

Religious communities and politics

Marion Maddox and Rodney Smith

Key terms/names

Constitution, contracting, discrimination, religion, same-sex marriage, sectarianism, secularism, separation of church and state, sovereignty

Modern Western political thought usually conceptualises religion as private and personal and politics as public. This chapter demonstrates that throughout Australia's post-invasion history religious organisations and commitments have had many and varied public effects, both shaping and being shaped by political, social and economic factors. After examining theoretical questions about how religion should be understood in relation to politics, this chapter considers how religion has contributed to debates about nationhood, national identity and belonging. It then investigates religious communities' involvement in formal political processes, in relation to the party system, as political actors and as contractors of services.

Defining religion

Political scientists have not always paid much attention to religion – and, when they do, they often do so without definition.¹ Yet religion is an elusive concept;

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1 Maddox 2015.

many languages have no word that is a ready equivalent of what English speakers understand as 'religion'.

As Brent Nongbri pointed out, religion's intuitive meaning for modern Westerners is 'anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity'.² Traditions that do not fit that pattern tend to be either overlooked or reinterpreted to squeeze them into a Protestant Christian mould.

To help navigate this problem, Ira Allen and Saul Allen proposed that political scientists should think of religions as 'systems of shared activity organized around transcendental signifiers'.³ Focusing on activity systems (which are observable) avoids favouring faith or belief (which are not only inaccessible to the researcher but also of greater importance in some traditions than others). Similarly, 'transcendental signifiers' are observable in public discourse, and not limited to such things as deities (which not all traditions have). The Allens' definition also helpfully avoids seeing 'religion' as static, allowing for the fact that such activity systems change over time, in interaction with other aspects of society, including the political.

Religion and democratic politics

Religious studies scholar Timothy Fitzgerald argued that the terms 'religion' and 'politics' acquired their modern meanings through being conceptually separated from one another in the 17th century. 'In this new formula,' according to Fitzgerald, 'religion has nothing in its true nature to do with "power" and "governance and the political state" were redefined as 'non-religious'. A consequence of the pattern Fitzgerald identified is that modern Western political thought has theorised that religion and politics are safest when kept separated.

This preference for separation is often traced to the trauma of the European wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries.⁴ The wars of religion were conventionally understood as being ended by the Peace of Westphalia (1648), a series of peace treaties that enshrined the principle that rulers could choose their own state religion, out of Catholicism, Lutheranism or Calvinism, while giving limited rights to citizens who did not adhere to the state religion.

The Peace of Westphalia is often held to have inaugurated a new era of tolerance, religious freedom and the liberal state, ending endemic religious violence.⁵ Maintaining peace, then, required citizens in liberal democracies to keep their religious views to themselves.⁶

2 Nongbri 2013, 18.

3 Allen and Allen 2016, 559.

4 Fitzgerald 2015.

5 Cavanaugh 2009, 130–41.

6 Audi 2000.

William Cavanaugh influentially labelled this account the ‘myth of the wars of religion’ and argued that it is ‘false’ because, among other reasons, religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom emerged only gradually, mostly long after the Westphalian settlement.⁷ Cavanaugh concludes that the myth instead legitimates the secular state’s claim to the exclusive use of violence – including violence wielded against religious groups, especially those perceived as challenging state interests.⁸

To Naomi Goldenberg, religions are more helpfully understood as ‘vestigial states’ – that is, ‘the cultural remnants of former sovereignties that persist within current states.’⁹ The main difference lies in the ‘abstractions they cite to justify their authority.’¹⁰ Where fully functioning states ‘might ground themselves on such terms as freedom, equality, justice, or as the proper homelands of an idealized race or ethnicity’, the ‘vestigial states called religions often appeal to some form of divinity (generally male).’¹¹ Goldenberg’s observations clarify that the kinds of organisations conventionally called religions, and those conventionally called states, share concerns with the organisation and distribution of (among other things) material goods and power (of various kinds). Little wonder separating ‘religion’ from ‘politics’ proves much harder than it sounds.

