# Special Feature Articles

## A user's guide to the religion/politics Rorschach test

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*This issue is devoted the theme of religion and politics. There are various ways in which the theme could have been interpreted. One would be to emphasise the political element of all religion. Alternatively it might devote itself to the politics of knowledge within religious traditions. Another interpretation would follow analysts of ritual process in seeing in the public manoeuvres of politicians and public figures a form of ceremonial. Turning to particular traditions, one might examine the interpenetration of theology and politics.*

*No single collection of papers could adequately traverse all the areas which such a broad theme evokes. Instead, this issue attempts to fill a few significant gaps in the literature. If one were to hazard a very broad categorisation, it might seem that some (G. Maddox, Dutney) explore the political dimensions of particular religious developments. Others (Symons, M. Maddox, Massam & J. Smith) might be better described as considering the religious dimensions of political phenomena. A third group (Stock and R. Smith) conceptualise religion and politics as discrete foci of individual and collective loyalties, which overlap variously at particular moments and in particular communities to reveal broad patterns of commitment. However, the papers themselves resist any move to place too much emphasis on such categorisation.*

*The contributors come from a range of disciplines, and, despite a large proportion of them choosing topics related to Australia, cover a broad range of topics. Historians, theologians, political scientists and a historical sociologist join us for a whirlwind tour from early Mesopotamia through eighteenth century England to modern Australia. While in their the breadth of focus the papers might appear disparate, a connecting plea which runs through them is that, although the paths of religion and politics are both regularly said to have lost their relevance to the modern world, many promising avenues open off their intersection. I have greatly enjoyed gathering this collection, and hope that it will go some way towards filling gaps in the literature, as well as providing a stimulus to further research.*

# Religion and Electoral Behaviour in Australia: Searching for Meaning

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If the Christian God **is** dead, her political work is not yet finished in Australia.[1] In his 1995 paper 'The Forgotten Cleavage? Religion and Politics in Australia', Clive Bean demonstrated that religious denomination and attendance levels had effects on party support at the 1993 federal election. These effects were independent both of each other and of a range of other socio-structural variables including class and gender (Bean 1995). Catholics were more likely than Anglicans and Protestants to support the Labor Party. Regular church-goers - regardless of denomination - were less likely than casual or non-attenders to support Labor. These patterns would have been unsurprising to attentive followers of similar national surveys of Australian religion and political behaviour in recent decades.

The 1996 Australian Election Study (AES), a large national mail-back sample survey of voters taken immediately after the federal election, largely confirms the main findings of these previous studies (see Table 1).[2] The then Federal Director of the Liberal Party Andrew Robb was able to boast after the 1996 election that his party had achieved the remarkable result of beating Labor among Catholic voters (Robb, 1997: 40), a claim supported by the AES survey figures in Table 1. Nonetheless, the traditional **relative** patterns of religious voting held in 1996. The Coalition's lead over Labor among Anglican, Uniting and Presbyterian voters was three to four times as large as its lead among Catholics. The Catholic Labor vote was again similar to that for those with no religion (Bean 1995: 11). As in 1993, the highest Labor vote came from Orthodox voters.[3]

In 1996, Australians who attended religious services most regularly were significantly more likely to be Coalition voters than those who rarely or never attended (see Table 1). More detailed examination suggests that - unlike in previous elections - this trend may have applied only to Catholics in 1996. It is too early to determine whether this result is a peculiarity of the 1996 election (or the 1996 AES survey), or a new feature of Australian religion and electoral behaviour. This oddity apart, however, the findings from 1996 confirm Bean's argument that religion still affects Australian electoral behaviour. As Bean (1995: 3-4) also points out, such findings contradict the claims, made by prominent interpreters of Australian electoral behaviour like Don Aitkin, David Kemp and Ian McAllister, that religion is no longer a force in Australian electoral politics and has not been so for some time.[4]

In this sense, Bean's 1995 paper was a valuable corrective to a widely held but mistaken view that the relationship between religion and voting in Australia has

**Table 1 1996 House of Representatives Primary Vote by Aspects of Religion (%)**

| | Liberal/ National | Labor | Australian Democrats | Other | (N) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Nominal Religion**[a] | | | | | |
| Presbyterian | 70.9 | 25.3 | 2.5 | 1.3 | (79) |
| Uniting | 62.9 | 25.3 | 5.2 | 6.7 | (194) |
| Anglican | 57.8 | 31.4 | 6.6 | 4.1 | (458) |
| Catholic | 50.8 | 40.4 | 5.4 | 3.3 | (478) |
| Orthodox | 36.4 | 56.4 | 5.5 | 1.8 | (55) |
| No religion | 36.0 | 45.6 | 10.3 | 8.0 | (261) |
| **Religious Attendance**[a] | | | | | |
| At least monthly | 62.8 | 28.8 | 3.7 | 4.6 | (347) |
| At least yearly | 55.6 | 34.9 | 5.6 | 3.8 | (390) |
| Less than yearly | 46.9 | 39.7 | 7.6 | 5.8 | (933) |
| **Attendance, Catholics**[a] | | | | | |
| At least monthly | 66.2 | 32.5 | 0.6 | 0.6 | (154) |
| At least yearly | 45.0 | 43.6 | 7.4 | 4.0 | (149) |
| Less than yearly | 42.4 | 45.3 | 7.0 | 5.2 | (172) |
| **Attendance, Anglicans** | | | | | |
| At least monthly | 57.9 | 26.3 | 8.8 | 7.0 | (57) |
| At least yearly | 70.3 | 21.8 | 5.9 | 2.0 | (101) |
| Less than yearly | 53.7 | 35.9 | 6.0 | 4.4 | (298) |
| **Attendance, Protestants**[b] | | | | | |
| At least monthly | 64.2 | 24.5 | 3.8 | 7.5 | (53) |
| At least yearly | 65.7 | 23.9 | 6.0 | 4.5 | (67) |
| Less than yearly | 65.4 | 26.1 | 3.9 | 4.6 | (153) |

