

Are Australian Values Christian Values?

Greg Clarke

Australian Christian Lobby address 2006
22 Sept 2006

To begin, I want to congratulate the ACL on pinpointing tonight's topic. From the front pages of the papers, to talkback, to internet surveys, to the cartoonists and satirists, discussion of values has been the subject of the week.

Indeed, Jim Wallace and his staff seem to have put their finger on one of the key issues with which our politicians will run towards the next election. We are in the hot seat tonight as we think about a Christian approach to this subject of values.

To have recognised this six months ago, when this conference was being planned, is great testimony to the capacity of the ACL to understand the mood of the times in this country in relation to spiritual and moral issues.

And can I express my own excitement and sense of honour at being asked to give this year's dinner address. To be able to speak my mind on this topic as you begin your annual conference, and to be given complete freedom to do so, is an immense privilege—one that I take very seriously and prayerfully.

I suspect I have been given the gig for at least three reasons:

Reason One

* the first is that I direct a Christian scholarship project called CASE, based in New College at the University of New South Wales, and have met Jim and others at various Christian events in which we are all involved. There is a growing sense in this country of the importance of high-level reflection by Christians on matters of public life. And there is also a growing awareness of the flipside—the importance to Australian public life of the input of Christians.

At CASE, and in our New College Lecture series, we aim to fulfil two important tasks:

1. getting smart Christian people to do the hard work of thinking theologically about the intellectual and social issues of our times
- and
2. contributing to public debate with events, publications and media involvement.

ACL's goals seem to align well with these goals of CASE, and so I am very happy to be here tonight aiding the work of both organizations.

So thank you for the invitation.

Reason Two

* the second reason I'm here is because of a murder mystery.

My own public profile in the past two years has been linked, for better or worse, with the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, that wild adventure into the origins of Christianity, the sinister secret behaviour of the Church and the supposed marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

As I travelled around Australia speaking about this novel's view of Christianity, I felt I learnt a great deal about the spiritual issues that interest Australians.

Speaking and writing on *The Da Vinci Code* taught me that there is a great variety of views about religion out there in Australia. While an easy majority of Australians still identify themselves as Christians in one way or another, when you talk to them one by one, a diverse set of beliefs comes out of their mouths.

On one night, in Wagga Wagga, I met within the space of half an hour a practising Gnostic who followed the teachings of a particular modern mystical prophet, a practising Buddhist who had converted from Christianity because he thought it was too hypocritical, a bunch of Christians from local churches of various styles and creeds, and a visiting muslim student who was doing a study of the Bible's historical accuracy. I met some rather zealous atheists, too!

I learnt that when it comes to religious beliefs, the statistics won't always tell us the true story. To find out what someone believes, you have to ask them specific questions.

I'll come back to that idea later.

My *Da Vinci Code* touring also taught me that not many people know much about Christianity anymore.

When tonight we talk about 'Christian values', not too many of the Australian population really grasp what we mean by that phrase.

In fact some of us here tonight might not be sure what we think of it either. Some of us may be more certain about what **Australian** values are than what Christian values are. Part of the reason for this is that no-one knows much about the Bible any more.

The teachers and academics all admit this is true. In the recent Australian History Summit held at Parliament House, Emeritus Professor Geoffrey Blainey highlighted the problem, as did a number of other speakers:

Many of the great statements and parliamentary debates, be it about Judas, 13 pieces of silver or touching the hem of government, mean nothing now. Yet to that generation they were made more powerful because they were metaphors chosen from the Bible. Somehow you have to bring back this knowledge irrespective of the vehicle you use.¹

We can hardly expect Australians—or anyone, for that matter—to know what Christian values are without knowing the source of those values, the Bible.

Christian values don't emerge from nowhere—they are found in Christ himself. And we learn about Christ through the words of Scripture—without the Bible somewhere in its appropriate place within the education system, not only in the home, we will continue to have generations of citizens with little grasp of what Christianity really is all about.

This is not a suggestion to proselytise in the classroom—far from it. It is merely the acknowledgement that in order to understand yourself as an Australian, you have to have some knowledge of the Bible.

