

17th Annual St Thomas More Forum Lecture

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Politics and Religion: The Growing Clash

By Paul Kelly

It is a great pleasure for me to present the 17th St Thomas More Forum Lecture in 2022.

I want to salute this Forum for the role it places in religious and intellectual life. It is an honour and humbling to deliver a lecture with such a glittering list of former speakers. I want to acknowledge Father Frank Brennan who spoke last year on the campaign against Cardinal Pell and whose role in documenting this monumental injustice has been crucial.

The life of St Thomas More is linked to my theme tonight – the relationship between duty to the state and duty to God. More’s integrity and intelligence took him to the highest office, but his refusal to put the authority of the king before the authority of God brought his execution. His life reminds us that serving both state and God is an honourable task but there are occasions when a choice needs to be made.

One of the celebrated American founding fathers, John Adams, the second president, said: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Those great American thinkers devised a Constitution that distributed power across the Executive, Congress and Judiciary to limit excessive government power and individual self-aggrandisement. But their work rested upon another assumption – that the American experiment would rise or fall according to human virtue.

Political theory and human morality are the two ingredients that constitute the long story of democracy. Adams, like his colleagues, was an opponent of an established religion. The founding fathers rejected both an established religion and any suppression of religion. But they believed America’s future depended upon a morality informed by a virtuous citizenry.

The first president, George Washington, agreed – saying “Religion and morality are the essential pillars of a civil society.” The founding fathers had little enthusiasm for Christian theology but they valued the role of Christian tradition. This distinction is pivotal. You don’t need a belief in the Holy Trinity to grasp the civilising role of Christian tradition. Adams, sceptical of much Christian dogma, recognised the crucial role of religion in public life. That great polymath, Benjamin Franklin, said: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”

Inspired as they were by Athens, virtue was at the heart of the American project.

It was replicated, even earlier in the British experience. The English philosopher, John Locke, an architect of liberalism, said human beings had the right to “life, health, liberty or possessions” but he saw freedom as tied to the individual’s duty to God. Thomas Jefferson drew upon Locke’s ideas when writing the Declaration of Independence. For Locke a virtuous citizenry deferring to God was integral to a political order that respected the individual. This argument owed much to Saint Thomas Aquinas who saw freedom not as individual licence but as the opportunity to pursue the highest good.

The reverse argument is powerful in affirming this point. What happens to the state when religion is banished? Novelist and dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, lamented the fate of Russia, its oppressions and its gulags, under what he called centralised atheism. Solzhenitsyn summarised the history of Russia in one sentence: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this happened.” For Solzhenitsyn, speaking in 1983, his parable had global import: “The failings of human consciousness, deprived of Divine dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century.”

It was Dostoevsky, studying the French Revolution who said: “Revolution must necessarily begin with atheism.” Unlike Dostoevsky, we now have the benefit of observing the Russian and Chinese Revolutions – and history surely suggests he was right. The Russian and Chinese method was to elevate Marx by first destroying God. The Communists, it seems, see religion as a pretty powerful force. (In passing I cannot but express dismay at the 2018 compact between the Holy See and the Communist Party of China authorised by the present Pope in a morally compromised effort to protect the church in China.)

My starting proposition tonight is that Western liberal democracy and the moral order originating in Christianity are the joint forces that deliver the good society. These are the foundation stones of the Western project and the Australian project.

It was the illustrious US Democratic Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan who said: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society.” Moynihan’s reflection opens the door to the bigger truth: that in the West the Christian heritage has been decisive in shaping the culture. And through the culture the Christian inheritance has been formative in the liberal democratic project that we enjoy today.

Many scholars affirm this story. In his study of the origins of the political order, Francis Fukuyama, said: “The rule of law in Europe was rooted in Christianity.” It was church law that initially broke down tribal norms by recognising the claims of the soul. This was a revolutionary event. It reveals the universalism of the Christian concept while also revealing its focus on the individual – as distinct from tribe or clan. Christianity asserted the fundamental relationship was between the individual and God. It was this Christian conception that fostered “the brotherhood of man” – an idea that shaped the young Bob Hawke.

In his book on the origins of Western Liberalism, Larry Siedentop, puts it well: “The story of Western development is not simple or unilinear. No cause has been uniquely powerful at all times. Nonetheless, it seems to me that moral beliefs have given a clear overall ‘direction’ to Western history.”

Yet culture is never static. The pace at which culture is buffeted, stretched and knocked senseless has rarely been as pronounced as it is in the early 21st century.

Our cultural foundations are shifting. There has been a sharp decline in Christian faith. In Australia, Christianity has fallen from 88 per cent of the population in 1966 to 52 per cent in recent years and, when the latest census figures are soon released, it is likely to fall below 50 per cent, a threshold event. This shift raises profound issues for Christians. And it would be absurd to pretend it does not have wider consequences for society and politics.

