Religion in the Public Square: What, exactly, do liberals want to quarantine, and why doesn't it work?

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DRAFT ONLY—COMMENTS INVITED

Abstract:

Fuelled by the power of the evangelical right, 'Religion and the public square' debates form a veritable industry in US political theory. Yet successive volumes frequently seem to retread old ground, making few advances. In the much less heated Australian religious atmosphere, such soul-searching can seem quaint or obsessive; yet recent political developments here, notably the success of 'family values' social conservatism, suggest that the relationship between political and religious views might merit further analysis here, too.

I will take up recent US debates about the place of religion in public debate (eg Carter 1994, Audi 2000) and argue that, although coming from widely divergent philosophical directions, they share a peculiar, and highly limiting, conception of the relationship between religious and political conviction. I will spell out where I think US debates grind themselves into an impossible corner and then point out how a more textured account of the political dimensions of religious belief can illuminate both US debates and the very different Australian religio-political climate.
Introduction

Religion in the USA is big business—not just for televangelists and their empires, but also for political theorists. The historical American worry about church-state relations has, particularly since Reagan, developed into a burgeoning literature examining various faces of the ‘wall of separation’\(^1\). In particular, studies have concentrated on the place of religious conviction in public debate, the proper limits of church and clergy political commentary and activism in a liberal democracy and the responsibilities and restraints appropriate for religiously-committed citizens.

The religious intensification of political debate in the USA over the last two decades is well-documented\(^2\). Courts agonise over the constitutionality of the Pledge of Allegiance and wonder how many reindeer are needed to make a nativity scene sufficiently secular to stand on public land. At the same time, White House staff report finding that morning Bible study was, in David Frum’s memorable phrase ‘not compulsory, but not quite uncompulsory either’\(^3\), the President launches a ‘crusade’ against ‘evil’, while gay and lesbian partnerships, abortion and single motherhood become increasingly pressured.

This intensification has been matched by increasingly anguished academic soul-searching. How should religiously-minded citizens and office-bearers in a pluralist, democratic society conduct themselves? May they draw on religious values to formulate political positions, or must they leave their theology at the gate when entering the public square? The liberal requirement of separation between religious institutions and the state is usually taken to entail (at least) a formal separation between religious institutions and the institutions of government. This, in turn, is often (and increasingly) interpreted as requiring also a separation in the practice of elected representatives. Their ‘private’ selves (who may or may not have religious commitments) are expected to stand aloof from their ‘public’ personae, who operate by secular norms in the secular public square. A representative survey of the last decade’s contributions on this question from political philosophers would be a major study in itself\(^4\).

\(^1\) The phrase is Jefferson’s, from a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. For recent discussions of his likely meaning and subsequent interpretations, see Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, Harvard UP 2002 and Daniel Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State*, New York UP 2002


Among the most influential sources for contemporary statements of the need for separation between religion and politics is John Rawls’s ‘political liberalism’\(^5\). Beyond his own work’s significance, he has influenced a wider school who appeal to the related ‘liberalism of reasoned respect’\(^6\). For Rawls and his followers, citizens in a plural, democratic society hold different, often incompatible ‘comprehensive doctrines’, religious, moral and philosophical, which guide their private decision-making. Entering the public realm, they join a ‘political conception’ which holders of ‘reasonable’ comprehensive doctrines can endorse\(^7\). The condition for joining is that they keep their comprehensive doctrines in the background.

Liberals state different versions of the case for a neutral, or at least carefully restrained, public square. Their arguments draw on liberalism’s historical suspicion of too much public religion—the fear summed up in Locke’s invocation of the ‘fire and faggot’ which inevitably follows any blurring the duties of the civil magistrate with the care of souls. They typically proceed by devising rigorous conditions under which the religiously committed may enter public debate. Following William Connolly, I shall call these theorists ‘secularists’.

Reading that literature quickly produces a sense of déja-vu. A great deal of it traverses very similar ground, in particular the vexed question of how far it is legitimate for religiously-committed citizens and organisations to bring their religious beliefs into public debate.

In response, a number of religiously-committed political theorists have tried to revise liberal interpretations so as to maintain the liberal preservation of rights and freedoms, while arguing that the secularists’ efforts unfairly exclude some citizens from full participation. They argue that the liberal ‘gag rule’ on religion disadvantages those who choose to live a ‘religiously integrated life’\(^8\). I shall call these theorists ‘revisionists’.

If the secularist literature induces rapid déja-vu, one might expect that the revisionist contributions would introduce some novelty. In fact, although arguing as it were from opposite corners, the two bodies of literature share misplaced assumptions about both religious and political commitment which make much future headway unlikely.

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Both groups maintain that there is a place for religious debate in the ‘public square’, but are concerned to preserve that space from religious fundamentalism, fearing the imposition of religiously-based restrictions on those who cannot share them. Both implicitly distinguish between safe and dangerous forms of religiosity. Both try to delineate the conditions under which religion can be made safe for liberalism. Both assume that, for the religious, religion is prior to politics: people are born into their faith, but grow into their politics. For the religious, consequently, their politics derive from their religion. This is the dangerous part. Audi tries to make religion safe for liberalism by insisting that religiously-committed citizens must be able to find sufficiently-compelling secular grounds with which to accessorise their religious morals. Carter tries to make religion safe for liberalism by insisting that a religiously-committed citizen’s religious and political convictions should not accord too closely with one another. Both rest on implausible (and peculiarly American) views of the nature of religion. Both also rest on an implausible view of how theological and political commitments fit together.

In the first part of this paper, I examine two representatives of the bodies of literature which I have called, respectively, secularist and revisionist. I argue that the reason why their authors, and the positions they represent, give an impression of arguing past one another is that they rely on an overly-limiting view of what religion is. From that follows a relatedly limiting view of how individuals form and maintain their deepest commitments, whether theological, political or moral.

In the paper’s second part, I read the American literature against the much less religiously-fraught Australian scene, arguing that similar concerns are nevertheless discernible in Australian public debate. Drawing on Australian data, I suggest ways in which our understanding of the relationship between religion and political conviction might be helpfully recast to move beyond present impasses.

**Secularists and the public square**

My paradigm instance of the secularist position is Robert Audi, whose *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* sums up a decade-long enterprise of developing an ‘ethics of citizenship’ for religiously plural societies, drawing chiefly (though by no means exclusively) on the framework of the later Rawls. Audi’s prescription for religious restraint in public debate differs from Rawls’s ‘overlapping consensus’ model of public reason in its specifics, but draws on the shared assumption that public reason can only be advanced when a procedure is adopted which excludes arguments based on premises not shareable by all participants. To that extent, Audi’s religion-focused work can be seen as an extrapolation of political liberalism’s implications for the specific set of church-state concerns which dominate the secularist literature.

