across the collective West.

Where this all leads as Christianity embarks on its third millennium remains to be seen. But once again we begin to see the signs of the emergence of Christianity seeing itself, and being seen by others, as a counter-culture increasingly operating within what some have called a post-Christian world. In some respects, therefore, Christianity, within the collective West, may be heading towards returning to the minority position it occupied in the earlier centuries of its existence.

But whether we conclude Christianity represents a minority or majority position within society and the polity or not, this still leaves unanswered the question of how any informed individual Christian (or Christians combined in the form of an organised Church) should relate to the State.

I would argue that a core and continuing fundamental principle shaping this engagement is that Christianity is always on the side of the marginalised, the vulnerable and the oppressed. This must be argued as being one of the core “fundamental principles” to which I referred before.

As noted before, this tradition is very much alive in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

It is also very much alive in the recorded accounts of Jesus of Nazareth: his engagement with women, gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes and more generally with the poor – all of whom, in the political and social environment of first century Palestine, being fully paid up members of the “marginalised, the vulnerable and the oppressed”.

And parallel to all of this was Jesus’ revulsion to what he described as the hypocrisy of the religious and political elites of his time.

Do these principles of themselves provide a universal precept upon which every element of social and economic policy can be constructed? Of course not.

But it does provide an illuminating principle (dare I say “a light on the hill”) in shaping our views of what constitute appropriate policy for the community.

What does this then have to say of economic self-interest? What does it have to say about Max Weber's Protestant work ethic? Or what constitutes the legitimate theological basis for private wealth accumulation?

On these questions we are left with troubling parables about camels passing through the eye of a needle.

But equally we are left with parables about the proper tending of the vineyard, the diligence of those who work the vineyard and the abundance of the harvest.

In this context, Catholic social teaching has long argued for a proper balance between the rights of capital and labour - in a relationship based on mutual respect as well as legal protection.

A third area of long-standing contention in Christian theology has been the question of the doctrine of the just war. What is the Christian view of violence by the State? And what is the Christian view of the State itself employing violence against other States?

These debates are ultimately anchored within Christian theology's concern for the sanctity of all human life. It argues that human life could only be taken in self-defence and only then under highly conditional circumstances – circumstances which include the exhaustion of all other peaceful means to resolve a dispute; and if war is to be embarked upon, then for the principles of proportionality to apply. On this point, for example, it is worth noting that Pope John Paul II did not support the Iraq war as a “just war” within the terms of Catholic social teaching.

We should also reflect on the implications of these principles as proportionality on the proper role of the State in providing, protecting or (in the current debate) circumscribing the freedoms of its citizenry. Christian teaching is sceptical about a State's demand for more power and more power. And so should we be sceptical today.

And then there is the question of the right of the State to lawfully execute its own citizens. Christianity's belief in the sanctity of life causes us to conclude that capital punishment is unacceptable in all circumstances.

Models of Christian Engagement with the State

These by no means represent a systematic presentation of what I described earlier as the “fundamental Christian principles” that should shape Christian engagement with the State.

It does, however, deal with three cardinal principles concerning the powerless, the accumulation of wealth and the power of the State to wage war and/or use violence against its citizens.

These are principles around which many of the great debates of our age between Church and State have been fought.

Mindful of these principles of Christian engagement with the State, it is also important to reflect on the different models of engagement that we see at work in contemporary Australian society.

In particular, I would like to reflect on the various models of political behaviour adopted by Christian politicians themselves.

Model number one is what I call the “vote for me because I’m a Christian”.

This is the model that I find to be most repugnant.

It is the model that says that simply on the basis of my external profession of the Christian faith, that those of similar persuasions should vote for me.

This is about as persuasive as saying that because I am a Sydney Swans supporter, that all other Sydney Swans supporters should vote for me as well because we ostensibly adhere to the same belief system.

This model is alive and well in the United States. Thankfully it is much less alive and much less well here in Australia. Although there are some dangerous signs that for certain Christian constituencies within our country, this represents an increasingly appealing message.

It is a model for which I can find no underpinning scriptural, doctrinal or theological authority.

Model number two says “vote for me because I’m Christian and because I have a defined set of views on a narrowly defined set of questions concerning sexual morality”.

