People Like That": Race, religion and values in recent Australian political rhetoric

Dr Marion Maddox

Religious Studies

Victoria University Wellington NZ

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'Us', 'Them' and implicit religion

In 1996, John Howard came to power in a campaign built, according to his then national campaign director, on the organising themes of 'Us' versus 'Them'[1]. 'We' were being marginalised, ignored and belittled by a Labor government in thrall to 'Them', noisy, self-serving 'special interest groups'. Just who 'They' were was never made clear. Over three terms of government, 'Them' stood, at various times, for Indigenous Australians, ethnic minorities, trade union members, churchgoers, feminists, environmentalists, and more.

From July 2001, a new 'Them' entered the Howard government's list of menaces: Muslims. Probably, few would have predicted a surge of religious prejudice. While Australia is often said to be culturally and historically Christian, and that is true at least in the limited sense that its traditions and assumptions are more shaped by Christianity than by any other religious tradition, it could hardly be said to be actively or obviously Christian today. A country where only around nine per cent of the population claim to go to church weekly, rising to the high teens for monthly, seems unlikely soil for the kind of religious fervour which would find others' views of God a source of fear.

Commentators have tended to treat the upsurge of anti-Muslim feeling since 2001 as more an expression of racism than specifically religious prejudice. Others have suggested it has more to do with the alleged association between Islam and terrorism than with religious values per se. This paper argues that a different picture emerges if we put religion in analytical centre-stage. There are good reasons to read Australian Islamophobia as evidence of powerful, if submerged and only half-articulated, *religious* anxiety. That Australians of Christian heritage are often profoundly ignorant, not only about non-Christian religions, but even about the religious traditions said to be their own, only intensifies the anxiety.

The explicit casting of Muslims as a religious 'them' us best understood against the background of the concurrent public conversations about religion. One conversation, often loud and explicit, was about Islam. It portrayed Muslims as outsiders-within-the-nation, conduits of anti-Western views and potential terrorists (especially when wearing distinctive, religiously-marked dress). That conversation gained volume from the stereotypes of terrorists and asylum seekers purveyed, and intensified, by public

policy moves such as the anti-terrorism kit and the ASIO and security Bills. A concurrent conversation, often muted and carried on more between the lines than in the headlines, was about Christianity. It portrayed 'Christian values' as 'tradition', related to nationalism, civic order and public safety. To bring these two conversations into focus, I first retell familiar stories of anti-Muslim prejudice, placing religion—rather than race of culture, for example—in centre-stage. Second, I draw out the more muted, ambiguous conversation about 'Christian values' to delineate the particular form of religious anxieties in postmodern, secular Australia.

People like that

In late July 2001, Sydney newspapers reported serial gang rapes in the western suburbs, with depictions of predatory young men, a high-tech game plan, duped young women and terrible ordeals. Piling detail on titillating detail, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* blustered that not enough was being revealed: 'politically correct' police, and politicians in thrall to powerful ethnic organizations, were pussy-footing around the fact that the perpetrators were Muslims[2]. As the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board (ADB) pointed out, 'The attacks became major news' only once 'they were angled as a story about Lebanese, Arabic or Muslim gangs targeting white Australian women'. And the ADB noted another difference: when police first tried, unsuccessfully, to publicise the issue, in August 2000, Sydney was in the grip of Olympic euphoria. A year later, when the story finally took off, that had been replaced by 'a growing moral panic about Arabic or Middle Eastern and Muslim asylum seekers'[3]. The rapes had become big news because they could be mixed up in a religious war on a global stage.

The moral panic had not come out of the blue. In 1998, former High Court Judge and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity President Sir Ronald Wilson drew attention to the government's rebranding of desperate asylum seekers as 'illegals', despite their recognition under international law[4]. Subsequent government opinion-shaping added images of 'queue-jumpers', wealthy, self-serving associates of criminal people smugglers. The message got through so well that, a month before the 'gang rapes' story hit the headlines, social commentator Hugh Mackay reported that, among his focus group respondents in the crucial outer-suburban marginal seats, 'Refugees previously referred to as "boat people" are now routinely described as "illegals"', and

said to bring 'unacceptable levels of crime and violence'[5]. By the time the year-old gang rape story emerged in August 2001, the carefully-nurtured public mood was fertile ground for a seemingly natural association between 'Muslim', 'Middle-Eastern' and 'criminal'.

