The Church’s Voice in the Public Square

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A lecture to celebrate the opening of the Centre for Theology and Ministry
Uniting Church
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As a Sydney based Jesuit, I am honoured and delighted to return to these environs
and to join in your celebration of the opening of the Uniting Church’s Centre for
Theology and Ministry here in Victoria. I studied philosophy and theology here at the
United Faculty of Theology for six years. Some complained that I was never here –
but I was, and I am very indebted to Uniting Church lecturers like Norman Young,
John Henley, Harry Wardlaw, Bruce Barber and Doug Fullerton. These fine, learned,
Christian gentlemen from a different Christian tradition than my own showed me how
the contemporary Christian can live a life of faithful service and intellectual integrity,
engaged fully in the world, even without a strong tradition about the authoritative
teaching role of a church hierarchy. I do not blame them for imparting to me what
Christopher Pearson, the in house Tridentine Murdoch journalist, described last week
as “the strangely Protestant notion of the sovereignty of conscience”. Reflecting on
their lives and witness, I hope I have come to a better appreciation of the benefits and
limits of my own tradition. As I have travelled Australia in the 22 years since my
ordination, I have often had the pleasure of Uniting Church hospitality from those
with whom I studied and from whom I learnt. Our joint commitment to ecumenism is
capped by your invitation this day.

Manning Clark once described Australia as “a society unique in the history of
mankind, a society of men holding no firm beliefs on the existence of God or survival
after death”. He would have been surprised by the October announcement of
government approved chaplains for Australian schools. In the public forum, our
leaders do not often speak religious thoughts or admit to religious impulses. Thus my
own surprise when I attended the mass celebrated by Bishop Carlos Belo in the Dili
Cathedral in 2001 giving thanks for Australia’s contribution to the liberation of East
Timor. At the end of the mass, Major General Peter Cosgrove spoke. This big
Australian army officer in military dress was accompanied by a translator who was a
petite Timorese religious sister in her pure white habit replete with veil. He recalled
his first visit to the cathedral three months earlier when he was so moved by the
singing that he realised two things: first, the people of East Timor had not abandoned
their God despite everything that had happened; second, God had not abandoned the
people of East Timor. As he spoke, I was certain that despite the presence of the
usual media scrum, not one word of this speech would be reported back in Australia.
It was unimaginable that an Australian soldier would give such a speech in Australia.
If he were a US general, we would expect it. Here in Australia, the public silence
about things religious does not mean that religion does not animate and inspire many
of us. It just has a less acknowledged place in the public forum. It marks its presence
by the reverence of the silence. That is why we Australians need to be attentive to the
responsible mix of law, religion and politics. Each has its place and each must be
kept in place for good of us all, and for the good of our Commonwealth.

- Does Religion have a place in Australian the public square?

A batch of anti-religious tomes arrived at my bedside last month when I was
hospitalised with acute renal failure. Being in a state hospital, I had no idea of the
religious affiliations, if any, of my doctors or nurses. I did not inquire, though I noted
one wearing a hijab and some others wearing crosses or religious medals. Each day a
different church volunteer came to my four bed ward offering me the Eucharist. We
would pray together briefly. One night a priest came and anointed me. I received
cards and greetings from people offering their prayers. None of this disrupted the
hospital routine and it helped me in my hour of need. As the media had reported my
hospitalisation, the hospital authorities had to place strict limits on visitors. One
evening a charge sister asked if two women at my bedside were on the approved list.
I told her that we did not mess with Aboriginal matriarchs. These two women had
discovered my presence in the hospital and came to pray over me, telling me that I
still had much work to do.

Prior to the publication of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (Bantam Press,
2006), I had presumed that in western intellectual circles the atheists were ahead on
points and that they were little troubled by the doings of those they regarded as well
meaning, slightly befuddled religious people. Like them, I had strong concerns about
fundamentalists who used their simplistic religious beliefs to buttress their
commitment to violent or undemocratic action. I now realise that Dawkins and his ilk
are upset even by religious people like me, perhaps especially by religious people like
me. Dawkins claims that moderation in faith fosters fanaticism: “even mild and
moderate religion helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally
flourishes”. Dawkins’ “take home message is that we should blame religion itself, not
religious extremism – as though that were some kind of perversion of real, decent
religion”. The same argument would not be put for scientific inquiry. Imagine a call
to ban all scientific inquiry because those who engage in responsible scientific inquiry
may be providing the opportunity for fanatics to harness science for their own
purposes. Dawkins and his ilk think religious belief of any kind is meaningless,
infantile and demeaning, so nothing is lost by agitating in the most illiberal way for
the suppression of all religion and not just religious extremism which causes harm to
others.

The successful marketing of *The God Delusion* has now unleashed a steady flow of
anti-religious rantings from intelligent authors who have thrown respect for the other
and careful argument to the wind, staking bold claims for the destruction of religion.
Instead of proposing strategies for weeding out religious fundamentalists who pose a
threat to the freedom, dignity and rights of others, these authors are proposing a
scorched earth policy of killing off all religion.

