

Christian Ministry Advancement Address

Barney Zwartz

Senior Fellow, Centre for Public Christianity

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The topic I've chosen today, the challenge of secularism to Christianity, is the reason I joined the Centre for Public Christianity in 2014 when I left the Age after 32 years. Christianity is engaged in a struggle all the more desperate because many people on both sides don't understand what is happening. I don't mean a struggle to exist – that is not in doubt. I don't mean a struggle to keep our former public influence and authority – that is irrecoverable. The challenge is to keep our public voice and vision against forces that want to relegate religion to the home and worship centre, to remove it from public life and public policy. I'll spend some time outlining this challenge, and I'll finish with three responses we can make.

Six years ago, I covered the second global atheist convention in Melbourne for The Age. An American lady from Freedom from Religion Foundation told how her organisation had stopped an Alabama college football team praying before games. As far as she knew, they were all willing participants, all believers, but she wasn't going to allow God near a state school competition.

She told the story triumphantly, expecting applause, which she duly got. And I got an insight into the militant secularist mind, which is as fundamentalist as any religious version. What all fundamentalisms have in common – whether religious, secular, atheist or totalitarian – is the assumption that there is only one way to live, and they will tell us what it is.

Such stories are increasingly common. At the absurd end was the Queensland education department dictum last year that primary school students must not be allowed to talk about Jesus in the playground. This is a more extreme version of the attempt to ban Christmas and Easter from schools and public spaces, usually on the spurious grounds that people of other faiths feel excluded. In my 12 years as religion editor, I never found one Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu who felt excluded. They were happy for Christian holidays to be observed and hoped that their own might be noticed as well. No, the move comes from secular ideologues.

At the worrying end are cases like the Coopers Brewery boycott last year after two Liberal MPs, Tim Wilson and Andrew Hastie, quietly and respectfully discussed same-sex marriage over a beer. One of those opinions, Hastie's for the negative, was illegitimate and must never be voiced, apparently. Lenore Taylor, editor of the Guardian in Australia, wrote last year that she would not be reporting the no case because there wasn't one. That's ideology, not journalism. Or, worse still, when a transgender activist took Catholic Bishop Julian Porteous to the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commissioner over a gentle booklet advocating traditional marriage, at the time explicitly the law of the land. What concerned me was not that some extremist made a complaint but that the Tasmanian commissioner seriously entertained it. The complaint was withdrawn before any ruling. Anti-discrimination tribunals perform a vital role, but they are not necessarily neutral. The landmark case testing Victoria's new religious vilification laws 15 years ago, the Catch the Fire case that took three years and went to the Supreme Court, only happened because a woman on the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission actively badgered Muslims from the Islamic Council to attend the seminar. The judge hearing the case expressed considerable concern about her role.

All these are examples of the challenge that 21st century secularism presents to Christian Churches and believers. We have long had to accept diminished authority and the loss of our privileged position in our modern pluralistic society. We have to accept that we are one voice among many in the marketplace of ideas and that we have to persuade people intelligently and sensitively. That is no bad thing, indeed I welcome it. But a disturbing new trend is emerging: the secular attempt to banish religion from the public square entirely, the idea that your faith is fine so long as you keep it at home or church, and don't bring it to work or to politics or the public square. Keep it out of education, medicine, abortion, marriage, euthanasia, and welfare. But to suggest we drop the priorities and values that we draw from our religious worldview is dangerously undemocratic and, in fact, not possible. Secularists don't leave their values at home, nor should they, and nor should we. We are as entitled as anyone to have a view about what a flourishing society looks like and to advocate for it.

But if modern secularism challenges Christianity, in return, religion continues to challenge secularism because, contrary to expectation, it has not gone away. Many commentators wrote religion's obituary in the 1960s and earlier. The forces of modernism – urbanisation, rationalisation, professionalisation and

secularism – were supposed to sweep it away. These secularists might accept in theory that religion's taboos and superstitions had a useful moral kernel – Voltaire said he wanted his wife and servants to be Christians so that she'd be less likely to cheat and they wouldn't steal. But they are disappointed. Religion, especially outside the West, is on the march. Africa, for example, went from 10 million Christians in 1900 to 400 million a century later. And, as post-Christian society in the West becomes more shrill and brutal, some secular theorists are becoming wary about what they wish for.

I referred earlier to 21st century secularism. That is because the self-understanding of militant secularists has changed its nature in recent decades to what I have been describing. But secularism in its traditional understanding – the one still held by the silent majority of Australians – is a very good thing that I absolutely support. It does not mean absence of religion but only that no religion is privileged over any other. Australia's Constitution states in Section 116 that "The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion." In contrast, England is not a secular country because the Church of England is the official religion, its bishops sit in the House of Lords and it has state privileges.

