

# Sectarianism, secularism and abuse: Why the Pell case divided Australia

[Karl Schmude](#) April 12, 2020 at 9:20 am

Last week's [exoneration](#) of Cardinal George Pell marks the end of a nearly three-year legal process: two trials on child abuse charges (the first resulted in a hung jury), the upholding of the guilty verdict in Victoria's Court of Appeal, and finally the overturning of that verdict in a 7-0 decision by the High Court. But it is unlikely to dispel the widespread hostility to the cardinal – or, more generally, to the Church in Australia. These legal events have revealed two powerful currents in Australian life – one recent, the other historical – which help to explain the depth of division and ferocity of debate.

The recent factor has been the history of clerical sex abuse in Australia, which as in so many countries, has shattered the Church's cultural authority and moral credibility.

George Pell began as a priest in the Victorian rural diocese of Ballarat, where some of the worst cases of clerical abuse occurred. Later, as Archbishop of Melbourne (1996-2001) and Archbishop of Sydney (2001-2014), prior to his appointment to the Vatican as Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy (2014-19), he became Australia's most prominent and outspoken Catholic leader, who never shied away from controversy.

While he developed the first protocol of its kind in the world – called the "Melbourne Response" – to handle complaints of child sex abuse in the Church, he was a constant magnet for personal accusations. One of these led to his conviction and imprisonment in 2018. Combined with his public opposition to fashionable causes, most recently same-sex marriage, he came to symbolise the Church's derelictions – and provide

an irresistible target for retribution.

The historical factor that fed into the present-day scenario has been the long history of anti-Catholicism in Australia – especially in Pell’s own state. Victoria’s early migrant population was divided between Catholics and Protestants, particularly Presbyterians and other Nonconformist groups. These tensions arose in much later cultural and political conflicts, as with the dramatic 1950s split within the Labor Party.

Melbourne bears comparison with Boston as a Catholic centre of cloistered intensity, by comparison with the more moderate and assimilated forms of faith in Sydney, or St Louis, where a social mixture of Catholic and Protestant faiths prevailed. And like Boston, Melbourne was the scene of an especially catastrophic clerical abuse scandal.

The sectarian form of anti-Catholicism has now largely vanished in Australia. However, its legacy is a secularist strand that resents the historical dominance of the Church – something Cardinal Pell, as a commanding figure in public life, seemed to embody. And the evil done by various Catholic priests, as well as by some religious brothers in Catholic schools, has made the secularist argument look more plausible than ever.

The accusations against Cardinal Pell brought together both strands of Australian anti-Catholicism. The horrendous record of child sex abuse, grossly mishandled by Church leaders; and the entrenched tradition of anti-Catholicism, recast from its sectarian origins into a virulent secularism.

The bulk of the media, in particular Australia’s national broadcaster, the ABC, led the way for a conviction against Pell by a protracted campaign of vilification. This reinforced a community urge, focused on the revolting revelations of child sex abuse, to procure a scapegoat.

As René Girard’s studies of this mechanism have revealed, scapegoating offers a power of release that can feel almost salvific. It does not require –

in fact, it disdains – any rational justification. It is deaf to the kind of plea in the High Court’s judgment last week: that the trial jury in December 2018, “acting rationally,” ought to have entertained a reasonable doubt as to the Cardinal’s guilt.

In a statement following the High Court decision, Cardinal Pell affirmed that “the only basis for justice is truth, because justice means truth for all.” It is inexpressibly sad that the case against him was driven, not by a passion for justice and truth, but by a thirst for vengeance and scapegoating.

After a week in which Catholics have marked Christ’s Passion, death and Resurrection, we might find consolation and hope in these lines of the Australian Catholic poet James McAuley:

*The calumnies will never cease,  
Look only to the sign of peace,  
The Cross upon the wall.*

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