In Australia, as elsewhere, religious communities have exhibited varying political alignments, and the rise of the ‘no religion’ category provokes further questions. Moreover, the demand to keep religion out of political debate is arguably anti-democratic, preventing some people (the religiously committed) from drawing on their deepest convictions in thinking about public concerns. Rejecting the conventional wisdom that religion renders public life unstable, several scholars have argued for democracy over secularism.¹² Lori Beaman gives the name ‘deep equality’ to the forms of ‘agonistic respect’ that facilitate democratic community across religious differences.¹³

Religion and politics at Federation

The first national Census, in 1911 (following separate efforts by the various colonies), found that 96 per cent of respondents identified as Christian, with ‘Church of England’ (Anglican) the largest group, followed by Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and smaller proportions of other denominations (mostly Protestant) and undefined. The largest non-Christian grouping was ‘Hebrew’

7 Cavanaugh 2009, 177.

8 Cavanaugh 2009.

9 Goldenberg 2013.

10 Goldenberg 2013.

11 Goldenberg 2013, 40–1.

12 Bader 2008; Connolly 1999.

13 Beaman 2017.

(Jewish), at 0.3 per cent, followed by Confucian, 'Mohammedan' (Muslim), Buddhist and Pagan. Agnostics, Freethinkers, Atheists and No Religion collectively made up half a per cent.

While this Christian dominance might look to modern eyes like a recipe for consensus, in fact colonial parliaments debated religion fiercely in the decades leading up to Federation (1901). Between 1853 (South Australia [SA]) and 1880 (New South Wales [NSW]), all the colonies abandoned public subsidies for religious schools, and most ended religious instruction in public schools. Whether excluding religion almost entirely (as in SA) or building non-sectarian religion into the curriculum (NSW), the goal was to make education as inclusive as possible.¹⁴

The Constitution and formal political institutions

Australia's Constitution and formal political institutions are not completely secular, nor do they embody religious values, language and symbols to the extent of those of some other liberal democracies, including the UK. People who become Australian citizens, for example, are free to make their pledge 'under God' or not; either way, the shared objects of their loyalty are distinctly liberal democratic and secular.

The *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1901* (Cth) begins with reference to 'the people ... humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God', an expression that the late 19th-century framers of the Constitution thought would be inclusive enough to avoid offending adherents of most faiths. A century later, in a much more secularised social context, delegates debating a possible Australian republic at the 1998 Constitutional Convention were happy to retain a reference to God in the preamble to the Constitution, seeing it as a reminder of a generic source of authority over lawmakers or as a reflection of the nation's best aspirations, or both.¹⁵

The other direct reference to religion in the Constitution occurs in section 116, which states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for the establishing of a religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

A casual reading of section 116 might suggest that it erects a strong, American-style wall separating church and state. In fact, the Constitution's drafters were not particularly careful about the wording of section 116, leaving constitutional protection of religious freedom in Australia relatively weak. While the High Court

14 Maddox 2014a.

15 Maddox 2001, 41–90.

has defined ‘religion’ broadly, it has interpreted ‘law for’ in section 116 as prohibiting the Commonwealth only from making laws specifically *intended* to establish a religion, impose observance, or prohibit free exercise. The court has upheld Commonwealth laws that impinge on the exercise of a religion but are not designed to do so. In addition, section 116 does not prevent the states or territories from making laws concerning religion. Attempts in 1944 and 1988 to address these issues via constitutional amendments both failed.¹⁶

The ban on religious tests for offices and public trusts in section 116, along with Australia’s increasing independence from the UK after 1901, meant that the King or Queen of Australia’s oath as British monarch to defend the Anglican faith – potentially offensive to Catholics and other non-Anglicans – was pushed into the background.¹⁷ The governors-general who have represented the monarch in Australia since 1901 have included Catholics, Anglicans, other Protestants, Jews and one avowed atheist. Government ministers, judges and parliamentarians have been even more diverse in their religious affiliations. On taking office, they swear either an oath ending with ‘so help me God’ or an affirmation omitting those words. As noted above, Australian parliaments include some religious symbolism and practices; for instance, almost all Australian parliaments start their daily business with prayer.¹⁸ Most traditions on display in those parliaments do not have religious origins but have developed within the institutions themselves, drawing on their Westminster predecessors.

