



## **Representing Jesus: Public Christianity in a late modern world**

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*The full text of this paper (6,300 words) commencing on page 3 is preceded by a 1,000 word summary which is immediately below.*

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### **SUMMARY**

In *Voting For Jesus*, Amanda Lohrey criticises aspects of the current relationship between faith and politics in contemporary Australia. But deeper reflection on the nature of the Australian ‘secular consensus’ is needed. I want to defend the secularity of the public sphere – but for explicitly Christian reasons. Secularists need to give greater recognition to the ‘moral sources’ of modernity, which includes Christianity, and politically active Christian religionists need to think more carefully about the political logic of their faith.

Most mainstream religious traditions still assume the procedural neutrality of the liberal public sphere, but the newer ‘fundamentalist’ forms are less willing to do so. The underlying tension is about the very terms in which public life is framed. What is needed is a sympathetic conversation about the cultural sources of the secular consensus, as has been exemplified in the Ratzinger-Habermas dialogue and between Jeffrey Stout and the so-called ‘new traditionalists’.

More attention needs to be given to the way that late modern capitalist development has created a society that is more consumerist than civic; and, in the political scene, to the contradictions between values rhetoric and political realities. The challenge is to critically engage with fundamental questions of moral community and to re-visit the relationship between Christian tradition and democratic values.

In doing so, the alternatives of privatised faith or Christian nationalism are not the only options. In recent years there has been a significant and influential movement committed to recovering the ‘eschatological politics’ central to the Christian gospel. In this view the accommodation between church and political power has profoundly distorted the communication of the gospel of Christ. The political task of the church is simply to bear witness to the primacy of Jesus. As Yoder and Hauerwas have famously stated: the church best serves the world by being the church.

However, it is a mistake to regard their approach as sectarian and disengaged. It is rather a different kind of engagement that is subversive - in the same way that the early Christians refused to be content with being a religious sect either within Judaism or Hellenism and challenged the authority of Caesar in the name of another king Jesus. Their refusal to acknowledge the sacral kingship of Caesar brought about both persecution and the conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity itself as the religion of Empire.

Oliver O'Donovan goes beyond Yoder to claim that the underlying Christian vision of the reign of Christ was a key factor in shaping the present form of secular society. O'Donovan (and Rowan Williams) also claim that without this theological rationality we experience modernity as menace, opening the way for the return of new forms of totalising politics demanding the allegiance of citizens to the larger causes of a sacred state or economy.

In contemporary Australia we have increased evangelical involvement in electoral politics and public policy but it would be a mistake to regard consumerist Pentecostalism or the politically organised Christian right as being representative of evangelical Christianity in general. If there is a danger of an anti-democratic Christian nationalism the impetus will not come from within the Christian community, but rather (as it has in America) from the co-option of Christian imagery and language by hard right political protagonists.

There are a number of key challenges for Christians constructively engaged in electoral politics and public policy issues who should also be engaged in a process of deep structural renewal of the internal life of the church:

**Recovering the narrative primacy of Jesus.** A gospel which is reduced to a privatised personal relationship with Jesus is a gospel abstracted from the history of Jesus.

**Disavowing Constantine.** This is easier said than done, since most mainline denominations still utilise symbols of power, own valuable real estate, support the theological academy and foster linkages between church leaders and secular elites.

**Renewing the politics of Jesus in the life of Christian congregations.** Most Christians have lost any sense of the political nature of the practices of baptism, eucharist and community. The credibility of Christian public activity depends largely on recovering the political integrity of a communal life modelled on the upside down peaceable kingdom of Jesus.

**Renewing Christian participation in welfare and pastoral care.** How will Christians respond to the secularisation and professionalisation of welfare which loosens the connection between welfare and the life of church community; treats welfare separately from evangelism; does not see welfare as central; and allows Christian welfare agencies to be a part of the apparatus of the state?

**Defending liberal institutions in terms of a Christian secularity.** This means defending the separation of church and state, the rule of law, freedom of speech, protection of civil rights and so forth, and being concerned about the accountability and transparency of secular government and the discursive conditions of an open society.

**Engaging constructively in a range of policy issues.** Rather than promoting behaviours that conform to Christian principles, the purpose of Christian lobbying should be to maintain the conditions and culture of civic freedoms. This differs significantly from that of (neo-) liberal freedom, which emphasises individual autonomy and has much less of a stress on the wider community.