In fact, we need a Bible Literacy Project. A project that will teach the Bible—teach it, rather than preach it—so that our children can understand their history, their art, their literature, and the major religion in the country.

There's a huge project underway in the United States, led by academics and teachers, both Jewish and Christian. It's called the Bible Literacy Project, It might form the backbone for something similar here.

When the US textbook was launched, one Washington newspaper ran with the headline, "Bible textbook could circumvent culture war".² Could it be so in Australia, too?

Reason Three

* and the third reason I'm here tonight is to do with a brief opinion piece I published a little while ago on Australian values.

My training is in literature and I spent twelve years of my life engaged in theological editing. I tend to notice words—obsessively.

I find it hard to walk past a misspelled shop sign without going inside and pointing out to the poor shop owner that the apostrophe is in the wrong place! Annoying to me! Annoying to the shopowner!

Around a year ago, I was reading a news story about a forum the Prime Minister had called with muslim leaders to discuss Islamic extremism. He shared his mind on the way he would approach the leaders during the meeting. And I felt very concerned about some of the words he used.

Here's the quote; pay attention to his words; I wonder what you think of it:

I will be reminding them [Muslim leaders], as I remind all Australians, our common values as Australians transcend any other allegiances or commitments, and I will be talking in practical ways about how these goals might be achieved.³

Are you with the PM here? Do you agree with his statement that “our common values as Australians transcend any other allegiances or commitments”? What is he saying here?

I’m actually deeply offended and worried by his statement.

My obsession with words forces me to notice that he is claiming here that our national values ‘transcend’ all other commitments. I can’t think of a single religious person—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or otherwise—who could agree with this statement. In fact, many would regard it as the ultimate act of blasphemy to suggest that there is a higher allegiance than one’s God.

Now, it was said on the fly in a radio interview; I may be reading too much into it; perhaps my word obsessiveness is taking over. If the Prime Minister was claiming that there is a kind of natural law which all human beings, by the very nature of the universe, understand and respect, then I can go part way down that path with him.

Yes, there are many shared values, morals, and a common conscience. Most religions, cultures and societies agree on many of these things. C.S. Lewis famously claimed that it would be “the abolition of man” to deny this.

But to suggest there are values that **transcend** religious beliefs—well, we are coming to the nub of our problematic topic tonight.

While we are on the topic of obsession over words, I have just this week read the government discussion paper on the proposed citizenship test. I suspect many of you are also following this debate closely.

Here’s what Andrew Robb writes in the Foreword:

Australia has successfully combined people into one family with one overriding culture, based on a set of common values.

Andrew Robb, Foreword to *Australian Citizenship: much more than a ceremony*, government discussion paper, September 2006.

There is one word in this sentence that bothers me: the word ‘has’. Has Australia already achieved what he describes here?

What Andrew Robb here claims is already the case, I suggest instead is a proposed ideal that we may or may not choose to pursue. I can think of a substantial number of Australians—white, black, Christian, muslim, migrant, native, urban, rural, who would find it hard to agree with Robb’s confident statement of one-ness, of a single national culture.

I know I’m a fusspot about words, but we have to pay attention to them. This kind of ‘from on high’ declaration that this is what Australia is—one family, one people, one culture, one set of values—should cause Christians to prick up their ears and pay attention.

For as long as we **agree** with the set of common values being described, such comments don't seem to bother us. And one would be hard-pressed to oppose the list of values that Andrew Robb suggests later in his Foreword are commonly held by Australians—values such as the freedom and dignity of the individual, and the spirit of a fair go.

But what if a time comes when we Christians **disagree** with the values of the nation, as many do now in Holland, for example, where immigrants must agree to a tolerant approach to sexuality, abortion and euthanasia?

What if you disagree with some common Australian values right now? When we think like that, we might as Christians worry a bit more about signing on to a charter of national values.

It seems to me this topic, at this conference, is extraordinarily important for our understanding of how the Christian community relates to the state. And yet the question I was given—"Are Australian values Christian values?"—has really had me stumped. Because it seems to me that I could pretty much equally answer it **YES** or **NO**.

I realised as I was preparing material that I was struggling to come down on either side with an answer. Why am I finding it so hard to say 'yes' or 'no' to this question? I came to realise I had two problems with the question itself.