Christopher Hitchens has visited most of the trouble spots of the world. He is an
acute journalistic critic of warring parties in any dispute. But in *God is Not Great* he
is not the bystander adjudicating between the fundamentalist Muslim suicide bombers
and the conservative Christian backers of the Bush White House. He is a belligerent, unyielding disputant asserting that religion ought have no place at the table of public deliberation. While he, who is not Irish, thinks Mother Teresa had no right to express her opinion about divorce law reform in Ireland, he has no hesitation in telling Australians about what we should be doing in Iraq. Why not the same rule for political intervention by outsiders, whether or not they are religious?

Hitchens identifies four irreducible objections to any religious faith: “that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.” He presumes that any believing Christian or Jew must subscribe to a literalist reading of Genesis as if it were a scientific text purporting to describe the origins of man and the cosmos. And yet, no scientific theory about the origin of man or the cosmos undermines or changes my reading of Genesis, any more than it undermines or changes my reading of Aboriginal creation myths.

In the wake of death threats for having offered shelter to his friend Salman Rushdie, he concludes with one of his many universal judgments against all religions and all religious persons: “The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee. Is it not obvious to all, say the pious, that religious authority is paramount, and that those who decline to recognise it have forfeited their right to exist?” It is not obvious to me. He thinks organised religion should have a lot on its conscience being “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive towards children”.

Hitchens has dedicated his book to the novelist Ian McEwan “whose body of fiction shows an extraordinary ability to elucidate the numinous without conceding anything to the supernatural”. Hitchens had never been religious but in his Marxist phase he “did have the conviction that a sort of unified field theory might have been discovered” and he admired Trotsky who had a sense “of the unquenchable yearning of the poor and oppressed to rise above the strictly material world and to achieve something transcendent. For a good part of my life, I had a share in this idea that I have not quite abandoned.” Now that he is neither poor nor oppressed he sees no need for transcendence beyond the strictly material world; he is content with an elucidation of the numinous in the written word as from the pen of McEwan. He does think “We have to transcend our prehistory” which includes “all postures of submission and surrender.”

He has no good word for any Christian or religious person except for Oscar Romero and qualified approval of Martin Luther King. However of King, he opines, “In no real as opposed to nominal sense was he a Christian”. He has no time for the argument that some religious people should be judged favourably because of their good humanitarian because the best relief workers he has met are secularists anyway.

He does concede that “religious faith is…. ineradicable. It will never die out, or at least not until we get over our fear of death, and of the dark, and of the unknown, and of each other.” He does see a place for conscience, “whatever it is that makes us
behave well when nobody is looking”. For him, “Ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it.” Some of us do find that we can form and inform our conscience even better when we believe that a loving God is accompanying us in the lonely chambers of decision. Some of us stand tallest when we submit and surrender to death, darkness and the other with dignity, and in love – with a religious sensibility.

Michel Onfray’s *The Atheist Manifesto* is one of those books you can judge by its back cover. It portrays him against a blank wall with a vacuum cleaner at his feet. His book is the result of a flurried, philosophical spring clean of history. He has swept up a potpourri of anti-religious content over the centuries and prefaced each collection of detritus with sweeping assertions such as: “all three monotheisms have a negative attitude toward the joy of life and even toward some of the basic human drives”; “monotheism loathes intelligence”; “in science, the church has always been wrong about everything: faced with epistemological truth it automatically persecutes the discoverer”; “monotheisms have no love for intelligence, books, knowledge, science”. The Catholic Church “excels in the destruction of civilisations. It invented ethnocide”; and monotheism is fatally fixated on death”. The argument for the last assertion is supported by the outrageous claim that Pope John Paul II “actively defend(ed) the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi by the Catholic Hutu of Rwanda”. There is no evidence for such a claim. Consider the Pope’s homily at the opening of the African Synod on 10 April 1994 a few days after the killings commenced:

> I wish to recall now in particular the people and the Church of Rwanda, who these days are being tried by an upsetting tragedy linked in particular to the dramatic assassination of the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi. With you, reunited in this African Synod, and in communion of spirit with the Bishops of Rwanda who could not be with us today, I feel the need to launch an appeal to stop that homicide of violence. Together with you, I raise my voice to tell all of you: stop these acts of violence! Stop these tragedies! Stop these fratricidal massacres!

Onfray begins the book with the stylistic flourish of a series of “mystical postcards” and assures the reader, “In none of those places did I feel superior to those who believed in spirits, in the immortal soul, in the breath of the gods, the presence of angels, the power of prayer, the effectiveness of ritual, the validity of incantations, communion with voodoo spirits, haemoglobin-based miracles, the Virgin’s tears, the resurrection of a crucified man……Never.” By the book’s end, the reader realises that the answer was not “Never” but “Always”. Onfray writes with a haughty and dismissive arrogance towards any person who has a religious sentiment. He even denies equality of treatment in the public square to any religious believer. “Equality between the believing Jew and the philosopher who proceeds according to the hypothetico-deductive model? Equality between the believer and the thinker who deconstructs the manufacture of belief, the building of a myth, the creation of a fable? Equality between the Muslim and the scrupulous analyst? If we say yes to these questions, then let’s stop thinking.”