**Participating in the reflexive debates about modernity's 'good life'.** Christians should be less concerned to shore up eroding 'Judeo-Christian values' and instead aim to open up discussion on the deeper moral/metaphysical issues concerning the nature of humanity, the implications of new technological powers, our relationship to the wider non-human world, and the kind of political institutions that are needed to ensure equity as well as peace and prosperity. The challenge of Christians is to demonstrate what their eschatologically oriented faith in the primacy of Jesus means in the context of this extraordinary, risk laden world.

## **Representing Jesus: Public Christianity in a late modern world**

*(Full text)*

In her recent Quarterly Essay, *Voting For Jesus*, Amanda Lohrey (2006) reflects on the recent resurgence of a more politicised Christianity in contemporary Australian politics. Lohrey is by no means antagonistic to the free pursuit of Christian faith within the within the sphere of personal freedom made possible by the secular liberal state, as is indicated by her sympathetic accounts of conversations with young Australian Christians that 'bookend' her essay. However, she is quite hostile towards the recent interventions of right wing Christian groups in Australian public life. She is scornful of many of these groups for their failure to be entirely honest about their Christian agenda. She is also critical of the way in which present political parties have exploited the growing religiosity of the Australian community. Finally, she is affronted by those, such as Sydney Catholic Archbishop George Pell, who claim that secular democracy is ultimately nihilistic, accusing Pell of 'illiteracy' in promoting a return to a theocratic form of politics. Against such politicised forms of Christian intervention she passionately defends the secular consensus forged through bitter experience of the excesses of past religious hegemony as vital for protecting the rights, freedom and dignity of all individuals, no matter what their religious convictions might be.

I too am supportive of the institutional conditions provided by a secular state governing under the rule of law. It is these conditions that enable conversation about matters of meaning and truth that Lohrey models (to some extent) in her essay. However, I think that she needs to be a bit more reflective about the problematic nature of the Australian 'secular consensus' in these late modern times. In particular I don't think she adequately recognises the growing cultural and institutional crisis confronting advanced industrial societies such as Australia – a crisis of which the so-called culture wars are but one symptom.

In this paper I want to encourage a reflective conversation between secularists and religionists that avoids the animosity and hostility of recent debates, especially in the US (see Goldberg 2006a; 2006b). There are significant changes afoot, which indicate that the recent increased visibility of religious movements and voices in political life is not just a phase in the historical cycle of sectarian religious activity in Australia (cf Hogan 1987). Here as elsewhere it is possible that we will see the emergence of a 'post-secular consensus' in which, for better or worse, 'religion' plays a central role. In Australia that could take the shape of a kind of reactionary Christian nationalism. Although I am a Christian I don't think that this would be a good thing at all. I want to defend the secularity of the public sphere – but for explicitly Christian reasons. I believe that secularists need to give much greater recognition to what Charles Taylor (1989) calls the 'moral sources' of modernity, which includes Christianity. Conversely, I also believe that politically active Christian religionists need to think much more carefully about the political logic of the faith that they ostensibly confess before they try to take advantage of this time of cultural flux.

### **A resurgence of public religion**

The resurgence of religion in modernised societies and its expression in political debate especially at election times is of course not unique to Australia. It is most visible in the United States, with the powerful influence of the so-called Christian right and its partial capture of (or co-option by) the Republican Party. The theocratic ambitions of some of its constituents are much more explicit and extreme and in recent times there have been several studies documenting the theocratic ambitions of the so-called dominionists (Hedges, 2005; Goldberg 2006a). The public role of religion in Europe has been highlighted by religious figures such as Pope Benedict XVI anxious about secularisation

and a growing intolerance towards Christianity and also by the presence of assertive Islamic communities in several European countries. Beyond that, at a global level, Christianity and Islam are growing rapidly within the developing countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa. Philip Jenkins (2002) describes such developments as having enormous long term implications for global politics, predicting the emergence of a significant fault line between a religious south and a secular and demographically shrinking west.

As Lohrey notes there are many 'secularists' who have assumed that religion would, in the course of societal modernisation, gradually disappear as a significant factor in public life. Certainly it is true that for some time, in Australia at least, the dominant discourses in public policy, business, high culture and academia have become thoroughly secularised, with most disciplines no longer considering 'god questions' to have much relevance. For the highly influential political philosopher John Rawls, that's the way it should be. Along with other liberal theorists such as Richard Rorty and Robert Audi, Rawls argued that religious language has no place in public discourse. In his view religionists wishing to participate in moral debates should be obliged to 'translate' their moral views into a more universally acceptable or accessible secular language.