Much of Audi’s argument hinges on the distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ reasons which a citizen might advance in debate over a matter of public concern, and the motivations which might underlie such arguments. He thinks it is acceptable for people to be moved by religious reasons, and, in some circumstances, to advance those reasons in attempting to persuade others. But he maintains that, in order to preserve the basic shape

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9 Cambridge UP 2000
of liberal democracy, people should only advance religious reasons if they can also find and (this is the more unlikely part) bring themselves to be sufficiently motivated by a parallel, sufficiently persuasive, secular reason.

This part of Audi’s argument has proved controversial, in particular the theory of motivation which seems to underlie it. Even before it appeared in *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, that aspect of Audi’s work had already attracted considerable discussion. One criticism is that Audi’s principle of secular motivation is that it needlessly constrains the capacity of the religiously-committed to develop and act on their moral capacities when a weaker principle of secular rationale would adequately protect liberal freedoms. A more comprehensive criticism is that both the principles of secular rationale and of secular motivation unduly burden those who wish to live ‘a religiously integrated life’, by forcing them to make unrealistic separations between their various kinds of motivation.

Beyond these criticisms, my concern is that Audi’s proposal rests on a mistaken view of religion, and that it has ramifications beyond the burdens it places on individual believers. Moreover, it misconstrues also the nature of political commitment and how religious and secular political commitments relate to one another. His arguments against political preaching reveal this latter misconception most vividly.

I argue that the impoverished view of religion and of politics which underlies Audi’s argument is shared across the spectrum of liberal writers on religion and by their revisionist critics.

### Bringing God back in: revisionist politics

My revisionist exemplar is Stephen L. Carter. Carter’s *Culture of Disbelief*, published in 1994, became a rallying-point for those who, without wishing to jettison liberal commitments to individual freedom and church-state separation, nevertheless find the secularist position unduly restrictive upon the religiously-committed. Carter, a self-described Christian, argues that the secularist position has achieved cultural dominance to the point where, though citizens’ religious beliefs may be ‘tolerated’ in public debate,
they are not accorded serious attention. Moreover, the religiously-committed are expected
to behave as though they do not take their own religious beliefs seriously. Carter aims to
defend the right of churches, their clergy and individual lay members to take part in
public moral and political debate, and of citizens to act upon religiously-derived
principles. Yet, reading the detail of his argument, it is difficult to imagine what content
any such participation could contribute.

Carter’s thesis is that, although Americans are among the most religiously-committed
people in the industrialised world, the tenor of American public debate tends to
‘trivialise’ religious commitment. Carter is picking up on a feature of American
religiosity which has been noted since de Tocqueville and Marx, namely, its tendency to
intense privatisation, so that it becomes a matter of individual idiosyncrasy which marks
people off as different from one another, rather than a shared outlook which forms the
basis of a common identity. Such an intensely privatised view of religion has the effect,
Carter claims, of punishing believers if they take their faith sufficiently seriously for it to
affect anything beyond their most private thoughts.

**Political preaching**

A major concern for both camps is what is routinely called ‘political preaching’. This is
the idea that clergy use their positions—either directly from the pulpit, via church bodies
such as social justice commissions or through press releases and other forms of public
statement—to advocate views which are properly political rather than religious. They
discern this tendency on both left and right, and across a range of issues. Both Audi and
Carter affirm, in common with other holders of the broad views they represent, that
churches and their officials have a legitimate role to play in public debate. However, both
sides are shy of spelling out exactly what that role might entail.

Audi develops his position about church and clergy activism out of his more general case
about the role of religious reasoning in public debate. The main thrust of his argument is
that religiously-committed citizens in a liberal democracy may well have, and be moved
by religious reasons when they advocate particular policy positions, but they have a
responsibility to respect church-state separation by finding equally persuasive secular
reasons before they advance their arguments in public. If they cannot find such secular
reasons, they should recognise that the principles driving their commitments are not ones
which all their fellow-citizens can share and so they should resist the urge to participate.
Audi does not advocate that such restraint should be a matter of law, but argues it is an
obligation of citizenship—a kind of civic etiquette. In Audi’s political psychology,
religious reasons for political stances come first (for the religiously-committed); those
committed to Audi’s ideal of good citizenship will then actively seek secular
justifications which can also support their view.

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13 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 1832; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* London:
Lawrence and Wishart 1975, p 141

14 Audi spends considerable space spelling out the various ways in which an argument may qualify as
‘religious’, but none at all telling us what makes an argument ‘secular’, apparently taking that to be self-
evident. See 2000 op. cit., pp 168-172
From setting out the responsibilities of believers, Audi moves to discussing the responsibilities of churches, church agencies and clergy. Here his arguments are based less on what is good for liberal democracy than on the idea that churches themselves have good reasons to prefer a mode of citizenship which (despite his occasional qualifications) restricts them to minimal involvement in public affairs.

Adopting the persona of a ‘serious but non-fundamentalist Christian’, Audi argues that:

If … I have thought about how power can corrupt and about how different are the missions of clergy and government officials, I may prefer a form of government in which all are free to pursue their religious ideals under the spiritual guidance of their choice and the clergy are not faced with secular concerns that may dilute their spiritual commitments or obscure their religious vision.\(^\text{15}\)

Here we come to one of the standard liberal arguments against clerical activism, with a pedigree back to Locke’s distinction between the care of souls and the duties of the magistrate. Locke’s concern was to prevent the state’s coercive power of ‘fire and faggot’ being enlisted in the cause of one or another religious orthodoxy. The danger he envisioned was theological police, not clerical social commentators. Audi, by contrast, wants to preserve the properly ‘religious’ from ‘dilution’ with a distracting interest in public affairs.

