

Liberalism built on Christian principles is lost on modern elites

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RJE comment: Hayden's insights (I've highlighted some of them), strongly support the perspective that the west in general, and Australia in particular, has moved into a position of deliberate hostility to Christianity, as also argued by Steve McAlpine from Western Australia.

The opening words of the Imperial Act that brought our Constitution into being are:

Whereas the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble federal Commonwealth under the Crown ...

Patrick McMahon Glynn is the author of that reference to humble reliance on the blessing of Almighty God. He was a South Australian delegate to the Federal Convention who later served in the House of Representatives for 19 years and in three federal ministries. His words reflected what the elite of the Federation generation saw as fundamental.

They do not reflect what modern elites think. The public voices of modern elites are not humble. They conceive themselves to have entitlements and rights, not blessings. And they do not feel any gratitude to Almighty God for their entitlements and rights. Instead they - desire to exclude any role for religion in Australian public discussion, and perhaps any role for religion at all in any sphere, public or private. They instantly demand an apology for any statement they dislike. They consider that what one does not condemn one must be taken to accept. They have failed to understand that that places them in a difficult position.

Some little time ago a particular point of view was publicised with the words: "Burn churches, not gays." This summons up remembrance that the last organisation in the West with any power to burn places of worship was the Nazi regime, and the fact that regime moved quickly from burning Jewish synagogues in November 1938 to the attendees of synagogues soon after — in their millions.

More recently vandals daubed on the walls of a Baptist church the words "Crucify 'No' Voters". Modern elites do not easily notice a deliberate and blasphemous allusion to a central element of Christian belief. They seem to waver between contradictory contentions: that Christ never existed, or Christ was never crucified, or the Roman soldiers attempted the crucifixion so incompetently that Christ merely fell unconscious and never actually died on the cross.

Does not the failure of modern elites to condemn these two examples of subhuman behaviour indicate an acceptance by the elites of their propriety and validity?

A related catchcry commonly heard is: “Why don’t religious people stop forcing their opinions on everyone else?” This is a call for what in Germany in the 1940s would have been called a compulsory inner emigration.

A key aspect of modern elites is the relativism of their beliefs. It is all right to call for the physical destruction of places of worship and the death of those who worship in them. That is treated as merely routine. It is fit to pass without comment. But it is not seen as all right for those who worship to state publicly the beliefs they hold, and to argue, whether on narrowly religious or ethical or utilitarian grounds, for or against particular policy positions under general debate. The elites may support a particular point of view. But it is intolerable for anyone else to oppose it. That is what modern elites call “tolerance”.

Until recently the approach of modern elites to religion was one of indifference. It is easy to understand how this came to be. The horrors of life in earlier times made it understandable that human beings were strongly attracted to seeking consolation in religious faith and in the hope of a better world after life in this world ended. We forget how some types of prosperity have become more common in the West, and how fast.

Indifference based on rising wealth can be insidiously damaging to religion. Prosperity has proved a graver foe than persecution. The more attractive the world seems, the less apparent need for contemplating the possibility of some other world. Religion inquires into the nature of humanity and the destiny of humanity. It tries to transcend the trivial. It looks for windows into another world. The vision of life it stresses may not be tragic. But it is serious. To those satisfied with the pleasures of this world, now so freely available, inquiry and search of these kinds is of no interest.

But members of modern elites are moving away from mere indifference. They are embracing a fanatical anti-clericalism. Some want to destroy faith itself. There have been recent persecutions in the Middle East of a kind and on a scale that have not been seen for centuries. Now, however, mass murders and threats of mass murder are disrupting and scattering communities who have lived for a long time in peace with their neighbours. We must hope that never happens in Australia.

But something equally uncompromising, though less severe, is emerging in Australia. Among the elites is developing a hostility to religion not seen in the West since the vengeful premierships of Emile Combes in the early 20th century. The hostility is demonstrated least against Hindus and Buddhists. It is also not much demonstrated against Muslims. It is beginning to be demonstrated against Jews. Some elements in the elites are drifting back to an anti-Semitism that one thought had been purged from Western life by the horrors of World War II and the persecution of Jews in communist eastern Europe after 1945. And hostility is increasing markedly against Catholics. One of the aphorisms of the great leader of the German Centre Party, Ludwig Windthorst, is becoming true again: “Anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals.” But no Christian denomination seems to be exempt from the new de-Christianisation campaign.

Now it is evil to invite anti-religious violence. It is also evil to damage the property of religious institutions. To fail to denounce those evils is to associate oneself with them. The case for the elites is weakened not only by their association with those evils. It is also weakened by their failure to appeal to reason.

Peter Kurty has recently written a remarkable book, *The Tyranny of Tolerance: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia*. He argues that traditionally liberalism aimed to protect

individuals against the encroaching power of the state. But this type of liberalism has been replaced. The new liberalism calls for the enervation of religious faith and religious practice.

