

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Lost in the secular desert: Christianity under siege

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12:00AM JULY 23, 2022 • 165 COMMENTS

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We are on the way to becoming, for the first time, an avowedly anti-Christian nation. Not just non-Christian, but anti-Christian. The census tells us. The culture tells us. The law tells us.

The 2021 census represents an explosive dam burst, with a flood of biblical proportions to follow. For the first time in the modern nation's history, only a minority of Australians identify as Christians.

This is not a gentle decline. It is a bus hurtling over a cliff. As recently as 25 years ago, nearly three-quarters of Australians called themselves Christians. In 2011, 61 per cent was still a solid majority; five years later it was 52 per cent, last year just 44 per cent and still falling.

That's a staggering 17 per cent fewer of the population who are Christian in 10 years. Nothing as dramatic and consequential has happened in Australian belief and outlook since 1788.

To be sure, there are nuances in the census. "No religion" does not equate directly to formal atheism. The National Church Life Survey suggests a small majority of Australians believes in God. That's consistent with the census. Non-Christian religions – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism and others – take total religious affiliation above 50 per cent.

The census also has some surprises. Sydney, sin city, is the most God-loving part of Australia, just as London is the most religious part of Britain.

But difficult as it may be for some Christians to accept, and much as some secular commentators may want to play it down, claiming that Christian affiliation was formerly overstated or to avert the public gaze from the radical wave engulfing us, Christians must understand they are a minority. That should free them to become a creative, dynamic minority, offering something magnificent to society. They also should get the same rights as other minorities, but that's another story.

In his brilliant 2021 book, *Being the Bad Guys*, Perth evangelical pastor Stephen McAlpine presents the dramatic transformation in Christianity's standing: "Wasn't it only yesterday Christianity was regarded as a societal good? Now? It's not only unpalatable; it's positively toxic."

In a justly famous blog post a few years ago, McAlpine suggested most Christians accept that Christendom – with all its virtues and all its villainies – is over and they are now in exile. They envisaged this exile in a metaphorical Athens, debating their beliefs in polite and interested company. That was Stage One Exile. Now, Stage Two Exile, is in a much more hostile Babylon, where they confront a state and culture uninterested in their ideas, determined instead to bludgeon them into submission.

McAlpine says: "The elite framework that drives the culture is increasingly interested in bringing the church back into the public square, not in order to hear it, but to expose its real and imagined abuses and render it naked and shivering before a jeering crowd."

Of course, the culture is not uniformly hostile to Christianity, but the "elite framework that drives the culture" certainly is.

I saw this in Hobart a few weeks ago. The so-called Dark Mofo, put on by the Museum of Old and New Art, MONA, was in full swing. A strand in Dark Mofo, much subsidised by innocent Tasmanian taxpayers, celebrates nihilism and ugliness. It frequently mocks and contemptuously misuses Christian symbols and terminology, and sometimes celebrates the repulsive and evil. One representative caption says: "Satanise your hands." The Mofo jamborees have used inverted crosses, an old anti-Christian symbol; they have buried an artist underground for three days in mimicry of Christ's resurrection; displayed a simulated man being hacked to death; re-created pagan customs; used foul animal carcasses; and much else.

No doubt there is great technical expertise in Mofo, but this dopey, second-rate, pretend radicalism – in truth about as radical as a ride in a limousine to a Hollywood fashion show – indicates a distressed and confused culture. It displays all the aesthetic insight and emotional maturity of an

over-indulged teenager trying ever more offensive swear words to shock the parents who indulged him. When swearing no longer shocks, he lights a cigarette and stubs it out on their bed. That's so cool, provocative, cutting-edge, subversive (the rank weasel word of our time). And so, so courageous. But on the Hobart waterfront, in counterpoint to Mofo, I attended a Christian exhibition titled Miracles. It was sublime, challenging, beautiful in design, with a quietly building narrative, engaged fully with science and reason. It examined the history of Christian miracles and explored their scientific investigation. Naturally it was subject to minor hostile demonstration.

