

Religious Freedom and the Future of Christianity in a Secular and Multicultural Society: Six theses¹

In this address I want to focus on what I would call the direction of the tide. There are many voices that point us to the waves breaking on the shore and we certainly need to keep an eye on this. However it is critical that we also keep an eye on the tide on the matter of religious freedom and the future of Christianity. I offer six theses for consideration and I trust that they provide us with a profitable basis for further conversations on some vitally important issues.

1. Religious freedom in a new context

Religious freedom is becoming a more urgent issue in Australia

When I was growing up in the 1950-60s 's this topic was not on the agenda, certainly not in my hometown in the Hunter Valley; nor was the matter in the public domain of Australian society. When I was at University in the early 1970's religious freedom was not on the agenda but the Vietnam War was. But by the beginning of the twenty first century religious freedom has become a matter of concern in the public space. Why is this so? Three matters concerning the present context provide the framework for our conversation.²

(a) *Globalization* In the first instance the reason can be located in the phenomenon of globalization. We have been increasingly aware that Australia is an island only in the geographical sense; in every other way we are connected in a global cosmopolitanism. Australia belongs to a world-wide community and increasingly the people, the races, the ethnic diversity, language diversity, and religious and cultural diversity of the 7 billion

¹ This article was the subject of a public lecture at Charles Sturt University, Port Macquarie campus on Wednesday 25 March. It is a revision of an address at *In Conversation: Religious Freedom in a Secular and Multicultural Society*, a panel discussion on 3 March, St James hall, Phillip St, Sydney, 2015 co-hosted by St James' Institute and Affinity Intercultural Foundation with Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson and Muslim theologian Associate Professor Mehmet Ozalp,

² Vice Chancellor of the ACU, Professor Greg Craven gave a talk on religious freedom on 6 March, 2014, St Clare's College, NSW, in which he identified three phases of the issue of religious freedom in Australia: 1788-1970 'the war between religions' which was a contest for dominance among Christian churches; 1970-2000 'the war within religions' which emphasized internal debates for the various churches over the extent to which one could accommodate to secular values; 2000-present 'the war on religion' which presumes all religion is bad and moves beyond secular critique to positive anti religious (and anti Catholic).

inhabitants of the planet is reflected in microcosm in Australia. We are today the whole globe in a little. And the revolution in communication in terms of travel, internet and social media, and capital markets makes for an extremely fluid network of belonging and identity. The speed with which this transition to a global frame of mind and practice is frightening. We haven't yet caught up with it and probably never will. Globalization has had an impact on the religious mix of Australia.

(b) *Multicultural means multifaith* Australia's multicultural character is both a consequence of globalization and a primary feature of this phenomena. Furthermore multicultural means multifaith; they are direct co-relates. As a result of people movements over the past 150 years, and especially post World War 2, the cultural and ethnic mix of Australia is such that in a global world Australia has people practicing the religions of the globe. The 2011 Census stats tell the story: 61% Christian, Buddhism 2.5%, Islam 2.2%, Hinduism 1.3%, Judaism .5% plus of course many other smaller religious communities whose voices are increasingly heard; whose cultural and religious traditions enrich our life.

© *Secular Liberal Democracy* The stats also tell another emerging story. In 2011 22.3% of Australians indicated 'no religion'. Moreover in the period October to December 2013, 37.6% said they had no religion.³ The Australian context is global, multifaith and increasingly secular. The environment in which these developments have occurred is liberal democracy. In this sense the peoples of Australia are bound together by shared goals and ideals 'in a way that does not require homogeneity-in dress, dietary custom, religious belief, or even outward religious observance'.⁴ USA, Canada, New Zealand and India are other examples. This is different from European traditions that for historical reasons have their identities shaped around particular racial, ethnic and cultural lines.⁵

³ Peter Kurti. *The Forgotten Freedom: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia*, Policy Monographs, Centre for Independent Studies, p. 5, quoting Tracey Joynson, 'Christians set to become a minority in Australia', *The Satellite* (17 April 2014).

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, p.18.