It sees faith as something that is at best an individual subjective profession of taste — a sort of hobby, harmless enough, but only if practised in private. Instead real tolerance is to be extended only to those who are alleged to be victims of discrimination. He says: “Tolerance in the name of relativism has, indeed, become its own form of intolerance. We are commanded to respect all difference and anyone who disagrees can expect to be shouted down, silenced or, often, branded a racist. Everyone must be ‘tolerant’.”

The tolerance practised by modern elites is tyrannical. They say: “You must listen to what I am going to say. Then you must either praise my virtue or shut up. Because if you try to say you disagree and why, you deserve to be, and you will be, hounded out of all decent society.” Thus the tyrants of tolerance pay lip-service, but only lip-service, to freedom of religion as a fundamental human right. Freedom of religion can be destroyed by persecution in the manner of some Roman emperors or Islamic State. It can be destroyed as well by the tyrants of tolerance. Section 116 of the Constitution prevents the enactment of any commonwealth law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. The tyrants of tolerance react to what religious speakers may say with orchestrated vilification, insults, derision, scorn, fake outrage and bullying mockery. That can do as much to prevent the free exercise of religion as any law falling foul of section 116.

Modern elites do not desire tolerance. They demand unconditional surrender. They want absolute victory for an uncontestable dogma that they see as unchallengeable — or at all events is not to be exposed to the risk of challenge. The modern elites call for their creeds to be tolerated. Then they call for them to be compulsory. Then they want them to be exclusive. This authoritarian claim overlooks the roles of both courtesy and reason.

In almost every way the past five or six decades have seen a massive decline in courtesy, civility and mutual respect. Seats are not given up to the pregnant, the elderly and the infirm on public transport. Travellers are exposed to the private affairs of other travellers. Citizens are not free from noise made by their neighbours. Passers-by in suburban streets are ceasing to exchange polite greetings. Public violence and drunkenness is more common. Loutish triviality prevails in commercial life, and at all levels of public life from parliamentary processes to community debate.

But there is more wrong with the approach of the elites than discourtesy. Their approach disables them from presenting their point of view properly. To shout is not to argue. To censor is not to reason. To bawl is not to persuade. They do not understand that their own position can be presented more forcefully by conceding the existence of a case against it.

Modern elites call themselves “liberal” and “tolerant”. Genuine liberalism and tolerance is the product of a long historical process. Modern liberalism in any genuine sense rests on a belief in individual liberty, in the moral equality of individuals, in a legal system based on equal treatment of like cases, and in a representative form of democratic government. How did this modern ideal of liberalism arise? Out of the religion that is now the most despised: Christianity.

From the time Christ walked the earth trends began that, though at varying speeds and in different ways and subject to various setbacks, caused the modern age to develop.

The process has been finely traced by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. He points out that before the Greek and Roman republics emerged, society was based on families run by patriarchs. The Greek republics were in effect tyrannies or oligarchies. Rome originally was run by kings, then by a republican oligarchy, then by emperors whose power in the first and last resort rested on military strength. In these societies “citizens” were generally few in number. In different ways women, younger sons, slaves, captives and foreigners could enjoy only debased and limited roles. Even a genius such as Aristotle viewed slavery as inevitable: “Some are free men, and others slaves by nature.” Thus natural inequality, and the natural superiority of the few over the many, were basic assumptions. The world was seen as dominated by many inscrutable deities and an uncontrollable and immutable fate.

Christ revealed a different vision. He showed a concern for the ill, the socially marginal, the outsider, the destitute. He opposed self-righteousness and hypocrisy. He had no concern to associate with wealth, power or celebrity. His associates were humbler. Many of them were women. He saw little children as heirs to the kingdom of heaven. He encouraged a search for the beam in one’s own eye before identifying the mote in someone else’s. He encouraged his followers not merely to love their friends and neighbours but also to forgive their enemies. He urged them not to meet violence with violence. His social teachings were reflected, for example, in the monastic tradition later. Thus in the fourth century, St Basil of Caesarea said: “It is God’s will that we should nourish the hungry, give the thirsty to drink, and clothe the naked.” They live on in religious charities even to this day. But above all Christ taught that all human beings were equal before God, and all could enter the kingdom of God.

His followers came to treat his life as a revolutionary and dramatic intervention of the divine into secular affairs. His enemies saw him as a rebel against unsympathetic religious leaders and Jewish puppets of Roman governors. His followers, however, saw him as having universal significance for each individual human being.

As Paul told the Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul advocated relying on conscience and good intentions and abandoning the ritual behaviour of the ancient world and the Jews, with its mechanical following of rules and immemorial customs. He urged the exercise of free choice in accepting the gift of grace attained through faith in Christ. Salvation was a matter of personal decision to be resolved between each individual and God. In that sense all were equal. Those equal in the eye of God came to be seen as equal in the eye of the law.

