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The troublesome mix: religion and politics

By Noel Preston

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The injunction to avoid mixing religion and politics has always been a nonsense, though in the past it was a popular rule of thumb, especially for dinner party hosts planning a cordial event.

As citizens, Australians have usually been aggressively secular. In our culture, though religious agencies are the main instrument of government financed welfare, faith is generally part of the private domain.

But things are changing. Recently our legislators' consciences have been publicly exposed by a succession of divisive issues with ethical and theological undertones - like stem cell research, legalisation of the abortion drug RU486 and same-sex marriage.

The interplay of religion and politics has become a major theme in public discourse - especially in John Howard's Australia.

Australia is now a multi-faith (and no-faith) culture where theocratic tendencies simmer below the surface, whether in the mosque or cathedral, while draconian security laws justified as necessary to defend our values and way of life undermine the liberal democracy which protects freedom of speech and religious practice.

The promulgation of "Australian values", something of a euphemism for beliefs, has become a political mantra, though in political practice they are adhered to selectively. Self-interested individualism is really the prevailing cultural ethos.

Meanwhile the Howard Government's changes to workplace relations, media ownership laws, intrusions into education and the constraints on agencies like the ABC appear to constitute a pseudo-religious "culture war", a battle for the hearts and minds of individual Australians.

At the same time there is evidence of a systematic agenda among conservative Christians to emulate their American counterparts by imposing their views on the body politic - from the infiltration of the New South Wales Liberal Party by right-wing Christian extremists to reports of the Exclusive Brethren injecting themselves into political campaigns, to say nothing of the line-up of political leaders wanting to be on stage at Hillsong Conventions.

No longer is the debate whether religion and politics should mix but how they should mix.

In times of grave global uncertainty is there a constructive role for religion to promote compassion, peace and hope for future generations? Is religion's role merely nurturing conscience in the political individual or should religious institutions and leaders act on the political stage in their own right? Is there a preferred type of religious belief, practice or ethic which is inevitably aligned to a particular political philosophy?

This last question sharpens the public discourse as recent interventions by federal Labor frontbencher Kevin Rudd, indicate. He is concerned about the way some of his political opponents claim their standpoint, often on matters of sexual morality, and embody Christian values.

In several forums Rudd has explained why, as a Christian, he is a social democrat. He espouses a political philosophy based on equity, community and sustainability: values he declares are at the core of the Christian Gospel, in contrast with his opponents' paramount focus on liberty, security and prosperity. Understandably, Tony Abbott, another federal politician who wears his religious convictions openly, rejects Rudd's analysis as "a caricature".

Into this milieu has come a very timely analysis, *Acting on Conscience: how can we responsibly mix law, religion and politics?* by Jesuit priest, human rights lawyer and academic, Frank Brennan. Across a variety of issues he explores how personal beliefs are best expressed in public life.

Balancing compassion and prudence, Brennan's presentation is a strong defence of liberal democracy and the rule of law. In the process he explains his recent conversion to the cause of an Australian Bill of Rights because checks on the power of the state are no longer guaranteed.

He fearlessly tackles his own Catholic bishops for exceeding the limits of their public role, criticises John Howard's attempts to co-opt religious sanction in support of the Iraq War, and takes a side swipe at liberal atheists who treat religious views disdainfully in public policy debates.

Significantly, against this background, an independent Christian think tank with a social justice orientation is being launched this week by former High Court Chief Justice, Sir Gerard Brennan. Called The Centre for an Ethical Society its board is chaired by the Anglican Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn, Rt Rev George Browning. The centre will set up regional chapters around the nation and convene a national congress in its first year of operation.

The Centre promises an alternative voice to some of those currently claiming to represent the Christian social view.

As the body politic engages global and domestic issues of global warming, terrorism and poverty, according to Bishop Browning the centre intends to refocus the religious contribution around a core question: "Can the common good prevail over self-interest and the desire for personal gain?"

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Noel Preston's recent book is *Beyond the Boundary: a memoir exploring ethics, politics and spirituality* (Zeus Publications). He is a member of the board of the [Centre for an Ethical Society](#).