Indigenous religion

For at least 60,000 years, the territory that is currently Australia was covered by a dense network of interlocking activity systems for organising power, knowledge, law and goods. These systems were conceived in terms of humans’ relationships with one another, with the land and with non-human others, both physical and spiritual. The languages in which these systems were expressed – more than 250, with some 800 dialectal varieties¹⁹ – did not distinguish ‘religion’ from other areas of life, such as political or economic. In the words of native title scholars Michael Dodson and Diana McCarthy, ‘The Indigenous process by which historical events become part of an everlasting and immutable Creation are ritualistic and religious.’²⁰ In addition to areas that European ways of thinking normally consider ‘religious’, this process is also the basis of some matters – such as land ownership – that European ways of thinking consider economic and of others – such as relationships, rights and responsibilities between groups of people – that European ways of thinking consider

16 Beck 2018.

17 Bonney 2013.

18 Maddox 2001, 109–17.

19 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2019.

20 Dodson and McCarthy 2006.

political. As Dodson and McCarthy observe, ‘the fit between traditional knowledge systems and Australian law is neither close nor comfortable.’²¹

In the colonial era, missions tried (with a few exceptions) to reshape Indigenous peoples’ political and economic systems, along with their beliefs, to fit a European image of a ‘Christian’ way of life.²² Belief had practical consequences; for example, colonial courts in the 1840s denied the testimony of Indigenous witnesses because they were ‘ignorant of the existence of a God or a future state’ or even ‘had no religion at all.’²³

Yet, little more than a century later, Indigenous law was considered *too* religious for an Australian court to recognise. The 1971 *Gove* case was the first land claim to be heard in a federal court. Justice Blackburn found that the Yolŋu claimants’ relationship to their land was ‘religious or spiritual’ and that this precluded the court from granting their claim.²⁴ In a further twist, anthropologist Nonie Sharp has shown how the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) finally undid the doctrine of terra nullius and recognised Indigenous ownership, but at the cost of downplaying the religious and spiritual aspects of Indigenous land law.²⁵

In 2017, the First Nations Constitutional Convention, meeting at Uluru, encapsulated the unity of the spiritual, material and political by declaring that Indigenous sovereignty:

is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This is the basis of our ownership of the soil, or, better, of sovereignty.

The *Uluru Statement* then spells out the consequences of that sovereignty’s fracture, including catastrophic incarceration rates. It proposes political solutions, including a Makarrata Commission, and a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, enabling ‘this ancient sovereignty’ to ‘shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.’²⁶

Patterns of religious belonging and commitment

The pattern of religiosity in a country affects the ways that religious communities interact with politics. A country in which a single religion has the committed

21 Dodson and McCarthy 2006.

22 Rowse 2017.

23 Smandych 2006, 107.

24 *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia* (1971) 17 FLR 141, 167, 270–1 (*Gove*).

25 Sharp 1996, 149–88.

26 First Nations National Constitutional Convention 2017.

Table 1 Religious identification in the Census since Federation (selected years)

	1901	1947	1971	1996	2016
Catholic	22.7	20.9	26.9	27.0	22.6
Anglican*	39.7	39.0	31.0	22.0	13.3
Other Christian	33.7	28.1	28.3	21.9	16.3
Total Christian	96.1	88.0	86.2	70.9	52.2
Islam	**	**	0.2	1.1	2.6
Buddhism	**	**	**	1.1	2.4
Hinduism	**	**	**	0.4	1.9
Judaism	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4
Sikhism	**	**	**	**	0.5
Other religions	1.0	0.1	0.8	0.4	0.4
Total religions other than Christianity	1.4	0.5	1.5	3.4	8.2
No religion	0.4	0.3	6.7	16.6	30.1
Not stated	2.0	11.1	6.1	9.0	8.5

Source: ABS 2017; ABS 2014.

*Includes Church of England **Less than 0.1 per cent

support of the vast majority of the population will have a different political dynamic to a country in which a number of religions each have strong community support or a minority of citizens have a religious commitment and the majority is non-religious. The specifics of the religions concerned and their historical presence in a country will also be important.

Australia's contemporary pattern is religious pluralism. According to the 2016 Census, the largest single religious group – 30 per cent of the population – were those who identified as having no religious commitment (Table 1). Australians who identified as Christian comprised around half the population (52 per cent). Catholics were the largest individual Christian group (23 per cent), followed by Anglicans (13 per cent). The 'other Christian' group (16 per cent) is diverse, with

Uniting Church identifiers comprising the largest sub-group at 4 per cent. ‘Other’ religions are also diverse, with Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus the largest non-Christian religious groups. Each of the categories in Table 1 hides diversity within religious groups: not all Catholics, Anglicans, Buddhists, etc. share the same beliefs and practices. Those with no religious identification will also have had different experiences of religion through their lives.