For this reason Siedentop asks: “Was Paul the greatest revolutionary in human history?” And he states: “Through its emphasis on human equality, the New Testament stands out against the primary thrust of the ancient world, with its dominant assumptions of ‘natural’ inequality. Indeed the atmosphere of the New Testament is one of exhilarating detachment from the unthinking constraints of inherited social rules.”

So Tertullian said that Christ had done “one mighty deed ... to bring freedom to the human person”. In due course this attracted hostility from the Roman Empire. The persecutions of some Roman emperors — not just those of Nero described by Tacitus or of military dictators such as Trajan or of Decius and Valerian, desperately trying to save a collapsing state, but objects of modern veneration such as the supposedly civilised Marcus Aurelius — assisted the spread of Christianity. As Tertullian also said, the blood of the martyrs was “the seed of the church”. The process was perhaps aided, perhaps hindered, by the gradual conversion of

that somewhat flawed figure, the emperor Constantine, with his unfortunate identification of church and state. The last battle was fought by the emperor Julian, who tried to revive paganism but whose dying words were: “Thou hast triumphed, Galilean.”

Yet even his goal was not to revive polytheistic paganism as it had been. Instead he wanted to create a new paganism with Christian influences, resting, like Christianity, on “the love of God and of fellow men”, and asserting “charity” as its vocation. He saw the spread of Christianity as resting on “their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives”. Even the great councils of the 4th and 5th centuries prefigured the modern liberal world, as they tried to thrash out basic questions in long debates, like a 19th-century representative legislature.

Now the modern elites in seeking to marginalise or silence Christianity are not only rejecting the cultural tradition of Christianity. Not only are they rejecting a large part of the entire life and history of the nation — because Christianity is so integrated with the national life and history that to annihilate it is to destroy that national life, which can live only in memory. They are also rejecting that fundamental part of the Christian tradition that is the source of the modern world and of their own favoured position within it. They are doing it whether they realise it or not. To do that is to run a risk of returning, at least in part, to what the Christian tradition replaced. And what it replaced is rule by patriarchs, or aristocracies, or oligarchical castes, heavily based on slavery, involving the subjugation of women, captives and younger sons and not recognising the status of aliens. It is to drift towards the opposite of Christianity. Above all, the modern elites welcome tyranny. Why not? They tolerate only their own views, even though those absolutely expressed views tend to change with the fickleness of fashion.

Shortly before going to the guillotine, Girondin leader Vergniaud said the French Revolution, like Saturn, was devouring its own children. In Australia we see the reverse. The children of the Christian revolution, after denying that it was their father, are devouring the revolution.

Members of modern elites would incredulously deny that their protected position owed anything to Christianity. But some of them would accept, perhaps, that that protected position owes something to classical secular liberalism. Liberalism endeavoured to create governmental structures that protected a private sphere of individual freedom. In that sphere, religious belief could survive. But some members of modern elites depart from their own origins in secular liberalism. By preventing any public expression of religious thought through ridicule and bullying, they tend to cause religion to wither away even in the private sphere. What can have no public expression will eventually cease to have any private existence. Thus the elites seek to destroy their inheritance from secular liberalism.

Subject to qualifications, the exercise of state power by the legislature or the judiciary cannot be said yet to have threatened the interests of religious people and their institutions as much as some of the elites would like. The most immediate threat is from the conduct of the elites using methods other than the force of law itself.

But a threat to religious institutions may not stop there. It may eventually come from the law itself. If it does, it may begin a trend that is likely to be adverse to many other institutions, small or large, mainstream or marginal, that the elites and the state that they tend to dominate come to dislike. That is why even those who are not members of religious institutions and have no particular sympathy for them ought to fear the war on religious faith.

There are prohibitions in Australian human rights legislation against discrimination based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin — but not religion. If the elites were able to proceed by force of law — whether by laws specifically directed against their religious enemy or that have a damaging impact on that enemy because of its unprotected position — some may think that the time for talking alone may have passed.

Some may think the time for resistance may have come. Some may see it as necessary to deliver sermons attacking unjust laws with sufficient power to threaten the life of governments, like Cardinal von Galen's sermons against Nazi involuntary euthanasia, for which he paid the price of incarceration in a concentration camp. Some may see it as necessary to endure imprisonment and exile as Cardinal Mindszenty did for opposing communist oppression and expropriation in Hungary after 1945. Some may endure imprisonment and expropriation, as thousands of priests and churches did for opposing Bismarck's anti-Catholic laws in Germany. Perhaps once again some persecution will be the seed of the church.

Let us return to the man honoured by this lecture. Had Glynn lived to see the days that a pessimist might consider to be coming, how would he have reacted to them? Probably with clear-headedness, but also with fire and passion.