He returns to the point once he has developed his argument about the need for citizens to refrain from drawing primarily on religious reasons and motivations when taking part in public debate. Religious organisations, too, should observe what he terms the ‘principle of ecclesiastical political neutrality’:

Let me tentatively suggest, as a partial solution to the problem of how best to conceive the role of churches in democratic politics, a principle of ecclesiastical political neutrality: in a free and democratic society, churches committed to being institutional citizens in such a society have a prima facie obligation to abstain from supporting candidates for public office or pressing for laws or public policies that restrict human conduct, particularly religious or other basic liberties.\(^\text{16}\)

Audi goes on to delineate what he means by ‘political’: he does not want a definition so broad that church commentary is precluded on any moral question, nor so narrow that ‘pressing for restrictive laws or public policies—such as policies requiring periods of prayer or meditation in public schools—does not count as political’. He also concedes that a clear distinction may not always be possible in practice, and reaffirms that ‘[T]he separation of church and state does not require, nor do any sound principles demand, that churches should not publicly take moral positions, even if there is political controversy about them’\(^\text{17}\). However, he cautions that ‘Clergy should in general seek to avoid even the appearance of partisanship’\(^\text{18}\). He offers one example: a church or its representatives may appear partisan by criticising immorality in one party when another is equally culpable. Beyond that, churches risk partisanship when they become too closely aligned with particular policy prescriptions: they should stick, instead, to pronouncements at a fairly

\(^{15}\) 2000 op. cit., p 22
\(^{16}\) ibid., p 42
\(^{17}\) ibid., p 44
\(^{18}\) ibid., p 45
high level of moral or theological abstraction. As with church institutions, he aims to draw a very fine distinction:

This is not to deny that it is possible to bring moral authority into politics, and indeed I have stressed that moral leadership by the clergy can greatly help in this. But moral leadership is easily clouded by political activities.  

While it might be relatively easy to avoid naming a particular candidate or party, matters become more complicated when there is a clear policy division and one side of politics is plainly associated with a particular policy prescription: a partisan endorsement might easily be conveyed (or, at any rate, imputed) without naming any names. Acknowledging the difficulty of keeping the distinction clear, he warns clergy to have a care not only to the content of their remarks (say, on ‘the duties of charity’, which might have implications for welfare policy), but also to their context and even intonation. But, when it comes to how those specifics might be enacted, Audi again becomes vague:

But if, in borderline cases, the moral and political intermingle, there is still a generally plain difference between, say, giving a moral sermon about the quality of contemporary movies and endorsing candidates, political parties, or politically contested public policy positions.

No doubt there is. But what about, say, the quality of contemporary welfare strategies? That would be no more specific than analysing the quality of movies; but, when everyone knows that one party supports a rigorous program of welfare cuts likely to hurt the worst-off, while another is prepared to tolerate a more widely-accessible welfare regime, the welfare sermon would presumably fall outside Audi’s neutrality principle. Audi acknowledges that ‘It may as a matter of contingent fact turn out that what a reformer calls for on moral grounds is supported by only one party; but there remains an important difference between calling for the reform and supporting the party as such’.

Yet it is hard to see what Audi’s careful hedging has achieved. He illustrates his argument with cases so general that they add nothing to existing debates, and acknowledges ‘borderline cases’ in which the distinction blurs at the very point that the conversation gets interesting.

Audi is worried about the potential damage to democratic institutions if churches get an unreasonable say. However, he says little about what damage might occur, or how it might come about. He spends considerably more space arguing that it is in churches’ own interests to observe his ‘ecclesiastical political neutrality’ principle. In particular, he argues that clergy who cross the barrier between moral and political comment jeopardise their own moral authority. Moreover:

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19 ibid., p 47
20 ibid., p 48
21 Needless to say, a sermon cast in opposite terms to the one I have assumed here—applauding principles of personal responsibility and decrying a something-for-nothing welfare mentality and the sexual irresponsibility which gives rise to single motherhood in the first place, for example—would equally fall outside Audi’s principle. The point is that by choosing a relatively apolitical example such as movies, Audi has fudged the very question he is trying to elucidate.
22 ibid., p 49
23 ibid., p 47
Politics and public policy are a complex and absorbing business, and to acquire the knowledge of them requisite to speak with the authority properly befitting a corporate church voice (or even an influential clerical voice) can easily reduce the time and commitment needed for spiritual and moral matters.\textsuperscript{24}

This, however, is a long way from his democratic arguments. It becomes, in fact, an argument for abandoning politics to a specialist bureaucracy. Imagine if his prescription were rewritten as follows:

Politics and public policy are a complex and absorbing business, and to acquire the knowledge of them requisite to speak with the authority properly befitting a corporate business voice (or even an influential entrepreneurial voice) can easily reduce the time and commitment needed for financial and commercial matters.\textsuperscript{25}

Such a formulation sounds much stranger (and less democratic), because we commonly take for granted that there is a substantial overlap between commerce and the political environment within which it takes place. We assume that being fluent in the language and ideas of politics and policy, at least so far as they are relevant to their immediate concerns, is part of the core task of a business leader. By contrast, the distinction which Audi wants to make in the case of clergy assumes a sharp division of the world into ‘spiritual’ and ‘non-spiritual’ concerns. I have more to say below about the definition of religion assumed by both sides; for the moment, I want to concentrate on Audi’s insistence that too much activism distracts clergy from their ‘core’ tasks. It is a concern to which he regularly returns. Just what these core tasks might be, however, remains vague. Perhaps Audi, observing a ‘principle of philosophical ecclesiastical neutrality’, feels unqualified to comment. Yet we might well ask whether it is enough to castigate a group for doing something other than their core tasks without at least gesturing to what that core might comprise. Clergy—at least many of them—apparently feel that participation in political debate is a core task; so, if we believe Audi, we cannot rely on them to define their own core tasks.

Guessing at what Audi might have in mind, in the absence of discussion, we might think of pastoral care, liturgy and preaching as core tasks. One possible reason why critics of clerical activism seldom say what the core tasks are that clergy should be concentrating on is that once we start thinking about actual ‘job descriptions’, their components sound less apolitical than if they are left allusively vague. Pastoral care is usually taken to mean care for people in their deepest and most pressing needs. Liturgy means the celebration of God’s presence in the material world. Preaching means proclaiming the word of God—and there we are, back at the problem where Audi began. Are there ‘spiritual’ needs which are not also material? Are there ‘material’ needs which have no ‘spiritual’ dimension (and from which the pastor can therefore stay aloof)? Can one celebrate God’s presence in a material order marked by gross inequality, without mentioning the fact? And what if the preacher feels that the word of God relates directly to the political exigencies of the day?