What are we to do – start fighting? Do we not need to accord equality to all these persons in the public square of the free and democratic society, applying the same rules to each of them whether or not they are religious? And is this not the real challenge for us in this post September 11 world? Onfray’s social and political
philosophy is very thin. A pacifist, he has no time for just war theory. A simple utilitarian, he thinks “good and evil continue to matter…simply as factors in the struggle to ensure the greatest possible happiness of the greatest number”. He claims the Church supported the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki because Fr George Zabelka blessed the crew of the Enola Gay. No mention of Fr Pedro Arrupe, later the Superior General of the Jesuits, who ministered to the survivors at Hiroshima and then spent years travelling the globe speaking against nuclear war espousing his message of The Planet to Heal. No mention of the Second Vatican Council’s most authoritative and binding declaration: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”

Tamas Pataki has contributed an Australian home-grown polemic Against Religion. He is less shrill and more measured than his French and English colleagues, and adds local colour with attacks on Peter Costello whose “appearances at Hillsong received an unusual degree of attention from the Australian media”. The “mendacious John Howard” joins company with “the apocalyptic Tony Blair”. He argues that religion captures the mind when reinforced and held in place by unconscious needs and phantasies. Religious people are narcissistic individuals who want to be loved and to feel special. They find it difficult to accept that “there is nothing higher than earthly human love because the love of ordinary men and women is so fragile and incestuously tainted for them. So they must seek something ‘higher’, something transcendent.”

Pataki’s core argument “is that religious doctrines and teaching ‘capture the mind’ and are held with ‘unquestioning faith’ only when reinforced and held in place by the type of unconscious needs and phantasies we have been exploring. The impulse to religious violence is not to be found in the content of religious doctrine alone, or in its schooling; what matters critically is the way in which religious doctrine, practices, and institutions are able to satisfy symbolically or subitively the unconscious wishes formed under the impress of religion and imbricated with early object relations (inter-personal relationships). Religion becomes especially dangerous and violent because of its deep roots in narcissism and omnipotence, in the distorted and uncompromising internalised object-relationships in which these things are consolidated.”

All three authors find it inconceivable that a religious person could accord reason and science their due place, could live a balanced life without being sexually repressed, and could welcome the insights of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Bertrand Russell. Hitchens asserts, “Thanks to the telescope and microscope, (religion) no longer offers an explanation of anything important…It can now only impede or retard”. Regardless of the knowledge provided us by the telescope and microscope, every person, every generation and every culture has to make existential sense of the abyss which will always lie beyond the reach of the telescope and the microscope. The thinking, self-critical religious person parts company with these three authors at the edge of what can be known about the self and about the world. For these authors, there is nothing beyond that edge because it is not knowable, though each of them occasionally lapses into a yearning for the transcendent or at least the numinous. The religious person embraces the mystery of what lies beyond the abyss of death, the dark, the unknown and the other.
The US liberal Ronald Dworkin has recently published *Is Democracy Possible Here?* (Princeton University Press, 2006) He posits the only realistic choice for the modern nation state as being. “A religious nation that tolerates non-belief? Or a secular nation that tolerates religion?” In our globalised world, there will always be a Mother Teresa or a Christopher Hitchens wanting to make their contribution to public debate about law and policy even in those countries where they do not enjoy citizenship. We need rules for engagement which apply equally to persons of religious faith and none. We need to distinguish the role of the individual citizen and the role of the person in a position of public trust whether in the executive, legislature or judiciary. That public trust must be discharged faithfully whether or not the office holder be a religious person. Religious beliefs and philosophical standpoints may well help to inform the discharge of that public trust. It is now too simplistic to assert that engagement in the public square or in a position of public trust ought to be open only to those who have no religious beliefs or who leave their religious commitments at home.

Public intellectuals like these three pamphleteers may relish the public expression of scorn and disdain for all religions. But they do nothing to assist the needed public discernment of the limits on personal opinions and preferences in the public square and in law and public policy.

One of the great Christian theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, in volume 22 of his *Theological Investigations* (Crossroad, 1989) asked two questions about dialogue and tolerance as the foundations of a humane society:

- Are you really willing to grant freedom to the other person, insofar as it can be done without harming others, even when you hold a different opinion and have the power to prevent others from doing what they want?
- Are you willing and patient enough, as far as possible, to find out and try to feel what others (or another group) want to be and how they want to understand themselves?

Sadly these three intelligent, gifted and illiberal authors have demonstrated that it is not only Islamic fundamentalists who fail to understand the rules for civil discourse and engagement in the post September 11 public square.

**What are the limits on religious involvement in the public square?**

As I sat down to write this paper, the ABC radio news on the evening of 6 June 2007 carried this report:

New South Wales MPs have used a debate on new stem cell legislation to attack the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, after he warned parliamentarians against supporting the bill.

NSW Emergency Services Minister Nathan Rees accused the Cardinal of blackmailing Catholic MPs.