For secularists, the resurgence of 'religion' is thus something to be lamented, and regarded as a reactionary rearguard response to the disruptions of modernity and globalisation. They hope that this resurgence will be only short term, and the ongoing progress of global economic development and societal modernisation will hasten the inevitable decline of public religion (Gauchet 1997). In the meantime the antics of religious people are tolerated, but hardly taken seriously (see Fish 2006).

### **Accommodating religious voices in a secular public sphere**

However, it is more likely that conservative political religion is not going to go away soon. Questions of god (and 'values') are becoming a prominent feature in public debates. This has forced a re-think about how the expression of 'religion' within the public sphere should be managed. Obviously, in a liberal society with its commitment to free speech and plurality of opinion, religious voices can't very well be silenced in the way that they continue to be in illiberal regimes such as post-Communist China. How then can they be accommodated? Jürgen Habermas, who has been the leading European scholar in relation to the forms of communicative ethics in the modern public sphere, now acknowledges the legitimacy and, indeed, *value* of religious arguments in public debate (Habermas 2006). Habermas agrees that it is a bit much to ask of religious believers that they should 'translate' their beliefs into secular forms of public reason in order to be accepted into public conversation. In a similar way in a North American context, Jeffrey Stout's book, *Democracy and Tradition* (Stout 2004) reflects a more sympathetic and constructive engagement with religious critics of liberalism (the 'new traditionalists') and the claims of public religion.

However, such attempts to accommodate religious reasoning still generally assume the procedural neutrality of the liberal public sphere with respect to any larger substantive visions of reality and the good life. This presumed neutrality has been challenged in recent years by various communitarians and civic republicans who have argued that insofar as a liberal polity lacks any tacit consensus about a shared moral framework it loses its way (Sandel 1998), or alternatively that this neutrality is spurious, masking a substantive (liberal) vision. Stanley Fish (1996), for example, has argued that the procedural open-ness of the liberal public sphere necessarily presumes some kind of primary commitments that are themselves not open to dispute and negotiation. Or as Charles Taylor once put it, liberalism is a fighting creed (Taylor, 1992).

Indeed, the public assertion of 'religion' has prompted some liberals such as Richard Rorty (2003) to acknowledge and make explicit the substantive core of the liberal creed and to argue forcefully that even if religionists can join the public conversation they will still need to do so within the framework of an enlightenment worldview and values (see also Bronner 2004). Rorty et al are

saying in effect: our worldview is the norm, we define the rules, and ‘religion’ needs to accept that framework and play by these rules. That of course is what most mainstream religious traditions have generally done (see Fish 1996), but the newer ‘fundamentalist’ forms are less willing to do so.

The underlying tension expressed in the so-called ‘culture wars’ is thus not just in relation to specific moral issues but is also about the very terms in which public life is framed. It is this deeper disagreement that prompts the more acrimonious kind of language evident in George Pell’s remarks about the nihilism of secular democracy (Pell 2004) reported by Amanda Lohrey and her contemptuous dismissal of them. She probably has good grounds for being suspicious of Pell’s proposed form of normative democracy, yet it would be better to recognise that the ideas presented by Pell are not just those of a reactionary theocrat, but overlap those of various civic republicans—such as Michael Sandel (1998) and Benjamin Barber (1984) in the US – and indeed of Clive Hamilton (2004) and other social democrats in an Australian context. There is a legitimate debate about the ‘thin-ness’ of procedural liberal democracy and the need to articulate some kind shared ‘public philosophy’ to underpin democratic institutions and civil society (see also Dixon 1999).

Pell certainly muddies the debate with his bald assertion that without religion a secular democracy is found wanting. Equally it is unhelpful for Lohrey to take umbrage and assert that you don’t have to be religious to be moral. What is at issue is not so much the morality of individuals, be they religious or secular, but the shared ethos and culture embedded within social institutions and practices, and in particular the extent to which a liberal democratic ethos is being eroded as a result of social, economic, political and cultural changes associated with secularisation/modernisation. Rather than engage in hostile and defensive rhetoric, it would be more useful for both sides to engage in ‘immanent critique’ of their own positions and be more willing to engage in sympathetic conversation about the cultural sources of the secular consensus, as has been exemplified in the Ratzinger-Habermas dialogue (Skidelsky 2005) and between Jeffrey Stout and the so-called ‘new traditionalists’ (Stout 2004).