\textsuperscript{24} ibid., p 50
\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, it is hard not to read a patronising tone into much of Audi’s discussion of religion. For example, fleshing out his concept of ‘civic virtue’ by reference to other groups (that the clergy) to whom comparable restrictions would apply, he begins with ‘educators, especially of the very young’ (p 178)
Audi does not tell us. In fact, he describes only one clerical responsibility, namely, maintaining harmony among believers:

[I]t is appropriate that clergy exercise restraint—clerical virtue, we might say—in dealing with political issues, particularly in public. If they do not, they invite peers who disagree to use religious leverage for opposite ends; and the public, quite possibly including their own congregations, may suffer. There is a significant risk of inducing political discord in parishes or denominations that might otherwise enjoy a harmonious unity.26

Audi does not stop at theory, but invokes scripture in his support. Citing the first commandment (having no other Gods) and Jesus’ warning against trying to serve God and mammon, Audi warns: ‘Politics should be a worthier pursuit than money and other false gods, but we must still ask how well one can serve God and the state’. But here, as with other preachers, the resort to proof-texting suggests that the argument is getting away from its author. One trouble with proof-texting is that an opponent can always come up with a counter-text. So, those unconvinced by Audi’s view that clergy should avoid sowing dissension among previously united believers might recall Jesus’ warning:

Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on, a household of five will be divided: three against two, and two against three; father opposed to son, son to father, mother to daughter, daughter to mother, mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law to mother-in-law.27

Apart from distracting clergy from their (presumed) core tasks and the risk of dissension, it is hard to see what Audi perceives as the actual dangers of political preaching. At one point he raises the possibility that ‘If there is a Protestant or Catholic or Jewish or Moslem position on a political issue, candidates may not only bend over backward to win church endorsement on that issue, but also covet it in other areas’28. However, issues on which there is ‘a’ position unanimously heard from an entire religious grouping are extremely rare. More likely is the situation (such as with Catholics on birth control, for example, and numerous churches on the Iraq occupation) where a church officially adopts one position, while members continue to support diverse views29.

Audi advances few arguments based on either liberal or democratic theory in support of his ‘principle of ecclesiastical political neutrality’. The few he does advance falter at the point at which they move beyond the obvious or trivial. He offers more arguments based on churches’ own self-interest. These may or may not be plausible—I think that they generally are not—but, either way, they are ancillary to the book’s point. Their presence, and prominence, in a book about how the religiously-committed should conduct themselves so as to best preserve a liberal-democratic polity leaves the impression that the church activist part of his argument is essentially visceral. At this point, Audi comes across as a secularist who simply feels uncomfortable when religion makes too much noise in the public square.

26 ibid., p 177
28 op. cit., p 49
29 See eg James Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics London: SPCK 1978
That charge cannot be leveled at Carter, whose project is rather to defend the right of religious people and organisations to take part in public debate, and to be taken seriously (and to take their own beliefs seriously) when they do. Nevertheless, Carter raises similar objections to ‘political preaching’, though for different reasons from Audi’s. Carter wants to maintain the right of religion to participate as itself (not disguised as parallel secular reason) in public debate, and argues that believers themselves must bear some of the blame for the ‘trivialisation’ of their deepest convictions. They bring public dismissiveness on themselves, he claims, when they attempt to enlist God on the side of political causes. This view forms the basis of three scathing chapters against ‘political preaching’.

For example, shortly after moving to New Haven, Connecticut, my wife and I tried out a church about which we had heard the most marvelous stories. The sermon was delivered with energy by a young woman—a divinity student, I believe—with the light of the zealot in her eyes and the flame of absolute conviction in her heart. She wanted to set us straight on Central America, because, she feared, many among us were misunderstanding God’s plan and therefore falling into sin … I was struck, eventually, by the realization that the preacher in question had no conception of the possibility of a faith not guided by her prior political commitments. For her, politics should lead faith, rather than the other way around … Her sermon, like many that were preached in support of Ronald Reagan’s presidential candidacy, exemplified the problem of the political tail wagging the scriptural dog.\(^\text{30}\)

Carter’s solution is that theology should be recognised as properly prior. Like Audi, he assumes that when a religiously-committed person takes a political stand, the driving motivation is religious. When it isn’t, according to Carter, it is a sign that things have got out of kilter. To switch animal metaphors, political conviction is the cart that should follow the theological horse. Audi wants the believer to find an equally powerful secular horse to run in the same harness; but his assumption is that the secular horse’s reason for joining in is that it will run on the track already laid before the religious horse.

So far, Audi and Carter share similar (though contestable) conceptions about the relationship between religious and political motivation. But there is another element to Carter’s version: the religious horse and political cart should not be too tightly hitched.

Matters become troublesome … when one’s theology always ends up squaring precisely with one’s politics. At that point, there is reason to suspect that far from trying to discern God’s will and follow it in the world, the political preacher is first deciding what path to take in the world and then looking for evidence that God agrees.\(^\text{31}\)

Instead, a sign of a preacher’s integrity is that the theological positions he or she espouses do not align too closely with her or his political commitments. Yet this seems an impossible position for anyone to hold. The preacher would be in the position of defending theological positions which he or she considered to be morally wrong, or—putting it the other way around—holding at least some sincere political convictions which she or he believed to be against God’s will. She would have to believe—even, if she is a

\(^{30}\) op. cit., p 69

Christian, Jew or Muslim, love—a God whose will she finds morally repugnant. The psychological consequences for such believers sound disturbing; the consequences for public debate scarcely less so.

The idea that allowing one’s politics to shape one’s theology amounts to a disreputable ‘political tail wagging the scriptural dog’ misconstrues the nature of both religious and political commitments. Indeed, Carter himself finds it difficult to sustain his position. For example, he reports approvingly a story of Gloria Steinem replying to a question about how Judaism led her to feminism, ‘It was the other way around’. In other words, her political commitments led her to a theological position.

Carter’s view of the relationship between religious conviction and political commitment is by no means unique. Studies of the relationship between religion and political behaviour tend to assume that religious preferences are fixed, and precede—even perhaps determine—political choice. The possibility that political commitments can legitimately affect one’s theology is less often raised. To some degree this may be a function of how research findings are phrased. Thus, typically of the field, Hans Mol’s exhaustive Religion in Australia includes a lengthy section on beliefs and morals in which the results are reported in the form ‘people who go to church and pray regularly are more likely to disapprove of…’ While that presentation does not necessarily preclude an alternate reading (people who disapprove of X are more likely to go to church and pray regularly), a reading of religion-and-politics research certainly conveys the impression that researchers have gone in quest of fixed religious beliefs which influence variable political attitudes.

What is religion?

In both the secularist and revisionist literatures, beneath the suspicion of ‘political preaching’ lie not only on questionable psychology but also dubious assumptions about the nature of religion.

Defining religion is notoriously difficult. Dictionaries are little help: their tendency to concentrate on belief in divinities excludes traditions (such as the atheistic strands of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, for example) which one would intuitively want to class as religions, and which it would certainly seem unfair to exclude from religion-state deliberations. On the other hand, it is difficult to cast a definitional net wide enough to include all such traditions, while at the same time ruling out life-shaping philosophies (such as communism or fascism) which bear strong family resemblances to religion but whose status as religion is considerably more controversial.

