

# Religious Freedom - Mainstream Churches and Society

An Address at the  
Church of St John the Baptist, Canberra

by

**Jack Waterford AM**

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## Jack Waterford AM



Jack Waterford is a journalist and commentator. He graduated in law from the Australian National University and began his career in journalism as a cadet with The Canberra Times in 1972, covering a broad range of rounds before being appointed Deputy Editor in 1987, Editor in 1995, and Editor-in-Chief in 2001. He is well known for his investigative journalism and for his work and advocacy on

indigenous health issues and on the national trachoma and eye health program.

He has delivered papers at many public forums and written book chapters on areas as diverse as press freedom, the High Court of Australia, public administration and the Petrov Affair.

Jack has received many awards for his work, including:

- the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year Award in 1985;
- being named a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2007 Australia Day Honours and;
- also in 2007, Canberra Citizen of the Year.

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Many of the great institutions of what some saw as a golden age of society six or seven decades ago now appear to be toppling. They are often doing so in disgrace, seeming to lose their moral authority, their capacity to lead and inspire, and their old comfortable and settled place in society. Disgrace of the banks. Major changes in that basic unit of a community – the family, including a marked shift in sexual ethics, and views about basic human relationships. The institutions of government, of the economy, of law and order, and the institutions big and small, of people in voluntary groups focused on culture, the arts, the sciences, sport, leisure and human improvement.

But none which once seemed so solid as the Christian churches. Solid. Respectable. Enjoying the support of the bulk of the population and the respect of everyone, even most of those without religion at all. With leaders who spoke with authority, and who nagged away at our tendency to be smug, reminding us of higher things and asking why we were here. Chiding governments and ourselves, but also seeming to set the general boundaries of decent human behaviour. Established to the point where it seemed to be reproducing not only its own congregations but its own ruling class, and much of the ruling class of the wider society. Men and women taught and trained in the history and traditions of the Christian churches, but also in its essential social and spiritual messages.

Despite that image of churches behind white picket fences, the authority and the reputation – but just as importantly the influence on civil society of the mainstream churches – appear to be in sharp decline.

While some church leaders nag about important social justice issues, the mainstream church and its representatives appear to have disappeared from the public square. It is no longer the central forum in which great social questions are discussed, and from which great principles of action are set to challenge the followers of Christ. The challenges for these followers are great, but those who articulate them rarely do so in a religious context, or from a pulpit.

Their close adherents are no longer, even in age, broadly representative of society. They are no longer doing much fresh building of churches; many are selling some off, or trying to redevelop the real estate.

Church social agencies are no longer at the cutting edge of social change. Too often, indeed, they have become sclerotic and conservative, using their institutional power to resist rather than to promote change or positive improvement in people's lives.

The churches have become involved in great scandal – and in areas such as the special Christian duty to the young and the vulnerable that was at the centre of the Christian message. Just as importantly, the response of too many churches to scandal was to deny, to resist accountability and justice, and to seek to protect the assets and the senior figures of the system, rather than its poor and dispossessed. The scandals

have proven to be devastating to the reputations of some of the senior figures of the church, and sometimes to the churches themselves. That most people know the difference can be seen by the way that those who are shocked by the want of good leadership refer to hypocrisy or variation from Christian standards.

Since white settlement, Australia has been seen as operating within a Judaeo-Christian culture. The strength and the persistence of that culture is declining. This is not primarily a matter of competing religions and cultures or the pervasiveness of ignorance, indifference, and the fact that modern generations do not seem to have absorbed the culture. Nor is it merely a matter of the fact that we have become a multicultural society, with many practising people of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist faiths or cultures. A higher proportion of such people, in fact, are far more observant and religious than the people of the older western cultures, particularly among the young.

There has been a loss of Christian literature, philosophy and way of seeing things, not least through the metaphors of the Bible. Biblical stories, including most of the parables of Jesus are no longer well known. When you ask many Australians to describe themselves and their values, a good many people, including Christians, make no reference to Christianity or a specific denomination.