Regrettably this model has an increasing number of supporters within the broader Christian community.

It is a community which tends to read down rather than read up the ethical teachings of the New Testament – producing a narrow “tick the box” approach to passing so-called Christian “morals” tests.

I see very little evidence of that approach in the Gospels.

I see much more evidence of it in 17th and 18th century European pietism.

Once again it will come as no surprise to you here that I am not attracted to model number two either.

Model number three says something like this: take models number one and two above and add to them the additional tag of “family values”. That is “vote for me because I am a Christian; vote for me because I have a defined set of views on questions of private sexual morality; and vote for me also because I wrap myself in the garments of something called ‘family values’”.

Regrettably it is my view that the term “family values” has become one of the most used and abused terms in the Australian political lexicon.

Once again, I beg to part company because this concept of “family values” is invariably a narrow one and invariably leaves to one side the ability of working families economically to survive.

Model number four is along the following lines: tick models one, two and three above but then add the following offensive play. Unleash a political fusillade against anyone who dares suggest that Christianity might have something concrete to say about the broader political, economic and social questions in life. And justify this fusillade with that hardy perennial: “religion should be kept out of politics”.

This is a view which says anyone who seeks to articulate from a Christian perspective a view on Iraq, a view on poverty in the world, a view on foreign policy more generally, a view on refugees and asylum seekers, a view on indigenous Australians, or a view, dare I say it, on workplace relations, then a pox on your houses, and may judgement be rained down upon you from the heavens above.

That’s what I’d describe in a somewhat partisan note as the Gospel according to St. Pete – particularly if you were to look at what the Treasurer, Peter Costello had to say most recently about Phillip Aspinall, the Primate of Australia, and head of the Anglican Church. When Aspinall raised some questions about the workplace relations debate Pete responded by saying the Archbishop hasn’t studied industrial relations, he’s only studied theology. Of course that’s code language for saying Christian leaders cannot have an informed and legitimate Christian view of matters beyond ‘I’m a Christian, I have a defined set of views on the life issues and I talk about family values.’ That’s model number four. And I don’t like this model either.

Model number five is along these lines: it says that the Gospel is both a spiritual Gospel and a social Gospel. And if it is a social Gospel then it is in part a political Gospel because politics is the means by which society chooses to exercise its collective power. In other words the Gospel is as much about the decisions I make about my own life as it is about how I act in society and how in turn I should act, and react, in relation to the exercise of the coordinated power of society through the State.

This view derives from the simple principle that the Gospel which tells human kind that they must be born-again, is the same Gospel that says that at the time of the Great Judgement that Christians will be asked not how pious they have been but instead if they helped feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the lonely. In this respect, the Gospel is an exhortation for social action.

Does this mean that the fundamental ethical principles that I have sought to outline earlier in my address concerning the protection of the powerless, the accumulation of wealth and the great questions of war and peace provide us with an automatic mathematical formula for determining every item of social, economic, environmental, national security and international relations policy question before government? Of course not.

But what it does mean is that these policy debates could and should be debated by Christians within an informed Christian ethical framework. And what is also means is we should repudiate the proposition that these policy debates are somehow simply “the practical matters of the State” which should be left to practical politicians like us rather than impractical pastors, preachers and theologians like you.

Sometimes you encounter in the broader Christian community the view that a Christian view on policy should always prevail no matter what. I respond by saying that’s terrific, but we don’t live in a theocracy. We live in a democracy which by definition is secular. If you want a theocratic form of government then you’re several centuries too late. But if you want to live in a secular democracy you are in a contestable polity where views will be distilled through the ballot box. And if Christians are of the view that their views are not being reflected sufficiently through the ballot box, then I would suggest that has more to do with the changing shape and architecture of Australian society than it does with the representativeness of Australia’s political processes. That is, you end up electing the people that the society itself ultimately reflects.

If you look at the census data, the number of people who profess an active belief in God has gone down over time. The most recent census data says that about 69 per cent of Australia. It’s somewhat less than that in Western Europe. Somewhat greater than that in the United States. But the trend line in recent times has been in one direction. So the secularity of the views reflected into the political process directly express what’s happening in mainstream Australian society.