Classical theories of religion have revolved around such concepts as Rudolf Otto’s sense of the numinous, Emile Durkheim’s sacred:profane distinction and, more recently,

32 ibid., p 59
33 Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 47-76.
34 Beyond these instances, many people raise examples such as fanatical devotion to a particular football team which, for some, take on many attributes normally associated with religion. For more on this, see REF REF REF
Clifford Geertz’s five-part definition\(^\text{37}\) and Ninian Smart’s typology\(^\text{38}\) all aim at what Talal Asad has (disapprovingly) called ‘universalist’ definitions of religion\(^\text{39}\). Each has been subjected to rigorous critique\(^\text{40}\).

Neither of our exemplars ventures far into the definitional quagmire. Nevertheless, both rest their arguments on largely unarticulated assumptions about the nature of religion. Those assumptions have implications for both the shape and plausibility of their arguments. Both assume a kind of religion which is fundamentally private, and in which the most important relationship—indeed, one might almost say, the only religiously important relationship—is between an individual believer and God. Consequently, both produce pared-down, lowest-common-denominator versions of religion which bear little relationship to any actual faith tradition.

Audi shies away from the notoriously intractable issue of defining religion, offering instead a Smart-like list of nine features, each ‘relevant, though not strictly necessary, to a social institution’s constituting a religion’. Adherents of a religion, according to Audi, are likely to believe in supernatural being(s), distinguish sacred from profane, practise ritual, follow a divinely sanctioned moral code, experience a sense of awe and mystery associated with the sacred and pray. Furthermore, they are likely to share with other adherents a belief in their mutual significant place in the universe, a mode of life based on that belief and a form of social organisation bound together by all the preceding elements.\(^\text{41}\) Audi identifies Christianity, Judaism and Islam as among ‘the richest paradigms of religion’, apparently because they exhibit all nine characteristics\(^\text{42}\).

Later, he develops another, similar but more general, list of five characteristics of which it can be said that ‘possession of a great majority … is normally both necessary and sufficient for the presence of a religion’. The list is designed to exclude the concepts of

\(^{36}\) Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* 1911


\(^{38}\) Smart identifies seven ‘dimensions’ of religion—the ritual, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, social, experiential and material—which, he argues, are present in all world religions, though in different mixtures and with the various dimensions given different relative importance. See Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, University of California Press, 1996


\(^{40}\) Perhaps most significantly, Asad argues that all attempts at universalist definition produce a ‘transhistorical’ understanding of religion which is in itself the product of the particular theological and political settlements of post-Enlightenment Christendom. Consequently, according to Asad, they prove of limited use when considering traditions (his case in point is Islam) whose political and religious foundational assumptions like outside that tradition.

\(^{41}\) 2000 op. cit., pp 34-35

\(^{42}\) One might equally argue, however, that the nine characteristics appear to a member of a Christian culture to be the salient features of religion because they are features which are particularly prominent in Christianity and closely related religions. One could go still further and argue that Audi’s particular configuration of the features is weighted in a way characteristic of certain kinds of Christianity, namely, Anglophone Protestantism. I have made a version of that argument elsewhere (see Marion Maddox, ‘Indigenous Religion and the Secular State’, http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1999-2000/2000rp11.htm) and do not pursue it here.
‘civil religion’ and ‘secular religion’, seeing their designation as ‘religion’ as usually metaphorical. Even if it is not, he concludes, ‘If there is a sense of “religion”—as opposed to a suggestive metaphorical use of the term—in which a religion can be not only non-theistic but secular, it is not a major concern in this book’. Only if ‘invocations or manifestations of civil religion imply a commitment to or endorsement of religion in the main sense (and particularly theistic religion)’ do his principles come into force.43

But here problems show. Audi’s determination to distinguish ‘real’ religion from metaphorical applications of the term lands him in a circular argument. Lacking a comprehensive definition of religion, he homes in on a feature which has historically provided much of the driving force for the secularist position, namely, religion’s divisiveness: ‘Granted that secular disputes can also polarize, other things equal they have less tendency to do this or at least to produce irreconcilable differences’44. And when they do polarise, at least ‘Secular disputes, as compared with religious ones, also tend to be resolvable without either side’s making as deep concessions’. Audi offers no evidence, but instead answers the putative objection by way of a qualification:

> If ideological disputes, say between communism and fascism, seem exceptions to this point, that may be in part because of how much an ideology can have in common with a religion. Indeed, there may be no sharp distinction between certain kinds of deeply internalized ideology and certain kinds of religion. (The more like a religion an ideology is, of course, the less other things are equal and the better the case for treating it like a religion in relation to the three separation principles.)45

In other words, secular disputes do not lead to irreconcilable differences; in the instances where they seem to do so, the contending positions must be not really secular after all. It is hard to see what Audi is actually arguing here, other than that arguments are likely to be intractable if the disputants come from mutually incomprehensible starting points. In particular, secular liberals find it relatively easy and congenial to argue with other secular liberals. It seems too easy to rule out those with whom secular liberals find it hard to converse, on the grounds that their views are, *ipso facto*, religious46.

As we saw with his arguments about believers’ obligations and clergy roles, Audi’s position rests on a sharp assumed distinction between a (quite limited) spiritual domain and everything else. However, he does not spell out where he sees the dividing line, and

43 Ibid., p 57
44 2000 op. cit., p 39
45 Ibid.
46 Rawls avoids this problem by using the category of ‘comprehensive doctrines’ to describe the various foundational systems out of which individuals construct their views. Many people—including, perhaps, secular liberals—have comprehensive doctrines, and Rawls finds space for conversation in the ‘neutral public reason’ which arises out of an ‘overlapping consensus’ between ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines’. A similar circularity arises in Rawls’s argument in that he contends that ‘neutral public reason’ cannot contain ‘unreasonable comprehensive doctrines’, and the definition of an unreasonable comprehensive doctrine turns out to be one that does not produce enough overlap with others to form part of a public consensus. Thus, some kinds of religion find it easier to fit in than others, and those that find it hardest are just those (such as, for example, Indigenous land-based religious traditions) most vulnerable within a secular, proceduralist, majoritarian system. While Rawls’s formulation is more subtle than Audi’s, they share a strong tendency to allow religious participation in the public square only on condition that the religious traditions concerned fit, or are willing to be remade in the image of, a liberal secularist model.
here the line turns out to be, though always sharp, nevertheless moveable according to the needs of the argument: the ‘everything else’ which lies on one side of it is here just proceduralist secularism.