Source: 1996 Australian Election Study (unweighted sample).

a Significant at p<.01

b Uniting and Presbyterian only. The 1996 AES data are not coded to allow identification of members of smaller Protestant groups, such as Baptists. These are presumably included under an umbrella 'Other religion' category, which has not been shown here because of its heterogeneous composition.

disappeared. My purpose here is not to contest Bean's empirical findings. It is rather to show that Australian political scientists are not much closer to answering the question '**Why** does religion affect electoral behaviour?' than they were three or four decades ago when Robert Alford, Hans Mol and Don Aitkin first used national survey data to explore connections between the two phenomena. If we are to answer the question more adequately, political scientists must move beyond general national survey studies of electoral behaviour that reduce religion to two fairly empty dimensions (religious self-label and attendance) and think more carefully about Australian experiences of religion and politics. This paper suggests some directions for such thought and research via a critique of previous political science accounts, a re-examination of some of the relevant national survey data, and approaches to understanding religion drawn from outside the discipline of political science.

## Bean's Explanations for the Religion-Politics Link

Bean (1995) draws on two lines of explanation for the continued links between religion and party loyalty: first, religion as a social context and second, the conservatism of church messages. He adopts a third argument regarding increased secularisation to help explain the persistence and strength of the first two factors.

Bean treats religion as a social context only very briefly, when dealing with the paradox that within the most pro-Labor denominational group - Catholicism - the more activist members are less likely than the inactive to support the ALP:

> One reason why this should be so may be to do with the distinction between the social and moral realms. A person's adherence to a religious denomination and their political partisanship may stem from the social realm. But virtually all churches' teachings, Catholic and Protestant alike, are essentially conservative in their nature and those who receive greater exposure to these morally conservative messages may thus become more conservative in their political outlook and more inclined to support the conservative political parties than the less faithful members of their denomination. (Bean, 1995: 8)

Social factors may bring people into contact with the church, but their importance ends there, where the churches' 'teachings' or 'messages' take over as the key conservatising factor.

The notion that church 'messages' are the key shapers of partisanship for the church-going probably constitutes the dominant explanatory strand in Bean's paper (Bean, 1995: 7). He cites with apparent approval Don Rawson's contention that the alignment of Catholic social doctrine with Labor policies explains the continued pro-Labor sympathies of the Catholic laity (Bean, 1995: 12). He also speculates in his conclusion that an apparent heightening of the religion-partisanship connection in 1993 may have been due to church criticisms of the Coalition's **Fightback!** policies (Bean, 1995: 14-15).[5] In each case, the messages of church leaders are depicted as swaying the political views of adherents.

Bean's third explanation appears to rest on the effects of growing secularisation on the decreasing minority who remain faithful. He writes that:

> ... it is ... possible that as the size of the religious section of society diminishes religion becomes a more important factor for those who retain their religious commitment. One avenue to help in an understanding of the continued importance of religion for politics might be by way of the possibility of gender differences in the political impact of religion. Since women tend to be more religious than men (Mol, 1971: 27-31) they may also be more likely to be influenced in their political preferences by their religious affiliations. The continued political effect of religion may in turn be due partly to a divergence in this respect along gender lines (Bean, 1995: 13).

Bean's point becomes diverted by a discussion of gender, but his initial suggestion seems to be that the dwindling group of church-goers will perceive their increasing marginality to Australian public life and will react in a defensive way by developing more uniform political loyalties, in this case presumably those that favour the Coalition parties (cf Hogan, 1984).

These explanations have four important features. The first is that they have a clear pedigree in Australian political science research on religion and politics. Second, they rest on under-developed, implausible and partly contradictory notions of religion and politics. Third, they are not substantiated by a body of evidence. Fourth, they are, like their predecessors, presented in a tentative way. In sum, while Bean has confirmed the continued existence of links between religion and politics, his paper amply demonstrates that Australian political scientists are no closer to discovering convincing explanations for these links than they were some two decades ago. The following discussion develops these comments by reference to the first two explanations presented by Bean, religion as social context and conservative church messages.

## The Pedigree

### (i) The social context of religious life

Bean's rather dismissive reference to the political effects of religion as a social context is typical of much Australian political science writing on the topic. This stance is initially surprising, since much of the research linking religious denomination to politics in Australia does so via examination of the historic links between Catholic working class communities and labour politics and Anglican and Protestant middle class communities with the Coalition parties and their predecessors. The key factor that seems to have diverted researchers away from the importance of religion as social context is the paradox mentioned above; that is, that the most involved Catholics have shown a diminished rather than magnified commitment to the dominant partisan tendency of their group. Hans Mol (1971: 299), for example, whose seminal study *Religion in Australia* so carefully traced the impact of the

social context of religion on other aspects of Australian life, rejected the idea that social dimensions of religion influence partisanship on precisely these grounds.

The playing down of religion as a social context continued in Aitkin's (1982) and Kemp's (1978) influential studies of Australian electoral behaviour. Aitkin saw churches *qua* churches as conservative, but suggested that social interactions between churchgoers might reinforce the conservatising effects of contact with the institution:

> It would be understandable if regular churchgoers picked up a generally conservative attitude to the temporal world from their experience of their church, even in the absence of explicit commentary from church leaders. This attitude would be reinforced by frequent contact with like-minded people in the church community, especially when the churchgoer took an active part in the lay organisations associated with the church. (Aitkin, 1982: 172-3)

With this brief suggestion, Aitkin returned to his general theme of church conservatism.