“He can apologise, or he can invite further comparisons with that serial boofhead, Sheikh Al Hilali,” he said.

State Planning Minister Frank Sartor says the comments border on zealotry.

“The days when the church burnt people in pots of oil are over,” he said.
Health Minister Reba Meagher says they were disturbing.

"That the Cardinal would chose to intervene and threaten Catholic MPs in New South Wales demonstrated just how out of touch he has become,” she said.

The previous day, Cardinal Pell had issued a statement opposing a NSW bill which would permit the creation of human embryos only for destructive experimental purposes. The NSW bill was similar to laws passed previously by the Commonwealth and Victorian Parliaments. He said, ““No Catholic politician - indeed, no Christian or person with respect for human life - who has properly informed his conscience about the facts and ethics in this area should vote in favour of this immoral legislation.” At his press conference, the Cardinal went on to warn “It is a serious moral matter, and Catholic politicians who vote for this legislation must realise that their voting has consequences for their place in the life of the church.” Some politicians read this as a threat. The Cardinal later classed it as “hinting at sanctions for Catholic legislators who reject important teachings”.

I agree with the Cardinal that persons with respect for human life should vote against this legislation. If I were a politician I would be voting against this law because it will permit scientists to create human life for the purpose of destroying that life, while admittedly hoping to achieve good for others. However, I will continue to respect the conscience of those politicians who say that they have to legislate for all citizens including those who do not share their religious and philosophical presuppositions. Many Australians claim to respect human life while supporting embryonic stem cell research, distinguishing between human life, human beings and human persons. There will be some politicians who respect human life who will be prepared in our pluralistic society to permit individuals to make their own decisions about the sacredness of the human embryo. I concede to them that there is a world of difference between voting for a law to remove criminal sanctions from morally contested behaviour by others and committing those morally contested acts yourself.

Recently Pope Benedict said the Catholic Church’s social doctrine “has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.” The same must go for the Church’s moral teaching based on contested philosophical questions about the status of the human embryo.

Truth enjoys primacy. The problem is when truth is contested. What then is to enjoy primacy of method for the individual Catholic wanting to act in accordance with the truth? Is primacy to be accorded to the formed and informed conscience of the individual or to the non-infallible statement of the Pope, Vatican dicastery or bishop? I opt for the former, insisting that the conscientious Catholic would seek guidance from the latter while not acting in accordance with the latter should such a directive be contrary to the individual’s formed and informed conscience. I have not seen this merely as a personal view but as an expression of Church teaching.

Bishop Anthony Fisher has put the issue well for all Catholics in his speech delivered in Rome in February. He said:
"The Church maintains its high view of the dignity of conscience. From this several things follow:

-- that we must do our best to cultivate a well-formed and well-informed conscience in ourselves and those we influence;
-- that we must take responsibility for our actions and thus always seek seriously to discern what is the right choice to make;
-- that we should seek to resolve doubt rather than act upon it;
-- that we must follow the last and best judgment of our conscience even if, unbeknownst to us, it is objectively in error;
-- that we must do so in all humility, aware that our choice may be wrong and so be ready, if we later realize it is, to repent and start afresh; and
-- that we should avoid coercing people's consciences: People should if possible be persuaded rather than forced to live well and so be given a certain latitude."

In good conscience I have to decide what to do, once I have given due weight to the views of religious authorities. I am one priest who is delighted to learn that the New South Wales Premier attends mass and communion from time to time. I hope he keeps doing so. If Mr Iemma or Malcolm Turnbull (A Catholic Federal Minister who supported similar legislation) were to attend any mass at which I was presiding, I would not have the least hesitation in giving them communion. The religious consequences of these politicians’ voting patterns in Parliament should first and foremost be private, pastoral matters for discussion with their pastors.

Those who have recently held the highest political office in the land have had occasion to tell religious people, and not just Sheikh Taj el-Din Al Hilaly, to butt out. At the height of the 1998 Wik debate, Paul Keating said, “Talk about Meddling priests! When Aborigines see Brennan, Harradine and other professional Catholics coming they should tell them to clear out.” John Howard when questioned about his Workchoices legislation, in light of the interventions by the likes of Cardinal Pell, Archbishop Jensen, Archbishop Aspinall and Bishop Manning, said: “If we are to have a sensible debate on the merits of this legislation, my advice to every person on this side of the House is: let’s leave out of the debate indications by the clergy to either side of the argument.”

During last year’s national stem cells debate, we had Senator Kay Patterson replying to a bishop appearing before the Senate committee: “Dear me, I might be excommunicated! Anyway, I do not think I will be, because it is my choice, not the church’s choice, I suppose.” We Australians are used to politicians, public intellectuals and media figures who have little time for religion in their own lives or in the public forum. Mark Latham put such views on public display when he published his diaries detailing his “first law of the church”: “the greater the degree of fanaticism in so-called faith, the greater the degree of escapism either from addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex) or from personal tragedy….Organised religion: just another form of conservative command and control in our society.”