It is also clear from Table 1 that Australians’ religious identities are more diverse now than they were at Federation in 1901, when nearly all of the population identified as Christian. Those Christians were divided, with the largest two groups being Church of England (Anglican in contemporary terms) and Catholic. The ‘other Christians’ were overwhelmingly Protestants – Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists and the like. This pattern of an Anglican and other Protestant majority and a significant Catholic minority reflected the colonising populations’ overwhelmingly British and Irish origins, which had not altered much by the Second World War. As other parts of this chapter show, this foundational period of Christian dominance and subsequent diversity has had important effects on Australian political institutions, political organisations and public policies.

Greater religious diversity began to develop from the 1970s, driven by two main processes. The first was the growth of immigration from outside Europe, which has increased the proportion of Australians from Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh traditions. At the 2016 Census, 4 per cent of people born in Australia identified with a religion other than Christianity, compared with 21 per cent of people born overseas.²⁷

The second process has been secularisation. Since the 1970s, fewer and fewer Australians have declared any religious allegiance. In 2016, 10 per cent of Australians aged in their 80s and 90s had no religion, compared with 25 per cent of those in their 50s and over 40 per cent of those in their 20s.²⁸ This secularising trend is also evident in patterns of religious practice and belief. About half of Australian adults attended at least one religious service a month in 1950, compared with one-fifth by the 1990s and one-sixth over the past decade. Practices such as prayer, as well as belief in God, have also declined. In 2018, 30 per cent of Australians prayed or meditated at least once a week. Twenty-six per cent believed in God, with another 30 per cent believing in a ‘spirit’ or ‘life force’.²⁹

This drift away from religious identities, practices and beliefs echoes the trends in most other Western liberal democracies, with the exception of the USA. The exact causes of this widespread trend have been debated, with factors such as increasing scientific education, increasing feelings of personal security, decreasing levels of childhood religious socialisation and decreasing trust in religious organisations all proposed as important.³⁰

27 ABS 2017.

28 ABS 2017.

29 Pepper and Powell 2018; Smith 2001, 253–4.

30 Norris and Inglehart 2011.

These patterns of religious pluralism and secularism mean that religion has very different interactions with Australian politics than it does with politics in the USA. In America, Christian identification, church attendance, beliefs and devotional practices are more common and more socially valued than they are in Australia.³¹ Devout American politicians who invoke Christian language thus share religious experiences and beliefs with many American voters in a way that devout Australian politicians do not. This does not mean that religion is unimportant in Australian politics; however, it means that American patterns of religious influence on politics cannot be assumed to operate in Australia.

Parties and voters

When the Australian party system solidified in the early 20th century, it did so primarily along class lines. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was born out of the trade union movement, while the forerunners to the current Liberal and National parties drew heavily on the support of urban and rural businesspeople and professionals. This class divide had some religious undertones, particularly in the non-Labor parties, which were dominated by Protestants. Labor attracted Protestant as well as Catholic activists and leaders. Labor's first five federal leaders were Protestants, before the party elected a Catholic leader, James Scullin, in 1928. Despite the ALP's diversity, a mythology of Labor Catholicism versus Liberal–National (Coalition) Protestantism became popular in Australia, particularly after the First World War conscription debate saw prominent Protestants, including Prime Minister Billy Hughes, leave Labor to take up leading roles in the non-Labor parties.³²

Labor's ranks continue to include Catholics and Protestants. By contrast, the non-Labor parties remained dominated by Protestants until the final decades of the 20th century, when upward social mobility among Catholics increased their presence and visibility within the Liberal and National parties. Three of the four federal Liberal leaders since 2007 have been Catholics. This trend effectively ended any lingering sectarian traces in the major party contest.³³

The most prominent Australian party that could legitimately be seen as a 'church' party was the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which split from the ALP in the 1950s and had strong connections with the Catholic Church.³⁴ The DLP held seats in the Senate from 1956, using its voters' preferences and the Senate balance of power to extract concessions from Coalition governments until it lost electoral support and disbanded in the 1970s.

