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Author(s): Elaine L Graham

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## A Window on the Soul: Four Politicians on Religion and Public Life

**Elaine Graham**

*University of Manchester, UK*

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### Abstract

In this article I examine public statements about the relationship between private faith and public reason through the pronouncements of four leading politicians: Tony Blair (United Kingdom), Helen Clark (New Zealand), Barack Obama (United States of America) and Kevin Rudd (Australia). Of the four, Blair and Rudd have been most articulate about the way in which their own personal faith-commitments have informed their political motivations, but in doing so both men have had to negotiate a broader cultural suspicion of ‘doing God’ in public. Whilst religion may be regarded as representing a strong ‘moral compass’ for a politician, those espousing a religious faith in public also have to contend with public anxieties about religious extremism. Of the other two, I argue that Obama speaks into a more receptive public arena, and that part of his skill has been to tap into a long-standing tradition in American public life which, despite separation of church and state, is more attuned to the casting of political values in religious language. Helen Clark is the only one of the four to identify herself as ‘agnostic’, yet her support for the 2007 Statement on Religious Diversity signals a new willingness on the part of a political culture that has tended to be ‘functionally secular’ to embrace the notion of religious faith as a part of healthy civil society. All four examples, therefore, furnish us with insights into different dimensions of the relationship between a politician’s personal faith and their public accountability in contemporary western democracies.

### Keywords

Tony Blair, Helen Clark, Barack Obama, Kevin Rudd, religion, public reason

### Introduction

Queen Elizabeth I famously stated that she had ‘no desire to make windows into men’s souls’, a statement of religious tolerance amidst the religious and

political turbulence of the sixteenth century. The scars of persecution and religious wars in Europe were to be a strong influence on Enlightenment thinking, especially the establishment of religious freedom and the idea of the secular state, and it is a principle that most western democracies value highly. Yet one characteristic of western society over the past decade has been the re-emergence of religion in matters of global and national public affairs, whether that is in terms of the personal values of a new generation of politicians, the pronouncements on current affairs by established faith leaders, or the political mobilization by particular religious bodies in order to influence public opinion.

In this article, I want to examine the complex and often troubled relationship between religion and contemporary politics, by examining the public statements of four leading western political figures: Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister; Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand; Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia; Barack Obama, President of the United States. However, it is not my intention to peer into their souls in order to pass judgement on their personal beliefs but rather, as a case study in the way contemporary politicians and political discourse are having to recalibrate the delicate balance between faith and reason in public life. In their positioning of themselves as people of faith or doubt, I want to explore how the deployment of the discourse of 'faith' by these four politicians is shaping our understanding of the nature of politics, identity and shared values in a post-ideological, post-secular, globalized world.

This is not so much a scrutiny of the orthodoxy or authenticity of their personal beliefs, therefore, as an examination of how faith serves as a form of 'discourse' in constructing an individual's moral universe and influencing other people's sense of values. Michel Foucault uses the term 'discourse' to explore how social institutions and practices are regulated by language, and the way in which certain kinds of statements function as authoritative by virtue of their effectiveness in creating a world of meaning. The critical task is to examine the conditions under which certain forms of discourse govern thought and action. Discourses create webs of meaning that order the world in particular ways: by indicating where authority is held to lie; what constitutes truth and falsehood; what is virtuous and what is reprehensible. They are sets of generative principles by which reality is ordered, or a particular world-view constructed and rendered axiomatic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

These politicians' statements on faith are to be seen not merely as individual apologia for personal beliefs, or even a defence of the right of religion to engage with politics, but as strategies by which religion represents (stands in for) an appeal to a broader, but less coherent set of values. It requires us to interpret the meanings behind the sentiments and judge the effects of introducing religious language into public life, not just as a matter of the personal motivations or integrity of their speakers, but as part of a broader, global realignment between the sacred and the secular, faith and reason; between the practices of religion and the exercise of citizenship.

### **Religion, Secularism and Modernity**

Any politician, or religious figure, wishing to engage with questions of religion and public life does so against the context of a dominant tradition in western political thought that wishes to separate faith and public reason. According to this view, attempts to offer religious reasoning to public debate are illegitimate since they breach basic principles of liberal democracy, which hold that religion and politics cannot mix. It is a staple principle of political liberalism that public debate should be underpinned by secular rather than religious principles. In some political settlements, such as the United States for example, this has meant the constitutional separation of church and state. The classic perspective on this is often associated with the political philosopher John Rawls, who spelt out the basic principles of liberal democracy in a pluralist society. The liberal principle of legitimacy for the public forum has as its starting point the plurality of value systems in a modern society. Political, moral and religious diversity is good, since it is the outworking of that essential freedom of self-determination independent of external constraint. Yet, how does one ensure that these differences do not spill over into sectarian conflict, and that political processes are not disrupted by irreconcilable differences?