### **Neo-liberalism and the question of ‘civic values’**

In particular, more attention needs to be given to the corrosive impact late modern capitalist development has had on the secular civic tradition. As many people have observed, (for example Pusey 2003 , Manne 2004, Rundle 2001, Capling et al 1998 ), the past two decades of economic reform in Australia has entailed a dismantling of many of the institutions, conventions and practices of civic culture and the establishment of a neo-liberal market society that is much more consumerist than civic in its orientation.

Of course it is possible that this neo-liberal form of governance is only a passing phase and that Australian civic values are so deeply entrenched that in time they will be reasserted in a new progressive coalition and social movement. Perhaps people will come to see the corrosive effects of a neo-liberalism and will elect governments committed to rebuilding a civic culture founded on values of genuine egalitarianism, cosmopolitan community and democratic open-ness. However there is good reason to think that such shifts are not simply a matter of policy fashion, but reflect the deeper structural effects of a capitalist techno-modernity, both extensively in terms of economic globalisation, trade and ‘development’ and intensively in terms of the inclusion of more and more aspects of life into the domain of commodified consumption.

These deep-rooted changes affect all areas of life. Whilst on the one hand modernity has brought unprecedented affluence that keeps Australians apparently relaxed and comfortable, there are deeper anxieties about what effect this has had on the very conditions of a civilised human existence. Capitalist modernity makes human community more difficult, eroding social capital and fostering a more family oriented and xenophobic individualism; it has resulted in destructive impacts on natural ecosystems and habitats upon which many species depend; and most deeply, it

has brought into question the central humanist assumptions about the nature and dignity of the human person, not only through the possibilities of ongoing technological modification and control of human personhood (a posthuman future) but also by foregrounding the ‘radical contingency’ of the human person in relation to the world picture of post-enlightenment science.

These cultural processes have of course long been described in terms of the progressive ‘disenchantment of the world’, which dissolves the metaphysical grounding of the values we associate with community, nature and the human self, reducing these to an arbitrary ideological consensus. Paradoxically, as many have noted, the process of disenchantment is at the same time a process of re-enchantment through which the profaned and commodified world is invested with a new ‘sacredness’. This ‘return of the sacred’ belies a secular imaginary in which secularisation entails a stripping away of a surface religiosity to reveal the naturally secular. Instead, it may well be that human life, confronted by the mystery and terrors of existence will invariably seek to shield that life through the symbolism of ritual and narratives of the sacred (Eagleton 2006, Girard 1997).

### **The civic values debate in Howard’s Australia**

It is this larger dynamic of a globalising techno-modernity, amazingly productive yet socially disruptive, technologically brilliant yet ecologically unsustainable, culturally nihilistic yet seductively sublime that gets largely obscured in the current debate about ‘civic values’ of which Lohrey’s comments are a part. On the part of the Howard right, this is no doubt convenient. Indeed, the whole discourse about values and citizenship in Australia promoted by the Howard government and the right wing media elites has been a skilful appropriation of a civic/nationalist/religious historical narrative to mask and legitimise the destructive consequences of the neo-liberal revolution (Rundle 2001).

The contradictions between the values rhetoric and the political realities are breathtaking. The Howard government has continued to push an economic reform agenda that fosters an increasingly competitive, consumer oriented society, in which social inequality, economic insecurity and civic conflict are increasing. Environmental challenges, such as climate change, are addressed in a less than adequate way, and Australia is complicit at an international level in regressive policies and the illegitimate war in Iraq. Meanwhile at a political level, many of the institutions, conventions and mechanisms of accountable democracy have been blatantly manipulated (think of the use of taxpayers money for political advertising) and undermined. Despite all this, the Prime Minister and his senior ministers go on about ‘Australian values’, citizenship and social cohesion and the need to keep alive the legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

By and large the left has been suspicious of the rhetoric of core moral values and religious tradition regarding them as a coded attack on multiculturalism and moral pluralism. Yet, as George Lakoff (2004) in the US has argued, the question of values is increasingly central to political debate and the unwillingness of the left to engage in values discourse makes them increasingly politically marginal. As Julia Baird (2006) commented in early 2006, the fact that the progressive left has tended to deny that Christian legacy has allowed the discourse of Judeo-Christian values to be coopted by social conservatives, the religious right and cunning neo-liberals. However Lakoff’s concept of reframing public discourse in terms of an alternative progressive values discourse is also insufficiently mindful of the material and religious/ metaphysical dimensions of a late modern global capitalism. Perhaps the challenge for the progressive left is to expose the hypocrisy of the neo-liberal appropriation of that discourse and to critically engage with fundamental questions of moral community: of freedom and belonging, rights and obligations, equality and diversity – and, most difficult of all to re-engage with questions of religion and the relationship between Christian tradition and democratic values.