At that point, Howard was in the fatigue stage of his second term, dented by devastating Coalition losses in the Western Australian and Queensland elections. One factor in the State disasters had been Pauline Hanson's One Nation, which was not delivering preferences to the Coalition parties. One Nation had launched its Queensland campaign with a refugee policy: 'We go out, we meet [the boats], we fill them up with fuel, fill them up with food, give them medical supplies and we say, "Go that way"'.[6] Federally, Howard faced falling polls, a resurgent ALP trading off GST anger and a federal election due by the end of the year. David Marr and Marian Wilkinson describe how, on 8 August 2001, Howard broached using the Navy to implement One Nation's 'push off' border protection policy—an option long championed by his hand-picked department head and ally, Max Moore-Wilton[7].

The issue promised plenty of traction: just a week later, 345 people arrived on Christmas Island, joined by another 359 the following week. Most were Iraqi and Afghani Muslims. By the end of August, Australia had more than three and a half thousand people in migration detention centres, and more were coming. On 24 August, the diminutive *Palapa* lost its engines, leaving its 438 passengers adrift, without even a radio or positioning equipment, until their dramatic rescue by Norwegian Captain Arne Rinnan of the *Tampa*, two days later.

Rinnan's increasingly frustrated efforts to land his passengers on Christmas Island, the Australian government's stalling over medical assistance while sending an SAS show of force, the tenuous 'Pacific Solution' and the impact of all that on the 2001 election have been exhaustively told by Marr and Wilkinson. Our concern is the affair's part in the continuing depiction of Muslims as the latest 'Them'. The Howard government went to extraordinary lengths to prevent the *Tampa* refugees ever setting foot in Australia. One effect of the refugees' isolation was that, as Marr and Wilkinson note, the nearest image of them that Australian viewers saw throughout the crisis was a hazy picture of a distant ship, coaxed out of a fully-extended long-distance camera lens. There is nothing like distance for keeping 'Them' scary.

Literature scholar Suvendrini Perera, in an article called 'A Line in the Sea', describes community and personal responses to the Tampa asylum-seekers which emphasised common humanity rather than fear. Lest such gestures appear too private, sentimental or eccentric to offer a moral yardstick for a national government, Perera also recalls Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, who, facing questions about the possible terrorist danger from asylum seekers and migrants, declared:

> Let there be no doubt. We will allow no one to force us to sacrifice our values and traditions under the pressure of urgent circumstances. We will continue to welcome people from the whole world. We will continue to offer refuge to the persecuted.[8]

Like Chrétien, Howard saw public fear of asylum seekers as a challenge to national identity; but, where Chrétien saw his people's identity threatened by giving way to fear, Howard invoked a mind-spinning paradox to accuse the Tampa asylum seekers of illegitimately trying to keep Australians true to our national identity. The refugees were seeking 'to intimidate us with our own decency', he announced, as the Tampa passengers tried to land in Australia[9]. Howard reassured us that we were fundamentally decent. Sending desperate, sick and hungry people away from our shores in a boat too small to legally carry them and in defiance of international law could not be an indecent thing to do: if it were, decent people like us would not have been doing it. Decency seemed to urge the passengers' claim, so not 'they' but 'we' were the real victims, 'held hostage' by our inclination to help people who proved, overwhelmingly, to be genuine refugees from intolerable regimes.

Before Australians had time to reflect too far on these paradoxes, however, all subtleties were burned away in the blaze of world events. Never mind that many of the *Tampa* refugees were fleeing the very regime that harboured the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attackers; the same Prime Minister who rushed to support the US action against Afghanistan fanned the fear that every refugee was a potential terrorist[10]. The connection was simple: they were all 'people like that'.

Probably the clearest instance of attributing negative characteristics to a whole segment of the community was the 'children overboard' affair. The last days of the November 2001 election campaign were dominated by stories that asylum seekers on

yet another creaky, leaky smuggler vessel had thrown their children into the sea in an attempt to blackmail the Australian navy into taking them to Christmas Island. Though the stories turned out to be groundless, they were unwaveringly recycled by Howard and his then Defence Minister, Peter Reith. Although keeping asylum seekers off Australian shores was, since the *Tampa*, official government policy—with the whole costly machinery of the navy's Operation Relex to back it up—the 'children overboard' image allowed Howard to paint the asylum seekers' rebuff as all their own fault. 'I don't want people like that in Australia', an 'angry' Howard told the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, repeating the line in successive interviews[11].