It was once said of Christianity, as of journalism, that its central function was to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. But a good many settled Christians have been rather more focused on protecting the institutional church rather than the spiritual welfare of its adherents, on not

offending anybody much, on being inclusive and of not much frightening the horses.

While many great social causes draw their inspiration from Christ's talk of the judgment of all nations (Matthew 25:31-46), a good many important folk in society deny that Christianity is primarily about love, social justice, and our duty to the least of our brethren.

In politics and public life, there is as eager as ever a public debate about ethics and proper behaviour – we have seen some in recent days over issues such as public corruption or sports rorts. But fewer people entering such debates make explicit reference to Christian values or approaches.

The number of children attending church schools may not have declined, but, it sometimes seems that many of these schools have failed to inculcate the values of the religion from which they have sprung. Indeed a good many parents no longer have the replication of their faith and values among primary reasons for choosing private schools. They are attending because they think it provides superior education. And because the wealth of most parents virtually guarantees a pathway to wealth and power, as well as rich friends. Less obvious is that it is a pathway to good behaviour or a better society. The old established churches seem to have missed the bus on working new technology to its purposes.

Both of my grandfathers were pillars of their church and their communities, as well as great patriarchs of large clans. But they were pious and humble people whose conversation as much as their religious practice involved not only a good deal of daily Christian ritual, but its simple and practical

expression, in terms of the duty of charity, in dealings with others.

One of my grandfathers was a great fan of G.K Chesterton who said somewhere – I have never located the precise quote – that the only currency that a person could take to the kingdom of heaven was money one had given away with their own hands, during their lifetime. He did not deprecate leaving money in your will, but did not think it made up for a want of charity in one's lifetime.

He was also fond of repeating another quote that Charity did not consist of giving money to the deserving. That was merely our ordinary public and social duty, an incident of citizenship with little to do with religion. Real charity consisted in helping the undeserving, and not only with money and other forms of support, but also love, understanding and, often, forgiveness.

I think of that sometimes when I hear a politician be a prig, declaring, as one did, that he would never give money to a beggar, though he would to a worthy charity.

Likewise, I am afraid that I have never been greatly inspired by those behind many of the charities set up for the relief of the poor by members of the British protestant middle class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When one reads reports of their proceedings, it is clear that the central concern even of the most enthusiastic organisers was that the level of assistance be not so great as to provide any sort of disincentive to work. It sometimes seemed better that 100 children starve rather than that a feckless or alcoholic mother or father received

any subsidy for their particular vice, or was discouraged from working from dawn to dusk if work was available.

Over recent decades, of course, attitudes of this sort have increased, even from folk who should know better about problems of the poor, the underclasses, and those who have become slaves to drugs. So has the very prevalent conviction that assistance from the state is a privilege rather than a right. Such people seem to believe that public welfare is to be provided reluctantly with maximum public humiliation and suspicion, and even there as a pure discretion, not one mediated by law or understanding of the individual circumstance. This punitive and coercive approach must often be contrasted with the sense of entitlement about industry and business receiving subsidies from the state.

Some new religions not out of the Christian mainstream seem to flourish, if with an interpretation of Jesus's message that seems to me to bear no relationship with what most people consider to be Christianity. Instead of love we hear a good deal of hate – much politically directed, of course. In broadcast services and messages from some Pentecostal groups of American origin, the focus seems to be on asking for money with spiritual menaces. Some of it would make even Tetzl – the man whose confrontation with Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation – blush.

One must admire the energy of its preachers, and their success in developing congregations as well as in enriching themselves. Some of that has turned on developing a culture of complaint – a suggestion that their actions and beliefs are now being actively persecuted or forbidden by law. While they are active in seeking institutional protection – if not so

much protection of the freedom of belief and religion of their adherents – they are rarely heard in the public secular forums on political issues raising issues of religious belief. They have largely been silent about the Christian approach to strangers in our midst, the poor, the sick, those in jail, or those who are hungry or sick. Many of their leaders, and some of their best-known adherents are remarkably coy about describing the values and the messages which guide their lives.