⁵ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.13, notes that 'Ever since the rise of the modern nation state, European nations have understood the root of nationhood to lie first and foremost in characteristics that are difficult if not impossible for new immigrants to share. Strongly influenced by romanticism, these nations have seen blood, soil, ethnolinguistic peoplehood, and religion as necessary or at least central elements of a national identity. Thus people who have a different geographical origin, or

Moreover the great majority of the peoples of Australia are descendants of immigrants albeit in a land of ancient people who travelled here 40,000 thousand years ago. Because of the particular make up of the peoples of Australia we are a remarkably pluralistic society with regard to race, cultures, languages and religions – particularly from the second half of the 20th century.

Recognizing, acknowledging and appreciating the diversity and fundamental equality of all peoples of Australia are critical components of our shared goals and ideals in a multi-cultural society such as ours. The tendency of nation states in the liberal tradition like Australia is to minimize internal diversity and maximize external differences.⁶ This is done for the sake of maintaining some sense of togetherness. It means that the critical issue for such states is how to manage a multicultural, multi-faith and increasingly secular society? The clue is to be found in the now often used phrase, ‘social cohesion’. The emphasis is on management of internal diversity for the purpose of maintaining a socially cohesive state. Given the increasing diversity of religious life in Australia and a growing secularism the dictates of social cohesion will impact, in subtle and not so subtle ways, on religious freedom religious futures in Australia.

2. The priority of togetherness

Religious freedom is negatively impacted by the political ideal of social cohesion

Underlying the focus on social cohesion is a deeper issue concerning what holds us together. We don’t seem to be clear about this any longer. The gremlin in the system is that we no longer seem to have any confidence about what might justify true human society. In the modern western world, the question about what justifies a true society is answered principally by reference to a utilitarian philosophy based on a pragmatic assessment of what works best to maximize economic well-being of individuals. This seems to have achieved a god-like status in the minds and hearts of people. This approach underpins a competitive market economy which functions

a different holy land, or a different mother tongue, or a different appearance and way of dressing, never quite seem to belong, however long they have resided in a country’.

⁶ For an important exposition of the development of the modern state and the logic of its attempts to minimize internal difference and maximize external difference; negate or privatize religious diversity see William T Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State and the Political Meaning of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011, Chapter 1.

according to Darwinian notions of natural selection where the most powerful and intelligent survive. Within such a framework, society is judged positively or otherwise on the basis of the usefulness of its constituent parts (including people) for the maximizing of efficient production and exchange of goods. Today the well being and flourishing of human society is interpreted in terms of economic value. Modern states provide the legislative environment in which this ideal can be pursued by individuals as the chief end of human life.

So what holds us together is a common vision of economic prosperity that we all have to play our part in achieving. This belongs to our quest for happiness and the good life. Social cohesion for the purposes of maximizing the good life in Australia undergirded by a pragmatic economic utilitarian ethic has become the major shaper of our liberal democratic society. On this account it is the responsibility of the state to manage the nation to maintain this aspiration. This is challenging in such a culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse country as Australia. Today we are probably more aware of the rich diversity of life, and differences between the peoples of Australia, as we are aware of the commonalities. Human flourishing – including such things as the value of community, corporate action directed towards the common good, the responsibility to care for the weak and poor - might not cohere with a vision of social cohesion interpreted in terms of a market driven economic growth paradigm. Indeed it might bump up against it in some significant ways.

What this means – among other things – is that diversity and difference will need to be managed. When social cohesion, filtered through the lens of economic well being, is the dominant paradigm in a liberal democracy the logic is that diversity and difference, so much an intrinsic feature of an open, free and cosmopolitan society, will have to be minimized, curtailed or marginalised and closely monitored. The ideal of social cohesion generates a management/regulatory approach by Government to many facets of life and this includes religion. This is particularly the case when we experience threats to social cohesion which are linked to some elements within religious traditions considered dangerous and violent. This leads to fear as a prevailing grammar for current political rhetoric.