People like what, exactly, was not spelled out; he could hardly have supposed that every adult on the boat had thrown a child into the water—still less, on every approaching boat—but they had all become 'people like that'. General allusions to the 'illegal' nature of asylum seekers' arrival had given way to personal vilification, playing on the most emotional of bonds, between parents and children. In fact, it was Howard who was throwing children 'overboard'—or, at least, shoving them out to sea.

The story seemed tailor-made to build up the picture of asylum-seekers as 'Them', a 'sort of people' wholly alien to 'Us', treating even their children in cavalierly self-interested ways 'We' could never comprehend or countenance. It was the latest twist in the line of inference and allusion which linked Muslims, suburban teenage criminals, international terrorists, fundamentalist theocrats and desperate asylum seekers together as 'Them'. Spelling out the connections could only have weakened a set of associations that thrives between the cracks of conversation.

Religion, race and 'Them'

Drawing on detailed polling during the racially-charged 1988 US presidential campaign, Princeton political scientist Tali Mendelberg demonstrates in her book, *The Race Card*, that, for white audiences, race remains a powerful political motivator. But, for post-1960s voters, imbued with the ideal of racial equality, the most effective racial appeals are the least specific. White audiences who know that racism is bad need to be able to assure themselves, even as they respond to racially-charged triggers, that they are reacting for non-racial reasons. If they cannot so assure themselves, the political trigger is much less effective.[12]

That pattern is evident in Australian Islamophobia. Although conservative columnists linked the gang rape story to 'the Muslim community's … cultural issues'[13], they did not directly claim, for example, that all Muslim men are rapists. Nor did anyone make bald assertions that all Muslims are terrorists, queue jumpers, fake refugees or child abusers. Such overt prejudice would have drawn attention to its own implausibility. Instead, repeated references to 'the sort of people' who would do such things combined into an implicitly anti-Muslim message which nevertheless contained what Mendelberg identifies as an essential element of a successful implicit appeal: deniability. So, even as Howard wove together fears about asylum seekers, the regimes they were fleeing, terrorism and unproven allegations of child abuse, he vehemently denied any racial overtone. Refugees would be repelled wherever they were from: 'white or Japanese, or North American or whatever—it is a question of protecting our borders'. He could not be appealing to prejudice, he reassured voters, because, not only was he himself innocent of prejudice, but so was his audience: 'I don't find any racism in the Australian public'[14]. It was just that the refugees were 'people like that', so absolutely foreign that they might reasonably be denied even a hearing.

The crusade against 'Them'

In the week following 11 September 2001, the *Toronto Star* newspaper commented:

> 'Acts of war', 'acts of terror', 'we're at war', 'hunt down and smoke out', 'wanted dead or alive', 'evil-doers', 'mass murderers' and 'barbarians' who 'slit' women's throats. If the war on terrorism was fought with rhetoric, US President George W. Bush may have won it by now.[15]

From the beginning, Bush seemed to be commissioning his troops for a cosmic showdown between the forces of evil and the forces of righteousness. All that paled, though, against his announcement of a 'crusade' on terror and his identification of Iraq as part of an 'axis of evil'. Both were taken as placing his government's actions in the middle east in a historical continuum with the medieval church's crusades against Islam, with all their overtones, for Muslims, of unprovoked, ideologically-driven Christian brutality. Two days after the 'crusade' remark, Bush's office issued a

retraction, saying that all the President had meant was that the response to terrorism would have the characteristics of a ‘broad cause’.[16]

Taken at face value, the apology paints staggering verbal ineptitude—what a monumental brick to drop in the most diplomatically sensitive environment since the end of the cold war! What extraordinary, gratuitous offence to offer at the very moment of trying to assemble friends—one which could almost seem calculated to produce a coalition of the affronted.

Observers of US political rhetoric might draw a different conclusion. Political scientist Cynthia Burack points out that Christian Right leaders regularly ‘practice small duplicities—such as apologies—in order to be misunderstood by the major population’. Her observation is not primarily about Bush: it comes in a discussion of the homophobic outbursts of politically activist televangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, when ‘narrowcasting’ to their ‘born again’ constituencies. That the speakers apologise when addressing a mainstream public does not alter the underlying message.