Political liberals such as Rawls argue that the limits of public reason should be honoured by all reasonable (reason being a great arbiter) citizens in their public discourse concerning fundamental political questions. As people committed to public consensus, yet knowing that they affirm a diversity of moral, religious and philosophical doctrines, they should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality. Rawls thus argues for adopting a set of values and principles that anyone would willingly and openly recognize as legitimate for deciding matters of constitutional

essentials and basic justice. It requires people to leave any set of principles that might inhibit that general agreement out of the realm of public debate; such as religious difference, for example. The latter, however reasonable and valuable, is to be excluded from public discourse because, according to the proponents of political liberalism, civility and mutual respect in public forum is possible only if it is grounded in consensus.<sup>2</sup>

Further elaboration of this is provided by the political philosopher Robert Audi when he argues that a healthy democracy depends on citizens being committed ‘in some way to the welfare of others’.<sup>3</sup> In a culturally or religiously diverse society this will require any policy to be founded on principles available to all citizens, regardless of their personal convictions: ‘the ethics appropriate to a liberal democracy constrains religious considerations... because of its commitment to preserving the liberty of all’.<sup>4</sup> Yet Audi goes on to single out people with religious convictions as exceptionally enthusiastic in their claims, and thus more likely to cause disruption. It is therefore necessary to restrain them from encroaching on others’ freedom of thought:

[V]ery commonly those who identify with what they regard as the ultimate divine source of religious reasons believe that anyone who does not identify with it is forsaken, damned, or in some other way fundamentally deficient... [R]eligious people often tend to be, *in a way that is rare in secular matters*, highly and stubbornly passionate about the importance of everyone’s acting in accordance with religious reasons.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas secular reasoning is available to all citizens by virtue of its being rooted in universal human reason, any theologically-derived reasoning is partisan and divisive, since it silences those who do not hold to that faith or who are not conversant with its vocabulary. Essentially, therefore, the fault-line between public and private in a liberal polity also means the establishment of some kind of ‘firewall’ between the secular and the religious.

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<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Audi, ‘Liberal Democracy and the Place of Religion in Politics’, in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: Debating Church and State* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 1–66 at p. 16. See also Esther McIntosh, ‘Philosophers, Politicians and Archbishops: Religious Reasons in the Public Sphere’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 2:4 (2008), 465–83, especially 476–80.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Audi, ‘Religion, Politics, and Democracy: Closing Comments and Remaining Issues’, in Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, pp. 167–74 at p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Audi, ‘Liberal Democracy and the Place of Religion in Politics’, pp. 31–2 (original italics).

Increasingly, though, such a separation between faith and politics is coming into question. An alternative view argues that only if citizens draw upon their own genuine convictions, seeking to achieve an ‘overlapping consensus’<sup>6</sup> on basic principles, will a vibrant civil society and a healthy democratic process be fostered. In response to Audi’s perspective, therefore, Nicholas Wolterstorff questions whether the freedom of the citizen in a liberal democracy necessarily has to involve the effacement of religious reasons in public debate.<sup>7</sup> He argues against their ‘bracketing out’ since he believes that to require religious constraint of others amounts to a restriction upon their freedoms and civil liberties as equal citizens. Wolterstorff continues, ‘I see no reason to suppose that the ethic of the citizen in a liberal democracy includes a restraint on the use of religious reasons in deciding and discussing political issues’.<sup>8</sup>

Greater clarity on this dilemma might be brought if we were to distinguish between two different types of the separation of religion and public life. Sunder Katwala argues that there has been a confusion or conflation of two distinct principles of the liberal state: first, that the state should not privilege one form of religious expression or favour particular teachings in its social policies; secondly, that religion should be kept entirely private. Yet the first does not necessarily entail the other; in fact, like Wolterstorff, Katwala questions the basic precept that ‘religious citizens must abstract themselves from their deepest beliefs in accepting an iron distinction between private beliefs and public values’.<sup>9</sup> Katwala distinguishes ‘ideological’ secularism (the ‘firewall’ between religion and the state) with ‘pragmatic’ secularism, which respects the prerogative of religious participants to advance religious views in articulating public values. The principles of human rights should prohibit discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion (such as their exclusion from public debate), just as they would enshrine respect for a diversity of gender, sexuality and ethnicity.<sup>10</sup>

Rowan Williams has recently made a similar distinction between what he terms ‘programmatic’ and ‘procedural’ secularism. Whilst programmatic secularism suspends any talk of value in a semblance of instrumental neutrality,

<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, ‘The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7:1 (1987), 1–25.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues’, in Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, pp. 67–120 at pp. 111–112.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Sunder Katwala, ‘Faith in Democracy: The Legitimate Role of Religion’, *Public Policy Research* (December-February 2006), 246–51 at 248.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

procedural secularism engages with but attempts to adjudicate between, competing convictions:

The empty public square of programmatic secularism implies in effect that the almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality and the public invisibility of specific commitments is enough to provide sustainable moral energy for a properly self-critical society. But it is not at all self-evident that people can so readily detach their perspectives and policies in social or political discussion from fundamental convictions that are not allowed to be mentioned or manifested in public.<sup>11</sup>

Yet complex negotiation is still required when faith groups or individuals expect to enter the political arena to state public claims on the basis of private commitments.<sup>12</sup> This might depend on a view of the public sphere that is not so much neutral, as in classic liberal theory, as mediated; varying philosophies and truth-claims may be seen as having their own integrity whilst also requiring a degree of ‘translation’ into a shared space of public discourse. What I want to do next, therefore, is to see how our selected figures are intervening into the changing dynamics of religion, taking account of factors both local and global in their various contexts, in order to participate, even influence, this whole scale realignment of religion and religious values in public life. I begin with one politician whose political stance was deeply informed by faith and yet he struggled to maintain this against increasing public scepticism.