There is a parallel development – as numerous surveys reveal there is shattering of trust across Western world political systems, including that of Australia. This downward direction has transcended various changes of prime minister over the past 15 years. There are many political factors at work in this decline and I have discussed them at length for years. I believe, however, that something more profound has gone wrong – the disintegration of shared values based on the Christian tradition and wider religious tradition leads to community division, confusion and the decline of public trust.

That great religious figure and philosopher, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put the issue clearly: “A free society is a moral achievement. We’ve forgotten that without a shared moral code to which we are all accountable, into which we are all educated and which we have internalised, we will lose trust in our public life on which our very freedom depends.”

Rabbi Sacks proceeded to argue – this was in 2016 - our societies, in their law, education and norms had abandoned, one after another, the moral principles in the Judeo-Christian heritage. He referenced the breakdown of codes of honour and responsibility and our failure to teach concepts of duty, obligation, altruism and the common good. His core point is that you cannot have a successful society without a shared moral code. Our Western societies have embarked upon a dangerous experiment to defy this principle. Rabbi Sacks warned, with reference to Greece and Rome, that no society in history had taken this journey and ultimately survived.

The contemporary malaise is more apparent in the United States where the entire Trump phenomenon is both a symptom and catalyst of the cultural and moral crisis. We see the spectacle of a defeated president acting as a political criminal – claiming without any evidence that his election victory was stolen.

Confronting the US dilemma, the American writer, George Weigel, said: “The first step is to recognise that American politics is in crisis because our public moral culture is in crisis. The second step is to recognise that American public moral culture is in crisis because of a false understanding of freedom. And the third step is to recognise the false notion of freedom evident across the spectrum of American

politics is based on a false anthropology: a distorted idea of the human person and human aspiration.”

What, precisely, is this false view of freedom? It is that freedom is an end in itself, not the means to a higher purpose and better society.

US journalist, David Brooks has brilliantly captured the personal dimension of this change: “By 2007, 51 per cent of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals. In one study middle-school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would most like to have. Nearly twice as many said they’d rather be a celebrity’s personal assistant – for example, Justin Bieber’s – than president of Harvard.

“As I look around the popular culture, I keep finding the same message everywhere. You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself...Commencement speeches are larded with the same cliches: Follow your passions. Don’t accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great.”

Australian writer, Anne Manne, in her 2004 book “The Life of I” says: “Changes in our culture have created an economic, social and relational world that not only supports but actually celebrates narcissism, cultivating and embedding it as a character trait.” Is it really a surprise that the American public elected in Trump a supreme narcissist?

Writing as long ago as 1999 Fukuyama said: “The tendency of contemporary liberal democracies to fall prey to excessive individualism is perhaps their greatest long-term vulnerability and is particularly visible in the most individualistic of all democracies, the United States.”

Fukuyama was prophetic. The culture of excessive individualism has been accentuated by two revolutions over the past 20 years – the first is the supremacy of feeling and emotion. The great lie of our age has become: “Always trust your feelings” – people are told your feelings are the real guide to whether something is right or wrong. This sentiment is invading universities, corporations, community norms and our laws. The subjective world is gaining the leverage over the objective world. Whether an individual is being bullied or abused or discriminated against is now partly determined by how they feel. Whether something is right or wrong is now partly determined by how you feel about it. The attack on objective truth is far advanced.

American writer, Yuval Levin, says that our culture is being re-engineered to be defined by what an individual prefers to be. Self-expression is the new morality. When Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, insulted the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison at an official reception she was applauded by many observers because she was true to herself: what mattered was her self-expression not old-fashioned codes of behaviour. Levin says of the self-expression culture: “We are naturally inclined to recoil from any demands that we conform to the requirements of some external moral standard – a set of rules of that keeps “me” from being “the real me.”

This is a new moral position. It leads to growing defiance or reluctance to accept or subscribe to the moral order handed down by institutional authorities, either religious or secular, unless they submit to individual feelings.

The second revolution is technological – the advent of the digital age and the arrival of social media is perhaps the most important change in our economic structure since the industrial revolution. Whole industries are slanted for oblivion and new tech companies are taking their place. The digital age changes the way we work, the way we live and the way we think. It destroys and it creates. It destroys the mass loyalties of the industrial age defined by class, union, company, faith and nation.

