

# celebrating | the secular

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On 4 November 2004 I read a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that I found genuinely shocking, a statement by Cardinal George Pell, of the Catholic diocese of Sydney, on what's wrong with democracy. This report was of a speech given to the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in the United States. In it, Dr Pell told his audience that liberal democracy is a world of 'empty secularism' that is over-focused on 'individual autonomy'. The problem with democracy, said the Cardinal, quoting John Paul II, is that it is not a good thing in itself; its value depends on the moral vision that it serves, and a secular democracy is lacking in moral vision.

Now either this is an astonishing statement of political illiteracy or it's a broadside from a theocrat. If democracy is not a good thing in and of itself, then why have we sent troops to Iraq to enable it? And what about the principle of equality before the law? Freedom of conscience? Freedom of speech and of action? Responsibility for community? Sounds like a moral vision to me.

But according to Dr Pell there's a flaw in this system and it hinges on that word 'secular', a virus of godlessness that gives rise to a catalogue of anathemas, including abortion, pornography, IVF-assisted reproduction and stem-cell research. Dr Pell urges his audience to rethink the meaning of 'normative democracy'. He is not prepared to argue openly for 'Christian democracy' because this would be too much of a minefield, even for a controversial cardinal. Instead he comes up with a model of his own called 'democratic personalism', which is founded

on ‘the transcendent dignity of the human’. What he means here by ‘transcendent’ is that we need to recognise our ‘dependence on God’ and place this at the centre of our system of governance. But, he asserts, ‘placing democracy on this basis does not mean theocracy’. Well, I’m sorry, but that’s exactly what it does mean, for it prescribes rather than allows, and it prescribes on the basis of ancient texts handed down as dogma; texts that are not subject to democratic debate.

This is where proponents of the secular make their dissent, and their dissent is based on a model of process. Liberal democrats have no objection to the individual’s faith in God, they simply assert the importance of allowing individuals to find their own way through to that faith in their own way and in their own time. The dangers of any other route are manifold. A secular democracy is not one in which the citizens have no moral or religious convictions; it is a system of governance based on the separation of church and state. That principle of separation guarantees one of the great civilising achievements of modernity: freedom of religious observance and non-discrimination on the basis of religious faith. This in turn gives rise to freedom of conscience—that’s what the word liberal refers to—and a secular democracy, as opposed to a theocratic one, guarantees that freedom. It guarantees that on every ethical issue in the public realm, *a case must be made*.

But this plea for democratic personalism is only the half of Dr Pell’s argument. Because secular liberal democracy lacks moral vision, because it is an ‘empty vessel’, this then makes it vulnerable to the forces of darkness, and in particular to the growth of Islam—a kind of fatal attraction ‘both for those who are alienated and embittered on the one hand, and for those who seek order or justice on the other’. In his address to the Acton Institute, Dr Pell warned his audience that *secular* democracy not only cannot stop the rise of intolerant religion, but also contributes to and worsens it.

On this reasoning we might picture our political system as not unlike a well-designed machine—a car, say—that lacks the input of moral gasoline. Voters like us, strapped into this arid voting machine, are stranded on the road to redemption until some busload of missionaries comes along to administer the fuel of moral instruction. But wait ... what if a busload of Muslims gets to us first and fills up the tank with darkness? Years of living in a secular moral vacuum have weakened our ability to resist these predations and we fall helplessly into jihad and purdah.

What evidence can we find for this proposition that the secular gives rise to ‘intolerant religion’? In Australia, sectarian conflict has markedly diminished over the past fifty years. The attack on the USA on September 11 came from Middle Eastern Islamists, mostly Saudi Arabian nationals, not from converts within the USA. The conversion rate to Islam among what Cardinal Pell describes as ‘native Westerners’ is extremely modest. The fastest growing religion in Australia is Buddhism.

Freedom of choice is not, as the Cardinal seems to suggest, a mere 'procedural' mechanism; it is a comprehensive set of values, of checks and balances that underwrite our way of life. 'Toleration', as the nineteenth-century liberals used to refer to it, is at the heart of this. A democracy that is not secular in its essence is not free because certain choices are pre-empted or excluded, as in the recent elections in Iran. You cannot vote to change the Bible or the Koran, but you can vote to change the Australian constitution. If you remove the secular from liberal democracy you don't reduce the likelihood of 'darkness', you enhance it, because you enhance the possibility of a tyranny under one credo.

Hostility to the secular is a marker of the authoritarian mind. It comes from the early Christian concept, adapted from the Romans, of the pagan, or non-believer. The pagans were people beyond the pale. Of course, they had their own gods, their own metaphysical systems, but what they did not believe in was the state, or officially sanctioned religion of imperial Rome. In Christian Latin the word pagan came to mean more than non-Roman: it meant 'civilian', meaning not a soldier of Christ.