## **Private Faith and Public Reason**

*Tony Blair*

A practising Christian since his days at Oxford University, Blair was initially quite articulate and open in discussing how his faith informed his politics. Yet Blair actually became more diffident over his decade in power, increasingly aware that he trod a fine line between the UK electorate’s admiration of him

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<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Secularism, Faith and Freedom’, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (23 November 2006), <<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/654>> [accessed 8 August 2008]. See also Mike Higton, ‘Rowan Williams and Sharia: Defending the Secular’, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 2:4 (2008), 400–417.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), p. 36.

as a creature of principle and a religious fanatic.<sup>13</sup> As the historian Callum Brown put it, Blair always risked transgressing the classically British sentiment about religion, ‘best not to take it too far’.<sup>14</sup> His advisor Alistair Campbell is famously reported to have intervened in an interview to prevent Blair answering a question about his religious beliefs, allegedly with the comment, ‘We don’t do God’.<sup>15</sup>

Blair’s pronouncements on the relationship between ‘faith’ and ‘politics’ went through a number of significant phases during his political career.<sup>16</sup> From the early 1990s through to the General Election of 1997, it was about the renewal of New Labour’s political fortunes that found in the legacy of Christian socialism a valuable moral depth and direction. As one of a cohort of new shadow ministers publicly associated with the Christian Socialist Movement from the early 1990s (which also included current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown), Tony Blair contributed to a number of manifestos and publications which explored the significance of Christian values for democratic socialism. Religion, and in particular the Christian social tradition, became firmly established as a central point in (New) Labour’s ‘moral compass’,<sup>17</sup> and Blair found in Christianity’s combination of personal responsibility with community values a powerful summary of the emergent ‘third way’ between free market individualism and state centralism.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In a televised interview after leaving office Blair offers the opinion that: ‘you talk about [religion] in our system, and frankly, people think you’re a nutter’. BBC 1, ‘The Blair Years’, (25 November 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Callum Brown, ‘Best Not to Take it Too Far’: How the British Cut Religion Down to Size’, *Opendemocracy.net* (8 March 2006), 18 paras at para. 2, <[http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions\\_government/britain\\_religion\\_3335.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/britain_religion_3335.jsp)> [accessed 11 May 2007].

<sup>15</sup> Colin Brown, ‘Campbell Interrupted Blair as He Spoke of His Faith: ‘We Don’t Do God’’, *Telegraph* (3 May 2003), <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html>> [accessed 11 May 2007]. See also McIntosh, ‘Philosophers, Politicians and Archbishops’, 479.

<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion of Blair’s faith in relation to politics, see Elaine L. Graham, ‘Doing God? Public Theology under Blair’, in P. M. Scott, C. R. Baker and E. L. Graham, eds, *Remoralising Britain? Ten Years of New Labour: Faith, Morals and Governance* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1–18.

<sup>17</sup> For Gordon Brown’s reference to religion, see Patrick Wintour, ‘I Will Not Let Britain Down’, *Guardian* (25 September 2007), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2176532,00.html>> [accessed 30 September 2007]; for a critique of the term ‘moral compass’, see Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, *Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare* (London: Matthew James Publishing, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> See Tony Blair, ‘Foreword’, in Christopher Bryant, ed., *Reclaiming the Ground: Christianity and Socialism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp. 10–12.

Nor was Blair afraid to admit to holding religious values. Yet in the dying days of the John Major administration (and by then Leader of the Opposition) Blair wanted such values to be understood by the electorate not as something that set him apart from the tough decisions of governance, but as a very demonstration of his realism and moral robustness. Blair's comments on religion in relation to politics at this time may therefore be construed as a strategic intervention into prevailing political discourse at a time of considerable volatility in terms of the relationship between values and public debate.

Once New Labour came to power in 1997, Blair's reputation as a man of principle was used to underpin a programme of 'remoralization': an explicit resort to the language of 'values' in public policy (especially in foreign affairs), but with a concomitant burden on citizens as moral agents, thereby shifting democratic discourse from one of 'rights' to that of 'responsibility'.<sup>19</sup> After the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the allies' invasion of Iraq in March 2003 however, Blair found the ground shifting beneath his feet, as professions of personal conviction, formerly the solid bedrock of his public probity, fell on the stonier ground of public suspicion of 'doing God' in the face of the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and widespread opposition to military intervention in Iraq.

For example, in the spring of 2003, when the allies were preparing to invade Iraq, some sections of the British media claimed that those close to Tony Blair had advised him not to end a televised address by saying, 'God bless you' on the basis that viewers would be alienated by its explicitly religious nature. Instead, he closed with the words, 'thank you'.<sup>20</sup> In an interview broadcast at Christmas 2008, Blair reflected on the ambivalence with which his faith stance was received by the public as follows: 'It's too difficult, whist you're actually in office, to talk about these things in a way that doesn't get misinterpreted, or people end up thinking, you know, when it comes to critical decisions that you're taking, somehow you've got a hotline to God... rather than looking at things in a practical temporal way'.<sup>21</sup>

If this is a sign of a greater hesitancy in the face of a realization of the divisive potential of religion as political discourse, then it may reflect the fact that the language of faith and the invocation of religious values on the part of religious leaders and politicians had now come to be seen as an evasion of

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<sup>19</sup> See P. M. Scott, C. R. Baker and E. L. Graham, 'When Remoralising Fails?', in Scott, Baker and Graham, eds, *Remoralising Britain? Ten years of New Labour*, pp. 226–48.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, 'Campbell Interrupted Blair as He Spoke of His Faith'.