31 Putnam and Campbell 2010.

32 Hogan 1987, 178–88

33 Hogan 1987, chapter 10.

34 Warhurst 2005.

More recently, minor parties promoting conservative Christian values have held a handful of seats in federal and state parliaments. The most notable have been the Christian Democratic Party, the re-formed DLP, Family First and the Australian Conservative Party; however, none of these parties has achieved nationwide organisation or support. By the same token, minor parties such as the Secular Party that have attempted to mobilise the growing number of non-religious Australians against the ‘power and privileges’ enjoyed by churches have secured negligible electoral support.³⁵ Right-wing populist minor parties, such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, have built support partly through expressing hostility to Muslim immigrants and Islamic traditions.³⁶

If the vast majority of Australians with religious commitments do not take the opportunity to vote for ‘religious’ parties, this does not mean that religion does not affect their voting. Political scientists have identified two longstanding relationships between religion and voting in Australia. The first is that religious identification affects party support. At the 2016 federal election, for example, 44 per cent of Catholics voted for Labor or the Greens, compared with 37 per cent of Anglicans and 33 per cent of Uniting Church adherents. Voters with no religion were most likely to support Labor (56 per cent). The second pattern is that more observant members of religious groups are less likely to support left-of-centre parties. In 2016, 33 per cent of voters who attend religious services at least once a month voted Labor or Green, compared with 49 per cent of voters who never attended.³⁷

These differences are weaker than they once were but they persist. No entirely satisfactory explanation has been advanced. More religious Australians are more conservative on issues such as euthanasia, sexuality and abortion; however, they are not consistently more conservative on the economic and social issues that typically divide the major parties. Moreover, the religiously observant are likely to be exposed to competing messages from their leaders about how they should vote. The distinctive socio-economic profile of many local churches and other religious communities – older and more middle class than the wider community – may also promote conservative or aspirational values. The evidence remains unclear.³⁸ There is also very limited evidence about how growing Australian religious communities such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism affect patterns of voting.³⁹

35 Secular Party of Australia 2019.

36 Pauline Hanson’s One Nation 2018.

37 Bean 2018, 240–1.

38 Perales, Bouma and Campbell 2019, 118–19; Smith 2009; Smith 2001, 264–76.

39 Al-Momani et al. 2010.

Religious commitment among political elites

Australia's federal politicians have at least as high rates religious adherence as the general population.⁴⁰ Also, leaders have become more outspoken about their religion. For example, in the decade to 2019, three prime ministers (Rudd, Abbott and Morrison) have regularly discussed their Christian faith (respectively, Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal), while a fourth (Turnbull) was a less vocal, but consistent, church attender (Catholic). Only Julia Gillard claimed no religion. The tendency for Australian politicians to discuss their religion publicly has increased as popular levels of religious commitment have fallen.⁴¹

Australian parliaments, not noted for ethnic or gender diversity, have nevertheless long enjoyed a range of religious representation. Jewish and 'freethinking' members served in colonial parliaments and, after Federation, in the national parliament, representing all political positions. For example, between 1858 and 1866, Judah Moss Solomon served in both houses of the SA parliament; in 1899, his son, Vaiben Louis Solomon, became the colony's first Jewish premier. Sir Isaac Isaacs was a member of the first parliament, served as attorney-general in 1905–1906 and, as Australia's ninth governor-general, became the British Empire's first Jewish vice-regal representative. In 1917, the NSW Legislative Assembly could not sit on Yom Kippur because both the speaker and deputy speaker were Jewish. The 45th parliament (2016–19) included six Jews (ALP, Liberal and Centre Alliance) and four Muslims (ALP and Greens).

It is tempting to look for direct correlations between politicians' religions and specific policies, but the reality is considerably more complicated. To take a few examples, the ALP's longstanding opposition to public funding of Catholic schools was permanently altered by Gough Whitlam, a self-described agnostic from a Protestant family. Further education policy changes favouring Christian schools and introducing religious chaplains in public schools were initiated by John Howard, who, while in office, described himself as only a sporadic churchgoer.⁴² Same-sex marriage was eventually legislated under the Catholic (and marriage equality advocate) Malcolm Turnbull, having been resisted by the atheist Julia Gillard. Religion is not an independent force in political processes; it interacts with party pressures, politicians' career paths, electoral calculations and community expectations, among other factors.⁴³