Her point is that the apology is a specific kind of ‘niche-marketing’, soothing the secular audience who would be horrified by such sentiments, while letting the original offence hang in the air long enough to be clearly heard by its Christian right target audience. They can mentally discount the apology—‘of course, he was forced into it by the politically correct liberal elites’. For those disinclined to see the most powerful man in the world as a hapless blunderer, though, Bush’s crusade ‘slip’, and belated retraction, can be read as just the kind of double-entendre Burack describes. Far from being an unintentional clanger, the evocation of Christian religious warfare can seem ‘narrowcast’ to a Christian fundamentalist audience waiting for just such a clarion-call, and its retraction a necessary hosing-down without removing the original message.

Following the ‘crusade’ episode, Bush took some pains to neutralise the comment, at least as far as his secular and international audiences were concerned. He was shown visiting a mosque, meeting Muslim leaders and repeatedly describing Islam as ‘a religion of peace’. The ‘c’ word dropped from his vocabulary, though he persisted with religious allusions such as the idea that ‘the liberty we prize is not America’s gift

to the world, it is God's gift to humanity' (America, the delivery boy, charged with seeing the gift gets through to its recipients, want it or not)[17]. Bush's iconography of an anointed 'us' facing down a religiously threatening Muslim 'them' required delicate handling.

By contrast, Howard's messages about Muslims have been much less ambiguous. In Australia, explicitly religious language cannot be relied on to carry the automatic positive vibes it does for substantial American audiences. Rather, religious appeals in Australian politics work more along the lines of the 'implicit' racial appeals described by Mendelberg. In our much more secular political environment, religion is likely to seem suspect in the same way that race is to post-1960s Americans. Not that religious appeals don't work in Australia—they just have to be deniable, so their subliminal appeal is not interrupted by rational dissociation.

Having announced no crusade, Howard did not need to appear at a mosque, or protest admiration for Islam. Instead, his portrayal of Muslims as the new 'them' picked up the half-spoken list of associations forged during the gang rape and asylum seeker episodes. Muslims remained firmly 'people like that', even when he was expressing sympathy with their plight. The chasm between 'us' and 'them' was obvious, for example, in his response to the deliberate burning of a Brisbane mosque shortly after 11 September 2001. Although newspapers reported his comments under the heading 'PM Outraged', his indignation proved conditional: 'If it is an act of vandalism or vilification, I condemn it unreservedly'. He continued, piling on qualifications:

> Islamic Australians are as entitled as I am to a place in this community. If their loyalty is to Australia as is ours, and their commitment is to this country, we must not allow our natural anger at the extremes of Islam … to spill over onto Islamic people generally.[18]

By purporting to know the hearts of one part of the population ('ours'), while raising doubt about the loyalty and commitment of another, he drew a sharp division between Australians; and he placed himself firmly on the righteously angry, patriotic, non-Muslim side.

Incidents like the mosque torching were the visible crest of a wave of street-level anti-Muslim harassment, with women and children the most frequent targets.[19] Barely a year later, Australia's response to the October 2002 Bali bombing raised the possibility that 'acts of vandalism or vilification' against Muslims were no longer the exclusive work of individuals, but had become official policy. Breaking into family homes during the evenings or in the early hours of the morning, handcuffing parents in front of their children and confiscating personal belongings, ASIO agents conducted highly public raids on the homes of people suspected of having attended past public lectures by Bali-implicated cleric Abu Bakar Bashir. Victims described violent methods that seemed less about catching suspects than about intimidating communities. The wider public got an impressive picture of strong, security-conscious government. It seemed a heavy-handed form of intelligence-gathering—and, leading to neither charges nor convictions, a singularly ineffective one. That the raids took place during Ramadan made the insult seem still more calculated. As the lawyer for one of the raided families put it, 'If [ASIO] had given our client the courtesy of asking him to provide information, or let them interview him or even come to his house, he would have opened his doors and made them a cup of tea'.[20] In fact, as the Asia Pacific Human Rights Network reported, at least one of those raided had contacted ASIO and offered to be interviewed. ASIO personnel refused his offer, only to come crashing through his front door at dawn two mornings later.[21]

The depiction of Muslims as the new 'Them' had progressed so far by this time that violent images of armed men breaking into the homes of sleeping families, rather than evoking fear of government terror tactics, showed up in opinion polls as reinforcing the government's standing as strong on national security.[22] Howard declared himself 'one hundred percent' behind the raids on Indonesian Muslims:

> These raids relate to investigations concerning individuals. People who claim that this is in some way targeting Islamic sections of Australia are just, in my opinion, deliberately trying to create a difficulty that does not and ought not exist. [23]

The facts that the raids used unnecessary force and maximum family disruption at the time of greatest potential religious offence to obtain no evidence against people who

had, in some cases, already come forward all melted into a perfect example of Mendelberg's 'denial'.