<sup>21</sup> BBC 1, 'Christmas Voices' (14 December 2008).

democratic accountability rather than a means of enriching our vocabulary of civic virtue. As he left office, therefore, and the Blair decade came to an end, we could perhaps see a shift in his own discursive synthesis of religion, remoralization and politics. Increasingly, he distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion, of whatever tradition; a conviction that led him to the establishment of his Faith Foundation in 2008. From establishing New Labour’s electoral credibility, and by extension, his own integrity at a time of unprecedented volatility in terms of political affiliations, Blair’s religious commitments have now propelled him away from party policy, indeed away from domestic politics altogether, towards a fascination with religion as a universal quest for moral values that define our very humanity.

Blair’s discourse of religious conviction makes more sense, however, if we regard it as something intended to be pitched into a cultural and political context of what Anthony Giddens terms ‘reflexivity’, as a key characteristic of late modernity, which he uses to describe the nature of personal identity.<sup>22</sup> He summarizes reflexivity as the situation in which ‘social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about these very practices, thus constitutively altering their character’.<sup>23</sup> This element of uncertainty and the collapse of foundational thinking—‘reason has lost its foundation, history its direction, and progress its allure’<sup>24</sup>—Giddens terms ‘radicalized modernity’.

Ambitions shift from the grand narrative of emancipation towards the ‘life politics’ of self-actualization as political solidarities, theories of the state, the primacy of the market are all scrutinized and dissipated. Politics becomes a kind of pragmatism in which no single agent, no one cause, can direct the course of history, although there are still ‘many points of political engagement which offer good cause for optimism’.<sup>25</sup> The third way, states Giddens, is about helping citizens to ‘*pilot their way* through the major revolutions of our time: globalization, transformations in personal life and our relationship to nature’.<sup>26</sup>

Within this perspective, Blair’s discursive interventions are in part about a search for a reliable and coherent public language by which he can establish

<sup>22</sup>) Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 38.

<sup>23</sup>) *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>) Christopher G. A. Bryant and David Jary, ‘Anthony Giddens’, in G. Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 683.

<sup>25</sup>) Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 21.

<sup>26</sup>) Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 64 (my italics).

his, and New Labour's, political credentials. The recurrent references to values may have originated in Blair's theological convictions, but they were intended to appeal not to a common culture of [Christian] belief but to resonate with an electorate in search of a 'moral compass' of their own. In that context, speaking from the heart and providing a moral and religious rationale for his policies rooted in personal conviction becomes an alternative to appeals to political theories or class solidarities with which people no longer identify.

### *Kevin Rudd*

Kevin Rudd, elected Prime Minister of Australia in November 2007, went against the grain of predominantly secularist public debate in that country when still leader of the opposition in 2006, by writing about the connections between faith and politics.<sup>27</sup> This was more than a personal confession of faith, however, being quite overtly party-political in criticizing what Rudd calls 'the political orchestration of various forms of organised Christianity in support of the conservative incumbency'<sup>28</sup> on the part of George W. Bush in the US and John Howard in his own country.

Rather than bolstering the interests of the powerful within a conservative programme that stresses family values and personal morality at the expense of social justice, Rudd argues that the instincts of Christianity are prophetic and counter-cultural. He invokes the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a potential role-model for those seeking an alternative model of political engagement, calling him 'a man of faith... a man of reason... a man of letters... above all... a man of action.'<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that 'faith', which might alienate some, is quickly complemented by words that broaden the appeal.

Rudd traces how historically, Christianity moved from being an oppressed minority into the state religion. Now, it is no longer predominant, and it is rediscovering a counter-cultural, yet engaged position. Rudd knows, therefore, that he is no longer addressing a common religious culture. The essence of Christianity's political witness is on behalf of the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor, although there must be a balance of realism between social justice and wealth creation: a plea for a form of realism that respects proportionality and pluralism whilst acting out of conviction. Essentially the vocation of the

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<sup>27</sup> See Marion Maddox, 'Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1 (2007), 82–100.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Rudd, 'Faith in Politics', *The Monthly*, 17 (October 2006), p. 5 at p. 1, <[http://www.themonthly.com.au/excerpts/issue17\\_excerpt\\_001.html](http://www.themonthly.com.au/excerpts/issue17_excerpt_001.html)> [accessed 12 June 2007].