I have gone on at some length about the imaginable golden age of my childhood, if only to emphasise how far the mainstream religious organisations appear to have fallen in the intervening period. The number of people who profess that they adhere to any Christian religion is now well under half of the population. Most of those who attend services are in the older quarter of the population. Congregations are ageing. They are losing followers, to indifference or death, at a far greater rate than they are making converts, or even creating nominal citizens, for example by baptising infants.

The number of children attending mainstream religious schools may not be deteriorating, but whatever inculcation of religious ideas takes place there does not seem to be doing much to fill pews, or otherwise demonstrate Christian citizenship.

Church-taught morality no longer reflects common social values.

One hardly, these days, hears words of moral imperative from politicians, even those who are plainly inspired by religion. That is to say that in public discourse, the general appeal is to reason and emotion, but not to a sense of what is right, or

fair, or just, or what is taught by their faith. One scarcely hears the word *should*. There are many civil leaders, including religious leaders who appeal to general Christian ideas and ideals when they discuss what Christians should think or do about refugees, Aborigines, or the environment. But only rarely will they appeal to tradition or authority, and when they do, many commentators, and many in the audience will think they are squibbing the question, rating personal belief and motivation well above acceptance of traditional beliefs and approaches from scripture or doctrine.

A sign of this is that politicians know that most morally conservative church leaders do not speak for their congregations when they proclaim values about personal sexual ethics, homosexuality, contraception, or abortion. A church-going Christian woman of a fertile age is as likely as anyone else to be using contraception, or having recourse to abortion. Church-going Christians – although not mosque-going Muslims – were as likely to vote for same-sex marriage as the general population. Likewise the majority of those who want their children taught the values of their faith do not see that ensuring this means that Christian schools should have the right to discriminate against gay teachers. Even less do they think that church social welfare institutions – publicly-supported hospitals or nursing homes for example – should be able to practise *any* discrimination against patients or employees because of the religious beliefs or dogmas of the provider institutions. In the long run indeed, the mainstream churches will lose such battles with ordinary citizens, including church-goers, asking why they should receive public money if they propose to spend it in a discriminatory way.

There's a further risk to religious institutions from the crusade for a right to discriminate on the basis of a freedom to believe and do what you like, at least as long as no-one else is hurt. Scandal over child sex abuse showed the leaders of many congregations protecting the malefactors and failing to protect the most poor and vulnerable in society. At a time when neither the citizenry nor the state is engaged in preventing freedom of belief, the demands for legislative recognition of such freedoms will be seen as for the protection of the guardians, not those whose interests should be being served.

Another risk to church institutions, I fear, is in the way that government has been co-opting many religious organisations to provide government welfare functions, such as in unemployment services. Many services provided 30 years ago by the state are being privatised or contracted out, and not a few faith-based services have been keen to get contracts. No doubt they have seen this is a way of bringing their Christian focus to services to the vulnerable. But, ominously, governments are demanding, as a price of such contracts, that organisations muzzle themselves in criticising government policy and practices. This is, I think, a reason some bodies have removed themselves from this business, and are careful of supping with the devil.

At the same time an increasing number of public activities carried out by church organisations, often with tax exempt status, are heavily subsidised by the state, and heavily regulated, including as to the sort of religious tests or discriminations that can occur. This includes schools and nursing homes, and not a few groups providing temporary relief for those who have fallen on hard times.

Of course church-based groups were providing hospitals and other services to the poor long before the state even imagined for itself a role in such matters. The range of services increased as religious groups became involved, during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in co-operative movements and friendly societies. That religious institutions shouldered such burdens was one of the reasons they got tax-free status and treatment as charities.