Kemp's argument went further in doubting the role of churches as politically efficacious social contexts. Although a central part of his 'theory of homogeneity effects' earlier in *Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia* argued for the importance of suburban social contexts for developing and changing party loyalties and explored the evidence for these in detail (Kemp, 1978: chapter 4), Kemp was strangely reluctant to apply the same logic to religion. Indeed, he went to some conceptual lengths to deny this logic, suggesting rather a theory of 'self-selection among church attenders' (Kemp, 1978: 209):

> It is possible that the Churches attract disproportionate support from those who are seeking some institutional shelter from rapid social change or believe that the Churches are bulwarks against change. From this perspective the willingness of an individual to become closely involved in 'associational' activities connected with the Church is an indicator of conservative social, and political, orientations. ... Of course, once such loyalties had been given, ... the messages of current social import circulating through Church networks would tend disproportionately to have a conservative character, and this in turn might have a conversion effect on newcomers who may initially be less conservatively inclined. (Kemp, 1978: 208)

Whatever the plausibility of this argument (see below), its importance here is that it dissolves the social context of religion into individualism. Churchgoers tend to be conservative not primarily because of social interactions within church contexts, but because a large number of individuals who are already politically conservative enter the gates of the church. The church is a magnet rather than a catalyst for conservatism.

Interestingly, Kemp's argument on this score may have influenced Aitkin. In the first part of *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, published prior to Kemp's *Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia*, Aitkin assumes that religion affects

politics and not *vice versa* (see Aitkin, 1982: 172-3), perhaps taking his lead from Mol (1971: 298-9), who had already dismissed the idea that churches attracted the politically conservative. By the second edition of his book, however, Aitkin (1982: 337) is agnostic on the issue:

> ... Labor has undoubtedly benefited by the decline in churchgoing (if one assumes that churchgoing leads to political conservatism rather than that the arrows point the other way) ....

For the two most influential researchers on Australian electoral behaviour, then, the social context of religion is unimportant beside (for Aitkin) an essential conservatism of churches as institutions and (for Kemp) the pre-existing conservatism of people who seek out church involvement.

Two other political scientists - Hyam Gold and Paul Reynolds - have published arguments which pay greater attention to Australian churches as social contexts. In a critique of Mol and Aitkin based on a re-analysis of Aitkin's 1967 data, Gold (1979: 53) argued that ' ... class orientations and social affiliations play a significant part in structuring or conditioning the relationship [between church-going and anti-Labor partisanship] for a large part of the electorate.' Gold's examination of respondents' class self-placement and the class composition of their friends led him to argue that only working class voters who were "partly assimilated" (that is, who either saw themselves as middle class or had middle class friends, but not both) had their partisanship affected by increased church-going. The "consistent" working class (those who saw themselves as working class and had working class friends) and the "alienated" working class (middle class friends and self identity) were not affected by church-going (Gold 1979).

Gold's critique is important, in that it makes an interpretation and test of the social class dynamics of religiosity central to the question at hand. On the other hand, his data interpretation is rather unsophisticated and his conclusions sometimes overstep the level of generality allowed by his findings.[6] While his argument seems to hold for Protestant and Anglican working class respondents, it does not explain the increased conservatism of the church-going middle class or of Catholics of any class. For these latter groups' decreased Labor partisanship, he has no explanation other than a recourse to the arguments of Aitkin and Mol.

Further, Gold is so committed to a theory of the dominance of class-related factors that he rejects out of hand the notion that churches themselves provide a social context for the weakening of working class identification and Labor partisanship, despite the fact that some of his strongest evidence points to such a conclusion (see, for example, Table 1 in Gold, 1979: 49). Instead, he depicts working class church-going and Coalition support as both driven by an externally generated desire among some workers to improve their status:

> Among Protestant members of the working class, in particular, public religious

> practice reflects in part a desire for a middle class status and a rejection of strict working class affiliations. ... Their tendency to distance themselves from their class background, with and through more frequent church attendance, is also reflected politically, in their reduced Labor support .... (Gold, 1979: 52)

According to Gold's account, one that parallels the logic of Kemp's, churchgoing merely brings behaviour and appearance into line with people's pre-existing values, in this case those of status climbing. Thus an argument that has the potential to restore attention to social elements of religion such as friendship networks ultimately deflects attention away from these.

Reynolds's (1991: chapter 11) argument regarding the social context of religion draws primarily on British and United States studies, although it refers briefly to research conducted in 1981 on regular Protestant churchgoers in Brisbane (Smith, 1981). This research produced results in line with Gold's arguments about the effects of class consistency, results which this time extended to non-manual voters (Smith, 1981: 80). On the other hand, the study suggested that Gold's key assumption concerning working class Protestant churchgoers as status seekers was doubtful. In particular, a substantial proportion of manual churchgoers could not be seen as status chasers at all, since they had friendships only with other working class churchgoers and not middle class churchgoers and (incorrectly) believed that most or all members of their church were fellow members of the working class (Smith, 1981: ch. 3). Thus one of the main conclusions of the study was, *contra* Gold, that it was the very lack of an accurate picture of the middle class dominance of the community to which they were deeply committed, rather than a realistically calculated desire to move among members of a higher class, that undermined traditional working class voting patterns for Protestant manual churchgoers (Smith, 1981: ch. 4).

Such results could hardly be labelled decisive explanations; however they point to the promise of exploring the partisan impact of the social interactions of religious life in greater detail and with better data. This promise has not been taken up. Instead, Australian political scientists have tended to turn to the second line of explanation raised by Bean - the churches' conservative message.

**(ii) Churches as messengers**

The words 'message' or 'messages' are ubiquitous in explanations for the Australian religion-partisanship connection. Sometimes, nothing further is said about the type or nature of these messages other than their 'conservatism'. Graetz and McAllister's (1994: 372; cf Kemp, 1978: 208, 215) terseness is fairly typical in this regard:

> The conservative influence of church attendance is attributed both to the conservative message that the churches transmit to their adherents and to the social networks that stem from regular attendance.