Carter’s solution to the problem of potential fundamentalist colonisation of the public square and the feared loss of liberal freedoms is to emphasise the uncertainty of religious conviction. In a move very similar to Locke’s in the Letter Concerning Toleration, Carter insists that, since no one can know the mind of God, everyone should do their best to live by what they perceive God’s will to be, while also recognising the possibility that my view of what God wants may turn out, on the Last Day, to have been mistaken. Consequently, one should avoid investing too much in a particular political outcome.

Like Locke’s, Carter’s argument is rooted in a distinctively ahistoric and individualistic notion of what religion is. However, Locke is careful to keep open the many facets of religious commitment, at least as they apply to the Protestant and Catholic traditions in which he is interested—ritual, doctrine, religious ethics and so on. Carter, by contrast, relies on a much reduced account of religion, presenting faith as primarily a matter of a believer trying to discern the will of God so as to perform (or refrain from) particular acts. And, despite his occasional assurances to the contrary, the picture that emerges from Carter’s account is of revelation as a thoroughly individualistic matter: God speaks to the mind of one individual believer, and that believer has to make her own sense of the message which comes through—however distorted.

This is particularly apparent when Carter considers the practicalities of how his proposal affects religious conduct in the public square. He opposes ‘political preaching’, he tells us, because:

> Few things are more trivializing to the idea of faith than for believers themselves to adopt an attitude holding that the will of God is not discerned by the faithful but created by them. ... If, as most Americans, believe, there is a God external to the human mind, and if that God has tried to communicate with us, whether through revelation or some other path, then the human task is surely to discover the contents of that communication, not to surrender that possibility in return for the freedom to call one’s own politics God’s will. Political preachers from right and left alike sense this. They know that their audiences believe in the possibility of learning God’s will, which is why it is rare that the political preacher says anything as self-effacing as ‘I can’t say for sure that this is what God wants, but it’s certainly what I want’. 47

Yet many believers might find Carter’s view of faith still more trivialising than those he criticises. The idea of God ‘external’ to the human mind, ‘trying’ to communicate with us (by revelation or otherwise), conjures up an image of a divine alien, perhaps hovering over the earth in a flying saucer, banging on the controls in frustration: ‘Sometimes I seem to be getting through, but there’s too much static on the airwaves!’ The alien is just that: foreign. No one can know what is in God’s mind, a theme Carter reiterates at several points. That is certainly a venerable theological perception: the apophatic tradition reminds believers that much of what can be said about God is God’s unknowability. But Carter reduces faith to a very few elements: what is unknowable is just God’s will for right human conduct, and the life of faith is just trying to discern God’s will correctly so

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47 ibid., p 73
as to act as God wants and so save one’s soul. God’s will, in Carter’s account, seems not just unknowable but altogether random. Although he uses the word ‘discern’, he says so little about the sources of such discernment, and so much about its uncertainty, that ‘guess’ might be more accurate.

Moreover, Carter’s reduction of a life of faith to trying to second-guess the unknowable divine will in order to avoid contravening it and thus jeopardising one’s soul is a curious amalgam of evangelical and Catholic theology, not recognisable in any actual Christian tradition. It is as if Carter, an Episcopalian (Anglican), cannot quite bring himself to believe in the Reformation principle of sola fides; he embraces instead a works-based soteriology in which doing God’s will gets you saved and contravening it gets you damned. But the other aspect of Carter’s theology is unrelentingly Protestant: where Catholic theology has emphasised the role of church teaching in giving the faithful guidelines as to how God’s will is to be enacted, Carter’s believer is left struggling alone, with only scripture as a highly uncertain guide, to guess what that will might require.

Consequently, Carter’s twin emphases on the unknowability of God’s will and the indispensability of saving one’s soul through one’s own efforts leads him into his own version of the Euthyphro problem: we have to both discern and do God’s will in the absence of any independent (or for that matter internal, as in the magisterium) category of right and wrong. I happen to believe that God wills that people should live together in peace; but it is just possible that God actually wants mass murder, so I should not rule out that possibility.

Advocating skepticism about one’s own convictions, he takes the example of the US Episcopalian church’s debates over the ordination of women (a cause he supports):

In the case of figuring out whether God does or does not will the service of women as priests, one … must act from conviction, and one must simultaneously be prepared for the possibility of error … [I]f, as many deeply pained opponents charge, the church was wrong, the error was necessarily a misunderstanding of God’s will; it would not be proper for those of us who support the ordination of women to say that the Bible cannot possibly wall off the priesthood from women simply because we do not want it to, for then we fall victim to the lure of political preaching … The answer has everything to do with discerning and then enacting the will of God, and nothing to do with the rights of women.48

Yet many believers would find this position severely trivialising—if not in the way that Carter imagines religious commitments being trivialised. For, on Carter’s argument, he and those who agree with him have to leave open the possibility that they may, at some future time, be persuaded that it was they, and not opponents of women’s ordination, who were mistaken. Should that time come, their response, on Carter’s argument, would be a regretful ‘Bother!’, followed by commitment to revoking the ordination of already ordained women and the prevention of any future such ordinations. God-the-alien may or—who knows?—may not want women ordained. Our job is to discern her will and try to do it.

But here, as in Audi’s formulation, the effort to differentiate one’s religious and political convictions seems psychologically—not to mention theologically—untenable. Carter

48 ibid., p 77
presents accepting that God does not want women ordained as a straightforward proposition. Painful, no doubt; disappointing, of course; even a little embarrassing, if you’ve stood too publicly on the pro-ordination bandwagon—but straightforward, nevertheless.

On Carter’s account, there is only one serious risk to be run, and it is a product of his own peculiar theological *bricolage*—that, by having guessed wrong in the cosmic Lotto, you jeopardise your soul:

> If it is God’s will that women serve as clergy but they are not allowed to do so, then those who prevent them put their own souls at risk—but not the souls of the women who are denied the opportunity. If, on the other hand, it is not God’s will that women be ordained, then the church that ordains them engages in an act of sacrilege. Worse, those to whom the falsely ordained administer the sacraments are also in danger of the judgment.49

But for many supporters of women’s ordination, accepting that their views are against the will of God would be far from straightforward. From the point of view of many such people, Carter’s formulation concentrates on the relationship between each individual believer and God (and particularly, each individual’s prospects of personal salvation), while ignoring important theological issues which derive from the setting within which those claims are made. For such people, there would be many consequences beyond those examined by Carter. To take one example, denying women ordination would mean making a judgment that those women who claim to have discerned a call to ordained ministry are mistaken—just the kind of judgment that Carter is eager to avoid, because it involves second-guessing the unknowable will of God. As another instance, denying women ordination would mean denying the sacraments and contact with a church to all those women (and men) who, for whatever reasons (past history of abuse, for example), are unable to receive those ministries from a man.