Other people's dogma

While endorsing actions which reinforced the updated version of 'Us' and 'Them', Howard's spoken responses tended to be brief, ambiguous and elliptical, leaving plenty of room for denials of prejudice, but also plenty of cracks in which implicitly religiously vilifying messages could thrive.

One issue, though, elicited a long exchange in which the shifting, un-pin-downable nature of 'Them' became strikingly apparent. Sydney radio talkback host John Laws asked Howard how he felt about NSW Legislative Councillor and maverick Uniting Church minister Rev Fred Nile's suggestion that Muslim women should not be allowed to wear full body and head coverings in public because the clothes might conceal weapons—indeed, as Laws put it, 'we don't even know if they're women because they're that covered'.

Howard gave his customary reassurances of Australian decency, tolerance and commitment to equality: 'We have to respect each other in these things. It's just a question of civilised living. If you've got a religious faith and providing you're not flinging it in somebody else's face, then you should be allowed to practise it.'

Nevertheless, Howard now inserted his 'I understand …' formula, which he regularly uses to endorse obliquely views too extreme for direct support (his response to Pauline Hanson's fist speech being one famous earlier instance):

> I don't have a clear response to what Fred has put. I mean I like Fred and I don't always agree with him, but you know Fred speaks for the views of a lot of people … No, look, I understand what he's getting at …

In the process, the Prime Minister licensed a sharp contrast between Muslim women and 'the Australian way of life':

> I want everybody in this country to live according to the modalities of Australia … People coming to this country, whether they're

> Islamics [or not], … must understand that when they come to Australia they … can't cherry pick the Australian way of life. I mean, people have to sort of, they have to take the good with the bad and things they don't like, well they've got to live with them because that's the nature of our society.

Howard's next comments, though, might have opened him to the accusation of doing some cherry-picking himself:

> We do respect very strongly equality of men and women. I think that's very, very important. And I think practices of any religion that don't meet that expectation will inevitably draw some disapproval and some criticism.

This was the Prime Minister whose belief in the equality of the sexes led him to rejig the tax and benefits system to encourage partnered mothers out of the paid workforce, reinstate 'chairman' for convenors of Commonwealth boards and committees and propose an amendment to the *Sex Discrimination Act* to allow the Catholic Education Office to offer men-only teaching scholarships[24]. Given his particular concern about 'practices of any religion' that contravene equality of men and women, we might also wonder at his silence on the ordination of women in the Catholic church and the consecration of female Anglican bishops.

Much of the discussion hinged on how much covering Muslim women are obliged to wear. Laws put it to Howard that 'apparently it's not mandatory in the Qu'ran for them to do that'. By most standards of religious freedom, whether a practice is mandatory or not is irrelevant—the point is that people are free to worship in the way they choose. Howard, though, would have been happy to adjudicate, if only he knew a bit more:

> Well, I'm not precisely sure of what the rules of the Muslim religion are on this question … I have got to frankly myself have a better understanding of just how fundamental that is … Now I can't make at this stage a judgment. I've just had this flung at me. I'm not sufficiently apprised of the tenets of Islam to fully understand that.

Laws reassured with a relevant authority: ‘Well I think dear Fred is, in as much as he [has] obviously looked at the Qur’an, and the Qur’an doesn’t state that it is necessary to have the full covering.’ Not religious freedom, but religious compulsion was the issue. (Imagine if the government decreed that Catholics could go to Mass, since it is compulsory, while Protestants, for whom communion is less central, could not).

Still more alarming is the public airing of naïveté about religious orthodoxy. It comes into focus with a thought experiment, putting Christian, instead of Muslim, custom in the dock. Imagine the response of Fred Nile, founder of the ‘family values’ oriented Festival of Light (FOL), to a similarly-argued case about his interpretation of Christianity. Suppose that, after reading the New Testament, a member of a non-Christian faith told Nile that there is no biblical reason why Christians should support 1950s nuclear families over other forms. They might maintain that, since Jesus was often at loggerheads with his parents and siblings, while Paul argued that marriage is only a second best to celibacy, the government should ban Christian heterosexual couples from flaunting their family form in public. The merits of the argument (or of FOL’s) are less important than that, like Nile, Laws and Howard’s view of Islam, the imaginary case treats religious orthodoxy as singular, able to be determined once-and-for-all by uncritical recourse to sacred text and blind to histories of interpretation.