3. Religion as a security issue

Religious freedom is under threat in a global environment of fear and anxiety

The cultural and religious diversity of a nation like Australia does not inoculate it from the anxieties and fears of our times. It does not mean that people 'do not fear the strange and different, or associate religious minorities with danger. It does mean that there is a powerful counterweight'.⁷ The American Philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to fear as 'the emotion of narcissism'. She notes that fear is 'primitive' being connected to primitive brain processes which humans share with other animals. Of course fear is valuable and often accurate when it comes to survival and/or when life is under threat. But fear's view of the world is too narrow. Unlike grief or sympathy or compassion fear is an emotion that systematically screens out the full reality and genuine worth of other people. Moreover when fear is socialized observes Nussbaum, it 'is always relentlessly focused on the self and the safety of the self'.⁸ Fear is fixated on the self and what threatens the self and as a consequence 'episodic fear and anxiety, or chronic fear, are simply more narcissistic than other emotions It threatens or prevents love'.⁹ Nussbaum concludes: 'Fear is a "dimming preoccupation": an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness. However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it is one of life's great dangers'.¹⁰

Nussbaum's discussion of fear and anxiety is developed in the context of what she terms the 'new religious intolerance' – which unfortunately is not difficult to identify and track around the globe. It is associated with what one writer refers to as the 'securitization' of religion.¹¹ Thus the securitization of religion 'entails rhetorically constructing religion as a direct security threat to the state and presenting it as an issue of supreme priority that needs to be dealt with outside the normal legal and political processes upon which religion is dealt with'.¹² How fairs Australia on this matter is a question at least worth asking. We ought not be naive about the fact that there is a powerful secular philosophy that carries strong popular appeal in the West. This approach regards religion as responsible for, or at least the underlying reason for much of the violence of the world. And certain fundamentalist strains in most religious traditions appear to

⁷ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.18.

⁸ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p.56.

⁹ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, p..57.

¹¹ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.35. This means that 'an issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure'

¹² Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, p.35

support this view. But of course as one person deeply involved in interfaith dialogue has remarked 'religions aren't violent human beings are'. Though the idea of 'religion as threat' is regularly given credence through media and politics today. This view trades on the narcissism of fear and anxiety and feeds distorted and violent tendencies already at work in society. So under conditions of a diverse cultural and religious mix, in a secular environment often hostile to faith, driven by a powerful economic growth paradigm, within the framework of a liberal democracy that experiences increasing threats to its existence and well being, it is axiomatic that religion will require stricter management. And this will eventually be experienced as a problem for religious freedom.

4. Keeping religion private

When religious freedom is reduced to a question of state management of religion the focus will be on its private value where its activities are orientated to a consumer spirituality.

In some respects this thesis has good historical precedent. Following the wars of Religion of the 17th century religion was relegated to the private sphere; its continued public character simply drew attention to an important dimension of the private life of individuals. This inward turn of religion – Christianity in particular – has resulted in an increasing disengagement of faith from the public square. And in some sense this disengagement has been the product from within Christianity of a desire to carve out a place for religion via retreat into interiority. In other words the Christian religion has aided and abetted the gradual control and management of religion by government. From another point of view it is possible to see the secular state as not really that secular but rather a new form of a state sanctioned religion where the idol of wealth and growth reigns supreme. The god of the market trumps all other religious voices in the public space. The state and the market are tied together (the original meaning of religion is to bind together) to provide a new vision of the good life.

For governments then, the critical issue is curtailment of the ambit of religion and the relegation of religion to the private space. To the extent that religion is a public affair differences between religions will necessarily be ignored or diminished. On the other hand commonalities will be promoted in so far as they promote the interests of social cohesion serving the economic paradigm. Clearly the place of religious dissent let alone

prophetic activity will be subject to scrutiny and where possible control. The future for Australia's religious traditions will be one of increasing management by restriction of freedoms to the private sphere of life. This is the logic of a state desirous 'of reasserting its authority over civil society, especially over those religious institutions that seek to articulate an alternative vision of power and truth, and if it is to command the loyalty of its citizens over and above other claims of membership'.¹³ This is what Peter Kurti refers to as 'statist liberalism' where the regulation of religion is filtered through values and attitudes that feed off intolerance of religion or in relation to notions of religious rights as inferior rights to other human rights.¹⁴

5. Religion as social capital

Religious freedom ultimately depends on society valuing religion as part of the social consensus and the exercise of political will to protect religion

From what I have said so far there is cause for concern on this matter in the coming years. At one level religious freedom is enshrined in law. The Australian Constitution section 116 protects religion in the sense of providing a clear space in which religious belief and practice can be expressed. Moreover Australia is a signatory to the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights¹⁵ that outlines the

¹³ Bryon S Turner, *Religion and the Modern Society: Citizenship, Secularisation and the State*, Cambridge: CUP, 2011, p. 193.