The word 'values'

1. Although I said that people need to know the Bible in order to understand Christian values, **values** just isn't really much of a Christian word. 'Values' language just doesn't seem to sit properly with Christian thinking. It's a relatively recent invention, compared with such words as 'ethics', 'morals' or 'virtues'. Whereas those words hark back to Graeco-Roman philosophers, before Christian times, 'values' seems to be a product of the recent economic age. It displaced 'virtue' and 'vice', as the modern age sought more utilitarian or malleable means of describing what society judges desirable. Values seems too modern a concept to connect very easily with the Christian faith of old.

Values float up from uncertain origins. As a Christian, then, I am often labelling things as values, when in my theological mind they are something else. So, we might say today that "tolerance" is a Christian value, whereas it would be more accurate, and dare I say more useful, to talk of the fruits of the Spirit—patience, kindness, self-control. Each of these three fruits of a life lived in step with God's Spirit seems to me to offer more than the abused and over-used word, 'tolerance'.

I'm not suggesting a non-Christian is never patient or kind or controlled! It's just that we Christians attach a particular depth of meaning to those words which is captured by 'tolerance', and we see our capacity to act this way as an outcome of God's spirit in our lives.

Today, 'values' has found acceptance among authorities as a term for elevation or transcendence that manages to keep religion out of the story. It has sidelined virtues (too prescriptive and do-goodish for Aussies), beliefs (too specific), and even rights (too PC).

[To describe “what we value” places the significance back on us and our choices, rather than on any sense of duty (Kant) or any sense of just how things are (natural law, Hooker and Aquinas). This makes it a word that is attractive to an age where liberty and freedom of choice is mandatory, but we are being forced to explore the limits of that freedom.]

We talk about ‘values’, because in some sense they are floating free of religion and free of ideology. They are being determined, instead, by cultural forces. In his September 11 address delivered at the US Embassy here in Canberra, the Prime Minister used the word ‘values’ six times in the four paragraphs of the speech. In that speech, the Prime Minister’s emphasis was on *common* values (he used the word ‘universal’), and he said that the 9/11 attacks were “an attack on values that the entire world holds in common” (which, if you think about it for a few seconds, can’t possibly be true).

But I think I know what he meant. He was endeavouring to express that sense of something elevating and meaningful that doesn’t refer to religion but appeals instead to culture.

It seems not too difficult to identify a cluster of values that most people agree are Australian. Few people object, for instance, to the values lists that are now taught in our public schools. And we have seen various lists this week in the press:

Kim Beazley: respect for each other, mateship, fairness, freedom, respect for our laws.⁴

Peter Costello: economic opportunity, security, democracy, personal freedom, strong physical and social infrastructure.⁵

Andrew Cameron: put a sock in it, she’ll be right, it’s the vibe, your honour.⁶

There’s something correct about all of these. There’s plenty of agreement. But can these values really float free of religious ideas or ideological shaping?

If we move beyond slogans and cuteness (“I like beetroot on my hamburger”), we start to see glimpses of the religious undercoat to the values picture.

Some of the values suggested as Australian this week sound like they come from the classical world—respect for all the gods, decency, democracy; others are drawn more from Jewish or Christian sources—treating men and women equally, working diligently, compassion for the poor.

These are **not** universal values that all people everywhere have always held; rather, they spring from specific moral and spiritual wells. Ask any historian or theologian—we may think they are common to everyone, but they are not.

Some values simply aren’t common to all. For instance, cows are less valued in Australia than they are in India—for religious reasons. And some of the things that matter most to people—the things

they most value—are very specific to their religion, such as the veneration of the physical presence of the Koran for muslims.

Christians value forgiveness—but do Australians?

Christians value sacrificial love for your neighbour—but do Australians?

Christians value being honest, even when no-one is watching—but do Australians?

When we start to talk about specific beliefs and the values that flow from them, the question of what values we share gets harder to answer.

The rule of law

The second reason I have struggled to answer yes or no to this question, “Are Australian values Christian values?” is I feel that the question may mask a deep-seated anxiety that our country’s leaders are experiencing, particularly a lack of nerve about the rule of law.

Most politicians have pointed out that it is an Australian value to respect the rule of law, but how confident in it are we as a means of governing the community?