Howard’s responses were a masterpiece of double-entendre. On one hand, he made noises about tolerance and inclusiveness: we respect religious diversity. Laws and Howard assured listeners that ‘most Muslims … overwhelmingly’ are ‘a delight to talk to’. In the same breath, they both firmly cast Muslims, and especially Muslim women, as ‘them’, whom ‘we’ assess. When pressed, rather than affirm religious freedom, Howard cast his response in terms of needing a better understanding of Islam. His listeners could infer that, once convinced that the chador was merely ‘optional’ for Muslim women, he would be happy to ban it—not only for public safety but for their own good:

LAWS: But wouldn’t it be better if they were less conspicuous at this time?

HOWARD: Well, obviously, consistent with their religious beliefs [25]

In suggesting that Muslim women would do better to abandon non-compulsory religious traditions, Howard effectively supported repression. The problem, in other words, was Islam, not prejudice.

Other people's fears

As a result of such implicit appeals, from 'illegals' to 'rapists' to 'terrorists' to 'child abusers', Australian Muslims were been repeatedly made to bear collective opprobrium in ways other communities are not. Muslims were portrayed as collectively responsible for other people's perceptions of them, even when the perceptions were groundless or the result of deliberate misrepresentation.

This became particularly prominent in 2003, when federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson wrote to his state counterparts asking for extra scrutiny of Islamic schools to allay fears that they were encouraging 'anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiments'. Curiously, Nelson claimed not to be reflecting his own concerns—he was reportedly 'confident' that no such sentiments were being taught, and praised the Islamic schools' charter promoting peace and mutual respect, making it unclear what the requested scrutiny would achieve. Nelson told State ministers the fears came from 'concerned citizens', and he was worried that their negative perceptions might spread.

Nelson's declaration of personal confidence in Islamic schools was corroborated by the chair of the Australian Council for Islamic Education in Schools, Mahomed Hassan, quoting a letter he had received from Nelson two months earlier, praising the schools' charter. So, the fact that Nelson then aired doubts to State ministers struck Hassan as 'hypocritical'. Tabling the Nelson letter in the Queensland Parliament, State Education Minister Anna Bligh argued that Nelson's first recourse should have been to allay the 'concerned citizens'' fears himself. Instead, she argued, 'By issuing a "please explain" to state education ministers on the quality of Islamic schools he has used his position to add weight to these unfounded fears and to pour petrol on the fire of prejudice'. She might have added that putting the onus on Muslim schools to counter allegations he knew to be unfounded, rather than trying to correct the prejudice at its source, furthered the perception of Muslims as 'them'. Once again, Islam, not prejudice, was made to seem the problem.[26]

The schools controversy erupted around the same time as another initiative which laid the government open to charges of implicit racism, the ‘fridge magnet’ campaign. Like the post-Bali raids, the medium seemed to be the message. In 2003 the federal government posted every household in Australia a booklet and fridge magnet with information about what to do in the event of a terrorist strike, phone numbers to ring to report suspicious behaviour and space to write in items of household information such as the location of the gas meter (the relevance of the latter in avoiding terrorist attack was left to the householder’s imagination). As University of NSW political scientist Matt McDonald points out in a detailed analysis of the anti-terrorism kit campaign, international relations theory has long noted the way governments ‘constantly attempt to create fear of “others” outside the nation as a means of garnering support for specific practices and achieving or maintaining support for the government itself.’ Viewed in that light, the kit’s purpose seemed to be ‘augmenting … domestic fear of terrorism’. Its mission was arguably to ‘reiterate to Australians the new dangers and insecurities …’, while indicating ‘that the government was “doing the job” of security’[27].

McDonald sees the kit as part of a government strategy to facilitate the passage of two controversial pieces of legislation then being debated in Parliament. The *ASIO Legislation Amendment Bill* promised ASIO powers to detain, incommunicado and without legal representation, people—including children as young as fourteen—suspected of being connected with, or having information about, terrorism. The *Security Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) Bill* included a 25-year or life term for a designated ‘terrorist act’ and gave the Attorney-general power to proscribe terrorist organizations.

Given the controversy surrounding the Bills, and the fact that they seemed to curtail civil liberties in ways unnecessary to the goal of containing terrorism, one could equally see the legislation, and the publicity surrounding it, as further ‘fear augmentation’[28]. The Bills painted a ‘them’ so dangerous (even when children) that normal civil liberties should not apply. Coupled with the anti-terrorism kit’s invitation to spot suspicious activity and dob in anyone whose behaviour did not ‘add up’, the new ASIO powers arguably offered not increased security, but a heightened sense of a half-visible menace.