## **Recovering the politics of Jesus**

Many Australian Christians, worried about social cohesion and the nihilism of a secular/consumer culture, respond positively to politicians talking about 'Christian values' and the possibility of 're-Christianising' Australian society. This of course is what alarms Lohrey, Marion Maddox (2005) and many others committed to the core liberal and democratic values associated with an enlightenment social imaginary. In Lohrey's view, for God to be at the centre of political life in anything more than a perfunctory or symbolic way means a theocracy. She believes that Christians should acknowledge the core values of a post-enlightenment public culture and tacitly accept the reduction of their set of beliefs and practices to being one response among many to the mystery of existence.

The alternatives of privatised faith or Christian nationalism are however not the only options for the expression of Christian faith in the public sphere. In recent years there has been a significant and influential movement committed to recovering the 'eschatological politics' central to the Christian gospel. This movement has been particularly associated with the work of the late Mennonite theologian John Yoder (1972) and his colleague Stanley Hauerwas (1991) now at Duke University. Yoder et al are critical of what they describe as the 'Constantinian' settlement: the accommodation between the Christian movement and the powers-that-be that followed the conversion of the emperor Constantine in AD 312 and which subsequently shaped the place of Christianity in the wider society. In their view this settlement has profoundly distorted the expression and peaceable communication of the good news that the gospel of Christ is supposed to be about. Despite the fact that the era of Christendom has long since passed, the accommodating Constantinian mindset still lives on in both a privatised spirituality and a renewed Christian nationalism.

According to Yoder the New Testament story of Jesus and the creation of 'the church' entailed a very different kind of politics, a politics that was paradoxically expressed and inaugurated in the life, crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus was interpreted and proclaimed by the first Christians (and orthodox Christians ever since) as the anointing of Jesus not only as Jewish messiah, but also as the 'Lord' who has overcome the principalities and powers, both temporal and spiritual.

The politics of Jesus is an eschatological politics, inasmuch as although the decisive act of inauguration of the kingdom has occurred, nonetheless its full realisation remains in the future. In the meantime it is the task of the church to bear witness to this 'already but not yet' different political order in its own life and community. This does not include trying to 'Christianise' the state and wider civil society through gaining control of legislative power, educational institutions and so forth. That would be to pre-empt the eschatological horizon of salvation history.

The political task of the church is simply to bear witness in a non-coercive to the fundamental claim about the primacy of Jesus as the unique revelation of the Creator God. As Yoder and Hauerwas have famously stated: the church best serves the world by being the church (see Hauerwas 1991).

This position has been sharply criticised by many theologians and politically engaged Christians as a sectarian politics of withdrawal and as a refusal to take responsibility for moral politics in the wider polity. However, it is a mistake to regard their approach as sectarian and disengaged. It is rather a different kind of engagement that simply refuses to accept the Constantinian compromises that have resulted in Christian complicity in so many forms of coercive violence.

Indeed, for Yoder, Hauerwas et al, the Christian story entails a thoroughly subversive form of politics. In recent years the New Testament scholar NT Wright (1997) has argued that in the first century after the time of Jesus, the Jesus movement with its uncompromising claims about the new universal kingdom of Christ came into direct conflict with the cult of Caesar which provided the

ideological glue for the far flung Roman empire. Rather than being content to becoming a religious sect either within Judaism or alongside the variety of Hellenistic cults, the early Christians provocatively challenged the authority of Caesar in the name of another king Jesus. In large part it was their refusal to acknowledge the sacral kingship of Caesar that brought about the periodic waves of persecution. Also it was this public and political claim that ironically eventually resulted in the conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity itself as the religion of Empire.

As we all know, in time this revolutionary and dynamic politics of Jesus in the early church gave rise to a multiplicity of traditions, from the established churches with their institutional inertia, control of property and continuing elite connections, to the bewildering diversity of sects that characterise the Christian movement today. For many critics the long era of Christendom was generally characterised by church-sanctioned repression, patriarchy, coercive violence, resistance to change, discrimination and complicity in imperialism and colonialism. To some extent that's true, but Christendom also gave rise an ongoing process of innovation, dissent and reform, fuelled by the constant reminder that the one who is worshipped as the 'world's true lord' is the one who is known in the humble service of 'the least of these my brethren' (Williams 2005).