But the increasing willingness of the state to recognise many of these functions as state responsibilities suggests to me that Christian congregations should rethink their approach to such organisations, remunerative as they are. They should be asking whether, in the modern age, they should focus on value-adding their religious convictions and values in areas where it could make a real difference. The modern church should not be simply duplicating services now provided by the state. They should be seeking to revive their place in the community, by leading its Christian witness. Otherwise, I fear, popular support for their subsidisation and tax exemption will ultimately wither away.

Indeed, there should be some who should welcome a greater separation of the church from the organs and formal institutions of society, if not the actual people and families in the community. It may involve shedding some comfortable traditions, such as tax-exempt status and subsidies. But it might also sharpen the religious message and focus.

Christian organisations can't take short cuts from the indulgence of the state. Their status and their power should depend on the quality of their mission and their message, the

effectiveness with which they carry it out in practice, and the support they have in the community. Just like any civic organisation. If churches are dependent for their power and influence not on the convictions of their followers but the patronage on their relationships with the great and powerful, they will face decline, if only because we now live, and want to live, in a more secular environment.

The influence of the church began with disciples of Christ who thought they had been inspired by a new, important and life-changing idea. An idea and ideal, and a leader, for whose message people have died. A message about which, once, no one could be indifferent, having in effect to choose sides. This message, and institutions set up to protect and propagate it, have persisted for over 2000 years. But its persistence cannot be taken for granted. That depends on physical and moral energy.

The constitutions of congregations are, of course, a matter for themselves. But a return to a pilgrim church, depending not only on its capacity to electrify its audience but to be subsidised by it, might make it rather less top-down, haughty about the lives of ordinary folk, and somewhat aloof to their practical struggles.

It might create a new sense of partnership, among a perhaps smaller group of people but one more galvanised by belief and conviction, as well as doctrines of faith and hope and charity.

Christianity is *not* an institution, let alone a settled part of society. It is a movement, almost necessarily at war with our sense of the comfortable and the established order.

It is a challenge, not a comfort, to its citizens, an inspiration to do better rather than a refuge from the wider wicked world. The churches would have more spiritual power, and inspiration, if they separated from the formal institutions of society and became again a pilgrim church, poor and challenging, as much persecuted as admired from without. The very fire of outside criticism is a spur to inculcating and reinforcing the message of faith and love.

The Christian religion has always had a capacity to endure, as well as to reform itself, often in many different ways, to meet the needs of different times. No doubt it will this time.

What seems to me clear, however, is that the forms of the religious institutions we once knew are not enduring and that the churches increasingly lack influence and clout among the people and in the public square. For those who think that a human organisation with some ostensible focus on the divine has a potential to do more for humans and human societies, that is probably not a good thing.

We must find ways of becoming urgent and important and challenging again – without becoming simply more a creature of an advertising idea, a banal or inoffensive morality, or a message stripped of its call on us to do the most for the least of our brothers and sisters.

# **The Church of St John the Baptist**

## **A Place of Special Significance**

St John's Church and its churchyard were consecrated on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 1845. Together with the schoolhouse nearby, they are listed on the ACT Heritage Register and are recognised as some of Canberra's treasures. Recent research has revealed that the presence of St John's played an important part in the selection of Canberra as the National Capital.

## **The Friends of St John's**

The 'Friends' organisation was formed in 1986. It supports the conservation of the fabric of the church and churchyard, sponsors heritage-related work at St John's and promotes the culture and heritage of the St John's community.

The Friends regularly host addresses by distinguished speakers on a broad range of topics. Three or four addresses are delivered annually, usually as part of a Choral Mattins Service. The addresses are published in booklets that are mailed to all of our members. Members of The Friends also receive newsletters during the year, with articles of historic interest as well as news of coming events.

## **You can help**

The Friends welcome members of all ages, and anybody for whom our beautiful Church has a special meaning, whether they attend the Church or not. Your membership will help us to preserve an important part of Canberra's heritage.

**Why not join today?**

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Information on how to join The Friends is available from

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The Friends aim to bind together the many people who care about St John's, who wish to see it and its grounds conserved as part of the national heritage, and who seek to promote its influence in the wider community through outreach activities.