So just who was authentically countercultural here? Who had something to say, an original vision? Who was serving truth and beauty?

Consider the ridiculous reaction to former prime minister Scott Morrison preaching a sermon at Margaret Court's Pentecostal church in Perth. Morrison's faith is the centre of his life. When he was PM, there was not one speck of effort to enforce, impose or privilege it. Morrison told the Perth congregation they could place a higher trust in God than in government, or even the UN, not that he said anything remotely against, much less delegitimising, government. He echoed the famous words of the psalm: "Put not thy trust in kings or princes."

A welter of absurd criticism followed on commercial TV, radio and the ABC, denouncing Morrison for "inappropriate" and "jarring" comments. We live in an age of spectacular cultural and religious ignorance. Did any commentator acknowledge that secular politics was invented by Christianity ("Render unto Caesar ...")? Christians have always placed a higher trust in God, even as they pledge to obey all legitimate earthly authorities. Jesus himself said: "My kingdom is not of this world."

Morrison's sermon dealt constructively, sympathetically and theologically with anxiety. Did any denouncer bother listening to it? Most disheartening was Anthony Albanese's criticism, which wrongly implied Morrison was spreading conspiracy theories.

Morrison tells Inquirer: "Having a strong faith and belief has always meant dealing with mockery and misrepresentation. It is increasingly going with the territory in Western societies, including Australia. History shows this has only ever served to make faith communities stronger."

Christianity's enemies in Australia stand poised to prosecute a bewildering range of legal attacks against Christians and their institutions, designed mainly to prevent them speaking in the public square. The NSW euthanasia law obliges Christian retirement homes to welcome kill teams into their homes. Legislation in some states, especially Victoria, makes it extremely difficult for Christian

schools to hire Christian teachers other than for the principal, chaplain and perhaps religious knowledge teachers.

Schools are a huge battleground because the Bible is full of “dangerous statements”. Consider St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” This is a spectacular rejection of today’s zeitgeist.

No Christian expects the state to legally enforce their morality. And it’s certainly true that Christians routinely fail to live up to Paul’s ethos. But is it now a bureaucratic or even criminal offence for Christians even to speak and teach their beliefs?

If a Christian school merely teaches the New Testament, it could be sued for discrimination. If a school asks a boy transitioning to be a girl to just slow down and think things over, and instead of wearing a dress perhaps wear the sports uniform that is non-gender specific, it could be sued under several states’ anti-repression laws. Pastors have told me that if a man, suffering mentally and spiritually from confusion over sexual matters, asks the pastor to pray with him, the pastor can be prosecuted.

Most states have outlawed the seal of the confessional for Catholic priests, though there is no evidence this will help in the battle against child abuse. The confidentiality of the confessional has been a Catholic sacramental doctrine for many centuries. Priests have gone to their death rather than break it. Such confidentiality is allowed to lawyers and doctors. But good priests are to be criminals.

There are many more legal assaults on Christianity, under way or in preparation.

One question for Christian institutions is whether they bend the knee to the new state religion or continue the teachings of Christ and the Apostles found in the New Testament. The early Christians faced similar choices.

Under Roman rule, Jewish communities had an exception from paying homage to Roman gods, the official state religion. Once the Roman Empire distinguished Christians as a separate group, they lost that exemption. Early Christians were not looking for trouble, much less martyrdom, but they would not worship the divine god Caesar as Roman authorities designated their emperor.

Christianity in the past has frequently been at a low ebb and it has showed a genius for bouncing back. This always takes courage, resolution, shrewdness, innovation. New missions for new times. Despite today's decline, there are many green shoots in the Christian garden. Jesus instructed the first Christians to proclaim his message, but also told them: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Giving life to both halves of that injunction is challenging. How Christians respond to their newly difficult cultural circumstances will determine much of what happens to them, and to the truths they offer.