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

church is to ‘speak truth to power’; Rudd argues, ‘Bonhoeffer’s political theology is therefore one of a dissenting church that speaks truth to the state, and does so by giving voice to the voiceless’.<sup>30</sup>

Interviewed subsequently on ABC Radio, Rudd elaborated further on the context of the article and some of his reasoning behind its publication. He admitted that in the past he had kept his Christian faith to himself, stating: ‘It’s very much the Australian way, and if I had my way, that would be my way as well’, but he was motivated to speak out in the face of campaigns by the right-wing Family First party to recruit conservative evangelical religious groups to their cause.<sup>31</sup> Rudd parodies the right-wing appeal to religious values in this way:

Vote for me because I’m a Christian, vote for me because I have a defined set of views on questions of private sexual morality, and vote for me also because I chant the political mantra of ‘family values’... ‘Religion should be kept out of politics’... This is a view which says that should anyone seek to articulate from a Christian perspective a view on the Iraq war, on poverty in the world, on asylum seekers, on indigenous Australians, or on workplace relations, then judgement may be rained down upon them from the heavens above.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, Rudd’s opposition to such an appeal reflects his desire to reclaim much of the ground that had been ceded to conservative, confessional interests in favour of a more progressive public theology that chooses to define ‘morality’ and ‘faith’ in more inclusive, socially responsible ways.

In the interview, Rudd insists that he was addressing people of faith as a person of faith, and he was concerned to challenge the view that God can be the exclusive property of the Christian Right. He states: ‘I haven’t been calling for necessarily... a *greater* Christian voice in politics... I’ve simply called for a *different* Christian voice in politics’.<sup>33</sup>

Yet he was aware that he was speaking into a pluralist context and that his specific theological stance would not necessarily render it illegitimate:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> See Maddox, ‘Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology’.

<sup>32</sup> Rudd, ‘Faith in Politics’, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> The Religion Report, ‘Summer Season: Kevin Rudd: Bonhoeffer and ‘the Political Orchestration of Organised Christianity’’, ABC Radio National (3 January 2007), paras 36 at para. 12 (my italics), <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/2007/1810679.htm>> [accessed 14 June 2008], p. 2.

A Christian perspective on contemporary policy debates may not prevail. It must nonetheless be argued. And once heard, it must be weighed, together with other arguments from different philosophical traditions, in a fully contestable secular polity. A Christian perspective, informed by a social gospel or Christian socialist tradition, should not be rejected contemptuously by secular politicians as if these views are an unwelcome intrusion into the political sphere. If the churches are barred from participating in the great debates about the values that ultimately underpin our society, our economy and our polity, then we have reached a very strange place indeed.<sup>34</sup>

Rudd shares Bonhoeffer's vision of 'a just world delivered by social action, driven by personal faith'.<sup>35</sup> While these may be shaped by Christian conviction, they are common values with deep roots in Australian society that transcend any particular group; in fact, its power lies in its insistence on transcending self-interest to embrace an inclusive and global community. Rudd states: 'This is an Australia which takes the values of decency, fairness and compassion that are still etched deep in our national soul, despite a decade of oxygen deprivation, and breathes them afresh into the great debates now faced by our country and the international community'.<sup>36</sup>

Rudd's statements may have been intended to capture the trust of sceptical voters, or establish his credibility with the electorate, but it was also about breaking the monopoly of a particular kind of religious intervention in public life and putting forward an alternative, as well as sketching out the territory on which Rudd would lead Labor (successfully, as it transpired) into the next election. Rudd was seeking to define the role of faith in politics as more than a functional one of delivering welfare services, or linking government with hard to reach communities or guaranteeing social cohesion. He wanted there to be space for a language of values in relation to faith and, perhaps like Blair, to the rejuvenation of political debate. Yet it was not about making Labor a 'Christian' or 'Christian socialist' party, since Rudd respects the secular and pluralist nature of the state. Nevertheless, he was arguing for people to be able to bring religion into their political activism and moral reasoning in the name of a healthy democracy. Rudd's statements fit well into the traditions of mainstream public theology, as a model of faith tempered or harnessed by reason, and of the adoption of a form of 'bilingualism' which is both rooted in the

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<sup>34</sup>) Rudd, 'Faith in Politics', p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup>) *Ibid.*

specifics of Christian tradition but seeks to translate that into more publicly accessible language.<sup>37</sup>

### *Barack Obama*

While public discourse and political campaigning in the US, especially for Presidency, is altogether more comfortable with public professions of faith than Australia or the UK, the Democrats have struggled in the past to capture the religious vote and have fought shy of campaigning on ‘Christian moral values’. Yet Barack Obama is a politician whose political roots are in church-related broad-based organizing in Chicago, and who has clearly been shaped by the rhetoric and ideals of the 1960s civil rights movement, which in turn owes a tremendous debt to religion in general and the African-American church in particular. To hear Obama speak is to be vividly reminded of the language and cadences of the African-American pulpit, transposed into public oratory, and acutely reminiscent of the religious-political speeches of Martin Luther King Jr a generation ago.

Obama is a church member (although a Newsweek poll reported in spring 2008 that thirteen percent of those polled thought he was a Muslim),<sup>38</sup> but he resigned his membership of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago following controversial comments from its pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Wright had claimed in his sermons that 9/11 was a punishment for the United States’ imperialist foreign policy and that HIV/AIDS was deliberately introduced into the African-American population by the government. ‘No, no, no, not ‘God Bless America’” he declaimed, “God damn America, that’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people!”<sup>39</sup> It was probably expedient for Obama to distance himself from Wright and his congregation for the sake of his public image; whilst it is *de rigueur* for all Presidential candidates to make an open profession of Christianity, any affiliation with anything too contentious, or too closely identified with a particular ethnic group, such as Wright’s diatribe, could prove fatally damaging.