During the debate a year or two ago about special religious instruction in Victorian schools, I lost count of how many times the 1872 Victorian Education Act was quoted to endorse removing religion entirely. It states that education should be free, compulsory and secular. Yet the MPs and teachers in 1872 would have been astounded to hear that this meant Christianity should not be affirmed or taught. They took for granted that it was highly desirable. The Education Act merely meant that no particular creed or denomination was mandated. We have to understand and combat the misconception of this new understanding of what secularism entails.

The same-sex marriage debate gave a fairly clear indication of where society is heading. Such thuggish behaviour as occurred and certainly all the attempts to silence the debate came from the 'yes' side. If you want a crystal ball, look at Canada, which is a decade ahead of Australia. Although the 2007 legislation, as here, simply approved same-sex marriage, the legal and cultural effect has been much broader. If same-sex marriage must be treated identically to traditional marriage in law and public life, then the assumption is that opponents can only be motivated by bigotry and homophobia. Any statement

of disagreement is seen as a simple manifestation of hatred toward a minority sexual group. So law graduates of Trinity Western University are not accredited in their home state of Ontario because students at the Christian university sign a covenant that includes abstaining from sex outside marriage, and this is seen as anti-gay. This refusal to allow them a career strikes me as pretty intrusive against freedom of religion or conscience. Right now in Canada there is controversy about refusal of government grants for summer jobs to employers if they decline to sign an “attestation” supporting gender fluidity, among other things. In Quebec childcare providers that teach religious beliefs or practices are denied government subsidies. It seems private day-care centres that begin their day with toddler yoga can receive government funding, but those that begin with prayer or Bible stories (as some centres operated by religious communities do) cannot.

Back home, the safe schools program, among other campaigns, shows that the same anti-religious agenda is strong in Australia. What else is on the modern secularist list? Limiting exemptions for faith-based organisations to discriminate in whom they hire, reducing tax exemptions for churches and religious charities, stopping state aid to religious schools, and stopping government funding for charities and welfare agencies that refuse certain services, such as Catholic hospitals that will not perform abortions or adoption agencies that refuse gay couples. Several Catholic adoption agencies have had to close, the church says. Public prayers, such as those that open Parliament, are an obvious target, while the long-term aim is to silence religious voices in the public square and especially in advocating for public policy. It is a foundational belief for such secularists that they employ reason and evidence whereas believers operate by dogma and faith, so that secularists are clear-eyed and neutral in contrast to believers’ blindness and bias. Recently I talked to a prominent secularist whose organisation has as one objective “ending religious interference” against social policies such as euthanasia. It lobbies parliaments to that end. I asked what sort of interference the group had in mind. “Lobbying politicians behind closed doors,” came the reply. But wasn’t that group doing exactly the same thing? “That’s different!” Ah, of course.

Nevertheless, I’m very glad we had the plebiscite in Australia, and I entirely accept the state’s right to approve same-sex marriages. The plebiscite gave a clear democratic imprimatur, while also showing that two in five Australians disapproved, a not insignificant minority. The legislation imposes no requirement on the churches to approve or conduct same-sex marriages. Nor

do I believe that bakers and florists should be allowed to refuse a request from a gay couple any more than from a Jewish or black or Muslim couple. But I think it is essential that Christians are allowed to hold and express publicly their opinions about traditional marriage and other Christian doctrines – the right so under threat in Canada.

The ‘yes’ case was highly successful at shutting down as irrelevant such concerns as the implications for freedom of religion. Paul Kelly commented in *The Australian* before the vote about the deceit and dishonesty of politicians who pretended that the only issue of religious freedom was allowing the churches not to conduct same-sex ceremonies. He wrote that the one certainty is ongoing legal and political trench warfare over the balance between accepting same-sex marriage and protecting the religious conscience. He pointed out that Australia has no statutory right to religious freedom, apart from discrimination exemptions and that there are far greater legal protections in relation to sexual orientation. Kelly noted that the response of both Labor and the Coalition varied between disregard and contempt. I quote: “The reason is apparent – politics. Labor has abandoned any interest in addressing the inadequacy of religious protection laws with its embrace of the LGBTI cause. As for the Coalition, the story is the weakness of its conservative caucus. The deeper point is, the churches are vulnerable, and the politicians know it.” End of quote. After the vote, I was struck by the brazen hypocrisy of Bill Shorten who dismissed any fears until he noticed that in nine Western Sydney seats the ‘no’ vote won, and suddenly discovered the need to advocate religious freedom.

