

Christians and Politics
Patrick Morgan
Academic and Author of
Your Most Obedient Servant B.A. Santamaria Selected Letters 1938-1996
in a Joint Forum with Prof John Warhurst
25 July 2007

I am going to talk on the most spectacular – and disastrous – case of church-state relations in Australian history: the episode of the Movement, led by Bob Santamaria and backed by the Catholic Church, which led to the great Split in the Labor party in 1954, and which kept Labor federally out of office for another 16 years and Labor in Victoria for another 28 years.

The Movement was an idea thought up by Bob Santamaria – Catholic unionists were organized, with episcopal backing, on an Australia-wide parish basis to get rid of Communist influence in unions, an influence which was then very strong.

In the 1940s Bob Santamaria was appointed by the bishops as head of Catholic Action in Australia. What was Catholic Action? In the early decades of the 20th century the Catholic Church in Europe realized it was losing the allegiance of the working classes. In response Catholic Action was developed in the decades between the world wars. It was a new form of social action which went beyond traditional forms of individual piety and attempts to convert others to the faith. It was called an ‘apostolate’ and was an activist attempt to bring about Kingdom of Christ on earth by the organized action of Catholics in the social sphere. It aimed to eventually change a whole society by changing the atmosphere of any milieu in which Catholic Actionists operated.

Santamaria disagreed with this orthodox view of Catholic Action in two significant ways. Firstly he said the church in Australia had not, as in Europe, lost the working classes. Here the large Irish-Australian Catholic group were still loyal to the church and had been shepherded into the Labor Party by Cardinal Moran and others, where they formed a coherent and organizable group. This led Santamaria to formulate a more positive, even aggressive, strategy than his European counterparts.

Secondly Movements like the YCS and YCW based their apostolate on the enquiry method of ‘see, judge, act’, a formula devised to change the ‘milieu’ in which Catholics operated. Santamaria thought this method little better than traditional individual piety. This stated aim was in his opinion too vague, and unable to encompass larger social realities, such as the structures of modern society: ‘I do not believe that the world will be transformed even by millions of individual acts of charity.

The reform of social institutions is the key to the Christian situation to-day, and this demands large scale action on legislative, political, economic and cultural lines’. Santamaria opposed the Catholic Action idea of an ‘apostolate of individuals’; he took the idea of Catholic Action further than its European promoters - some said too far - by developing a kind of activity which he called ‘the apostolate of institutions’. He understood the structures of modern societies and how to influence power centres,

such as legislative bodies, in a way that earlier Chesterbellocians and other Christian social thinkers didn't. These bodies had to be influenced. His original contribution to Catholic Action theory was to adapt it to modern political structures.

Santamaria's activities had two aims – the positive one of advancing Catholic social principles, and the negative one of opposing Communism. He argued you had to get rid of militant atheism – that is, Communism - before you could put in place the Church's positive social justice agenda. By a peculiar form of circularity, the second aim ended up assisting the first. The success of the Movement in the 1940s and 1950s in greatly reducing the number of Communist and pro-Communist union officials meant that Movement members became powerful in the trade union movement. This led to them becoming equally influential in the counsels of the Labor Party, as many Labor Party conference delegates were elected by the unions. They were in the ALP ostensibly to fight Communism. But by the early 1950s, the worst Communist union excesses having been allayed, Movement members were in a prime position to begin promoting Christian social principles as Labor policy, the original Catholic Action aim. By the early 1950s Santamaria's men, led by Frank McManus in Victoria and Jack Kane in Sydney, controlled the state executive of the ALP in Victoria and NSW, the two most important states.

In a 1952 letter, now famous, Santamaria wrote to his patron Archbishop Mannix,

The [Social Studies] Movement should within a period of five or six years be able to completely transform the leadership of the Labor Movement, and to introduce into Federal and State spheres large numbers of members who possess a clear realisation of what Australia demands of them, and the will to carry it out. They should be able to implement a Christian social programme in both the State and Federal spheres...This is the first time that such a work has become possible in Australia and, as far as I can see, in the Anglo-Saxon world since the advent of Protestantism.

Now the trouble started. This was a secret, Church-backed and church-financed organization taking over a major political party. Was that proper?

By 1954 those trade union leaders whose who had called the Catholic Movement in to help them being swamped by the Communists in the Labor Party became scared that the Movement itself was taking them over, so they changed sides. Dr Evatt, the Labor leader, almost fatally weakened by losing the 1954 federal election and by his strange behaviour at the Petrov Royal Commission, took the dramatic step in October 1954 of denouncing the Movement as a sinister outside force trying to take over the ALP. This action saved Evatt but not the ALP, which split and was weakened for decades. The Catholic community lost a lot. Sectarianism, then on the wane, was revived for another few decades.

There has been a lot of bogus moralizing about Santamaria's attempt to permeate the ALP. What's the problem? People do it every day. Today environmentalists try to persuade the major parties to adopt their policies, with marked success. That's OK - it's called politics. But for a secret organization to holus bolus take over a major party may be more dubious. But I want to concentrate on the religious angle here. The matter went to Rome and the Vatican declared, quite rightly, that Church-backed groups should not operate directly in the political process. Church and state are separate. Catholics could and should, the Vatican said, organize *as citizens* against social evils like Communism, but not as part of the church. Santamaria then had to disband the movement and reform it as the NCC, an independent private secular body, with no apparent connection with the church.