My plea is for a rightly circumscribed place at the table for religion in public deliberation about law and policy. In my new book Acting on Conscience, I hope I have set out rules for engagement which apply equally to me, Sheikh Hillaly and Archbishop Aspinall, the Anglican Primate who kindly launched the book in Queensland. I was delighted that Kevin Rudd agreed to do the national launch in Parliament House, Canberra and was chuffed that he and Tony Abbott were prepared to pose together for media photos at the launch. Perhaps a Jesuit is capable of finding
some common ground between political protagonists who dispute even the role of their shared religion in politics! Rudd’s recent Bonhoeffer lecture established his credentials as a politician who takes religion seriously in the political process. One newspaper asserted that he went “a step too far when he effectively invite(d) the churches to sign on to the Labor cause.” In my opinion, he did no such thing. He rightly said, “For too long in this country, there’s been an assumption that if you have private faith your natural destination is one of the conservative parties.” He invited individual Christians to respond to the political challenges of the day in light of their faith. He also endorsed the role of church leaders who have spoken out on issues such as the new IR laws. Why shouldn’t they? Church leaders do have a contribution to make to political debate when they confine themselves to statements of principle consistent with their religious teachings and when they scrutinise laws and policies in light of those principles.

Some citizens have religious beliefs which sustain, inform and drive their social commitments and comprehensive view of the ultimate significance of human existence. Those views are entitled to a place at the table of deliberative democracy, just as are the views of the secular humanist. The secular humanist cannot say, “You believe life is a transcendent mystery. I don’t. Therefore we should for the purposes of good civic life simply assume that there is no transcendent mystery to life, and anything you think, feel or desire should be translated into a message comprehensible to me.”

The utilitarianism of pragmatic Australia has always required an ethical corrective which has often been informed by religious sentiment, whether the issue of the day be the dispossession of Aborigines, refugee children in detention, our commitment to the Iraq War for unjustified, wrong reasons, or the wanton corruption of AWB and HIH - the corporate culmination of the “whatever it takes” mindset. Religious citizens have a role in calling a halt to the pragmatism and insisting that some things are wrong in themselves regardless of the practical consequences for others in the short term. I am not suggesting that it is only religious citizens who call for such a halt, nor that it is only non-religious citizens or state officials who commit the abuses in the name of national interest or profit.

The state needs to respect the inherent dignity of every person and this requires due acknowledgement of the person who acts with a formed and informed conscience about what is right for him and for others. The state is entitled to constrain a person who acts in a manner contrary to the fundamental human rights of other citizens or contrary to the public interest, given that the public interest includes optimal freedom for all persons. The person who occupies an office of trust in any of the three arms of government is required to discharge that trust consistent with the terms of the office.

Religious leaders are free to proclaim the formal teaching of their faith communities, not only to their members but to all members of society. As citizens, they are entitled to agitate for laws or policies consistent with their formal teaching. It is not only folly but it is wrong for religious leaders to represent to the world that all members of their faith communities think and act in a way fully consistent with the formal church teaching, or that most of their members think law and policy should reflect their formal church teaching.
When people like me agitate for native title or refugees, politicians tend to treat us as if we are trendy lefties, spared the need to be elected. But when I, hoping to apply a consistent ethic for the protection of the vulnerable, raise ethical quandaries about legislation on things like embryonic stem cell research, I am labelled a conservative Catholic.

Imams should have the same liberty as the rest of us to ventilate their views. But they should also be guided by the same rules of political morality which is more than the expedient assessment of what works in the marketplace of ideas. Public figures who represent a religious tradition have a social obligation to respect the sensibilities of the community, while cogently stating policy options consistent with their religious tradition. There is nothing prophetic or religious in claims that demean the weak or the vulnerable. Without media oxygen, such claims can rightly wither.

The Iraq War – A Case in Point

When reflecting on the role of religion in politics and the function of church leaders in political debate, I think the 2003 Iraq War is a good case in point. In hindsight, we should all agree that it would have been better if our elected leaders had paid greater heed to our religious leaders and those other citizens who were urging a more principled approach to war than one based simply on consequential arguments and the demands of the US alliance. There was a surprising unanimity of views amongst church leaders opposing the Iraq invasion on the grounds that it did not comply with the just war criteria. You are all familiar with the statements made by Australian church leaders. It is interesting to note in hindsight that they echoed the remarks made by their US counterparts who would have been under greater political pressure to toe the White House line. On the eve of war, Bishop Gregory, the head of the US Catholic Bishops Conference said:¹

Our bishops' conference continues to question the moral legitimacy of any pre-emptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. To permit pre-emptive or preventive uses of military force to overthrow threatening or hostile regimes would create deeply troubling moral and legal precedents. Based on the facts that are known, it is difficult to justify resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature or Iraq's involvement in the terrorist attacks of September 11. With the Holy See and many religious leaders throughout the world, we believe that resort to war would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for the use of military force.

As early as September 2002, the US bishops had told the President, “We fear that resort to force, under these circumstances, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force. Of particular concern are the traditional just war criteria of just cause, right authority, probability of success, proportionality and non-combatant immunity.”² The US Catholic bishops maintained that view.