¹⁴ Peter Kurti on ABC, Religion and Ethics Report
www.cis.org.au/media-information/audio/442-peter-kurti-on-abc-religion-and-ethics-report Wednesday, 27 August 2014

¹⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) Article 18 states:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

nature of religious freedom. Yet such freedoms are not absolute and can be restricted if, for example, they clash with a 'legitimate end' such as defense of the country. It is also the case that state legislatures can enact laws that provide exemptions from state laws (e.g. in some contexts related to equal opportunity/employment matters) and can, on occasions restrict the ambit of religious freedom. The point about legislation is that it can be changed.

For example in 2014 the Federal Government sought to repeal Sections 18 C, of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and insert a new clause. The Government's *Freedom of Speech (Repeal of s. 18C) Bill 2014* proposed that, in the name of 'freedom of speech', the current prohibition on publically offending, insulting, humiliating or intimidating 'a person or group of people' on the basis of their 'race colour or national or ethnic origin', be removed, and replaced with a prohibition on vilification and intimidation. In response to significant community opposition especially from the indigenous community and religious leaders from minority religious traditions the proposed changes were withdrawn.

It is an interesting situation given that the appeal to freedom of speech might appear to serve the interests of freedom of religion. But it is only an appearance. As one Muslim commentator noted, Muslims belong to a universal faith and can't be identified with a particular ethnic or racial group. Given this state of affairs it is inherently inaccurate to refer to racist attacks upon Muslims. Islamophobia is necessarily religious.¹⁶ Watering down Section 18C in the name of free speech would result in greater freedom to discriminate against people of a particular religious tradition. Jewish critics of the proposals were similarly mindful of this consequence of the repeal of 18C. Religious freedom needs to be guarded against such developments.

However the deeper reality is that beyond the law the fundamental protection for religious freedom depends on the extent to which a society values religion and the existence of a political and social consensus to ensure such values are protected.¹⁷ Precisely because of the nature of Australian society, the emphasis upon management of diversity and a hierarchical approach to human rights organized through a secular filter,

¹⁶ Shamsul Khan, A Muslim perspective on Racial Discrimination Act amendments, posted 3 April, 2014. Khan is a Senior Lecturer of Politics and International Studies at University of South Australia

¹⁷ Professor Greg Craven, St Clare's College, 6 March, 2014.

there will I suspect be increasing pressure points when it comes to the exercise of religious freedom.

6. The future of Christianity

The idea of religious freedom challenges the Church to rediscover its own charism embedded in the freedom of the gospel

In the light of all I have said about challenges to religious freedom in Australia, 'Does Christianity have a future'? Perhaps I could put it in a slightly different way; 'What kinds of futures does Christianity have in Australia and which one(s) might qualify as genuinely Christian?' I don't say this lightheartedly. There are a number of contemporary reductions of Christianity alive and kicking in the public space today.¹⁸ There are two in particular that are worth noting. First there is a reduction of Christianity to simply one religion among many; albeit one of the major the religions of the world. Moreover Australia is a home to the religions of the world. But of course the matter is not so simple. For example in the early years of the twentieth century the great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, proposed that religion was a human construct and as such Christian faith was not a religion but a revelation. Slightly later Dietrich Bonhoeffer was more circumspect. He didn't espouse a theory about religion as such. He allowed, at least implicitly, for more space or wriggle room about the vexed question of the nature of religion and Christianity in particular.

However in twenty-first century Australia, Christianity can quickly lose its particularity, fall victim to a sociological reduction of religion. It risk failing to live out of its particular charism or founding reality located in and energized by a particular relation to God. How might one respond to this reduction of a sociological kind? It is critical to recall that the mission of Christian Church is not first and foremost the propagation of religion as a helpful aid for human kind, and a bulwark against secularism. As appealing as this is the problem is that the basic religious values being defended, and held in common with other religions, often end up looking remarkably similar to some cherished values and aspirations of secularism e.g. ethics, concern for truth & justice, solidarity with others etc. We might well find common cause with such ideals but such an enterprise can easily succumb to a secularized version of faith. Christianity will not have a particularly bright future if it does not wrestle more fervently against its own inner

¹⁸ I have benefitted from the writings of the Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann in *The World as Sacrament*, London: DLT, 1966. An older and prophetic book for its time.

