



Scott Morrison, a devout Pentacostal, must strike a balance between satisfying the demands of the Coalition's religious base and protecting LGBTI rights. Mick Tsikas/AAP

After his 'miracle' election, will Scott Morrison feel pressure from Christian leaders on religious freedom?

May 28, 2019 5.43am AEST

Four years before his 2019 election miracle, Scott Morrison explained divine intervention to Annabel Crabb and viewers of her Kitchen Cabinet program over his famous "ScoMosas". After 14 years of failed IVF, he and his wife conceived naturally. Their first child was born on the seventh day of the seventh month in 2007.

He added:

And I don't think that was by accident; and that's a constant reminder to me about who's in charge.

Some Pentecostal leaders have a clear idea about who's in charge, not just in their personal lives but in the nation's politics – and it's not necessarily the people or their elected representatives. Some depicted the 2019 federal election as a choice between Scott Morrison and the Liberal Party's "godly

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principles” or “the Enemy [Satan] having his way.” They saw “darkness coming” if Morrison was not re-elected.

Prophecy for Australia and Scott Morrison in 2018 // Adam F Th...



Pastors Adam Thompson and Adrian Beale talk politics to a congregation of Hope City Church in suburban Melbourne last September.

The big fear behind such (literally) apocalyptic language was religious freedom: conservative Christians warned of impending persecution if Labor was elected, raising fears over discrimination on the basis of religious identity and a loss of freedom to run Christian schools according to their beliefs.

These leaders saw voting for the Coalition as offering the best chance of passing new laws to protect religious freedom.



James Boyce

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This important letter on behalf of all the Catholic religious orders in Australia is the complete opposite of the bigotry pushed by the PM's Australian 'Christian' Churches & the Australian 'Christian' Lobby. catholicreligious.org.au/media-releases...

9 1:08 PM - May 25, 2019

Letter to PM Scott Morrison from CRA Presi...

Letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the eve of his re-election, asking him to consider a number of issues, as a matter of priority, in catholicreligious.org.au

[See James Boyce's other Tweets](#)

Why Christians have rallied behind religious freedom

This is new: until the past decade, conservative churches consistently opposed strengthening Australia's religious freedom protections. They campaigned against religious freedom in the 1988 referendum, for example. And as recently as 2005, the Sydney Anglicans' news service called the defeat of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Amendment (Religious Tolerance) Bill a vote "for religious freedom."

Back then, "religious freedom" meant protecting religious minorities (such as Jews and Muslims) against discrimination.

Read more: Five aspects of Pentecostalism that shed light on Scott Morrison's politics

Then came Victoria's long-running *Catch the Fire* case, in which two Pentecostal pastors were accused of religiously vilifying Islam, leading to fears that Christians could no longer declare the superiority of their own beliefs.

The marriage equality debate in recent years stoked more fears that conservative religious schools and other organisations might be prevented from teaching the sinfulness of homosexuality.

As Elenie Poulos, the former director of the Uniting Church's national policy unit, points out: With very few exceptions, Australian churches have a strong record of opposing anti-discrimination protections for women, LGBTI people, and religious minorities. Instead, most churches' lobbying aims to:

...protect their institutional position and entrench their moral code in Australian law.

Overstating the strength of the Christian vote?

Some election analysts are now suggesting that Morrison won his "miracle" election in part thanks to the Christian vote, pointing to Coalition swings in seats with larger numbers of Pentecostal voters.

But previous research urges caution. Although there were fervent calls by churches for pre-election prayer and fasting sessions and intense lobbying campaigns by Christian organisations, these efforts did not necessarily represent large numbers of people. Pentecostals make up just over 1% of the population, and, like other religious voters, have a variety of political interests.

Read more: Explainer: what is Pentecostalism, and how might it influence Scott Morrison's politics?

Certainly, worries about religious freedom extend to other religious groups, but it is not clear how far. For example, the “Canberra Declaration”, which invokes concerns about religious freedom, abortion and same-sex marriage, has been endorsed by conservative Christian organisations, such as the Australian Christian Lobby, the National Alliance of Christian Leaders and the Australian Christian Values Institute, along with Catholic and Anglican bishops. It has amassed nearly 85,000 signatures since 2010.

Christian Schools Australia (CSA) sent leaflets home with students at 329 schools just before the election. They stated that “religious freedoms are at the heart of our shared values and beliefs” and those values “are the main reason our schools were chosen.” That might have swayed votes, but research has found only a quarter of parents indicated religious values were a “strong” reason in choosing CSA-style Christian schools.



Christian Schools Au

@csa_edu_au

Parents of Christian school students urged to vote for religious freedom dlvr.it/R4n3Sh

8:08 AM - May 16, 2019

[See Christian Schools Au's other Tweets](#)

Rather than a mass movement, it might be more accurate to see the promoters of these apocalyptic views as a ginger group: a subgroup within a movement who try to push the broader membership towards a stronger position, including by creating the impression of a public opinion groundswell.

Much more research would be needed before the religious freedom campaign, or any “Christian vote”, could be confirmed as election-swinging.

Pressure on Morrison to push a ‘godly’ agenda

Nevertheless, with all this talk of an election miracle, newly energised conservative Christian leaders may feel emboldened to demand that the “godly” government deliver on more of their agenda.

That could present Morrison with a problem, particularly in areas such as the right of conservative Christian organisations to discriminate against LGBTI employees and abortion access. Acceding to the demands of conservative Christian ginger groups on these issues would mean adopting positions highly unpopular in the wider electorate.

As successive Republican presidents in the US have found, feeling beholden to the religious right can be a poisoned chalice when it leads to demands that put them at odds with other voters.

Read more: Why Australians' religious freedom is worth protecting

And there's another problem. Buying into apocalyptic scenarios in which disagreement becomes "persecution" and political opponents are agents of "the Enemy" leaves very little room for compromise.

British New Testament historian Candida Moss points out that:

...you can disagree with someone sharply on the basis of your religious beliefs ... [but once] you say they're persecuting you, you're basically accusing them of acting with Satan.

Apocalyptic hopes are easily disappointed, and have been, time and again. No politician wants to end up in the Satanic camp.



Scott Morrison dancing with students during a visit to Galilee Catholic Primary School in Sydney last year. Joel Carrett/AAP

A balancing act in government

It's no wonder, then, that Morrison blows hot and cold on religious freedom.

On one hand, his government has promised religious freedom legislation, and even a **religious freedom commissioner**, rejecting the Ruddock review panel's recommendation that such a position was unnecessary.

On the other hand, Morrison **angered** conservatives in his party by introducing legislation removing religious schools' right to discriminate against gay and lesbian students. He also pointedly **declined** to defend rugby player Israel Folau in his dispute with his employer over anti-gay social media.

To continue to walk this line in his first full term as prime minister, Morrison will need more miracles.



[Coalition](#) [Scott Morrison](#) [Religious freedom](#) [Pentacostalism](#) [religious discrimination](#)