40 Maddox 2001, 11–19.

41 Crabb 2009.

42 Maddox 2014a, 183; Maddox 2005, 258.

43 Maddox 2014b.

Religious communities as political actors

While many religious communities will claim to be non-political, they engage in politics in various ways and often develop theological or doctrinal understandings of this political involvement and its limits. Local religious communities can have some impact on the politics of their immediate communities and are in turn affected by local government planning decisions and the like. Although determined advocacy by local religious leaders sometimes reaches wider audiences, their efforts are mostly limited to mobilising members of their congregations and surrounding communities. In doing so, local religious communities often respond to positions taken by their state or national leaders, to religious advocacy and lobby groups, or to wider social movements that include religious groups. These local responses may not be uniform, particularly when the state or national leadership of a religious community is openly divided on a public issue or offers no clear guidance on it. Before the 2017 postal survey of Australian voters on same-sex marriage, for example, the governing bodies of most major religious groups held official positions, mostly opposing same-sex marriage. National and state leaders of some religious communities were openly divided on the issue, however, which gave local religious leaders scope to openly oppose, or at least fail to endorse, the official line of their organisations.⁴⁴

As the same-sex marriage debate indicated, there is no peak religious organisation that speaks in the public arena for all religious communities, or even for all Christians. Most, but not all, major Christian denominations are members of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), which, among other activities, makes statements on public policy issues such as economic justice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, refugee rights and welfare, foreign aid, peace and security. Member churches are not, however, bound by NCCA statements. Muslims Australia (the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils) and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) act as national peak bodies for most significant Islamic and Jewish communities. The NCCA, Muslims Australia and ECAJ maintain interfaith dialogue and express similar positions on some policy issues, such as religious tolerance, refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights; however, united action in other policy areas has been limited.⁴⁵

Internally, religious communities reflect a similar diversity of views about public issues. As John Warhurst points out in the case of the Catholic Church, often mistakenly seen as a monolithic organisation, the 'Catholic lobby' is a diverse patchwork that includes formal bodies such as the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, major service delivery agencies such as Catholic Social Services Australia, Catholic Health Australia, the National Catholic Education Commission

44 Perales, Bouma and Campbell 2019, 114–5.

45 Executive Council of Australian Jewry 2019; Muslims Australia AFIC 2019; National Council of Churches in Australia n.d.

and Catholic universities, advocacy bodies such as the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office and the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations, charitable bodies such as St Vincent de Paul, pressure groups in which Catholics have played major roles such as Right to Life Australia, along with key individual clergy and laypeople. In some policy areas, such as health care and education, the Catholic lobby acts as an insider, negotiating directly with government officials on the basis that Catholic hospitals and schools form a key part of policy implementation. In other policy areas, such as refugees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, peace and security, Catholic bodies rely on outsider repertoires of public mobilisation and protest, often through participation in broader social movements.⁴⁶

Several developments in the lobbying efforts of Australian religious communities have been evident in recent decades. The first has been the growth, since the 1960s, of interest groups and social movements with positions that directly challenge traditional religious values. Where once the Christian churches were dominant voices, particularly on 'moral' issues such as euthanasia, sexuality and abortion, now they are just one set of voices competing with a range of other vocal and well-organised interests.

The sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants (including Anglicans) that marked the lobbying efforts of Christian churches for much of the 20th century has largely disappeared, replaced by an increasing tendency to unite against secular voices in policy debates.⁴⁷ In recent years, this co-operation has extended to Islamic and other religious communities. In addition, sections of the churches have sought a role within social movements alongside secular groups with whom they share positions, a pattern that developed from the late 1970s in movements for peace, Aboriginal land rights, refugees and the environment.⁴⁸

The most recent development has been the increase in professional lobbying by or on behalf of religious communities. This development has been most obvious in the Canberra-based Australian Christian Lobby, which has employed staff to lobby parliamentarians and influence voters since 2001, mostly in support of conservative policy positions. Its techniques are partly borrowed from similar organisations in the USA, but it has less influence than its American counterparts.⁴⁹

Religious communities as service providers

Australia's shift to neoliberal governance has increasingly built religious organisations into policy implementation, as providers of services that were

46 Warhurst 2008.

47 Hogan 1987.

48 Smith 2014.

49 Maddox 2005; Payne 2019; Smith 2014; Smith 2009.

previously supplied predominantly by public agencies. Especially since the mid-1990s, education, welfare, aged care, health and disability services have been progressively privatised, with religious organisations as major participants. Economist Paul Oslington calculated in 2015 that, due to contracting arrangements with governments, ‘Church-related not-for-profit organizations deliver approximately half of social services in Australia’, and that this proportion would increase due to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.⁵⁰