### **The legacy of Christian liberalism**

Historian and theologian Oliver O'Donovan (1996) has argued that, despite the entanglements and compromises associated with 1500 years of Christian establishment, the western church has never fully lost sight of the 'eschatological tension' between the kingdom of Christ – enacted in the liturgies and practices of church life – and the forms of imperial, papal monarchical and bureaucratic/technocratic power. Like Yoder, O'Donovan argues that the core political logic of the Christian narrative is not one of the Christianisation of existing political power, but the creation of an alternative form of politics paradigmatically expressed and constituted by the crucifixion of Christ.

O'Donovan goes beyond Yoder, however, to claim that the underlying Christian vision of the reign of Christ was a key factor in shaping the institutions and practices of early modern liberalism including the limitation of the power of the sovereign, the emergence of a constitutional state constrained by the rule of law, the recognition of the rights and freedoms of citizens and the creation of free spaces for civic deliberation (see also Williams 2005).

For O'Donovan, then, the proper and authentic outworking of the politics of Jesus in relation to the wider polity within which the Christian community is located has been the creation of a Christian secularity. Far from fostering a Christian hegemony, this political logic is fundamentally supportive of the conditions of confessional pluralism, an open public sphere in which the Christian gospel, along with other creeds and forms of life, can be freely represented. Such open-ness is not merely a concession to enlightenment values, but expresses the communicative logic of the divinity revealed in Jesus. It is a logic that is incarnational – the Word becomes flesh – and most deeply of all, relational and dialogical, reflecting the trinitarian nature of God's own being and action.

O'Donovan also claims that sans this larger theological rationality and its articulation in public institutions and civic culture, we experience modernity not as freedom but as menace, opening the way for the return of new forms of totalising politics demanding the allegiance of citizens to the larger causes of a sacred state or economy. Rowan Williams, the present the Archbishop of Canterbury made a similar point in a speech on religious diversity in the 'new Europe' given in Brussels at the end of 2005:

.. Western modernity and liberalism are at risk when they refuse to recognise that they are the way they are because of the presence in their midst of that partner and critic which speaks of 'alternative citizenship' - the Christian community. ... the distinctively European style of political argument and



debate is made possible by the Church's persistent witness to the fact that states do not have ultimate religious claims on their citizens. When the Church is regarded as an enemy to be overcome or a private body that must be resolutely excluded from public debate, liberal modernity turns itself into a fixed and absolute thing, another pseudo-religion, in fact. It is important for the health of the political community that it is able to engage seriously with the tradition in which its own roots lie. To say this is not to demand the impossible, a return to some past age when the institutional Church claimed to dictate public policy. But without a willingness to listen to the questions and challenges of the Church, liberal society is in danger of becoming illiberal. Wholesale secularism as a programmatic policy in the state can turn into another tyranny - a system beyond challenge. The presence of the Church at least goes on obstinately asking the state about its accountability and the justification of its priorities. It will not do to forget that the greatest and most murderous tyrannies of the modern age in Europe have been systematically anti-religious - or rather, as I have already hinted, have become pseudo-religions (Williams 2005).

What then should we make of the interventions of a more politicised Christianity in contemporary Australia? Lohrey's title for her essay, 'Voting for Jesus' captures in a rather ironical way the problematic nature of increased evangelical involvement in electoral politics and public policy. The image of Jesus as a political candidate lobbying for people's votes in order to implement a particular political programme seems fanciful and, indeed, a category mistake. Yet it is a useful image to provocatively highlight the danger of politicised religion, all too evident in the US and to a much lesser extent in Australia. Do the recent activities of the Christian right lay the foundations for an anti-democratic Christian nationalism, even Christian fascism?

I don't believe that the impetus for such developments will come from within the Christian community, but rather from the co-option of Christian imagery and language by hard right political protagonists. Recent developments in the US indicate that rather than the evangelicals capturing the Republican Party, it has been more a case of the Republicans selectively and cynically exploiting Christian social anxieties for their own partisan purposes (Sullivan, 2006). As Christian Smith's 2002 study indicates, there is a much greater diversity and degree of political moderation amongst American evangelicals than the dominant stereotypes would suggest.

Likewise, in Australia it would be a mistake to regard the more publicly visible expressions of Hillsong's consumerist Pentecostalism or the politically organised Christian right as being representative of evangelical Christianity in general. The larger picture is one of a positive (though often frustrated) ferment amongst many congregations sincerely wanting to embody a Christianity that is both faithful to the claims of Christ and also constructively engaged with the needs of people in everyday life and community (see Morgan, 2005, for the example of Rick Warren's engagement with issues of global poverty).