tendencies to rest content as one religion among others, or become shaped into a new kind of secular religion dressed up in the clothes of Christian faith. I am not suggesting for a moment that Christians ought not find common cause with people of other faiths for a better civil society. Nor am I advocating that the Church should turn its back on the modern world and thereby fail entirely to see God at work in the world. What is more urgent and important is to recover a sense of the world as a sacrament of God's loving presence rather than captive to the powers of darkness. Such an approach would seem to me to be more in keeping with a Christian way of seeing the world. This calls for a new kind of vigilance if Christianity is to have a Christian future. However more than that the future of Christianity is almost entirely dependent on the extent to which the Church of Jesus Christ can recover and live out of its founding charism. To live freely not only requires external protections and permissions and resistance to reductive impulses. It also requires an inner freedom to live out of its deepest roots in God. This is a challenge for disciples of the Jesus we encounter in the gospels. The pervasive impact of materialism and compromise with values that undermine the goodness of God often severely constrain the Christian Church to live the joyful life of faith.

However the recovery of the founding charism of Christian faith is a costly venture. For individuals the journey by which we continually find inner renewal has to do with recovery of energy in, with and for God. Often our Christian lives are like driftwood being carried along subject to the elements but somewhat unselfconsciously and inwardly if not outwardly disengaged. This is particularly a problem for those who have been followers of Christ for many years. It is easy to simply 'go through the motions' but with little inner aliveness. I meet many on this particular path; a growing tribe; sometimes disgruntled with the Church, perhaps they have been hurt along the way, dispersed yet still hungry for connection to others to share this stage of their pilgrimage but feeling disenfranchised from the institutional life of the Church. Of course there are many others who live with clarity, earnestness and energy in the walk of faith. They can be great encouragers and sometimes annoying. The difficulty they often have is that their energy is often more self-generated than they realize. They may attribute it to the good Lord but they may not hear the voice of Christ, 'apart from me you can do no thing' (John's Gospel 15). So at the personal level we are continually being challenged as Christians to recover our first love, to tap the wellsprings and primal energies of the Spirit of Christ and live out of such deep resources. This is where our deepest freedoms lie. It is such inner resources that generate a fruitful and faithful life. The great

exemplars of this are the saints and martyrs of the past and present. And we see it in the faces of the young and young at heart.

The Church of God as a body is also called to recover its primary vocation as that body through which the rich and varied wisdom of God shines through bearing witness upon heaven and on earth to the crucified Lord of Glory (Ephesians 3:10). Here in this remarkable passage from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians the body of Christ is identified as that body of people through whom the gospel of the goodness of God shines. In my study I have a beautiful reproduction of a stained glass depiction of the Canterbury Pilgrims from the Cathedral that bears that name in the England. The fact is that the pilgrims remain opaque and darkened until they are hung in the light which shines through and illuminates their journey. When the light shines through they become true pilgrims. The Church is called to be translucent to the light of the knowledge of the glory of God seen in the face of Christ. This light gives energy. In the process faith is photosynthesized. The result is growth and transformation. This may sound attractive, indeed it is. But it will cost the Church dearly to live like this. These days we are more aware of our failures that hang like an enveloping cloud over us. We are also aware of the struggle to live faithfully in a highly consumerist culture where material well-being overwhelms our best intentions to do something brave for God. We are obsessed with plant, funding, restructuring and it can all be made to sound very rational if it is baptized in the language of mission. But we spend relatively little time considering the vitalities of corporate faith, the energetics of our life together. It seems always to be trumped by concern for structure. In truth the two go together. However the deepest freedoms for the body of Christ are to be located in the divine energies that emerge out of feeding on holy word, holy sacrament and holy witness in the world. This focus will provide the right conditions for appropriate restructuring.

I have spoken briefly at the end of this address about the future of Christianity in Australia. At both personal and corporate levels the future of Christianity, of living Christianly, will require a recovery of the sources and movement of spiritual energy. In an environment which I believe will become increasingly less hospitable to a public Christian presence and voice the primary calling of the Church and the basis for its true future in God will require the re-appropriation of its founding charism, that gift of the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is this charism that will give sufficient energy for the Church to turn away from itself towards the world for which Christ died and rose and also sufficient wisdom for the kinds of public and prophetic engagements required of the Church today.

Stephen Pickard, March 25, 2015.