In other words, changing one’s view on a moral question (ordination of women) has consequences for one’s theology: one’s view of the nature of the God who requires a particular course of action. Supporters of women’s ordination would find themselves left with a God whose will included, among other things, allowing some to be deluded into a false sense of calling and perpetuating institutional violence towards abused women and men. For many supporters of women’s ordination, such a faith would be not merely difficult but impossible. If God indeed wills those things, God is wicked. Since faith in a wicked God is not one of the more readily available religious choices to modern believers, it is likely that such a person would abandon her faith altogether. If she were to feel herself enjoined instead to the worship and service of a God whom she felt to be wicked, the psychological strains (for example, for someone who also believes that ‘God is love’) would be almost unimaginable. The assumption behind his argument is, arguably, more trivialising than that of his targets: in his efforts to quarantine the divine from political second-guessing, he leaves believers with a God that few would (bother to) believe in. Consequently, Carter’s separation between religious and political commitments is too watertight to be credible. Religious belief, for those in the theistic religions, lands up, fundamentally, questions of what God is like.

49 *ibid.*, p 77
Both Audi and Carter take the separationist principle beyond institutional concerns and translate it into the very minds and personalities of believers. Religious and secular political motivations have to be kept separate—in Audi’s case, so that the conversation does not unfairly exclude those who cannot share its religious presuppositions; in Carter’s, because faith must not be driven by politics.

A more realistic appraisal of the connection between theological and political conviction comes in the work of a Christian theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx. He directly challenges the idea that people passively derive their moral, social and political commitments from religious doctrine. Rather, at least in cosmopolitan, secular, urban societies, those views are constantly shaped by one’s encounters with other ways of life, so that pluralism becomes part of the deepest mindset of such societies’ members. The revisions which such people find themselves making to their moral, social and political views engender, for the religiously-committed, a related set of theological revisions. Consequently, according to Schillebeeckx, the movement decried by Carter as a ‘political tail’ wagging a theological dog is in fact a fundamental aspect of theological formation:

It is often forgotten that a change in ethical view also brings about changes in one’s image of God. Those who cling on to old pictures of God then find themselves involved in all kinds of clashes with new ethical values, so that in the long run the abandonment of the ‘old morality’ also affects belief in God … Legitimate changes in ethical appreciation must therefore go hand in hand with new conceptions of God if in the long run people are not to experience some dichotomy or schizophrenia.

This suggests that we should be looking for much more complicated interactions between religious and secular political motivation than either the secularist or revisionist literatures acknowledge. To move the discussion forward, I turn now to examine some actual instances of the ‘partisanship’ charge against politically active churches.

Who is a partisan?

In Australia’s more religiously tranquil atmosphere, questions about the proper role of churches in public debate seldom burn with the intensity common in US politics. When discussions go beyond superficialities, they often express unease about the apparent intrusion of religious beliefs into the political forum. What little public commentary is available generally assumes that religiously-committed parliamentarians and politically-committed clergy should fit Rawls’s ideal type of citizens who hold comprehensive religious doctrines but enter public debate bracketing their religious beliefs.

At Federation, the assumption was that most politicians would have religious beliefs; that they would exercise them politically; and that having representatives who behaved ‘as

Christians in all things was one among the range of safeguards which citizens in a democracy could expect to protect the political process. These days, we may have slipped, without articulating or even noticing it, to the opposite assumption. The expectation underlying much public commentary is that, while Members and Senators may have religious beliefs, they should not exercise them politically; and the absence of religious convictions from parliament is one safeguard of the political process. Similarly, religious scrutiny of policy and political practice is no guarantee of honesty or ethical accountability; rather, clerical commentators on political questions are more likely to be presented as rogue intruders into public debate.

Politically-outspoken church representatives are often accused by their political targets of ‘political motivation’ and ‘partisanship’. Indeed, although the issuers of such charges typically portray church activism as a novel incursion into settled church-state relations, in fact charges of church and clergy ‘partisanship’ are older than the federal Parliament. In 1877, for example, newspapers alleged a Wesleyan Methodist attempt to take over the South Australian Legislative Council. Such claims were not new, even then: the Methodist Journal was ready with a reply from the 1820 Liverpool Minutes, read annually to Wesleyan ministers, that ‘we as a body do not exist for the purpose of party’.

The charge of partisanship has not disappeared with the passing years. In an early foray beyond Treasury issues, federal Treasurer Peter Costello blamed declining faith in the churches partly on church leaders speaking out on ‘what they perceive to be moral issues’, including the GST and war, while overlooking ‘people who really had engaged in moral failure’ within their own ranks. Two months later, stung by church criticism of Australia’s involvement in the US-led ‘coalition of the willing’ against Iraq, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer delivered a still more blistering damnation of church comments on foreign policy. Downer’s is a recent statement of a well-tried position: in the past, church leaders stuck to spiritual matters, and now venture into politics as a result of inadequate theology, misguided priorities or reckless publicity-seeking. In the process, he appealed to many of the assumptions which we have seen underpinning both secularist and revisionist positions. He argued that clergy ‘seek popular political causes or cheap headlines’ which tends to ‘cut across the central role they have in providing spiritual comfort and moral guidance’, though he did not say how. He argued (again without evidence) that ‘environmental causes, feminist and gay agendas and indigenous rights’ make up a ‘diversion’ from ‘the fundamentals’. He did not say what those fundamentals are, though he did lament that many clergy had lost sight of ‘even core

52 Senate Hansard, 14 June 1901, p. 1138.
55 Peter Costello, ‘Is Faith a Lost Cause’ Address to Anglicare lunch, WatersEdge, Pier One, Walsh Bay, Sydney, 27 June 2003
57 See for example Richard Yallop ‘The New Crusaders’, Weekend Australian 6-7 September 1997
issues of faith such as the resurrection’. Why someone could not believe both in the resurrection and in indigenous rights, or why one should be a distraction from the other, he did not make clear. But the worst diversion of all, he found, was ‘overtly partisan politicking’, which, in the instances he addressed, referred mainly to taking positions on human rights and international affairs.

Related complaints, over a large range of issues, have appeared at regular intervals through the Howard ascendancy. In 1999-2000, I interviewed fifty present and past Members and Senators of the Australian federal parliament about their perceptions of the relationship between religion and politics. The charge of church partisanship was a regular complaint, particularly from the conservative side. For example, interviewed in 2000, Downer responded to Uniting Church criticism of his government’s goods and services tax (GST) by arguing that Rev. Harry Herbert, the church’s NSW Synod officer responsible for speaking on social justice questions, ‘is a bourgeois leftie’. As such, Herbert appealed, in Downer’s view, to a constituency more political than theological:

There are people who are of the centre right in religious groups and there are people who are lefties. … Day in and day out, Harry Herbert comes out and kicks the shit out of the Liberal Party … Activist bourgeois lefties like Harry Herbert, because he’s part of their sort of paradigm. Lefties run the anti-GST line. That’s just part of the left-wing baggage they carry around with them. So, some of them are in churches. I think exactly the same of them as I think of people who are not in churches, which is that they wilfully do not wish to understand how the tax system works and how it’s being changed. And nothing will persuade them that the Howard government is anything but a cruel and wicked instrument of wealth redistribution in favour of the mega-rich.