Several commentators have focused not on Obama’s private convictions, however, but on his ability to draw upon the tradition of American political

<sup>37</sup> See Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, ‘Nurturing Reason: The Public Role of Religion in the Liberal State’, *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif*, 48:1–2 (March–June 2007), 25–41 at 35; also Duncan Forrester, ‘The Scope of Public Theology’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 17:2 (2004), 5–19.

<sup>38</sup> Eve Conant and Richard Wolfe, ‘Obama’s New Gospel’, *Newsweek* (12 May 2008), <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/135384>> [accessed 13 January 2009].

<sup>39</sup> Timothy Lavin, ‘Chimes of Freedom’, *The Tablet* (3 May 2008), 4–5 at 4.

discourse that allows, even expects, overt (if non-specific) reference to faith and God.<sup>40</sup> In speaking about hope, vision, and aspiration as fundamental to his political project, Obama is mining a deep and rich vein of the religious foundations of America's national identity, of its destiny as divine gift and of its democratic, egalitarian polity as embodying the best of the human spirit. It chimes in perfectly with Robert Bellah's analysis of 'civil religion'.<sup>41</sup> In the absence of any prescribed or official religion, the nation develops a set of shared symbols that transcend sectional interest and become the overarching ideals against which national identity and common purpose are defined. It is reminiscent, too, of Martin Marty's identification of the pronouncements of the founders of the American republic as constituting a fundamental strand of modern public theology.<sup>42</sup> Obama may be seen in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln as advancing a form of political discourse that rests implicitly on religious values, despite the formal separation of church and state.

For Obama, therefore, it is not simply about portraying himself as a trustworthy individual, as in Blair's case, but about rooting his ambitions in a set of collective ideals that can only be expressed in religious language. Yet in his campaign, Obama successfully drew on another tradition: that of religion as a potent source of social capital, or the values and norms that inspire us to forge social bonds, to form relationships of trust and outreach. According to scholars such as Robert Putnam, those who belong to communities of faith are statistically more likely to be active in charitable or political causes, and it is religious organizations that are often at the heart of neighbourhood networks.<sup>43</sup> Obama articulates this precisely, in saying that religion offers a framework of meaning and values that connect us, just as sociological theory refers to religion as a source of 'social cohesion' that protects individuals from anomie and connects them to collective mores. In Jonathan Raban's words:

Americans want a narrative arc to their lives. They are looking to relieve a chronic loneliness... They are not just destined to travel down that long highway towards

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Raban, 'Good News in Bad Times', *Guardian* (5 January 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96:1 (1967), 1–21.

<sup>42</sup> Martin E. Marty, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience', *Journal of Religion*, 54:4 (1974), 332–59.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

nothingness . . . Without a vessel for my beliefs, without a commitment to a particular community of faith, at some level I would always remain apart, and alone.<sup>44</sup>

Again, we may view this through an understanding about the reflexivity of late modernity, in which the electorate is looking for bearings by which to set its 'moral compass', not necessarily by following the content of a politician's beliefs so much as identifying with an almost autobiographical quest to establish their own orientation. For Obama, religion provides that 'narrative arc', sets out a world-view into which he can immerse himself and, in the process, tap into its language, symbols and traditions. Further, African-American theology and church life generates the 'faithful capital' that drives social renewal. The churches are guardians of values that characterize America's faith in itself and its people, united in a recovery of its founding principles. According to Raban:

What the crowds crave from this scrupulous agnostic is his capacity to deliver the ecstatic consolation of old-time religion—a vision of America that transcends differences of race, class and party, and restores harmony to a land riven under the oppressive rule of a government alien to its founding principles.<sup>45</sup>

Another example comes from earlier in the campaign for the Democratic nomination, from an interview Obama gave with David Brooks of the *New York Times* in April 2007. Brooks asks Obama what he has been reading recently, to which Obama replies by quoting the (ostensibly) unlikely choice of the liberal Protestant public theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. When asked what he takes away from his reading of Niebuhr, Obama's answer is carefully measured, but directed against political opponents both within and beyond his own party, with particular censure aimed at those who allow an excessively doctrinaire world-view to inform their political decisions. He states:

I take away . . . the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and

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<sup>44</sup>) Raban, 'Good News in Bad Times'.

<sup>45</sup>) *Ibid.*

inaction. I take away the sense that we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.<sup>46</sup>

It is significant that Obama chooses to invoke the work of a formidable public intellectual and a key figure in the twentieth-century tradition of theologically informed comment on social, economic and political affairs.<sup>47</sup> His interest in the moral legacy of Niebuhr's Christian realism for contemporary international affairs, is another example, I contend, of a deliberate effort to communicate across gulfs of religious and moral pluralism into a shared public discourse, in ways that manage to respect the pluralism of the intended audience without selling short the speaker's integrity.