What do we learn from this episode of 50 years ago? In relations between church and state, the abiding principle is that no single world-view should be imposed upon citizens, whatever the beliefs of the dominant class. In the past the church imposed views as part of the traditional establishment. We now separate church and state, a development I applaud.

Now to move to the present situation. Religious people in Australia today accept the separation of church and state. We have learned to be tolerant. With the exception of a minority of Moslems, the Islamists, none of us want a theocratic state. We accept and tolerate what we don't actually like, such as liberal laws on abortion, euthanasia and stem-cell laws.

But I'm afraid our tolerance is at the present time not being properly reciprocated. This is the new problem. Things have swung to the opposite pole. As Shakespeare said - 'The present pleasure, by revolution lowering, doth produce the opposite of itself'. We now have the old problem - ideological domination by one group - but coming from a different quarter.

Today the view that dominates society is one that can be seen in the media, in the universities and among opinion formers - it is variously called the liberal or secular humanist or permissive or trendy view of the world. It is the voice of the 'new' establishment, as distinct from the old one, and it makes it hard for those of a religious disposition to be properly heard, for our voice to be taken seriously in debates in the public square.

The key notions of the new establishment include relativism and tolerance - anything goes, there is an emphasis on novelty, on trying things out, ills in this view are caused by society more than by individual faults, rights are more emphasized than responsibilities, there is an acceptance of hedonism, and a short-term focus on the individual personality's well being, self-gratification and self esteem.

This liberal world view pretends to treat all views equally, to be tolerant and inclusive (its favourite words), but this is often not carried out in practice.

I'll give two recent exemplary cases from Victoria.

a. Two 'Catch the Fire' Ministry pastors were targeted and taped by Equal Opportunity Commission thought-police because they quoted the Koran advocating violence to non-Muslims. EOC and VCAT found them guilty of being anti-Muslim, of religious vilification, and ordered them to apologize. Where is their freedom of speech? Imams who say far worse are not touched. Where is equality and tolerance?

b. Senator Julian McGauran claimed evidence existed of a late term abortion at a hospital, a criminal matter. He tried to raise the issue. All sorts of barriers put up to stop him, privacy laws, he wasn't allowed access to medical records, etc. That is, evidence of a allegedly criminal matter was withheld. He was depicted as the villain, not the doctor who allegedly performed the illegal act. McGauran was derided for months as a DLP-type interfering, moralizing, conservative Catholic imposing his out of date views; as a male interfering in women's business. Finally though he got the file, he could never get his case heard –the police and other bodies refused to act.

McGauran became the villain, though he was defending defenceless human life, not those who had allegedly carried out a criminal act.

Similarly Cardinal Pell recently became the media villain, when the real issue was the stem-cell cloning bill parliament, which in its earlier versions allowed human-animal cloning hybrids. Nobody was jumping up and down about that, but they were jumping up and down about Pell, a regular and easy target.

These examples show that the new dominant ideology does have a worldview of its own, (it's not a *tabula rasa*) and it enforces it. It's a two stage process - first we are asked to tolerate what we don't like, and then we are asked to positively endorse it. Things change very quickly from Equal Opportunity to Affirmative Action, when it becomes compulsory (and even coercive) rather than being truly tolerant and inclusive.

The dominant liberal worldview is particularly horrified by views with a religious basis. It despises religion as a left-over superstition, long superseded by science and rational thought. Those of a religious disposition believe, on the contrary, in the sacredness of human life, that human nature stays the same and is not malleable, they believe in delayed satisfaction not hedonism or giving in to the ego, that there are limits and boundaries which are not to be crossed (eg cloning human beings), that we shouldn't be self-obsessed but have longer term, ulterior goals, and seek to transcend our present condition, that we have a responsibility not just to ourselves but to the great stream of chromosomes which we come from and pass on. This is a quick attempt to sum up the religious disposition, but you probably get my drift. Such views find it hard to get a guernsey, a fair hearing.

On euthanasia Dr Nitsckhke who openly seeks to break the law is a media hero, whereas McGauran who seeks to uphold it is a villain. It's a strange world. Peter Singer, who advocates infanticide, is a world intellectual hero. His bio-ethics supporters argue for killing human beings, a novel use of the word 'ethics'. Lord Winston, one of the founders of IVF, has recently come out against bio-ethics legislation because it doesn't work - scientists and bio-ethicists supporters keep well ahead of the evolving laws. He gets a good public hearing because he was one of the original in-group, but those who raised this problem two decades ago, including Mr Santamaria, weren't listed to because they were considered too religiously biased.

We don't, fortunately, face abortion, euthanasia, infanticide and IVF as day-to-day problems, but we do face endemic societal breakdown in schools, welfare, drugs, depression, divorce, single parent families, ADD, street violence and so on. I haven't time to fully describe the situation. Now if you try to tell the people who have been running these spheres for decades that their policies of continual liberalization, victim creation, harm minimization and authority-bashing are on the wrong track, you won't get a hearing.

In summary, the dominant secular humanist world view is not a blank slate, when the crunch comes it is not tolerant and inclusive and egalitarian, and it seeks to use various tribunals and to manufacture and direct public opinion to exclude those with a religious world view. On the other hand, those it declares minorities or disadvantaged, the favoured ones, are given extra rights we don't get.

Christians are not a victim group in Australia. But the new problem for religious views in society is in fact the old one in a new guise, one group imposing its views on citizens, except this time it's not the religious who are doing the imposing, we are the ones being imposed upon.