We shouldn’t need a pledge on the VISA application form that says “I agree to abide by Australian law and respect Australian values while in Australia”. The first part of the sentence is fine; but the second half is not. How could it be enforced?

The law should contain what is required for a civil and free society. The law will be serving certain values, but I suspect the desire to add a charter of values to it—when there has been such resistance for a long time to a bill of rights—says more about the attendant fears of the day in Australia than it does about what would be good for the country’s future.

Should all immigrants agree to obey the law of the land? Well, that’s an easy question to answer. Of course. Should they agree to uphold Australian values? I don’t know what to say. I find myself wondering whether that would take us beyond the borders of what a government should be deciding.

There is, of course, something greater than the law, and that is the Spirit. But the Spirit is a far more specific means of transcendence to Christians than are ‘values’. And talk of the Spirit takes us into a religious sphere where no-one wants the state to tread. So with the law we must be content.

But I’m not a lawyer, and I expect and indeed hope for some vigorous debate on this point.

So, I’ve explained to you some of my reticence in answering the question posed to me. I worry about whether the word ‘values’ really covers what Christians are on about. And I’m concerned that the government should stick with the law, and let the churches, the community groups and individuals do the talking about what values matter to us.

But what can I leave you with in answer to our question, “Are Australian values Christian values?” In order to give you some sort of meaningful framework or introduction to the sort of issues you will deal with throughout the conference tomorrow, what can I say?

You see, tomorrow, you will hear from some of the most influential political figures in the country. They will no doubt have certain agendas they wish to present to you, certain ways of winning you to them, certain emphases that are suited to a gathering of Christians with a love of their country.

Tonight, we need to prepare the ground so that you can actually *think* about what they say to you, and not just react in the heat of the moment.

I have no idea what Peter Costello, Wayne Swan and the others have for you on the questions of values, but I do know that it will be persuasive and you will need to step back and think about how well it matches with your professed Christian faith.

I am then, going to urge you towards a position of moderation on the topic of values. It is very difficult to urge anyone toward a moderate position! It’s much easier to urge people toward an extreme!

But the only way I can see to answer the question, “Are Australian values Christian values” is to say, “Some are, some aren’t”. That’s my answer. Some are, some aren’t.

This moderate response steers a sensible path between the remote poles of theocracy and separatism. Between expecting the country to be in step with Christians, and having no input at all to how we live as a society.

The moderate response admits that there is a Christian story in the background of much of Australian life—for instance, in our approaches to work, law and education (“tools, rules and schools”). There is a Christian heritage.

But it also recognizes that Australia is far from “a Christian nation”—that title should be reserved purely for the Christian church, those followers of Christ whom theologians teach have become the “people of God” and who see the awaited “new heavens and new earth” described in the biblical Book of Revelation, chapters 21-22, as their true home.

Some Australian values are Christian values. And some aren’t.

I propose, then, a series of “Some’ statements to guide Christians as they think about their involvement in the national values debate, and to guide others who are interested in sorting out how the Christian faith limits and directs a Christian’s political priorities.

1. “Some Australian values are things Christians admire”.

Of course they are. There is so much in the Australian spirit that Christians want to celebrate and be proud of. We might include here a version of ‘mateship’, that stands by a friend in the toughest

of circumstances. Perhaps we Christians would call it 'lovingkindness' or 'brotherliness/sisterliness' instead. But whatever we call it, it's a part of Australian culture that matches really well with what Christians value.

Other contenders include an idea of fairness ('the fair go'), respect for individual freedom and individual responsibility, and pursuing peace. The goal of peace is something that Aussies and Christians share.

2. "Some Australian values can be traced back to Christian ideas".

Here I am thinking particularly of something like caring for those in desperate need, a concept which in Australian welfare history springs directly from the words of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 25:35, where Jesus says the way his followers treat those in need will reflect the way they treat him. If you did something for the 'least' of you brothers, you did it for him).⁷

Often, such values can be traced back to some sort of Christian origin. Not always, but often.

3. "Some Australian values are not Christian values".