Civilian? To the liberal democrat this is an honourable word. Being civil—courteous towards and tolerant of the beliefs of others—is at the heart of what liberal democrats stand for. It does not mean they lack spiritual convictions: it means they are respectful of those who disagree with them. To be secular is not to be anti-religion, but to be anti-theocracy. Secular doesn't mean without; it doesn't mean empty. On the contrary, in the context of liberal democracy it means multiple and diverse or, to pursue the spatial metaphor, 'full'.

This was something that the founders of the Australian constitution understood, and they went to some pains to enshrine it in law. In a recent opinion piece, also in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 June 2004), Associate Professor Helen Irving of the Sydney University Law School reminded us that the founders of Federation set out very deliberately to create a secular constitution, to ensure that our system avoided the sectarian strife and bigotry of old Europe. Section 116 of our constitution expressly prohibits the Commonwealth from establishing a religion, requiring or prohibiting religious practice, or imposing any religious test for public office. To quote Dr Irving, 'Not only did it depart from English practice, it went beyond the First Amendment in the US constitution, which only forbids laws establishing a religion or prohibiting free religious practice'.

This makes Australia the most secular liberal democracy in the world. But that doesn't mean we are godless, and this conflation between secular and godless is too often and too glibly made. No more startling and impressive reminder of this has been afforded us in recent times than the case of the national elections in India in 2003. There, under a secular constitution, a fundamentalist Hindu party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was voted out of office, largely by rural Hindus. Not only that, it went quietly. How else could this happen

*but* under a secular constitution? How else could such a diverse country preserve itself, over fifty years, as a democracy?

But for fundamentalists of all creeds, a good democracy is one of limited choice, sanctioned by priests and mullahs in the name of the ‘transcendent’. For the rest of us, what we have learned in the great liberal tradition is that a real moral education does not involve the passive absorption of dogma but the freedom to sometimes make a bad choice and to learn from it. It reminds me of the time a friend of mine was appointed principal of a large suburban high school in Hobart. Up until then, the common practice in the school (as in many schools still) was for the students to vote for prefects and the staff to exercise a priestly right of veto over student choices. My friend abolished this practice. The traditional argument against free student choice was that the students might elect a ratbag to the prefecture. My friend responded that this would only be a true and realistic reflection of what happened in the nation’s parliaments, but that in any case the important principle at stake was to educate young people in what lay at the heart of a democracy—the freedom to make a wrong choice, to make mistakes, to find your own way, to learn from experience.

In a secular liberal democracy that works, we are all pagans and civilians first and something else—Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu—second. That fact is galling to the theocrats, but cherished by us pagans. Our pagan bible is made up of those two great essays by John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* and *On Representative Government*. To be a liberal democrat, Mill argued, means not just a set of convictions about the mechanisms of representative government: beyond that, it is a ‘temper of mind’. By this marvellous phrase he meant that a democracy is sustained both by rational speculation as to the ideal, of how we personally would like other people to be, and a loving acceptance of the weaknesses and foibles of people as they currently are—in other words, a true political marriage of head and heart. It is this ‘temper of mind’ that gives democracy its resilience—that makes it less, not more, vulnerable to extremism. But democracy, as Mill understood, is a constant work-in-progress. We never quite get it right, we never have all the answers, and to find our way through to better answers we have to keep alive the spirit of toleration, what the philosopher Jacques Derrida called ‘the community of the question’. The strongest guarantee of that community remains the secular state.

Dr Pell tells us that secular democracy represents ‘a failure of the imagination’ but the contrary is the case, for the secular liberal democracy we enjoy today is a triumph of the liberal imagination of the nineteenth century, of the imagination of thinkers such as John Stuart Mill. It was Mill and his partner Harriet Taylor who, as early as the 1830s, could ‘imagine’ a democracy in which, for example, women had equality under the law. It is possible, under the Australian constitution, for a woman—of any religious persuasion—to become prime

minister of this country. It is not possible, under canon law, for a woman to become a cardinal in the Catholic Church, or, for that matter, the Anglican Bishop of Sydney.

The Dark Ages never really go away. They are not an historical era, not a chronological period, but a potential. We have constantly to defend, explain and celebrate what we've won; to take nothing for granted. This is the task of political education and Cardinal Pell has done us all a favour: he's reminded us of that. Reminded us that we don't often enough teach our students in schools about section 116 of the Australian constitution, and why it's there.

In their own eccentric and un-plotted way, writers play a role in this. The word is there to explore, and in the process, to test experience. Writers speculate constantly as to the nature of reality and the dimensions of the possible. They are contrary, individualistic and tend to the sceptical. They hold every story that was ever told up to the light and test it against the truth of their own experience. In the process, they help to keep the liberal imagination alive. When we give awards and prizes, as we do tonight, we don't just reward individual writers, we acknowledge and celebrate their general contribution to the health of the democratic community.

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