Whereas a Christian perspective on contemporary policy debates may not, therefore, prevail, it must nonetheless be argued. And if argued it must therefore be heard by those in authority. It should not be rejected contemptuously by secular politicians as if these views are an unwelcome intrusion into the political sphere.

If the Churches are not allowed to participate in the great debates about the values that ultimately underpin our society and our polity, then we have reached a very strange place indeed.

Christian Perspectives on Industrial Relations

This brings us to our current great debate on industrial relations which is about to be launched formally by the Commonwealth Parliament next week. I have already referred to the fact that certain contributions to this debate by Christian leaders have not been entirely welcomed. They should have been. Because what this debate is about is core Christian business in that what we are dealing with here is the relationship between the interests of the powerless against the powerful. There is no escaping from that point.

Let us be clear-cut about the radical, and indeed revolutionary set of workplace relations changes that we are about to see introduced into the Federal Parliament next week.

- First, the minimum wage for working Australians will no longer be determined by the independent umpire - the industrial relations commission. It will be determined instead by a so-called “Fair Pay Commission” – itself an

almost Orwellian celebration of language. The minimum wage being the final wage safety net for the lowest paid Australians – of whom there are millions, literally millions in our workforce.

- Second, individual protections provided by industrial awards for working families will be reduced from 20 down to five – which means that previous provisions concerning overtime allowances; shift allowances; the spread of hours worked (including weekends worked), meal breaks, holiday pay and holiday leave loadings are now up for individual contract negotiation. This means that each individual employee, including very young employees, may now be required to negotiate these matters directly with their employer in a relationship which can scarcely be described as fair, just or equitable.
- The protections which employees currently have from unfair dismissal will be in large part removed – including protection from unfair dismissal if your boss decides he or she doesn't like you.
- On top of all these, if a trade union presents an agreement on behalf of a group of employees for certification by the Government and that agreement does not comply absolutely with the provisions of the new industrial laws and the individual contract philosophy on which the new law is based, then trade unions become liable for fines up to \$33,000.

The central organising principle behind these new industrial laws is simple: it is a redistribution of wealth and power away from the weakest Australians to the wealthiest Australians. It is not the thin edge of the wedge when it comes to the Americanisation of the Australian industrial relations system. It is in fact the Americanisation of the Australian industrial relations system.

Because these laws so directly confront Christian precepts concerning the protection of the powerless, that is why we have seen a virtual unanimity in the condemnation of these laws by the Australian Christian Churches.

The Uniting Church has called on the Government to rethink its approach to the further deregulation of the industrial relations system. The National Director of Uniting Justice Australia, the Reverend Elenie Poulos, has stated: “the Government’s proposal to strip so many workers of their rights to challenge unfair dismissal is immoral”.

The Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Peter Jensen, has criticised the legislation, highlighting the “need for preserving shared time for child, families and relationships for all Australians”.

Cardinal Pell has also been critical of the legislation.

It is curious that the implementation responsibility for the ideological revolution should in recent years have fallen to Ministers Abbott and Andrews. Both these Ministers grew up in the tradition that I grew up in—the tradition of Catholic social teaching. But as they embark on this brave new ideological world I have asked both Ministers, but Minister Andrews in particular given that he currently holds the job, to

reflect on how this proposed industrial relations revolution stands with more than a century of Catholic social teaching.

How does it square with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, which states: "*it is a natural human right to form professional associations of workers*"?

How does it square with Pope John Paul II's encyclical of 1991, *Centesimus Annus*, where in reference to the observation of *Rerum Novarum* about the natural human right to establish professional associations Pope John Paul II states: "*Here we find the reason for the Church's defence and approval of the establishment of what are commonly called trade unions...*"

Both encyclicals refer to the right to a just wage, which John Paul II states "...cannot be left to the 'free consent of the parties, so that the employer, having paid what was agreed upon, has done his part and seemingly is not called upon to do anything beyond'".