Billionaire investor, George Soros, warned several years ago that Big Tech was undermining the open society and threatening human integrity. “Something very harmful and maybe irreversible is happening to human attention in our digital age,” Soros said. “Social media companies are inducing people to give up their autonomy. The power to shape people’s attention is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few companies. It takes a real effort to assert and defend what John Stuart Mill called ‘the freedom of the mind.’ “

The analysis done by the Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University, Jonathan Haidt, is the most potent warning of a dangerous future. Haidt said: “The rise of social media shreds any shared network of social understandings or meanings. It is worthwhile to look back at the story of the tower of Babel – human beings were getting so powerful that God said he would confound us by shredding our common understandings by dividing us by language. I believe social media is doing that today. A democracy is predicated on the ability of groups to compete but also to co-operate. You must have compromise in a democracy and that is becoming increasingly difficult.” Haidt predicts there is a real risk US democracy will fail sometime in the next 30 years.

The axioms of our life, long anchored in religious tradition, are being dismantled or contested – our societies don’t agreed anymore on freedom of speech, on how we should live, on how we should die, on the meaning of marriage, on how children should be raised, on what is a man, on what is a women, on our nation’s history, on the limits of privacy, on whether religion should be allowed in the public square and, ultimately, on what is virtue.

It is hard to discuss the moral order when there is so little real agreement on what constitutes the moral order.

In my view what we are now witnessing in Western societies such as Australia is an assault on our cultural traditions, largely derived from Christian experience and a simultaneous assault on the principles of political liberalism that underpin our democracy.

It is not my purpose tonight to lecture about the church and the spiritual world but I do want to address some principles I think the church should follow as an institution in the temporal world.

Let me nominate four such principles.

First, the natural expectation is that the church should focus on the moral and cultural order – to take freedom and equality to their moral foundations. True liberty is the liberty to do what you ought to do. Liberty recognises that the distinguishing feature of mankind is the capacity to make moral choices.

That means taking the side of the marginalised, the vulnerable and the oppressed. It means maximising a constructive and charitable role in the social order. It means requiring the rich and powerful to accept the greater responsibility they owe to the moral order and social justice. The church cannot be a metaphysical abstraction on the fringes of community or a largely silent voice intimidated by progressive culture.

This means a full engagement with modernity. Retreat from a hostile progressivism is no answer. George Weigel said: “Through its sometime turbulent encounters with modernity, the Catholic Church recovered the basic truth about itself as an evangelical, missionary enterprise.” The church learns and strengthens through its encounters with atheistic communism or intolerant progressivism. History suggests the church grows in adversity. Have we forgotten this historical truth?

Religion exists not to service the political system or secular hierarchies of power. It has a higher purpose – to address the moral order by exhortation and by example. In so doing, the church must take the long view. Modern societies are more diverse than ever – diverse in their religious, non-religious and cultural outlooks. But that doesn't mean there is no place for a moral order – the public is constantly alert to moral arguments. It typically sees issues in moral terms. The success of progressives is precisely because, unlike many conservatives, they understand this. The argument for same-sex marriage was put in moral terms. The argument for climate change action is largely a moral argument. The argument for a national anti-corruption commission is a moral argument. One reason the church loses influence is because it loses moral arguments or doesn't make them. It needs to confront this. The church won't win every argument it makes. But the church, I believe, needs to engage and commit in a far more visible, effective and principled manner than it does at present.

Many people, not necessarily religious people, grasp that our society is adrift, lacking in a shared moral understanding. Amid prosperity, people are unhappy, dissatisfied, impatient, searching for something, a new cause, a new age religion. There is a widespread view that our culture is being debased. This historical time is an opportunity for the church, an opportunity it could have utilised far more. Humanity, let alone our country, deserves an engaged Catholic Church navigating the future.

My second point is that the church needs to engage not just in the language of God but in the language of the culture. It needs to be defined by what it believes not by what it opposes. It is seen as too negative because it has been too negative.

Attempting to veto every progressive proposal is the road to marginalisation. The church will benefit by reaching out to the organs of cultural life – to the writers, artists, film makers, musicians, poets and creative people. It will benefit by reaching out to the organs of policy life – the economists, historians, environmentalists, biologists and social scientists. It needs to stand by its principles – but it should

engage with the language of our culture, fully involved in contemporary debates. Yet its voice seems to be missing.

As Roger Scruton said the environment is not the preserve of the left-wing. Indeed, it is, as he said, the “quintessential conservative cause”. Yet many conservatives have got side-tracked into some deluded moralistic opposition to climate action. The church can honour the planet without succumbing to the Green ideology of worshipping nature.

And as Pope Benedict said there is a need for a new understanding between science and religion. The church’s enemies have had too much evidence for too long of the church’s suspicion of science. The church, Benedict argued, welcomes the marvellous possibilities opened by science. By the same token, if science tries to exclude faith, it diminishes humanity. The church can encourage science but also stand on the principle: science that seeks to banish faith cannot enhance society.