The changing conditions of late modern industrial societies will surely prompt a greater level of public engagement by ordinary Christians. Many will be motivated on the one hand by a dismayed response to the moral/ spiritual effects of the acids of modernity and on the other hand by a desire for Christians to give public expression of their conviction that Jesus is the world's true Lord, the way, the truth and the life. I believe that the framework of political theology represented by Yoder, Hauerwas and O'Donovan can foster an engagement that avoids both a reactionary Christian nationalism and a tacit accommodation to a humanist world view.

### **Representing Jesus: Challenges for public Christians**

I mentioned earlier the view of Yoder and Hauerwas that 'the church best serves the world by being the church'. The implication of this is that as Christians become more constructively engaged in electoral politics and public policy issues they should also be engaged in a process of deep

structural renewal of the internal life of the church, in ways that recover the distinctive ‘politics of Jesus’. As I see it, this involves the following key challenges:

**\* Recovering the narrative primacy of Jesus:** In her critical remarks on contemporary Australian Christianity, Lohrey comments on the recent fashion amongst Christians to foreground Jesus and to soft peddle the church and its more formal and archaic practices. She is right to some extent to interpret this as something of a marketing ploy, such that ‘Jesus’ can be distanced from the messiness of church history and become a cipher for whatever spirituality people may wish to invest. For many post-enlightenment Christians, the gospel has indeed been reduced to a privatised personal relationship with Jesus and the hope of being saved in a future life. This is a gospel abstracted from the history of Jesus himself and from the history to which the preaching of the gospel message has contributed, for good and for ill.

Yet the renewed focus on Jesus also reflects a more authentic desire to recover the primacy of Jesus in a Christian understanding of our world and its histories. In his seminal *Politics of Jesus*, Yoder’s purpose was to counter the dominant view that the teaching and life of Jesus had little relevance for contemporary social ethics and that Christian ethical thought needed to be framed by more universalist and/or pragmatic concepts. Likewise, the considerable scholarship of New Testament historian and theologian NT Wright has been devoted to making sense of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish context and also in relation to the theo-politics of the Graeco-Roman world of the first century AD. Beyond that, O’Donovan’s approach to political theology is a model of the way in which the narrative of Jesus’ kingdom provides the lens through which human history including that of Christendom and its secularised aftermath can be interpreted.

The coherence and integrity of ‘Christianity’ stands or fall on what we make of the extraordinary claims that the New Testament makes about Jesus. To its detractors, be they first century pagans or twenty first century secularists, they are preposterous, yet without them Christianity turns into something else altogether.

**Disavowing Constantine:** A recovery the historically grounded kingdom narrative of Jesus provides the necessary basis for coming to terms with the historical legacy of the long era of Christendom. This entails facing up to its deep failings and also honouring the faithfulness of generations of Christians. It also requires over-coming the legacy of Constantinian establishment in the present. This is easier said than done, since most mainline denominations are still enmeshed in these arrangements, including the monarchical/Episcopal symbolism of the episcopacy, the possession of considerable tracts of valuable real estate, the culture and institutions of theological scholarship within the academy, the extensive network of linkages between church leaders and secular elites, professions, civil service and business community. These continue to shape the ‘common sense’ of mainline Christianity. It is not altogether clear what ‘disavowing Constantine’ would mean in these contexts. Should the established churches sever their historical linkages with the state, with ancient universities, and sell their assets and give to the poor? For most to do so would be folly, yet in not doing so, ‘the church’ remains comfortably part of the established order.

**\* Renewing the politics of Jesus in the life of Christian congregations:** Perhaps reform takes place more fruitfully at the grass roots in the communities in which Christians participate. I mentioned earlier the seminal contribution of John Yoder in recovering the distinctive politics of Jesus. Yoder has also argued that one of the fundamental tasks for Christians is to recover the distinctive political practices of egalitarian, peaceable Christian community implicit in their core sacraments. It is at this level that the failure of Christian politics is most evident. Many – perhaps most – Christians have lost any sense of the deeply political nature of the practices of baptism, eucharist, the fostering of diverse skills and contributions of communal members, processes of communal discipline and reconciliation, and forms of communal deliberation on matters of the

common life. The credibility of Christian public activity depends largely on recovering the political integrity of a communal life modelled on the upside down peaceable kingdom of Jesus.