John Paul II continues, in an even starker criticism of industrial agreements which rest exclusively on individual contracts, when he states of the conditions which prevailed in 1891: "*It was said at the time that the State does not have the power to intervene in the terms of these contracts, except to ensure the fulfilment of what had been explicitly agreed upon. This concept of relations between employers and employees, purely pragmatic and inspired by a thorough-going individualism, is severely censured in the Encyclical as contrary to the twofold nature of work as a personal and necessary reality.*"

Furthermore, on page 33 of *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II states: "... *society and the State must ensure wage levels adequate for the maintenance of the worker and his family, including a certain amount for savings ... The role of trade unions in negotiating minimum salaries and working conditions is decisive in this area.*"

That does not sound like a marginal role for trade unions to me. More explicitly, in connection with the role of the state in arbitrating between industrial parties, Pope John Paul II, in reflecting on *Rerum Novarum*, states: "*The State, however, has the task of determining the juridical framework within which economic affairs are to be conducted, and thus of safeguarding the prerequisites of a free economy, which presumes a certain equality between the parties, such that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience.*"

That, to me, does not sound like any explicit disendorsement of the concept of an independent industrial relations commission. If Minister Andrews thinks these observations are marginal to Catholic social teaching, I would draw his attention to John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, which deals explicitly and at length with the rights of labour in the modern economy. *Laborem Exercens* says: "*The experience of history teaches that organisations of this type are an indispensable element of social life...especially in modern industrialised societies ... They are indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice, for the just rights of working people ... their union remains a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it.*"

These various encyclicals have been brought together in the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. I would draw your attention in particular to chapter six, entitled 'Human Work'. Quoting more recent authoritative statements by Pope John Paul II, the pontifical council states: *"Today, unions are called to act in new ways, widening the scope of their activity of solidarity so that protection is afforded to the traditional categories of workers but also to workers with non-standard or time limited contracts, workers in those jobs are threatened by business mergers..."*

And, on the broader role for unions, what does the Government have to say about paragraph 307 of the pontifical commission's *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church* where it states: *"...beyond their function of defending and vindicating, unions have the duty of acting as representatives working for the proper arrangement of economic life... unions and other forms of labour associations are to work in cooperation with other social entities and are to take an interest in the management of public matters. Union organisations have the duty to exercise influence in the political arena"*.

My point to Minister Andrews is that the core documents of Catholic social teaching in no way seek to marginalise the role of trade unions. Nor do they seek to marginalise the role of the State in bringing about a fair industrial system through instrumentalities such as an independent industrial commission. In fact, the reverse.

Coming closer to our own time and place, I am sure the Government will also be interested in the views of Bishop Kevin Manning, the Catholic Bishop of Parramatta, who recently told the 'Sydney Morning Herald': *"Labour market flexibility is not a good in itself. If flexible arrangements undermine the ability of workers to earn a living wage or to plan a family, then the state has a responsibility to intervene in favour of the common good."*

That is what we find in Catholic social teaching. That is exactly what Justice Henry Bourne Higgins, the son of a Methodist minister, concluded when he inserted the arbitration power in the Constitution and when he handed down the Harvester Judgment in 1908.

Justice Higgins came from a generation of Australian evangelicals many of whom were actively engaged in the formation of the Australian Labor movement during the last decade of the 19th century. They witnessed first hand the misery of the depression of 1890. They witnessed first hand the impact of the shearers' strikes and the maritime strikes of 1891. And what they witnessed in terms of the impact on the lives of working families of the time – the weak, the powerless and the vulnerable – were policies of the State which were not in their view compatible with an informed Christian conscience.

So when we today turn to the great challenges of our age and the legislation before our Parliament next week, surely it must say something to those who occupy the Treasury benches in Canberra when there is virtually a unanimous cry of concern from the combined Christian Churches. This rarely happens in Australian politics. The Churches do not speak with one voice. But when they do, there is, I would think,

something of a prophetic voice speaking to the politicians of our age to sit up, take note and to act.

And that brings me to the nature of my call to you this evening – in the halls of this proud, Christian evangelical college here at the University of New South Wales.

My challenge to each of you tonight is that on the question of Christianity in politics, on the great debate which is about to engulf our country on the future of the laws that will govern every workplace and every working family in the nation, it is impossible for you to simply be an indifferent observer.

It is my argument that it is incumbent on each of you to become engaged.

It is incumbent on each of you to become active.

It is incumbent on each of you to make your voice heard.

Evil prevails only when good men remain silent.