Just think of the flipside of the examples in our first two statements. One example is sticking with your mates, regardless of the cost to your actual sister/wife/children. Another is *ignoring* those in desperate need, as appears to have been the case with Delmae Barton up at Griffith University, lying for six hours in a bus stop after a stroke, without a helping hand being raised. When Australians act in this way—Christians or not—the Christians have a tiny, underused word which summarises the behaviour: 'sin'.

We tend only to mention *positive* values when we draw up values list, but all of us could equally easily reel off a list of values Australians hold that are less than honourable.

Ripping off the boss. Getting away with it. Doing the bare minimum. She'll be right—when she won't be right unless we get up off our backsides and do something quick! Ignoring the stranger. Using up more than our fair share.

Do you know, last month the head of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Professor Ian Lowe, stood in this same spot and identified **consumerism** as Australia's new unofficial national religion. And I suspect he's correct. We worship at Westfields. Now there's an Australian value for our times that you will struggle to find in the Scriptures.

Christians don't really expect people to live up to their values. Christians expect human beings to be selfish, fearful, angry and ignorant. We're not pleased about it, but we're realistic. Because we know that's what we are like, too.

Somewhere within the values discussion, it needs to be noted that there are certain values which society implicitly or explicitly encourages and supports, that reflect badly on the human race. These are things for which Christians use the word 'sin'.

4. “Some non-Christian values are not Australian values”.

Despite the awkward double-negative, this statement is important. There are aspects of non-Christian value systems that most of us would call un-Australian. For example, feeding a cow instead of a disabled child is not in keeping with the way Australians value cattle or children. There will certainly be some values held strongly in non-Christian religious worldviews that are not compatible with broad Australian values. This is an important aspect of the current values debate, and we can't ignore it.

Different belief systems will produce some values that just aren't shared by mainstream Australia. We're going to have to work out, lovingly and wisely, what to do about that.

5. “Some Australian values are common to many religious and secular faiths”

Here is where most politicians and secular commentators wish to locate the national discussion about values. There are indeed plenty of values on which many religions agree; there is a lot of common ground. Maybe we should just focus on that.

But if we make this statement the leading statement in the values debate, as Howard seemed to suggest in his radio interview quote earlier on, we are ignoring the insights in our first four points. We may lose a lot of significant input from specific religious traditions, too, and find ourselves flailing about for a new kind of 'religion without a creed, just values'. As one commentator has said, "A policy based only on values eventually becomes a crusade."⁸

If we Christians can make this kind of moderate thinking clear to those around us, it is my view that the Christian faith will be seen in its best light.

It won't be seen as bullying and coercing others to believe as we do and behave as we do or to hold to our values without having our beliefs. Nor will we be ignored, because we will be pointing out where certain 'values' are in fact drawn from the wells of Christian thought, from the Bible, and from the mouth of Jesus himself.

Even more importantly, if Christians **live out** Christian values—if we bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control—then the nation will be a better place and the name of Jesus will be honoured. They will see our good deeds and give glory to God.

¹ [http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/5B7E6762-18E9-4D98-A08E-](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/5B7E6762-18E9-4D98-A08E-6BCAA7C1B1DE/13788/history_summit_transcript1.pdf)

[6BCAA7C1B1DE/13788/history_summit_transcript1.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/5B7E6762-18E9-4D98-A08E-6BCAA7C1B1DE/13788/history_summit_transcript1.pdf)

² http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Site/News/bibl_news050922KnightRidder.htm.

³ <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Howard-to-urge-Muslims-to-take-lead/2005/08/22/1124562782889.html>.

⁴ <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/beazley-proposes-visitors-migrants-agree-to-values/2006/09/11/1157826875313.html>

⁵ <http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/subscribe-to-our-values-or-dont-come-here/2006/02/23/1140670203748.html?page=fullpage#>

⁶ [http://www.case.edu.au/detail.html?&cHash=66617921a0&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=45&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=46](http://www.case.edu.au/detail.html?&cHash=66617921a0&tx_ttnews[backPid]=45&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=46)

⁷ <http://www.australiaschristianheritageforum.org.au/resources/RobinsonandJuddsPaper.pdf>

⁸ Kate Legge, "Just Keep Walking", *The Weekend Australian* magazine, 1-2 July 2006, pp.16-20.