The suspected capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction could not itself constitute just cause for an attack. Even if a state or a coalition of states be able to claim that it is the right authority to make a decision about war, that authority must be

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¹ Wilton D. Gregory, President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Statement on Iraq, 26 February, 2003
² Letter of Bishop Wilton D Gregory to President George W Bush, 13 September 2002
able to produce credible evidence about the possession of such weapons and the distinctive threat they pose to those states wanting to launch an attack. If you cannot convince the western democratic members of the UN Security Council that there is a real threat to world peace or a real and unacceptable threat to particular states, it is very likely that you are not engaged in war for a just cause. Even if the coalition of willing states be the appropriate authority, they still need to demonstrate that all other avenues have been tried to disarm the rogue state. As the coalition of willing states provided the incentive for renewed inspections by pre-deploying troops, the coalition was entitled to put a reasonable limit on the terms of pre-deployment or to demand that other states opposed to war provide assistance with the pre-deployment simply to maintain the pressure for verifiable inspections. Even if the US had established that it was a competent authority to determine that there was a just cause for war which was a last resort, there would still have been a need to consider the consequences of such an engagement.

The nonchalance and belated show of humanitarian concern by the Coalition of the Willing after they had failed to uncover large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction confirmed the suspicion that the Coalition’s leader, the United States, had an alternative agenda, namely regime change in Iraq, an attempted re-ordering of the Middle East, and an experiment with a new American project premised on preventive intervention.

Those who oppose such ideological experiments in the future will do better if they are able to articulate more clearly the margin of appreciation afforded governments which are privy to sensitive intelligence material. Even if such opponents fail to agree on whether the UN Security Council is the competent authority to determine the legitimacy of war, they could agree that the Security Council is the most appropriate sieve for sorting the conflicting claims made by nation states which may be the appropriate authority. The UN Security Council is well qualified to sift out those claims of nation states based only on ideology or national self-interest.

The Coalition of the Willing’s failure to find any weapons of mass destruction and its inability without UN endorsement and Arab acceptance to impose secular democracy on factionalised Iraq give us good grounds to return to the orthodox theory of just war, adapting the application of the criteria to the contemporary situation.

The Washington based George Weigel who was the biographer of Pope John Paul II claims, “There is a world of difference between recognising the serious failures of US public diplomacy since 9/11 and a foreign policy approach that imagines the impossible (French and German support for deposing Saddam Hussein) and proposes the imprudent (waiting for French and German permission to do what needs to be done – whether that be in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Darfur or wherever.)”3 There is also a world of difference with recognising that a threat to world peace is not likely to be as imminent or real as claimed by a US administration when neither the French nor Germans nor an overwhelming majority of the UN Security Council can be convinced that there is no option but war.

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A Catholic like me is entitled to express some caution in backing my government on such issues when the Vatican continues to express strong reservations. All citizens need to review their trust in government in light of the fact that the US was confident that WMD would be discovered and then took almost two years to admit that none would be found. Admittedly not even Hans Blix knew whether or not the Iraqis had disposed of all their WMDs. He was happy to adopt Donald Rumsfeld’s line that “the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence”. Not even Hans Blix could guarantee that Iraq was without WMD. In his book *Disarming Iraq*, Blix said:

Could it have been argued that this uncertainty was intolerable and required elimination by armed action? It could, but I think it is unlikely that such an argument would have been endorsed by the legislatures of the US and the UK, let alone the UN Security Council. Presumably it was an awareness of this circumstance that led the US and UK governments to claim certainty that the weapons existed.

According to Blix it was most probable “that the governments were conscious that they were exaggerating the risks they saw in order to get the political support they would not otherwise have had.” Blix conceded:

It is understood and accepted that governments must simplify complex international matters in explaining them to the public in democratic states. However, they are not just vendors of merchandise but leaders from whom some integrity should be asked when they exercise their responsibility for war and peace in the world.

As we look back over the Iraq War, all of us must concede that it does not make a good case for the so-called doctrine of pre-emption. The religious leaders did well in spelling out the principles and directing the public to the relevant questions. In a modern democracy, government needs to package the issue simply. It has reached the stage that a civil servant like Paul Wolfowitz can admit that WMD was chosen as the “bureaucratic” reason for the war. Government always acts out of a plurality of motives, not the least of which is national interest. Since September 11, US bases have now been removed from Saudi Arabia and are established in Iraq. Strategists in Washington would not have disregarded concerns about future oil supplies. Following September 11, the American people had good grounds to fear further terrorist attack.

A democratic government in such a situation rightly and understandably gives first priority to the safety and the fears of the population. If a government can engage in action which it thinks guarantees the safety of its citizens while placing at risk only those under a tyrant regime which has failed to guarantee the removal of the threat, it will so act.