Former Liberal Aboriginal Affairs Minister Fred Chaney has repeatedly made the accusation—indeed, in one publication he extends the charge of ‘partisanship’ beyond the local Catholic hierarchy to find ‘an agenda more related to the agenda of the political Left than to the Gospels’ in a number of Papal encyclicals.

‘Partisanship’, at least when the reference was to Australian instances, uniformly meant that Coalition politicians detected among church leaders a tendency to favour Labor policies over their own, and that they felt such preference to be illegitimate.

Some accommodated this apparent contradiction by arguing that churches should not pronounce on policy detail, restricting their comments to general matters of principle. So, recalling church responses to the Coalition’s Fightback! policy in the lead-up to the 1992 federal election and subsequent criticism of the Howard government’s Native Title amendments, Tasmanian Senator Eric Abetz complained that churches:

Invoke the Bible on issues where I believe the Bible is silent—for example, saying the GST is unchristian … The church has an important role in general terms to say what is

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58 The research is reported in Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics* Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library 2001


the measure of a fair tax system, or the measure of a fair Native Title regime; but to say ‘a tax on food is immoral’ is bordering on being immoral itself. It is politically motivated62.

The implication is that ‘political motivation’ is wrong, or at least mischievously disguised. Not all Members and Senators took this approach. Some were happy in principle for churches and other religious organisations to make—or at least to endorse—specific policy proposals. However, in practice, organisations issuing such proposals or endorsements were still liable to be chided for ‘partisanship’. The criticism raises questions about perceptions of ‘partisanship’, and indeed of what ‘politics’ is taken to be.

In its strongest form, the statement that churches can make policy recommendations but not ones which are ‘politically motivated’ or ‘partisan’ might translate as stipulating that churches’ policy recommendations are acceptable as long as they do not accord with the stated policy of any existing party. This could be one way of enacting (from the churches’ point of view) a strict religion-state separation, but would make religious bodies’ position doubly difficult: they would be always in the position of advocating policies which no one was ever likely to implement, and at the same time would be precluded from endorsing policies with which they agreed. Indeed, if, for example, a political party were persuaded by a church’s arguments and adopted the church’s policy proposals, the church would thereupon have to abandon the policy since it would, by the fact of its adoption, have become ‘political’ and ‘partisan’.

If the requirement for churches not to be ‘politically motivated’ or ‘partisan’ does not preclude their espousing actual policy commitments, it might be taken to mean that churches may advocate policy positions but that their pattern of advocacy should not conform to any settled political alignment. (Churches should, in other words, operate like corporate swinging voters.) Such an argument might accept that it is legitimate for individuals to develop settled patterns of political opinion and behaviour, but maintain that collectivities should adopt a ‘swinging’ stance.

The implication would seem to be that those whose convictions lead them into a systematic pattern of political commitment are less virtuous political actors than swinging voters, who do not hold fixed—let alone ideological—political positions, but instead vary their political alignment according to particular issues63. Churches, presumably, would be expected to decide between parties less on grounds of self-interest than swinging voters are typically held to do, and more according to which party best reflects a conception of Christian values; but those Members and Senators who issue the ‘partisanship’ charge would seem to anticipate that this kind of reflection would not issue in any consistent party position64.

63 For a discussion of the characteristics of swinging voters, see Ernie Chaples, ‘The Australian Voters’ in Rodney Smith (ed), Politics in Australia Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1997, pp. 361-362
64 If this is indeed the view of politicians, it reflects a remarkable attitude to their own party organisations. After all, political parties are made up of people whose partisanship and political motivation allows the party to survive and its parliamentary representatives to keep their preselection. Equally, since preselection is only the first step to office, Members and Senators owe their political survival to ‘partisans’ beyond party structures: fortunately, therefore (from the point of view of electoral longevity), such settled loyalties extend well beyond the party organisations. Those desirable voters who begin with no preconceptions and
The politicians’ objections to church and clergy activism share one intriguing feature with both secularist and revisionist damnations of ‘political preaching’: all reflect a strikingly low view of politics. From the secularist side, we saw Audi comparing politics to the worship of ‘false gods’. Carter’s insistence that politics should follow religion would retain its sense if the word ‘mere’ were inserted before ‘politics’. Similarly, the ‘partisanship’ charge against churches when it comes from politicians substantially parallels public cynicism about politics. It is a commonplace, at least to readers of opinion polls, that the public at large views politics with suspicion and partisanship as slightly shameful. We might reasonably be taken aback, though, to find the degree to which politicians themselves seem to regard ‘politics’ as a pejorative term, and the holding of fixed political opinions as *prima facie* suspicious (at least when expressed by religious leaders).

Instead, secularist and revisionist theoretical views, and the arguments of politicians who level the real-world ‘partisanship’ charge against churches, agree in tending to depict politics as a specialist field—one in which, in a democracy, non-specialists may be allowed to dabble, but in which they should not claim to speak with any authority. They agree also in resting their arguments on an assumed but unarticulated distinction between the ‘proper’ roles of clergy (even if their task can accommodate more than just believing in the resurrection) and political ‘diversions’, but with no explanation of where or how that division is to be drawn. Where theological literature has devoted entire schools to the study of how the churches’ obligation to speak on political issues should be enacted, there is no corresponding articulation from the side of those who would limit church participation in public debate. This seems to be because secularist and revisionist alike assume the ‘secular’ as a straightforward category: the religious entails ‘spiritual’ concerns (whatever those may be), while the secular is everything else. The secular appears as the unmarked category contrasted with the religious. But, though the religious is taken to be the problematic half of the dyad, it does not typically receive very clear definition. Instead, shifting, and contestable, assumptions about the nature of religion underlie proposals about how the religious should behave.

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*decide every contest rationally on the parties’ merits therefore make up, overall, only a tiny proportion of a Member’s or Senator’s potential supporters. For the most part, he or she must accept the support of the ‘partisan’ and even of the ‘politically motivated’.*

*63 I have in mind the major corpuses of liberation theology, political theology, ecotheology, feminist theology and so on.*