A SECULAR CANCELLATION OF THE SECULARIST TRUCE: RELIGION AND POLITICAL LEGITIMATION IN AUSTRALIA

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Secular Australia and Public Religion

Like a self-willed actor who insists on adlibbing, the secularisation thesis seems forever creating headaches for its authors. One can feel, reading secularisation literature, as if overhearing a series of late-night script development meetings, where increasingly exasperated writers and directors exclaim: ‘Well, of course the general storyline still works, but now there’s the subplot with the US creationists to accommodate! And how do we build in the affaire foulard?’ Local developments have given the theoretical literature on the secularisation thesis an ever more sophisticated texture as it accommodates greater complexity.

One persistent question with which analysts have grappled is the phenomenon of religion assuming a more prominent public role, even as its public presence, at least based on numerical representation in the population, would be expected to weaken. Several studies have observed the seeming oddity that, as population levels of religious commitment in western nations decline, Christianity often seeks out increasingly public roles. Here I concentrate on two significant contributions, fifteen years apart: José Casanova (1994) and Peter Achterberg and his collaborators (2009). In their concerted efforts to deal with the theoretical complexity of secularism, they go furthest into the tangled webs of privatisation and deprivatisation, the territory that I explore further here.

Among the secularisation paradigm’s many twists, turns and tweaks, Australia only partly fits existing privatisation or deprivatisation accounts of public religion in the modern world. In Australia, as in so many other Western countries, Christianity has seized a more urgent public and political voice as its numerical strength has declined. Unlike the patterns uncovered by other scholars of religion and public life, however, the driver for the shift in the Australian case is not primarily the remaining religiously committed population. Its effects are felt overwhelmingly at

* I thank Shirley Maddox for Research assistance.
the level of formal politics—that is to say, in the world of party political rhetoric and the implementation and selling of government policy; yet the significant push comes from politicians who often do not, themselves, have strong – or any – religious commitments. Over the last fifteen years, Australians have experienced unusually frequent political appeals to ‘Christian values’ and the idea of Australia as a ‘Christian nation,’ pitched to voters who overwhelmingly lack specific religious commitments but for whom an ambiguous (and necessarily vague) Christian rhetoric appeals not despite, but because of the bulk of the population’s distance from religious enculturation.

The fine-grained and interacting effects are easily missed if the interpretation is limited to statistical analysis of declining church attendance measured against, say, rising numbers of mentions of God in political contexts. Such statistical data are available, but they take us only a little way towards the more interesting question of causation. To find out why God’s political profile is growing in Australia while her worship declines, we turn to a range of qualitative methods, including media analysis and analysis of politicians’ statements and personal declarations. To account for this phenomenon requires marshalling an assemblage of characteristics as diverse as the nation’s religious and political culture, the continuing sensitivity to certain incidents in recent political history and features of the federal voting system which cause aspects of electoral politics to play out in unusual ways.

Public Religion and Secularisation

Casanova (1994) argued that the essential feature of secularisation in modernity, whether or not church attendance fell, was differentiation, so that religion ceased to occupy the formal public role epitomised in caesaropapism, becoming instead a collection of voluntary organisations among the many competing for citizens’ attention. Casanova puts forward as his ‘central thesis and main theoretical premise’ that secularisation is not unitary, but, rather:

what usually passes for a single theory of secularization is actually made up of three very different, uneven and unintegrated propositions: secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere. (1994: 211)