If they move beyond such brief statements, political scientists generally focus on four distinct if related types of messages. These are open messages of support for

parties, specific messages concerning policy, religious doctrinal messages and messages of support for the general social status quo.

Open messages of support for parties link churchgoers and parties most directly. Kemp (1978: 202-5), who argues that such messages are rare in Australia, sees the mobilisation of Catholic support for the Democratic Labor Party in the 1950s in this way. As Kemp argues, the DLP is a special case; examples of church leaders openly advocating votes against Labor or for the Coalition are rare.

This may not weaken the partisan impact of religious messages if the churches take stances on policy issues that divide the parties. Mol, who refers to regular churchgoers as "plugged-in" to church communication networks (1971: 189), speculates that the Coalition's support for state aid might have constituted a policy message dampening Catholic churchgoers support for Labor in the 1960s. He rejects the argument because of its specificity--it cannot explain Protestant churchgoers' anti-Labor partisanship (Mol, 1971: 299; cf Aitkin, 1982: 169). Taking a somewhat broader set of policies, Aitkin (1982: 173) proposes that church messages surrounding "personal morality - drink, sexual behaviour, gambling and censorship" are influential over the votes of the devout. Canvassing some of the difficulties with this argument - notably that Catholics and Protestants emphasise different moral issues, that the major parties are often undifferentiated on these issues and often allow MPs conscience votes on them (Aitkin 1982: 173, 338; cf Kemp, 1978: 216, Reynolds, 1991: 225-6) - Aitkin remains reluctant to let it go:

> ... there is no mistaking the conservative attitudes of churchgoers in fields other than party preference ... To the extent that party attitudes in these matters have been distinguishable in principle if not in practice it can be said that churchgoers' attitudes accord with those of the Liberal and Country Parties .... This ... is a long established association. (Aitkin, 1982: 173-4)

This type of explanation is given an additional dimension by Kemp (1978: 188, 214-7, chapter 9), who argues that the emergence of a larger "secularist" group in the 1960s correlated with the "radical policy stances" of the ALP, the Australia Party and the Australian Democrats.

The argument for connections between doctrinal messages and the parties move explanations for electoral behaviour away from specific endorsements of party or policy to the effects of broader ideological and theological strands of thought and commitment. Political scientists have regarded three doctrinal divisions - between Catholics and Protestants, between religious and secular worldviews and between theological conservatives and liberals - as potentially important.

Mol (1971: 299) raises the possibility of a connection between Protestant individualism and Coalition ideology. He rejects the idea, since the Catholic stress on collective social action should lead Catholic activists to greater support for Labor. Like so many ideas about Australian religion and political commitment, however, this one refuses to die. Reynolds (1991: 220-3; cf 229-30), in the most comprehensive

recent Australian discussion, again places stress on Protestant-Catholic theological messages. Protestantism created "...a climate for like-minded approaches between individualistic theology and political conservatism" while Catholicism's "collectivist world view...tended to sit easily with the approaches of the ALP....".

Mol also suggests that the very comprehensiveness of, and depth of commitment required by, religious doctrines makes them incompatible with some political ideologies. Specifically, deeply committed Catholics and Protestants might be more supportive of Labor ideas if the latter did "...not encroach on the former by means of an emotion-laden, commitment-requiring, unifying view of reality, but concern[ed] themselves solely with technical, even opportunistic service to a religiously pluralistic constituency" (Mol, 1971: 300). The Coalition parties' more pragmatic worldviews are less likely than Labor's to generate such a competition for commitment (Mol, 1971: 305; cf Reynolds, 1991: 230).

Drawing on American research, Reynolds (1991: 234) argues that conservative theological stances of church leaders (on the literal interpretation of scripture, God, the Devil, creation, heaven, hell, miracles and so on) reinforce the political conservatism of congregations (while presumably liberal and radical theological emphases reinforce political liberalism or radicalism).

A final level of politically-charged church message is generalised support for the status quo. Examples of this argument by Aitkin and Kemp were presented above. Its negative and positive forms can be distinguished. In the first, the status quo is supported because, whatever their failings, there is little point trying to alter social arrangements in this world. Eternal salvation trumps any "incongenial status quo" (Mol, 1971: 300). In the second, the status quo is seen by believers as a positive good because it is established by God, because the churches have historically been "co-opted" by the state "to the mutual advantage of both" and because the churches enjoy social prestige as part and parcel of the status quo (Reynolds, 1991: 228-9; see also Reynolds, 1988: 30 and Prenzler, 1992: 281).

Australian political scientists have been vague about who the important political messengers within the churches are. Biblical and other texts, Popes, bishops, clergy, lay leaders, church educational and pressure groups and religious politicians are all accorded pretty much the same status and role in church communication networks (Reynolds, 1991: 226-35). The implication is that because the rhetoric of church messages is uniformly conservative, the identities and roles of different rhetors do not need distinguishing. Such a stance is fairly typical of the conceptual under-development of Australian studies of religion and political behaviour.

## Conceptual under-development, implausibility and contradiction

### (i) Religion

The discussion of conceptual short-comings in the political science literature might well begin with the concept of religion itself. The exact dimensions that

comprise religion are a matter of much debate, but it is notable that the Australian studies highlight two - denomination and attendance levels - as important for electoral behaviour. This may be because they are economically ascertained in questionnaire studies (Graetz and McAllister, 1988: 120) and they 'work' (that is, they correlate with partisanship and voting). Nonetheless, focusing on these two in such a bald way immediately empties out religion of much of its diverse content (see Schuman, 1971). The assumption in using them to define religion must rest on the idea that they will produce broadly similar meanings and experiences for the different individuals they categorise as, for example, Catholic churchgoers or Orthodox non-attenders (see Reynolds 1991: 227-8).