### *Helen Clark*

Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand between 1999 and 2008, differs from the other three figures in that she identifies herself as an agnostic. Yet in spite of that, she has been prominent, even outspoken, on the importance of respecting religious faith and diversity within Aotearoa New Zealand, as evidenced by her support for the New Zealand Statement of Religious Diversity, published in May 2007. This Statement, if realized effectively in workable public policy, represents a very considerable departure from the relationship between religion and the state contained within the classic liberal western Enlightenment model. It does not envisage the neutral, secular state insisting on the 'bracketing out' of religious conviction and affiliation in matters to do with citizenship, national identity and multiculturalism; instead it reflects an understanding that cultural diversity has to embrace religious diversity, and that this may have to be promoted and protected by the state in various ways.

In launching the Statement at a Regional Inter-Faith Conference in Waitangi in May 2007 Clark said:

My government works hard to ensure that all ethnicities and faiths are valued and included in 21st century New Zealand. I hope that the spirit of Waitangi will assist your work... on how the many faiths and cultures in our region can live in

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<sup>46</sup> David Brooks, 'Obama, Gospel and Verse', *The New York Times* (26 April 2007), <<http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=FA0810FD3E5A0C758EDDA>> [accessed 12 June 2007].

<sup>47</sup> Marty refers to Niebuhr as the exemplar of this mainstream tradition of public theology. Marty, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience'.

harmony... For we do not accept that there is anything inevitable or unavoidable about tension and conflict between ethnicities, cultures, and faiths.<sup>48</sup>

Ostensibly, an innocuous endorsement of the Statement, yet Clark's close association with it came under strong attack from secularist and humanist groups, as well as from conservative Christians, with much of the antipathy directed towards Clark herself.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, this is entirely consistent with my overall thesis, I think; that in a culture of political and personal reflexivity people are looking to the personal comportment of politicians in these matters, and so Clark's integrity is inevitably implicated.

The 2007 Statement on Religious Diversity and Clark's advocacy of it, within the broader scope of the government's ambitions towards social cohesion, represent a significant acknowledgement of a religious dimension to public life in Aotearoa New Zealand. As one commentator, Joris de Bres, remarks, such a Statement does not contradict the non-partisan brief of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, since 'the State has as much of a responsibility to engage with citizens who share a community of belief as they do with those who share a community of culture, ethnicity or geography'.<sup>50</sup> Clark seems to have little embarrassment about 'doing God' in public; and perhaps the absence of a personal agenda—in all but the minds of her most virulent opponents—helps to ease her policy of a characteristically Kiwi 'non-alignment' in matters spiritual.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Clark, Address at Opening Ceremony of the Third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue (29 May 2007), <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/print.html?path=PA0705/S00741.htm>> [accessed 14 June 2008]. The phrase 'the spirit of Waitangi' is a reference to the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which is regarded by many as having established a form of biculturalism between Maori and Pakeha (European) settlers.

<sup>49</sup> See for example, 'Helen Clark's Diplomacy', *Open Parachute* (30 May 2007), <<http://openparachute.wordpress.com/2007/05/30/%C2%B6-helen-clarks-diplomacy/>> [accessed 21 June 2008] and NZPA, 'Tamaki To Protest as Leaders Discuss Religious Diversity', *infonews.co.nz* (29 May 2007), <http://www.infonews.co.nz/news.cfm?1=1+t=124&id=2107> [accessed 5 August 2008].

<sup>50</sup> Joris de Bres, 'Human Rights and Religious Diversity', *Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal*, 2:2 (August 2007), 9–14 at 9.

<sup>51</sup> She is commended for lending her official support to many multi-faith activities, such as hosting Eid and Diwali celebrations at Parliament; see Chris Carter, 'Parliament to Celebrate Rosh Hashanah', *beehive.govt.nz* (9 September 2008), <<http://feeds.beehive.govt.nz/release/parliament+celebrate+rosh+hashanah>> [accessed 13 January 2009]. See also Mike Houllahan, 'MPs Want Prayer Changes to Reflect Religious Diversity (New Zealand)', *Religious Diversity News: The Pluralism Project* (1 June 2007), <<http://www.pluralism.org/news/article.php?id=16474>> [accessed 13 January 2009].

In support of the 2007 Statement, one could argue that by enshrining religious identity and affiliation in public policy, the government is taking a significant step to guarantee the parameters of social cohesion against the manifestations of religious resurgence globally. In the classic liberal segregation of religion and politics, as an ideal form of ‘strong’ secularism, all partisan values and principles, especially theologically derived ones, are to be insulated from the public domain. In a ‘post-secular’ world, however, such a distinction could actually militate against any kind of public transparency or accountability on the part of minority religious groups, by disallowing any common space in which religiously motivated policies could be debated. Neither secular states nor secularist public rhetoric are necessarily a protection against religiously motivated politics; quite the opposite, in fact, if a residue or minority of religious parties takes on the mission of actively shaping the political or civic agenda. Without a statement on religious diversity that is both theological and political, New Zealand might find itself vulnerable to such a process.<sup>52</sup>

While Clark’s commitment to religious diversity is to be welcomed, however, there is little indication of how this might translate into firm public policy beyond broad statements about difference and respect. In fact, the initiative may be driven as much by the agenda of national security as by the broad principles of human rights. Whereas the authors of the report stress the value of interfaith relations and a Statement such as this is a step towards ‘learning the art of dialogue’<sup>53</sup> between faith communities and wider society, Clark’s comments in her Preface betray a second concern. ‘It is my hope’, she states, ‘that the Statement will help all New Zealanders, of whatever faith or ethical belief, to feel free to practice their beliefs in peace and within the law’.<sup>54</sup> The Statement does contain some comment on people’s right to practise religion free from harassment, and the need to address disputes between faiths, however that might be sanctioned by legislation, but Clark’s emphasis also reflects a tension between aspirations towards interfaith understanding

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<sup>52</sup> This is an interesting echo of Katwala’s position that the segregation of faith and politics may actually constitute a form of discrimination against those whose cultural backgrounds do not recognize such a distinction; see Katwala, ‘Faith in Democracy’.

