RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS SACROSANCT


FULL TEXT

The Christian church may have lost its authority but adherents deserve protection. Religion has been the root cause of so many wars over the millennia and remains the catalyst for conflict to this day. In the Islamic world the age-old Sunni v Shi’ite conflict shows no sign of slowing. In Iraq and Syria Islamic State beheaded far more Shi’ites than Western journalists. Israel’s right to exist is disputed by most of the Arab world—not that conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is anything new.

The Crusaders sent army after army to capture and hold Jerusalem from those they regarded as infidels. Just who were the worst barbarians was at times hard to pick. Jean de Valette, after whom Malta’s capital is named, beheaded all of the prisoners in his dungeons and fired their heads back at his Muslim besiegers.

When I began my time as an organiser of the Labor Party in NSW in late 1971, the “wars” were between Masons and Catholics and communists and Catholics. In Victoria and Queensland, the Catholics walked out of the Labor Party and Labor took decades to recover. The split of the 1950s saw the formation of the Democratic Labor Party, which conspired with the Liberals to keep Labor out of power. In NSW Young Labor in the 1960s, one delegate was exasperated by being accused of not being Catholic enough to be worthy of joining the right. “Yes, but did you go to communion?” was the retort from a fellow delegate after the hapless delegate had informed those present he had been to mass on Sunday.

The NSW right and the Catholic Church were joined at the hip. The mostly Irish working class voted Labor and went to church on Sunday. It was considered a major breakthrough for Catholics in Australia when one finally secured a senior position in a federal -Coalition government. Phillip Lynch was elected deputy leader of the Liberal Party and later became treasurer in the -Fraser government. That occurred more than 40 years ago and those intervening four decades have seen profound change in the way the church is seen by Australians and the way the church sees itself.

In the Sydney archdiocese the man who replaced George Pell, Archbishop Anthony Fisher, has been methodically removing the working-class Laborites from -influence. If you are voting Liberal and/or have links with Opus Dei you are on a roll. The past two -Liberal prime ministers, Tony -Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, are -Catholics and there are many more in the cabinet. There has been a seismic shift of influence in the Catholic Church but the real question is, does it matter?

The answer to that has to be: not much. The Catholic Church and the other Christian churches have been losing clout as quickly as they are losing adherents. There was, strangely, no direct question in the census last year about whether we attend church services but few would doubt that fewer than 10 per cent of us get out of bed on Sunday morning and go to church. There are no doubt many reasons for this decline in godliness in our nation but the scandals that have come to light in recent years have given many a reason to step back. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has shone a light on the dark -secrets the church so desperately tried to sweep under the carpet.

The complicity of bishops and cardinals in working to move pedophile priests from one parish to another to maintain the good name of the church has been revealed. For decades victims were treated cruelly and often branded as liars. To their eternal shame, the same patterns of evil were found in countries such as Ireland that had been so staunchly Catholic. Church attendances in Ireland are down dramatically and the fact that country could
carry a referendum in favour of same-sex marriage is extraordinary. The con­clusion is now too easy to draw: organised religion is a fading force in the Western world.

In the past few weeks there have been two decisions taken in Australia that ably demonstrate that decline. Despite ferocious lobbying and preaching from the pulpit, Australia said Yes to same-sex marriage 62 per cent to 38 per cent. That decision would have been impossible when I was a boy and my mother would dress me up in my Sunday best and put on her hat as the family went to church.

Even more outstanding in this context is the decision of the Victorian parliament to pass a bill on euthanasia. In the 1990s when an attempt was made to pass just such a bill through the federal parliament, the churches funded a successful cam­paign against the bill. Maybe that was the last hurrah of organised religion.

Successive popes have railed against the use of condoms in Africa, where overpopulation and AIDS have ravaged so many countries and produced hundreds of thousands of orphans. They refuse to budge on divorce and homosexuality, and the world has just moved beyond them. The mob have voted with their feet and the dwindling number of priests struggle to cope in churches when the pews remain forever empty.

Despite all of this, I will always defend the rights of believers. The new happy-clapper churches at least provide a welcome break from the yoke of old-style religion.

My Sky News colleague Ross Cameron pointed out to me that his wife took their daughters around to the local Anglican church. In winter, he said, it was cold and -miserable and in summer hot and -unbearable. The church was -attended by very few, so it is no surprise that Hillsong has done so well.

There are thousands at each service and the music is funky enough to sell more albums than any pop artist can manage. In Brian Houston, they have a charismatic orator who has taken Hillsong to establish branches right across the world. Hillsong provides relief for those exasperated by old-fashioned reverends and priests, quite apart from those about to be sentenced for serious crimes who suddenly and mysteriously see the light.

If a bill on religious freedoms is required then I would support it. The world will move on after the postal survey result. No matter who is getting hitched, bakers will jump at the chance of more $300 wedding cakes and florists will flock to fill the orders of same-sex couples. Disappointment at the Yes vote has fuelled all sorts of wild claims, but there is a bottom line here. Religious freedoms can and should be protected.

CREDIT: Graham Richardson

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