In fact, these two dimensions are likely to have varied meanings for different people, in large part because they will differ - individually and collectively - on other dimensions of religiosity such as style of church community, beliefs, religious practices outside the church context, religious knowledge and direct experiences of the sacred (see Glock, 1962). To know that someone is a regularly churchgoing Catholic is not to know much at all about what religious experiences she shares with a church-going Pentecostalist or with a Catholic who never attends mass. John McCallum (1987; 1988; cf Bouma 1992) has argued plausibly that, of all these dimensions, denomination and attendance are not the most appropriate markers of the religious experiences of Australians. His survey research shows that large numbers of Australians with minimal contact with institutional religious settings nonetheless have beliefs in and experiences of the transcendent, calling into question the notion of Australia as a secular society.

Maintaining a conceptual focus on churchgoing and denomination is therefore unhelpful because it allows (or forces) researchers to read far too much into the apparent electoral consequences of these dimensions and to look for unity of experience whether or not it is there. In this way, as we have seen in previous sections, both denomination and attendance are typically read as implying commonality of beliefs, or experiences, or knowledge, or practices as suits the argument. Greater attention to the possibility of variations in these other religious dimensions would act as a necessary corrective here. Such attention might also caution against repetition of the type of implausible blanket explanations of Australian church attendance advanced by Gold and Kemp among others (see above). It would also necessarily focus attention onto what has been a largely blank category in the research to date - the 'secularists' in Australian society. Instead of being defined by double absences - on-attendance and no religious affiliation - the structure of secularists' values, experiences and so on would have to be taken seriously as having potentially important content for political behaviour and commitments.[7]

These points are important for political scientists, since each of the dimensions of religiosity outside denomination and attendance has been found to have some connection with partisanship or related political orientations in Australian or overseas studies (see, for example, Mol, 1971: 300; Jelen, 1987; Smidt, 1988; Kelley, 1988:

70-3; McCallum, 1988: 180-4; Wilcox, 1990; Dixon *et al*, 1992; Graetz and McAllister, 1994: 156-63). The possibility that these various dimensions will act in a consistent way on partisanship is denied by what we already know of the interaction between denomination and attendance levels for Catholics. Adding the other dimensions to develop a more holistic concept of Australian religious experiences would thus almost certainly push research away from the existing simplistic explanations of religion and partisanship.

A related difficulty for the conceptualisations of religion found in the Australian research concerns the point at which attendance begins to affect partisanship and voting. Bean's emphasis on regression analysis (useful for distinguishing between the effects of different variables) obscures the intriguing point that irregular churchgoers have often exhibited patterns of partisanship and voting virtually indistinguishable from regular churchgoers. In the 1993 AES survey, for example, Coalition partisans comprised 46.0 percent of regular churchgoers (monthly or more) and 45.3 percent of irregular churchgoers (at least yearly). The main difference was between these two groups and those attending less than yearly or never, 37.4 of whom were Coalition partisans. The same held for voting. The proportions of regular and irregular churchgoers voting Labor for the House of Representatives in 1993 were 41.9 percent and 42.5 percent respectively; for those attending less than yearly, 51.1 percent. Labor's vote in the 1993 half-Senate election from the three groups was 35.0 percent, 37.9 percent and 45.9 percent. The biggest difference in each case is between those who go to church at least yearly and those who hardly ever or never go. Previous studies suggest that this pattern has occurred on and off since at least 1967 (see Aitkin, 1982: 170).

Even where irregular attenders do not correspond to regular attenders in electoral loyalties, the difference in Coalition support between non-attenders and irregular attenders is often almost as large as the difference between irregular and regular attenders. In 1996, for example, the increase in Coalition House of Representative vote between non-attenders and irregular attenders was 7.2 percent; between irregulars and regulars 8.8 percent. Labor support fell to a similar pattern (see Table 1). Other 1996 AES figures show that Coalition partisans made up 51.0 percent of non-attenders, 44.1 percent of irregular attenders and 37.0 percent of regular churchgoers.

These findings suggest that most political scientists' attempts to conceptualise Australian churches' impact on electoral behaviour have focused at too high a level of church involvement. The implications for the 'conservative message' and 'social context' explanations are particularly serious. Messages received for an hour or so once or twice every year must be extraordinarily powerful to consistently affect electoral behaviour. Similarly, to attribute voter behaviour to a social context experienced directly only occasionally suggests an implausibly powerful effect.

An image of religious involvement from John Bodycomb (see Kaldor, 1987: 26-7) may be a useful conceptual corrective here. Drawing on medieval society,

Bodycomb sees four levels of contact with the church. Those in the cloister are well-integrated into church life. Those outside the cloister but in the close have some contact with the church. On the common, the church is a vaguer presence for those who maintain a merely nominal adherence to a denomination. For those out in the countryside, the church rarely if ever intrudes into their lives. Most attempts at conceptual explanation of the churches' impact on electoral behaviour focus on those within the cloister walls, but much of the churches' electoral effect can in fact be found on people who inhabit the close and perhaps even the common.

How does the church affect those in the close and common? It may be that the occasional direct messages from local churches are merely part of a broader set of religious messages received by irregular attenders through the mainstream and religious media or via para-church religious organisations. Similarly, religious social contexts may extend well beyond the cloister into para-church organisations of various sorts to which irregular attenders are more likely than non-attenders to belong. It may be that those on the close and common were previously in the cloister, or that their parents were in the cloister, and that the effect on partisanship is a residual or even indirect result of earlier religious socialisation. It may be, as suggested earlier, that closeness to the church walls is largely irrelevant to many religious experiences that have an independent effect on party support. These various possibilities cannot be resolved here (or, indeed, with the evidence currently available). Suffice it to say that each goes well beyond the standard Australian conceptualisations of religion as attendance and of the main elements allegedly doing the political work within the cloisters.