The church should examine the renovation of its great institutions, notably its education system. The church educates about one in five students in this country but often seems to resemble a factory that manufactures atheists. At the same time its education performance is often woeful. I know of Catholics unwilling to send their children to Catholic schools because they are neither properly instructed in the Catholic tradition nor given a sound education. Perhaps we need a new Catholic approach to curriculum, indeed a new curriculum where respect for the Western canon, objective truth and traditional culture is enshrined at the heart of the academic process – as distinct from religion being just an add-on to the school day.

Many years ago former Anglican bishop to the Defence Force, Tom Frame, said: “Within the space of several decades, the church has moved from nearer the centre of public life to the periphery. It has lost ground. Christians no longer enjoy political, social or moral ascendancy.”

Much of this is true. It arises partly from cultural change and partly from the church’s blunders. But no trend lasts forever – the recuperative power of the great religions is a re-occurring historical theme. Moreover, much of the progressive ideology that has gained traction at the expense of Christianity remains deeply flawed.

My third point is that political liberalism – the foundation of Western democracy – is now needed more than ever. Yet it is under assault in the West from ideological extremes of left and right. Unfortunately, conservative American church leaders are participating in this attack.

The left is always restless, searching for a new utopian model to dismantle the status quo – and Australia is not immune. Identity politics defines the individual by characteristics – race, sexual preference, gender – and wants such identity recognised in law, administration, media and personal relationships. Under this dogma one’s position in society is determined by group identity.

This view of humanity is anathema to the liberal foundation that all people, regardless of race, religion, sex or gender, are equal before the law and share a common dignity. It is a departure from the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s where

the aim was to remove discrimination and bigotry and enshrine all people under the same liberal tent. It repudiates the Christian principle that the primary relationship is between God and the individual and that the soul does not recognise identity politics.

This is a progressive assault on the liberal state and the Christian view of humanity. If accepted in law and culture it guarantees a more divided and fragmented society, individuals set against each other by identity and communities polarised into a condition of virtually permanent conflict.

The mission of the church is to respect minorities and champion the oppressed – but it has an obligation to defend the liberal principle that is the basis of the moral order, the Christian culture and a successful society.

At the same time liberalism is under attack around the world from authoritarian leaders led by China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, by populist autocrats and aggrieved right-wing conservatives. The shattering of centre-right liberalism in America saw Donald Trump hijack the Republican Party and seek to sabotage US democracy. Sadly, Trump won much support from Evangelical Christians.

There is an alarming conservative and Catholic movement in the US asserting the crisis of the church and the culture is the fault of liberalism. In his book 'Why Liberalism Failed' Catholic academic, Patrick J Deneen, says liberalism has failed because it was true to itself – it has promoted titanic inequality, weak government, loose morals, raging pornography, material and spiritual degradation. The lament is that liberalism cannot take a stand on the moral issues of the day.

Yet political liberalism is not an ideology but a framework to allow diverse peoples with different beliefs to live in harmony in the same polity. There is no known alternative framework to achieve this result. The decline in Christian practice that Deneen bemoans is not the work of any politician. He misallocates blame. If religion has suffered setbacks in the democratic liberal state that is the fault of religion. If your side loses out in the decision-making of the democratic state that is the fault of your own side, not the fault of liberalism.

The church needs to take responsibility for its own failures – not blame political liberalism. Indeed, the church needs liberal democracy. At the same time the church expects the politicians in the liberal state to uphold liberal principles. That means ensuring the secular state remains true to its mission – being neutral and allowing religions and non-religions to flourish in the public square and not turn into an anti-religious state that seeks to ban religion from public life. In Australia, the state needs to ensure passage of a religious discrimination act to safeguard religion from discrimination the same way laws prevent discrimination on the basis of race, gender and sexual preference.

The fourth and final point I want to make is that in an age of fake news the church should stand for truth and the quest for truth. This is the ultimate recognition of God's will. The assault on culture as bemoaned by many people I have quoted rests upon the subjective, the emotional and the flawed latest stage of post-modernism.

Contemporary culture thrives on the notion that truth is relative – while this is convenient for many people it also disturbs them.

Within human consciousness there is an impulse for the real story, for what really exists. There is a solid link between cultural tradition and common sense. People honour their family, their relations, their history, their country and their sense of duty and obligation. This reflects the quest for truth. I believe there is much support in our community for traditional culture and a moral order based on tradition.

When it comes to the most important things in life, we want the truth, yet much of contemporary progressive culture pivots on denial or distortion of truth. The public's longing for truth will endure – it offers a powerful foundation for the church in its quest for individual redemption and a better society.