The effects of this shift included hastening the de-unionisation and deregulation of workforces in social services. The transfer of substantial quantities of previously government services to religious organisations, which are exempt from aspects of anti-discrimination law, removed a significant proportion of the education, health and welfare workforce from the reach of these protections and raised questions about the use of public money for services that were not provided on a purely non-discriminatory basis. Religious organisations have historically been effective critics of government policy; but, from the mid-1990s, the contracts under which they become agents of government policy often included ‘no-criticism’ clauses, limiting this capacity.⁵¹ By giving a publicly funded boost to organisations with declining memberships, Oslington observed, the contracting system put ‘most Australians’ contact with Christianity ... through education or social services rather than congregations’.⁵²

Providing contracted services also gave religious organisations an edge in debates about religious freedom. Through the 20th century, discussion of religious freedom mainly centred on protecting members of religious minorities from discrimination, and many conservative Christian churches were strong opponents of moves to strengthen religious freedom, extend the reach of section 116 of the Constitution or initiate laws against religious discrimination, fearing that such moves would compromise their right to proclaim their own beliefs. In the 21st century, discussion of religious freedom shifted to conservative churches’ concerns about same-sex marriage, and especially fears that they would lose their entitlement to discriminate on the basis of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, or to teach a heterosexual-only view of marriage.⁵³

One area where the involvement of religious organisations in delivering public services has been particularly evident is schooling. By 1880, all of the Australian colonies had abolished public subsidies for religious schools, and from then until 1963, religious schools received no public money. ‘State aid’, as it was called, was reintroduced incrementally, first by the Coalition government under Robert Menzies. This was followed by a much larger expansion, in 1973, by the Labor

50 Oslington 2015.

51 Maddox 2005, 228–59.

52 Oslington 2015.

53 Poulos 2019.

government led by Gough Whitlam. The original justification was equity, given the dire state of many Catholic schools that were unable to afford even basic facilities. The return to ‘state aid’ was part of a larger package of education reform overseen by the Commonwealth Schools Commission, which was required to observe the ‘primary obligation ... to provide and maintain government school systems ... of the highest standard and ... open, without fees or religious tests, to all children.’⁵⁴

Since then, however, the funding mix has consistently favoured private schools over public schools, as well as shifting from the neediest schools to benefit the better-resourced schools.⁵⁵ In 2019, one in three private schools received more public funding per student than public schools with similar student profiles.⁵⁶ Since more than 90 per cent of private schools have some form of Christian affiliation, this represents a substantial public subsidy to religious organisations.

In 1977, the highest proportion of Australian students to date – 78.9 per cent – was enrolled in public schools. In 2019, nearly one-third of Australian students attended private schools. Australia’s education landscape since the 1960s reflects a similar pattern to other areas of service provision: religious organisations attracted increasing amounts of public money, even as religious adherence declined.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that, while Australia’s formal political institutions are broadly secular, Australian politics has been substantially shaped by dominant Christian traditions, often in surprising ways. Members of non-Christian religions have taken prominent roles in Australian public life, but their traditions’ impacts on the public culture have been smaller overall than that of Christianity. Indigenous ways of knowing, including the spiritual dimensions of sovereignty and land ownership, remain an aspect of the Australian religious landscape that the non-Indigenous population is still attempting to comprehend.

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⁵⁴ *Commonwealth Schools Commission Act 1973* (Cth), section 13(4)(a).

⁵⁵ Maddox 2014a, 83–6.

⁵⁶ Ting, Liu and Scott 2019.

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About the authors

Marion Maddox PhD PhD FAHA is a professor in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University in Sydney. She specialises in religion and politics. Her publications include *Taking God to school: the end of Australia's egalitarian education?* (2014), *God under Howard: the rise of*

the religious right in Australian politics (2005) and *For God and country: religious dynamics in Australian federal politics* (2001).

Rodney Smith is professor of Australian politics in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Among other books, he is the author of *Against the machines* (2006) and *Australian political culture* (2001) and co-editor of *From Carr to Keneally* (2012). He is the current editor of *The Australasian Parliamentary Review*.