**(ii) Partisanship and party**

The second area of conceptual weakness in the accounts summarised above is their treatment of partisanship and party. Partisanship and religious commitment would appear to share much. Greeley's argument (quoted in McCallum, 1988: 181) that "... the driving force of religion ... is experiential, imaginative, symbolical and narrational, not propositional ...." could serve as an account of how partisanship is seen by most Australian political scientists (see, for example, Aitkin, 1982). Hence the attractiveness of the sort of argument presented by Mol (see above) that an image-rich, ideological partisanship is likely to present religious believers with incompatible emotional and psychological demands.

One difficulty here is that partisanship may not mean such strong commitments at all. By assuming a strong, comprehensive, meaning-giving partisanship and a strong meaning-giving, comprehensive religious commitment, Mol discounts the range of meanings a loyalty to a party can have. There would probably be few Australians who would see the two as equally important, or important over the same areas of life. Former Labor federal government minister Graham Richardson is an exception. Describing the aftermath of a serious car accident in his youth, he writes:

> My spleen was removed and, 200 stitches later my only memory was being given the last rites twice, which is pretty disconcerting when you're sixteen. ...

> Three operations over the next few years gradually reduced the scarring, but I became a bit depressed and passive. The whole episode screwed me up for quite a few years. It was the Labor Party that restored meaning and purpose to my life. (Richardson, 1994: 8; cf 359)

Aside from those who become intensely involved in party politics, however, party identification may remain a relatively unimportant part of the way individuals define themselves, their meaning and purpose, without losing its importance for structuring their votes. Since the 1980s, for example, the intensity of party identification has declined generally in Australia without a significant decline in the effect of partisanship on voting (Graetz and McAllister, 1994: 364). Moreover, since we know little about what images, narratives, emotions and so on are important components of strong party identification in Australia, it is difficult to predict where these would overlap with and cut across various religious commitments. In any case, the highly religiously committed, as measured by the imperfect indicator of regular churchgoing, seem no less able to reconcile strong partisanship with their other value commitments than non-attenders (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Strength of Partisanship by Religious Attendance, 1993 (%)**

| | Attendance | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Partisanship** | At least monthly | At least yearly | Less than yearly |
| Very strong | 20.8 (109) | 23.8 (150) | 19.4 (238) |
| Fairly strong | 48.8 (256) | 48.9 (306) | 50.0 (665) |
| Not very strong | 30.4 (150) | 27.3 (173) | 30.6 (443) |

Source: 1993 Australian Election Study (unweighted sample).

Central to the alleged explanatory value of conceptualising religion and party identification as competing commitments is the argument that Labor identification involves a greater challenge to religious commitment than Coalition identification. Such an argument fits a tendency among Australian political scientists to see the Coalition parties as ideologically emptier or more pragmatic than the ALP. The argument also implies that the much vaunted conservatism of churchgoers should not be understood as a positive defence of existing institutions shared with the Coalition parties - a defence which would, after all, require filled out images, narratives and so on to justify the status quo - but as fear of change pure and simple and support for the Coalition because they will change less than Labor.

Until the 1970s, when Mol originally made this argument, it may well have made some sense, even if it did underestimate the way in which the Coalition leadership of the time was forced to provide powerful images and rhetoric to justify the status quo (Connell and Irving, 1992: chapter 5; Brett, 1992). By the late 1970s,

however, the more pragmatic ALP that Mol had both anticipated and urged had become a reality. The ALP leadership was disentangling itself from much of the policy, ideology, imagery and symbols of Labor's past (see, for example, O'Meagher, 1983; Mills, 1985: chapter 2; Jaensch, 1989; Maddox, 1989). Moreover, it was the Coalition parties who were, by the early 1990s, asserting the more commitment-laden and change-portending political images and policies in documents such as **Fightback!**. Thus, even if in the 1960s it was arguably fair to conceptualise the parties in the terms Mol does, by the 1980s, such a conceptualisation seems odd or nostalgic.[8] Yet, in this later period, the power of religion over electoral behaviour remains strong.

Another area in which the conceptualisation of parties needs greater work if we are to understand the impacts of religion concerns minor parties. Bean (1995: 9) conceptualises all minor parties from the 1960s as standing in an intermediate position between Labor and the Coalition. Thus, for Bean (and many other Australian political scientists), the Australian Democrats occupy the space in the party structure occupied by the DLP until the mid-1970s. Whether or not this makes sense in general terms, it makes little sense of the religious meanings of the two parties. While the DLP was not **the** party of Catholics, its policies drew on Catholic teachings, it was supported by sections of the Catholic hierarchy and it drew disproportionate electoral support from churchgoing Catholics (see Reynolds, 1974: 58-9). The Australian Democrats are hardly in the same position. As Kemp (1978: chapters 6 and 9) noted soon after the formation of the Democrats, their policies and image contained elements, particularly on moral issues, that should have endeared them to secularists rather than the devout. The evidence from 1996 adds to earlier findings showing that the Democrats do draw somewhat higher support among non-churchgoers and those claiming no religion (Table 1; for earlier figures, see Marks and Bean, 1992: 314-5, 320-1; Bean, 1997: 78-9). The religious dimension of Democrat support therefore needs quite different conceptualisation to that of the DLP. (The response that the Democrats are merely a protest party does not provide an answer here, or at least a complete one, since it begs the question why people with differing religious commitments protest in different ways using different parties. 'Protest' should not be understood as an empty category.)