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5 ibid., 271.
6 On 30 May 2003, *USA Today* carried this report: “The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason,” Wolfowitz was quoted as saying in a Pentagon transcript of an interview with *Vanity Fair*. The magazine’s reporter did not tape the telephone interview and provided a slightly different version of the quote in the article: “For bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on.”
It is one thing to advocate the role of the UN Security Council. But once further inspections were contingent on the US doing the lions’ share of maintaining an army camped beside Iraq, the US had a prerogative for determining how long it was prepared to wait. Those urging further delay had an obligation to commit troops to maintain the pressure. These prudential and strategic questions are well beyond the competence of religious leaders. But these leaders are entitled to maintain the pressure on the decision makers urging greater transparency and honesty in decision making, highlighting the national self interest and ulterior strategic objectives in any such unilateral, pre-emptive strike. Given all that we now know, Hans Blix was surely right in asserting, “The action taken against Iraq in 2003 did not strengthen the case for a right of pre-emptive action.”

The present state of our world after the war in Iraq, with Australia having been a member of the Coalition of the Willing, provides immediate challenges to us who seek a better life in an ordered world. The post-World War II world order is now up for renegotiation. In Washington and Baghdad, political leaders spent much of 2003 invoking the name "God" as if their actions were pre-ordained and justified. Such utterances confirm the prejudices of Australian humanitarian sceptics and call religious persons to a deeper reflectiveness about the relationship between divine presence and human action. Just 17 years since the end of the Cold War and five years since the destruction of the World Trade Centre, we are only beginning to find ways for building and keeping the peace in a New World order. These are still early days in the shaping of the New World order and institutions. There has been no equivalent moment since 1945. Back then, Australia had an unequivocal commitment to multilateralism and diplomacy. Sadly, Australia has been party to a rash new theory based on militarism and unilateralism. War is no longer the last resort. The UN is no longer the arbiter of justified force in the absence of direct aggression on a member state. Compelling evidence of threat and overwhelming prospect of better outcomes are no longer necessary preconditions for war when the national interest of the world's only superpower is equated with the common good of all.

Though there was spirited debate and cabinet resignations in the UK because of Mr Blair's ready membership of the Coalition of the Willing, Canberra compliance with prime ministerial directives was complete. It was very troubling to hear the mixed messages from Prime Minister John Howard and Mr Tony Abbott about the increased risks of terrorism to Australian citizens. Abbott, the Leader of the Government in the House, told Parliament, "There is the increased risk of terrorist attack here in Australia". Next day, the Prime Minister told us, "We haven't received any intelligence in recent times suggesting that there should be an increase in the level of security or threat alert." Regardless of who was right, their contradictory statements provided incontrovertible evidence that there had been insufficient debate, discussion and discernment within our Cabinet and political party processes prior to making a commitment to war in such novel political circumstances.

Even more troubling that such a commitment could be made when all service chiefs who held the key command positions during the first Gulf War had questioned the wisdom of Australia's course. The Army's General Peter Gration had reconfirmed, "My fundamental judgment that it's wrong remains." Before the war began, he had

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7 H. Blix, op. cit., p. 274
said, "I have strong objections to the coming war as both unnecessary and likely to produce unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences. The real threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction is much exaggerated and that threat can continue to be contained and deterred." The Air Force's Ray Funnell said, "It's strategic stupidity on a monumental scale." He said the rationale for war was "weak" and the timing "inappropriate". The Navy's Admiral Mike Hudson said, "It's almost immoral." The day after President Bush proclaimed war, Hudson said, "I am deeply concerned that the aggressive manner of the United States, coercing others to join them in the coalition of the willing could irreparably damage the unity of the UN." Before the war, RSL President, Major General Peter Phillips said, "We, like most Australians, are not yet entirely convinced that we have enough to justify a ground invasion. We will understand the difficulties that face the US, in that getting hard evidence that it can present to people, it's not easy. We're also trying to look to the future and just the terrible aftermath that could come from a ground invasion. We'd be looking for some reassurance that this had been thought through and was manageable." In April 2003, Phillips repeated, "The reason we opposed the involvement of Australian troops was entirely about what would happen after this war."

Also troubling was the media's treatment of the united stand by religious leaders against the war. For example Pope John Paul II in his annual address to diplomats in January 2003 said, "One cannot resort to war, even when the intention is to ensure the common good, if not as the very last option, and in accordance with very strict conditions, and taking into account the consequences to the civilian population both during and after the military operation." Having observed that Iraq's population "already exhausted by 12 years of (U.N.-mandated) embargo", he said, "War is never inevitable. ... International law, honest dialogue, solidarity between states, and the noble efforts of diplomacy are worthy means of resolving differences between states." But this did not stop columnists from the Murdoch press repeatedly claiming that "the intervention in Iraq was theologically speaking a just cause consistently affirmed by the Pope."