Nevertheless, the size of the minority ‘no’ vote forced Parliament to recognise the extent of such concerns. It set up an expert panel led by Philip Ruddock into whether Australian law adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion. Submissions to that panel closed yesterday.

It has not yet been decided whether submissions will be made public, but many of the arguments were also made to the recent Senate inquiry into the status of the human right to freedom of religion or belief. The Senate report last year, by the way, noted that freedom of religion is *not* protected in Australia. That clause in the Constitution I read earlier, so often quoted as guaranteeing religious freedom, applies only to the Commonwealth Government. The states can legislate as they choose.

What does freedom of religion look like? New Zealand provides a minimum understanding in its Bill of Rights, something Australia lacks. According to the New Zealand legislation, everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, including the right to adopt and hold opinions without interference. Everyone has the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching, and everyone has the right to freedom from discrimination. Of course, the language of rights is part of the problem. What do we do when a perceived right of religious freedom conflicts with a perceived right not to be discriminated against?

The Catholic Church, in its submission to the Senate, said that freedom of religion must not be ignored, treated with embarrassment or suspicion by policy and decision makers, treated as contrary to reason or science or read down and so narrowly interpreted that it is reduced to mean nothing more than freedom of worship within the confines of places of worship.

This last is an important point because it is precisely what militant secularists are trying to achieve. But freedom of religion and conscience is not just freedom to worship, important as that is. The fundamental character of religious belief is public, which is why people of faith build houses of worship and undertake good works.

The Catholic submission noted that anti-discrimination exemptions allowing religious groups to discriminate in whom they employ are often seen as a right to get out of something whereas it is really a right to pursue their religious mission.

The church says religious freedom is a fundamental human right which recognises the central place that faith plays in the daily lives of so many Australians and in the lives of an increasing proportion of people across the globe – at least 84 per cent, according to recent research.

Cardinal Francis George, the late archbishop of Chicago, said a few years ago: “I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.” Hyperbole? Certainly, but it shows the direction he thought Western society was heading, and the trends Christians cannot ignore.

So, I’ve laid out some aspects of challenge that religious people and organisations will increasingly face. The pressing question is, how should we respond?

There are three things I want to highlight.

First, it is tremendously important that faith does not retreat into the role the modern secularists want to give it. They believe religion should be private belief practised behind closed doors, or, at best, about keeping quaint and colourful ethnic cultures alive. They are certain religion has nothing to offer on the great moral and social issues except as a model to avoid. Melbourne Anglican theologian Michael Bird put it colourfully on the ABC's religion and ethics website a couple of years ago. He wrote: "The impression I get from years of reading some sections of the media is that religion is a lot like pornography: a mostly repulsive thing, which should be done only in private, and safely away from public view."

So Christians cannot leave unchallenged the caricature of religion as an ideology that is hostile to so-called secular values of tolerance and pluralism. Opponents who believe that utterly fail to understand how faith works in people's lives. They often see it as an arid set of propositions or dogma, where it is in fact an organic, dynamic way of life. They seem to think that believers produce moral arguments by parroting lines from a text, rather than analysing and observing and thinking about issues as they do. In fact opinions from religious groups are often particularly expert, as when the Brotherhood of St Laurence talks about homelessness from its intimate and extensive experience.

To give up the public square is to concede the battle. We have to engage with the wider community and argue for our view of a better society. It is entirely compatible with democracy to believe one's own religion is the best way to human flourishing, or even the sole repository of truth, and at the same time to believe in political pluralism with rights for all. Christians should take full part in civic debates, while also recognising we are only one of the legitimate voices. We argue with as much grace and rhetorical power as we can muster, and if we lose, as often we have, well, we gird up our loins and try again. The essential thing is to keep engaging, and not to desert the field.

And one powerful factor in our favour is that even as fewer people identify with organised religion, vastly fewer still identify with militant secularism or atheism. The strident tone and arrogant disdain for religion of such fundamentalist atheists as Richard Dawkins or A.C. Grayling are not at all persuasive to the vast majority of Australians. Just as we like our religion to be low temperature, so we distrust fanaticism among its opponents. We do not enjoy posturing or belligerence. I am sure that is why in the 2011 Census some

six million Australians declined to identify with a religion but only 59,000 of them described themselves as atheists, a minuscule minority. Star Wars Jedi, I believe, had more adherents.