**(iii) Conservatism**

A third area of conceptual confusion, anticipated above, surrounds conservatism. In the absence of an overtly religious dimension to the party contest in Australia, conservatism does much of the conceptual work connecting religiosity and partisanship. Religion and the Coalition parties are both held to be conservative; therefore they go together. The problem here begins with whether they are conservative in the same ways. The short answer is that they are not, or at least, not in ways that can legitimately deprive the ALP of the title conservative.

Political scientists tend to take their cues on religion's conservatism from classical sociological and anthropological accounts.[9] What these sociologists and

anthropologists had in mind is that religions usually act as an integrative force that binds individuals to a broad social order (see Gellner, 1994). The difficulty is that such a notion of conservatism is not sensitive enough to discriminate between a vote for the Coalition or the ALP, since neither party is remotely interested in fundamentally disrupting the social order.

Once this conceptual mismatch is identified, the case for conservatism as a connecting link becomes much weaker. It rests on other mismatches, typically that between the conservative 'anti sex, drink and gambling' social morality of religiously committed Australians and conservative policy stances of the Coalition parties. The difficulty here is that these two 'conservatisms' are not the same. As noted above, at federal level the major parties do not tend to take different stances on issues of personal sexual morality and law and order, the very issues on which the religiously committed are more conservative. Voters who are conservative on these issues are no more likely to vote Coalition than to cast a Labor vote. The core policy issues of Australian politics - economic policy, industrial relations, social welfare, environmentalism - often see the major parties differ. On these issues voter conservatism has been associated with Coalition support. On these core issues, however, the devout are no more conservative than their secularist neighbours. The one set of issues where a single dimension of policy 'conservatism' seems to divide the major parties **and** religious from secular voters is defence and foreign affairs. This is a very slender reed on which to base an entire theory of common religious-Coalition conservatism (for some of the relevant data, see Kelley, 1988; McCallum, 1988: 182-3; McAllister and Moore, 1991; Graetz and McAllister, 1994: 156-63).

The connection between conservatism in religious belief and political conservatism and liberal theology and liberal politics is also conceptually dubious. On the one hand, liberal theological approaches often suggest a pluralism and tolerance of belief that can translate into political tolerance and pluralism (support for minority rights, allowing different lifestyles to flourish in society etc.), and conservative theology often demands strictness in personal behaviour (Johnson 1962; 1966). On the other, it is quite possible for liberals and conservatives alike to see their theological approaches as pertaining only to individual relations with God, or to their immediate inter-personal relations within the church community or their neighbourhood, leaving wider political behaviour and commitments open-ended (for empirical evidence from the United States, see Mock 1992). Believers have to **make** the connection between theology and politics for the political implications of different theologies to be clear. Theology does not automatically supply a particular politics (see Wilcox 1990: 29-34).

**(iv) Messengers and audiences**

The conceptualisation of religious messages described earlier is quite simple: they are uniformly or overwhelmingly conservative and they are successful in (re)orienting the political views of many of the religious. Bean suggests that they operate successfully as short-term as well as long-term influences. Each of these

points seems to be deficient.

First, the messages are more mixed than many Australian political scientists contend. A number of the messages of Australian church leaders and bodies have been anything but conservative. This applies historically to issues such as the Catholic Church's teachings on the social wage in Australia (Blackburn, 1996). It also applies to a series of more recent church social justice statements. These have included, for example, *Changing Australia* on socio-economic issues in the 1980s and church apologies for past treatment of indigenous Australians in the 1990s (see Suter, 1988; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1998: 4). These statements do not represent the views of the churches as a whole, or even of a majority of church-goers. Nonetheless, their existence as a lively strand within the churches denies a monolithic unchallenged conservatism. *Changing Australia*, for example, far from being seen by church opponents as a safely marginalised document, provoked extensive debate, political manoeuvring and ideological responses, such as the CIS publication *Chaining Australia* (Hogan, 1987: 263-7; Suter, 1988). The criticisms of **Fightback!** from sections of the churches in 1992 and 1993 noted by Bean stand in this tradition of ideological debate within the churches.

If church messages are more diverse than often suggested, their audiences are also freer to choose from among the strands of church messages in order to find those that sit best with their sense of the world. Parishioners should not be conceptualised as passive receivers of messages, a view of audiences in general that was comprehensively challenged years ago (see Ward, 1995: chapters 2 and 3.). Instead, religious audiences should be seen as themselves having dynamics that limit the scope and content of political messages introduced into church settings (see Wilcox, 1990). Within individual congregations, these dynamics will differ with the beliefs of the congregation. Ministers in theologically conservative evangelical church settings, for example, will be constrained in their political messages by the limits of direct biblical authority and by a fear of appearing to be compromising doctrine in joining political activity with ministers from other denominations. Ministers in theologically liberal churches face other constraints, particularly the knowledge that a liberal individualism of interpretation renders their pronouncements on political issues no more authoritative than those of other believers (see Jelen, 1994: 29-32, 36-9).

Within wider denominational or cross-denominational settings, such statements will be constrained by the diversity within denominations or across denominational borders. The responses to the Uniting Church Assembly's recent *Interim Report on Sexuality* is a good example of intra-denominational diversity affecting the construction and reception of messages; *Changing Australia* a good example of the difficulties of meeting the expectations of cross-denominational audiences (Suter, 1988). These types of points will be familiar to scholars of rhetoric and political communication, but they have not been incorporated adequately into accounts of political communication in Australian religious settings.