Our values

The national conversation about Islam (largely carried on by non-Muslims, deaf to the attempted contributions of Muslims) forms one part of early twenty-first century Australia's religious anxieties. The other big part was a quieter, less headline-grabbing conversation about Christianity. Its most frequent expression was in growing talk about values. Everyone seemed worried about who's got them, who needs them and how to impart them; but no one said what they are. All the talk about them assumed that everyone knows what 'values' are. No one questioned them: apparently, everyone *does* know what everyone else means when they talk about 'values'. Except me: I found myself increasingly confused.

Howard began it, with an apparently off-the-cuff remark about the drift of students from state to non-government schools. The state system, he said, had become, 'too politically correct and too values-neutral'. He glossed the remark by explaining that parents were frustrated with a lack of 'traditional values'. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial made me feel I was not, after all, quite alone in my confusion, observing, 'these phrases are code—but for what it is hard to say'[29].

The only clue Howard offered, either in the initial interview or in any of the numerous follow-up pieces, was that some schools 'think you offend some people by having nativity plays'. Searching earlier sources, the *Herald's* Mark Riley found that this was not the first time Christmas traditions had come in for prime ministerial championship: in 2002 Howard had inveighed on Melbourne radio against kindergartens' alleged 'banning' of Santa and department stores' dropping nativity scenes from Christmas displays, which he labeled 'not very impressive' and 'a cave-in to political correctness'. Riley also unearthed a piece of vintage Howard outrage over NSW Premier Bob Carr's 1997 intervention to stop a NSW state school's annual passion play. In fact, the State government had intervened not on religious grounds but because parents had complained that the whipping, spitting and humiliation scenes were too graphic for young children. Riley concluded that the collection of instances—'Easter plays, Christmas nativity scenes and old Saint Nick'—indicated that '"values" has become his shorthand for "religious values"'. In fact, the traditions cited all relate (though tenuously in Santa's case) to a single religious tradition. Riley's *Herald* colleague, Linda Doherty, was more precise, pointing out that to

'Howard, his ministers and talkback radio callers', 'values' referred not to just any religion, but meant Christian values[30].

Similarly, the language of 'banning' evokes religious censorship, raising the theocratic ghosts of 'them'. From his 1995 campaigns against 'political correctness', Howard had given 'censorship' an additional meaning—the 'pall' of elite prohibitions which, he claimed, the 'chattering classes' had draped over the social landscape, which the silenced 'we' pierce only at our peril. While the kindergarten 'banning' of Santa conjures up images of spiky-haired teachers barricading doors and chimneys against the white-haired old fellow's doddery efforts to reach the innocents within, it is hard to see how it could mean more than that the (unnamed) kindy had decided to hold a Santa-less Christmas party. (The childcare centres I've had to do with lately enjoy an annual visit from the Christmas Fairy, a trend I had put down not to ideology but to scarcity of fathers willing to don the furry red suit in midsummer—no one to my knowledge has interpreted Santa's absence as a 'ban').

During an interview with Sydney talkback host Alan Jones, Howard did dredge up one more concrete instance: a Queensland Education Department suggestion that schools replace Christmas observance with a celebration focusing on year's end and holidays. This, he said, was an 'attempt to sort of bland down any kind of traditional approaches in our country'. That blanding-down was a symptom of political correctness, which he saw as the root of discourtesy, incivility and, ultimately, even the kind of street violence that produced that week's other big news story, the death of cricketer David Hookes[31].

Far from blanding down, the multicultural classrooms I know have preferred a multiplicity of religious observances, with children introducing one another to their respective traditions. Howard's claim of secularist censorship surely belongs more to the overheated religious atmosphere of North America, where, at the time of writing, courts are considering whether the Pledge of Allegiance should be said in schools (with its polarising cold war addition 'under God')[32] and whether the Ten Commandments may be displayed outside court houses (many of them, it turns out in a truly American twist, placed there originally by Cecil B. de Mille to promote his movie of that name)[33]. Those are just the most recent in a long string of court battles over the detail of what religious references may be made in US public life (sometimes

summed up as the ‘plastic reindeer test’: if a Christmas nativity tableau appears with a sufficient proportion of reindeer and other secular decorations, it is cultural, not religious, and therefore permissible[34]). One possible lesson from the bitter American fights, where each successive judgment deals a body blow to one side or the other, is that the more rigidly people’s deepest commitments are excluded from public life, the more easily they retreat into resentful fundamentalism of the kind that exploded into the Oklahoma bombing[35]. Howard’s out-of-the-blue musings about ‘politically correct, values-neutral’ public schools seemed an attempt to translate that vote-rich feeling of frustrated exclusion into Australia’s much more laid-back religious climate.