If our first response is to reject the secularist caricature of Christianity, the second is the other side of the same coin, to mount the positive case for religion. This is especially important at a time when religion is deservedly earning an immense amount of bad publicity, from Islamic extremism to clergy sexual abuse. Despite these setbacks, religion is powerfully attractive for several reasons. Michael Bird gave six:

- 1: Religion can create a sense of identity - not merely a convenient tag, but a way of defining oneself among a swirl of local sub-cultures.
- 2: Religions often contain rituals that infuse meanings into elements of life including birth, marriage and death, and give them transcendent significance.
- 3: Religions tend to see life as having meaning and purpose – a welcome alternative to the nihilism or consumerism that leaves so many people feeling empty.
- 4: Religions often prescribe ethics and values, especially behaviour towards others.
- 5: Religions create communities, hubs of families, which are often ethnically and culturally diverse but unite in worship and serving other people.
- 6: Religions offer a sense of hope. Our current predicament, whatever it may be, is not the last word. A better future is possible.

In sum, religion is a blend of identity, symbol, purpose, behaviour, community and hope. At its best, as history shows, it can make significant contributions to the lives of individuals and to our communities.

The third response is that we must fight the history war. We should educate ourselves to rebut what critics claim about the historical influence of religion for ill. Some criticism is fair, of course, but often the attacks are ignorant and prejudiced. The Centre for Public Christianity is at present making a documentary called *For the Love of God: how the Church is better and worse than you ever imagined*. We have to be honest about both. I'd like a dollar for each time I've been told that religion is to blame for all wars, that missionaries were imperialists who degraded marvellous cultures, that Christians are blind or irrational or emotional cripples or repressed bigots who are dangerous. The

narrative increasingly taking shape under modern secularism is that Christianity played only a minimal or even a malign influence in Australia's development, but this flows almost entirely from prejudice.

So, as I said, we must equip ourselves to challenge these misconceptions. The sad fact is that most Australian Christians don't know their own history, and do not rebut the attacks because they cannot. We need to be informed, and combat these ideas gently and intelligently. A defence of Christianity's record and influence is an important form of pre-evangelism. It is a good tool in breaking down the barricades against faith in the mind. And it is a tool nearly all of us can use, even if we have to do a bit of reading first.

Each of us, in our own circles, can help to stand against this cultural tide. We can all speak up. It was the civic and communal values of Christianity and the faith-motivated dedication of many individual Christians that built this nation. Their legacy remains in schools, universities, hospitals, libraries, hostels, not to mention palliative care, aged care, charities and other welfare providers. It was Christians motivated by their faith who were the chief advocates for prisoners, the poor, the Indigenous, who had a vision of and worked for the common wealth. Today many people merely pay lip service to the idea of a commonwealth, and we can all see the results in diminished business ethics, and failing personal and social responsibility and accountability.

Roy Williams writes in his excellent book *Post-God Nation*: "An astonishing number of distinguished figures in Australian history since 1788 have been people for whom faith was a major motivating force. They have had a sense of mission, and they have acted on it in such disparate fields as politics, law, exploration, business, science, journalism, trade unionism, the arts, architecture, engineering and education." The reason New South Wales did not quickly descend into nihilistic chaos after settlement was largely due to visionary Christians, especially in feeding the colony, but also in early attempts at education, healthcare and exploration. All social welfare was done by the churches and volunteers, and the Anglican Church provided all education until the 1830s. Williams argues that without religion, and without committed individuals motivated by religion, the colony would not have lasted long. He says: "The convicts would have been sent to their doom in West Africa, or the First Fleet would have foundered. The colonists, or those of them who arrived alive, would soon have starved or fallen fatally ill, or committed suicide, or descended to impoverished barbarism."

So my message is this: Christianity has overwhelmingly been a force for good in this country, and Christians need to say so. Its vision, its principles, its motivating force have inspired countless thousands to dedicated service, to selfless generosity, even to heroism. Of course, there have been dedicated, selfless and heroic non-believers too, but I think American public intellectual Wilfred McClay is right when he notes that “secularism boasts no energising vision and no revolutionary élan”. Instead, he says, it must await the excesses of the religion or some similar foe to make its case, stir up its fading enthusiasm and rally its remaining troops. Just like the Freedom from Religion leader with whom I opened, too many secularists, it seems to me, are permanently angry and aggrieved, and offer little positive to replace what they decry.

And that, of course, is Christianity’s great advantage: its ability to change and energise lives, to restore relationships, to build hope and to build community. Its legacy and its future are, I suggest, immensely positive.

Thank you.