Taken together, these arguments indicate that Bean's suggestion that the criticism of **Fightback!** by some church leaders prior to the 1993 federal election would have swung the votes of a significant number of faithful rests on misconceptions about religious communication. The 1990, 1993 and 1996 Australian Electoral Studies allow comparisons that indicate the effect of this criticism was quite small or non-existent. One test is to see whether Coalition identifiers for whom the church message was most likely to be heard and to be seen as important were more likely to cast a deviant vote (against the Coalition parties) than Coalition identifiers for whom church messages would be less salient. Table 3 indicates that this was not the case. The shift away from a normal Coalition vote in either House of Representatives or Senate ballots was not significantly higher among the most regular church-goers than among non-attenders in 1993.[10] Those Coalition identifiers who might have been expected to take most notice of the churches' message were no more likely to vote against their long-term partisanship than those expected to take least notice. Comparisons with 1990 and 1996 indicate that the 1993 pattern is fairly typical, in that regular churchgoing and non-attending Coalition partisans exhibit similar levels of deviant vote. The 1993 church criticisms of **Fightback!** therefore did not seem to pull Liberal and National churchgoers' voting patterns out of line.

**Table 3 Deviant Voting Among Coalition Partisans for the House of Representatives and the Senate by Religious Attendance, 1990, 1993 and 1996 (%)[a]**

| | Attendance | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | At least monthly | At least yearly | Less than yearly |
| 1990 House of Reps | 8.9 (20) | 11.1 (25) | 7.8 (27) |
| 1993 House of Reps | 9.6 (28) | 4.3 (14) | 7.2 (42)[b] |
| 1996 House of Reps | 5.8 (10) | 5.4 (9) | 5.3 (18) |
| 1990 Senate | 15.0 (33) | 12.4 (28) | 9.6 (33) |
| 1993 Senate | 11.8 (34) | 8.7 (28) | 9.7 (56) |
| 1996 Senate | 8.1 (15) | 12.3 (20) | 10.7 (18) |

Sources: AES 1990, 1993, 1996 (unweighted samples).

a Percentages show the proportion casting a deviant (non-Coalition) vote in each group.

b Significant at $p<.05$.

In at least four key areas--religion, parties and partisanship, conservatism and religious communications--the Australian political science literature is conceptually weak and misleading. Without attention to this problem, better explanations for the connections between religion and political behaviour are unlikely to be forthcoming.

## The problem of evidence

A final problem for scholars wanting to understand Australian religion and electoral politics is the lack of a body of appropriate evidence on which to base argument and analysis. Having convinced themselves that social structural variables are comparatively unimportant in determining electoral behaviour, the approach of recent national election surveys conducted by Australian political scientists has been to emphasise collection of more fine-grained political data rather than detailed socio-economic data. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in this, except that when political scientists do bump up against social structural variables - such as religion - which have a persistent effect on voting behaviour, they cannot go very far at all in advancing explanations before they are forced into the sorts of speculations discussed above.

On the other hand, the smaller scale studies that explore dynamics of religiosity and their connections with political behaviour in a much more detailed way, suffer from their lack of size and generalisability.[11] A series of small studies on specific electoral politics and religion issues, such as those conducted in the United States and regularly reported in journals such as *Review of Religious Research* and *Sociological Analysis*, can add up to a fuller picture. In Australia, there are very few such studies to draw on for deeper explanations of the general relationships between religion and political behaviour.

## Conclusion

Bean (1995) presents his explanations of the persistent relationships between religion and partisanship in a tentative way. So did Mol, Aitkin, Kemp and Gold before him, most of them acknowledging in passing that they did not have the data to interpret the relationships clearly. In addition to lacking the relevant data, Australian political scientists have not conceptualised religion in ways that would allow a better understanding of its impact on electoral behaviour. A number of their proposed explanations are conceptually and empirically implausible. Australian political scientists have drawn surprisingly little on insights about religion drawn from scholars in the religion studies field. The search for the electoral meanings of Australian religion goes on in fits and starts. Unless such a search is guided by better conceptual tools and evidence, it is likely to continue in the desert for another forty years.

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## Notes

1. Following the practice of the other authors discussed in this paper, I will deal only with Christian religion in this paper.

2. The 1990, 1993 and 1996 AES survey data are used in this paper. The 1990 AES was

directed by David Gow, Roger Jones, Ian McAllister and Elim Papadakis, the 1993 AES by Roger Jones, Ian McAllister David Denemark and David Gow and the 1996 AES by Ian McAllister, Roger Jones and David Gow. Data sets were obtained from the Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University. Results and interpretations are mine.

3. According to the 1993 Australian Election Study results, 66.1 percent of Orthodox voters gave their first preference to Labor in the House of Representatives ballot. Bean (1995) makes no mention of this in his analysis.

4. Rather curiously, given his 1995 argument for the importance of religion, Bean does not mention its effects on voting at all in the analysis he and Ian McAllister conducted of electoral behaviour and the 1996 federal election (see McAllister and Bean, 1997).

5. Bean does not specify whether he means the denomination-partisanship or religiosity-partisanship relationship, or both, in this context. Religiosity-partisanship is more likely.

6. Calculating measures of association for Gold's significant results shows that they are considerably weaker than he suggests.

7. Kemp (1978: chapters 6 and 9) began some preliminary thinking in this direction but it has not been taken up by others.

8.Mol repeats the argument unchanged in **The Faith of Australians** (1985: 215-6).

9. For example, Aitkin (1982: 172) draws on Troeltsch; Kemp (1978: 184-5) Tonnies *via* Lenski.

10. The statistical significance of the 1993 figures is due to the low deviant vote among intermediate attenders. This result is curious but trivial. Tests using groups other than Coalition partisans also tend to discount Bean's argument. In 1993 Labor identifying regular churchgoers were no more likely to cast a normal vote for their party in the House of Representatives (94.5 percent) than Labor non-attenders (91.3 percent). Non-attenders with no party identification were slightly less likely to favour the Coalition with their votes (29.5 percent) than regularly attending non-partisans (41.7 percent). The 1993 Senate voting figures show the same patterns.

11. Smith's (1981) study of Brisbane Protestant churchgoers, for example, involved a small sample (379) with a low response rate (28.2%).