Those of us who opposed our nation's involvement in the war feel a deep sense of shame that it came to this with such little public agitation. Democracy was reduced to the simplistic prime ministerial declaration to Parliament, "You have a right to protest, to dissent and to register your concern, but direct those protests to the government, to me, not to those who are overseas on our behalf", followed by the contradictory declaration to the protesters who did just that next day outside the Lodge that they were entitled to their opinion while the Prime Minister was entitled to his, with the rider later in the day, "You have a right to protest but you have to understand that the stupidity or otherwise of individual acts of protests will be judged by your fellow Australians accordingly". Those who are uncertain about our involvement in the war are besieged by a profound ambiguity. Even some of those who supported the war effort have a regretful righteousness - a sense of powerlessness that we could do no other in the face of evil than to participate in evil, hoping that greater evil could be avoided. Is it not time to consider granting our elected politicians a conscience vote on future commitments to such wars? And should we not all pay greater heed to the considered reflections of religious and humanitarian citizens and church leaders who espouse moral principles in season and out of season?

**Conclusion**
The pragmatic, consequentialist ethic in contemporary Australia has long wreaked havoc on outsiders not meriting our respect, but now we risk its turning on us. Just think of our tolerance of long term immigration detention without court order or supervision, or even without independent bureaucratic oversight, until Cornelia Rau (one of us) ended up in the bureaucratic web of detention for the good of national security and border protection.

Here in Australia we now jump too quickly from talk of Australian values (which at their best are usually universal humane values wrapped in the flag) to an assessment of consequences. Our politicians are now fond of telling us that those of us who are unelected may have a role in discussing values but then it is up to the elected politicians simply to assess the consequences of a law or policy, presuming that it is the consequences alone that will determine the rightness of wrongness of the action.

On an issue like war it is not just a matter of what’s likely to work out for the best in an imperfect world. We are required to judge the morality of war not just by its consequences. There are conditions to be fulfilled for a just war, principles to be applied – conditions which have never been fulfilled in the case of the Iraq war, and principles which have not been articulated or distinguished by government. This is not a war which is becoming wrong because of its consequences. It is a war which was wrong from the beginning, because the novel US doctrine of pre-emption is contrary to the longstanding principles of just war espoused by Christians, humanists and other religious persons over the centuries.

We cannot just jump from values to consequences. What’s likely to turn out for the best in an imperfect world is not simply what is best for the majority or what the electorate will wear, regardless of the cost to the minority or to the individual without government or majority support. We have an obligation to remind our fellow citizens, including our elected politicians, that there are principles which preclude some courses of action no matter what the political or utilitarian calculus. Our religious convictions help to inform our values. But it is not simply a matter of then choosing between outcomes on the basis of consequences. From our values, we derive certain principles which are to be applied regardless of the consequences of an action. Our social obligation is to do the hard intellectual work involved in articulating principles derived from values, then reconciling conflicting principles and conflicting rights with reasoning which is transparent and public.

Consequentialist arguments carry too ready an appeal in the modern democratic state where so much is determined by the television sound bite. Religion is one of the social and cultural foundations which can correct too ready a recourse to short term, popular consequences whether the issue be war and peace, indigenous rights, refugee rights, stem cell research or the right to life of the vulnerable at either end of the life cycle. We need more politicians like Rudd and Abbott who are prepared to enunciate a coherent political philosophy for a pluralist society while being inspired and held accountable by their religious understanding of the world.

When considering the Church's voice in the public square, we need to distinguish questions of principle, prudence and pastoral solicitude. On an issue such as embryonic stem cell research, a church leader is entitled to take a stand on principle,
informed by his religious tradition, opposing legislation aimed at permitting scientists to create human life for destructive experimentation. We move from questions of principle to issues of pastoral solicitude when a church leader chooses publicly to give hints of sanctions against co-religionist legislators as Cardinal Pell and Archbishop Hickey have done this past month. Some pastors, myself included, think such suggestions should take the form of private advice rather than public hints; and public hints should always be preceded by private dialogue. There is also the pastoral consideration to be paid to those legislators and scientists who, in good faith, do not share our theological and philosophical presuppositions. There are good pastoral reasons for not classing them as “anti-lifers” and for avoiding analogies between a church and a political party, suggesting that “just as members of a political party who cross the floor on critical issues don't expect to be rewarded and might be penalised, so it is in the church”. Then there is the prudential side of every such public dispute. Media attention is more assured if one simplifies the protagonist's position as Cardinal Pell did again this week when speaking of “today's fashionable notion of the primacy of conscience, which is, of course secular relativism with a religious face.” But is it prudent to so simplify the protagonist's position as to caricature it? Is it prudent to hint in the public square at internal church sanctions when that could distract from, and even drown out, the coherent church statements of principle addressing a legislative or policy proposal? In the public square, church authorities are armed only with public argument informed by and consistent with their religious tradition. Persuasion by argument, not coercion by authority, should be our religious hallmark in the public square. Greater ecumenical co-operation usually ensures that our message in the public square is more marked by persuasion than coercion.

There must always be room for diverse viewpoints on pastoral solicitude and prudent political action, even when there is unanimity within a religious tradition on questions of moral principle. I trust that this Centre for Theology and Ministry will help us all with the enunciation of principle, the practice of prudence, and our commitment to pastoral solicitude, whether we be north or south of the River Murray, and whatever our Christian affiliation.

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8 Cardinal George Pell, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 June 2007