<sup>53</sup> Dame Sylvia Cartwright, ‘Foreword’, *Religious Diversity in New Zealand: Statement on Religious Diversity* (New Zealand Diversity Action Programme, 2007), p. 2, <[http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc\\_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/25-May-2007\\_08-24-50\\_NSRD\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/25-May-2007_08-24-50_NSRD_booklet.pdf)> [accessed 13 January 2009].

<sup>54</sup> Helen Clark, ‘Preface’, *Religious Diversity in New Zealand*, p. 1.

and government anxiety about national security, social cohesion and religious extremism.<sup>55</sup>

## Analysis

I have been tracing various interventions across a range of contexts made by four political figures regarding faith and politics. Each of them is, I argue, speaking into a slightly different discourse about how religion should or should not shape public life. For three out of the four that involves identifying themselves with a particular faith commitment, but overall I think we can see how such professions have to be mediated into a wider context in which religion of one or many kinds carries meanings and associations that have to be negotiated carefully. What seems to be new at the start of the twenty-first century is the sense that religion is seen as a powerful and legitimate source of private motivation and public values; if not for the population at large, then at least in some respect by proxy. Yet at the same time, to speak of faith in public requires delicate handling, as the pronouncements of all these political figures demonstrate. In public contexts, in which to claim an allegiance to faith is increasingly suspect, the language of faith has to be carefully mediated and its deployment highly contextual.

In the UK, Blair's identification of himself as a 'person of faith' was undoubtedly a part of the 'remoralizing' of British politics in the 1990s, although his increasing reticence about his beliefs reflects a growing scepticism towards 'doing God' in public among the British public. By contrast, however, Obama's inauguration in January 2009 may signal a rejuvenation of American political discourse as he injects a renewed public theology of idealism into a tired and discredited office. Similarly, Rudd's desire to realign Australian politics towards the centre-left has involved a repudiation of religion as equated with conservative morality and the defence of 'family values', in favour of a tradition of Christian socialism as part of a contemporary progressive social democratic vision. Clark's insistence on facing up to the issue of religious diversity in a political culture that has tended to be 'functionally secular' both upholds a strong advocacy of a particular model of religious faith as a part of healthy civil society and speaks into a political tradition proud of its multicultural and

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<sup>55</sup> During the Report's preparation, Clark stated that government did need to address the question of religious extremism to prevent the kind of second and third generation Muslim activism seen in the UK. Audrey Young, 'Clark Calls For Action to Combat Extremism', *New Zealand Herald* (27 December 2006).

socially cohesive heritage. Yet the shadows of the global ‘war on terror’ are also evident at the margins of her endorsement of religious diversity as a guarantor of social cohesion.

My argument is that the various statements on the part of these figures represent interventions in complex, multi-layered ‘discourses’ about the nature of faith in public life, and they are an appeal to those who see the need, in the words of Margaret Archer, to ‘value values’.<sup>56</sup> One of the reasons for this state of affairs might be the reflexivity that I introduced earlier. While citizens are more and more concerned to pilot their way, according to their expressive desires, in the context of the decline of social and cultural prominence of religious leaders, politicians are increasingly charged with the task of providing the bearings for a society’s ‘moral compass’. Perhaps in this respect politics, like religion, has shifted ‘from a form of social engagement, focused on commitment to a bounded community, to a form of consumption, focused on individual needs which may change over time’.<sup>57</sup> In the absence of hard and fast affiliations to labour unions or long-term commitment to political ideologies, the personal integrity of politicians comes to matter more. It becomes less compelling and less effective for political figures to speak out of traditions of political philosophy, but more significant to represent themselves as the kinds of people who understand what it means to ‘value values’ in political debate.

Questions of the common good, and of virtue and vision, both personal and corporate, lie at the heart of any healthy body politic, and it is to their credit that all four of the political leaders I have discussed are seeking to uphold that aspect of public life. My use of the terminology of ‘discourse’ serves to draw attention to the fact that such statements are doing more than simply describing a set of convictions; they are performing a political function, by importantly providing a set of publicly articulated values that are capable of connecting with the electorate in a particular way, creating alignments and meanings about the nature of politics that go beyond specific questions of religious affiliation to the very well-springs of shared values that make up the body politic.

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<sup>56</sup> Margaret Archer, *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 230.

<sup>57</sup> Mathew Guest, ‘Reconceiving the Congregation as a Source of Authenticity’, in Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley and Alana Harris, eds, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 63–72 at p. 63.