

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# We ignore religious teachings and resulting tolerance at our peril

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By **ANGELA SHANAHAN**, COLUMNIST

12:00AM DECEMBER 22, 2018 ·  172 COMMENTS

Lately this column has gained a reputation for being about religion, which in Oz-speak translates as a rather eccentric interest of minimal importance. Australians are not overtly religious people. Christmas illustrates this, and Easter even more so.

However, compared with other parts of the English-speaking world we are sort of “middling” religious. We are more religious than the Brits but not as religious as the Americans, and although 30 per cent say they have no religion, according to the census more than 52 per cent of people in this country are Christians and the rest have a religious affiliation other than Christianity.

When these figures were released this year it caused a bit of a sensation because it was the biggest increase in people who marked no religion. So why write about religion when it seems to be on the decline? Well, here are a few reasons.

First and foremost, because religion is the prime motivating force in the world: not politics, not ideology, but religion. Religion informs people’s consciences. It moulds our moral outlook and our daily ethics. A people’s spiritual roots govern their lives, and religion is usually the source of a nation’s culture.

In the religiously illiterate West we often find this fact hard to swallow. Religion is considered just part of the philosophical free-for-all, tolerated as a social benefit because it runs schools and hospitals or as a private pastime for the less “enlightened”.

However the idea that religion provides anything more than superficial comfort and nice music at Christmas seems to many people an exaggeration of its importance. However, Judeo-Christian precepts found in the commandments of Moses and the New Testament gospels are the foundation of our morality, the ethical basis of our law and our tolerant social compact. Lately all that has been ignored in favour of the secularist Enlightenment, which, at least in the case of the French version, wasn't always so enlightened.

However, if we look outside the confines of the Western world, we can see religion as an active force that affects everything in public life, and politics and ideology are often mere offshoots of religious imperatives.

Predictably, one can see militant Islam as a prime example. Western secularists sometimes argue that this is proof of the pernicious influence of religion. Of course they are right about that in the case of Islamic militancy. But that hardly makes the factor of religion any less important. If anything, it make it more so. It does not help to ignore religion and its history in understanding the conflicts in parts of Middle East - between different religions and sects, and the internal upheavals, rivalry and persecutions in Pakistan and India, or Egypt and Africa. The average Australian understandably dwells in ignorance about most of this and their response to these chaotic scenarios is often: "Who cares? Let them fight among themselves." But of course "they" are not just fighting "among themselves". "They" are bringing their battles to "us".

Some people try to perpetuate their own solutions to Islamic militancy in our midst, denigrating harmless cultural practices that have their origins in religious symbolism, such as women wearing the hijab, or showing a breathtaking level of ignorance about Islam and its history, making solemn pronouncements about Islam needing a "reformation", apparently ignorant that militant Islamists think they are the reformation. It is the Wahhabists, the "mad men of God", who think of themselves as the pure version of Islam, mimicking their ancestors who came out of the desert to sweep across the Middle East.

However, recognising that one's neighbours are not all making bombs in their shed out the back and simply adopt the live-and-let-live principle is probably the most effective

way most of us have to combat fear, ignorance and suspicion that in itself can breed the ghettoised militant mindset. Another word for it is toleration.

So the second important reason I write about religion is that it is vital to our cultural life. It is vital to toleration. We are a successful, pluralist, polyglot society with a large number of diverse ethnicities and religions, and although many people in Australia do not think of themselves as “religious” because they do not practise the rubrics of religion, their consciences have been informed by the morality of religion, especially of the Judeo-Christian variety. That is a bulwark against the relentless onslaught against freedom of religion and conscience prosecuted by the culture warriors using the blunt instrument of the anti-discrimination laws.

Remember what happened to the Catholic Archbishop of Hobart, Julian Porteous? He was summoned before the Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commission over the distribution of a pamphlet about Catholic teaching on sacramental marriage. The teaching of the church on marriage was being equated with “hate speech” and it was argued that the archbishop didn’t have the right to send home this doctrinal information via children in Catholic schools. So presumably Catholic schools would have been prevented from teaching Catholic doctrine. This may seem, and indeed was, irrational but it kept Porteous a prisoner of the system for 18 months and was never resolved. This incident showed a degree of intolerance that borders on persecution.

In Australia we have always prided ourselves on our live-and-let-live, easygoing compact based on the long-fought-for, old-fashioned British idea of toleration. Too many people on the Right as well as the Left forget that toleration means tolerating what you don’t agree with as well as what you do. The warriors of identity politics threaten to split that tolerant compact.

Now more than ever we need to defend religion of conscience as a basic right or we all, religious and irreligious alike, will end up prisoners of the thought police.

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