The Australian Catholic Church recently held a plenary council, a national consultative meeting. Its preparatory documents, emerging from a "new class" of Catholic institution bureaucrats, made a few gestures to the zeitgeist but was chiefly concerned with internal governance, positions of power and changing liturgy.

Philippa Martyr, a Perth academic who is a columnist at the Catholic Weekly, in a tough-minded judgment tells Inquirer: "One of the themes of the plenary council was that Catholicism doesn't have to be this hard (in opposition to the culture). But in fact it does have to be hard (to be true). These gabfests are basically setting up income streams for people in future jobs. It's all piffle. It's got nothing to do with salvation."

In the end, Christian denominations choose between surrender to the ideology of the culture or faithfulness to their beliefs. It's not possible to do both. The Christian movements that accommodate the culture on its key points inevitably disappear, for if they are only offering what the culture already has, why would anybody bother?

Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher, at the start of the plenary council, admonished the preparatory documents for their lack of attention to three crises: the decline of Christianity produced by secularism and exacerbated by the abuse crisis and disengagement brought on by Covid; the need to protect "the unborn, pregnant, refugees, trafficked, frail elderly, dying and other invisibles"; and the growing cultural hostility to Christianity.

The early Christians, notwithstanding all the changes of 2000 years, faced similar challenges. I asked Melbourne's Catholic Archbishop Peter Comensoli whether there were lessons from the early Christians for the church today: "Yes. I spend a lot of time in the Acts of the Apostles, to find ways to be active and Christian when you're unknown. There's a great ignorance of Christianity these days.

Acts gives the church ways to be a faithful disciple when you're small and not necessarily of interest, and if you are of interest you might be getting a bad rub.

"Life as a Catholic is a life of exile at the moment. That will be the way for some time. Identification with the faith is often with big institutions, schools, health care. But these are not the sites where we will rebuild faith. That will be in families and small communities."

John Dickson, an Anglican cleric and a prolific and brilliant historian of the ancient world, believes profoundly in the example of the early Christians. It's a theme of his superb new book, *Bullies and Saints*.

"The early Christians were cheerful being a minority," he tells *Inquirer*.

"They were reconciled to having no power and being frequently insulted. They thought of themselves as a tiny minority which had stumbled upon a vast treasure. Of course the rest of the world didn't have it, so they wanted to share it. They were characterised by cheerfulness, confidence, humility.

"The early Christians didn't have social credibility, or emperors or senators who professed Christianity. All they had was prayer, service, persuasion and suffering."

Dickson cites non-Christian sources from the early days of Christianity recounting Christians' compassion and generosity, their care for the sick, their philanthropy. Women flocked to early Christianity. Celsus, a second century Greek philosopher who wrote the first systematic denunciation of Christianity, mocked it as a religion of women and slaves.

"Everyone found a social lung in the early church," Dickson says, "everyone could breathe a bit easier."

The Christian sexual ethic, of marriage as an institution of mutual love, of women equal before God to men, of girl babies valued, of restraint on the gratifications and brutalities of men – these were radical but ultimately deeply attractive to a pagan world that had elevated self-indulgence for the powerful, and especially male gratification, very high.

Edward Gibbon, in his classic and intensely anti-Christian *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, lists five reasons for Christianity's triumph: the zeal of Christian belief; the promise of eternal life; the miracles, though the age of miracles was brief; the virtues of Christians; and finally the unity of the Christians, with people, priests and bishops working to a common vision.

Today's Christians, like anyone else, would find these qualities hard to emulate. But history shows Christianity's ability, metaphorical and literal, to rise from the dead. It's done it before. In our society, will it happen again?

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Greg Sheridan is The Australian's foreign editor. His most recent book, *Christians, the urgent case for Jesus in our world*, became a best seller weeks after publication. It makes the case for the historical rel... [Read more](#)

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