\* **Renewing Christian participation in welfare and pastoral care.** There is a long tradition of Christian involvement in ‘acts of mercy’ and caring for the poor. It is not always adequately recognised that it has been Christians who have been and continue to be at the forefront of providing help and support for marginalised, poor, the sick and so forth. In our contemporary world there are a couple of challenges facing Christians in relation to this participation in welfare activities. One is how we respond to the secularisation of welfare. Although many welfare and advocacy agencies had their beginnings as Christian initiatives, in time they have become professionalised and have come to operate from more general rational and secular principles, and their connection with the life of church community has weakened. There is a tendency therefore for many Christians, particularly in the stream of de-politicised consumer Christianity to treat ‘welfare’ as a secular activity, to be treated separately from evangelism. At the same time there are streams actively engaged in aiding the poor – even though these get to be seen as additional options and not as core business. So, how central or option is caring for/ representing the poor for contemporary Christianity?

The second issue is the extent to which Christian engagement in welfare is animated by notions of charity/philanthropy or justice, and more specifically the extent to which Christian welfare agencies become part of the apparatus of the state. In recent times, neo-liberal governments have both attempted to off-load the responsibility for welfare to the private or voluntary sector, and have also acted to restrict the extent to which such agencies can act as critical or advocacy voices for justice. In the US this has had a peculiar inflection, with the Bush administration’s support for ‘faith based’ agencies, thus adding a sanctified gloss to the structural system of inequality.

These four challenges are focussed on recovering the distinctive politics of Jesus in the life of Christian community. They provide the necessary basis for any credible and faithful engagement with the wider political domain. What should characterise Christian interventions in public life?

\* **Defending liberal institutions in terms of a Christian secularity:** A fundamental aspect of Christian public engagement should be strong support for the ‘Christian secularity’ of the wider public sphere. This means defending those key features of the modern liberal polity: the separation of church and state, rule of law, freedom of speech, protection of civil rights and so forth. As I noted earlier, this commitment arises out of the eschatological politics of the kingdom of Christ, and not out of a desire to contain the excesses of religion.

The defence of Christian secularity should more than the protection of religious freedoms. It should also be particularly concerned about the accountability and transparency of secular government, requiring that government’s honour their responsibilities to maintain the infrastructure of civic life with equity and justice. It is also vitally important that Christians defend the discursive conditions of an open society within which the Christian gospel and other claims to truth may be freely communicated and freely deliberated. As noted earlier, in recent times the present Howard government has significantly compromised each of these three aspects of secular governance. It is unfortunate that many Christians have been prepared to go along (for example) with the Australian government’s condoning of indefinite detention of would-be asylum seekers, use of coercive interrogation of suspected terrorists, and the weakening of the critical independence of the ABC.

\* **Engaging constructively in a range of policy issues:** Simply by being citizens in a complex society, Christians are necessarily participants in the formulation, implementation and ongoing disputation of public policy in many areas. Most Christians, most of the time will be politically inactive, but from time to time will take up one cause or another: from campaigns against abortion

and gay marriage to advocacy for millennium development goals. I believe that rather promoting behaviours that conform to Christian principles, the purpose of Christian lobbying should be to maintain the conditions and culture of civic freedoms. The concept of civic freedom entails both civic rights and civic responsibilities and assumes membership within a political community. It thus differs significantly from that of (neo-) liberal freedom, which emphasises individual autonomy with much less stress on the responsibility to be part of and contribute to the wider community.

**\* Participating in the reflexive debates about modernity's 'good life':** Finally, I believe that Christian involvement in electoral politics and policy debate should be less concerned to shore up eroding 'Judeo-Christian values' and instead aim to open up the deeper moral/metaphysical issues posed by the 'reflexive' conditions of late modernity. A techno-modern order, framed by an enlightenment world view now dominates social and cultural life, yet even as it does so, its ecological, socio-political and metaphysical contradictions become ever more apparent. It is surely better for Christians to participate thoughtfully, constructively and honestly in reflective conversations about the fundamentally religious/theological issues that this situation poses. What is it to be human? Does our deeper understanding of evolutionary origins and emerging technological powers threaten our human-ness or open up the possibilities for genuine moral and communal enhancement? How are we to overcome our destructive relationship to the wider non-human world? Do we need a new religiously based ecological ethic? In our profoundly unequal world, what kind of political institutions are needed to ensure equity as well as peace and prosperity given the constraints of the planet's ecosystems? The challenge of Christians is to demonstrate what their eschatologically oriented faith in the primacy of Jesus means in the context of this extraordinary, risk laden world.

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