What faith can do

One feature of secularisation to which sociologists of religion have long drawn attention is that religion comes to be seen in increasingly instrumental terms. It becomes less as a system of beliefs relating to a force which makes claims upon us, than a toolbox of therapeutic and goal-setting techniques which can be adopted selectively to achieve individual ends (the personal fulfilment theology of Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* is a paradigm)[36]. Such theories flourished in the 1960s and 1970s as mainline denominations’ membership rapidly ebbed from their post-war crests, while the religious marketplace seemed suddenly flooded with new age and faux-eastern movements offering goal-oriented fulfilment, often with only the most minimal claims on converts.

A number of strands in the late 1990s suggested a further, more overtly political development in the use of religion as instrumental. People remained willing to appreciate religion as producing desirable outcomes, but they embraced it on others’ behalf. *I* am sufficiently sophisticated not to need religious beliefs to make me moral/ obedient/ compliant/ generous/ truthful, their behaviour suggests; but religion is a good thing for other people to have. This development helps explain the appeal to a highly secular electorate of an apparently sincerely—but not too in-your-face—religiously committed Prime Minister. More, it explains the attraction of other policy developments of the Howard period, such as social programs which carry a (particular, conservative kind of) religious aura.

Howard’s 2004 remarks were not the first time the drift from state to private schooling had been linked to a quest for ‘values’. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a

major series of articles in mid-2003 documenting the transfer in federal government funding from state to private schools, which the paper declared to be expanding 'on a runway trajectory'[37]. The *Herald* found parents who professed no religion hoping that schools would instil 'values' they themselves felt incompetent to convey[38]. When Howard's comments reopened the issue in 2004, the paper ran a follow-up article, maintaining that parents who denied any religious conviction nevertheless deliberately sent their children to Christian schools in quest of 'a better sense of discipline' and tending to the 'spiritual and social needs'[39].

A similar pattern is likely among those who, though lacking religious convictions of their own, support religiously-inflected 'family values' positions such as affirming marriage as exclusively heterosexual, discrimination against gay and lesbian parents, opposition to euthanasia and the move towards US-style 'faith based' contracting out government welfare services to church agencies[40]. On one hand, such people draw a distinction between religion (meaning Christianity) and the allegedly associated values: 'I'm not a believer, but …' On the other hand, they affirm, probably more strenuously than many religious believers, an indissoluble nexus between faith and morality: even if you don't accept the theology yourself, you (or perhaps those more at risk of moral lapse—single mothers, children, the unemployed) stand the best chance of learning the morals, receiving the standards and absorbing the principles from people who do. To the holders of such views, a Prime Minister who not only apparently believes in dogma which they themselves cannot, but also enacts it on the nation's behalf, in the form of 'mutual obligation', upholding exclusively heterosexual marriage and so on, is a highly attractive option.

Howard's vague appeals to 'values' work in the same way as his allusions to his Methodist childhood: they add a quasi-religious weight to his frequent nostalgic invocations of 'the way things used to be', without being religiously specific enough to mark him off from the secular, amorphously spiritual 'us'. The combination contributes to a politically invaluable persona for a prime minister in a highly secularized electorate, where religion (meaning some vaguely-apprehended kind of Christianity) is seen as a good thing for other people to have. It makes particularly effective politics in a climate of increasing fear and suspicion. Religious values, even if we don't ourselves share them, promise sincerity, right-mindedness and safety in an

uncertain world. How much stronger and more reassuring the promise, when the world beyond our vulnerable borders is portrayed as teeming with a religiously fanatical, potentially criminal ‘Them’.

Other people’s faith

In 2003, federal Treasurer Peter Costello told tertiary students about his faith. The venue was the National Student Leadership Forum on Faith and Values, a Parliament-sponsored annual conference, introduced under the Howard government and modelled on a Washington program of the same name. Delegates get to quiz politicians about their faith, and meet international guests such as Fiji’s successful coup leader, subsequently elected President and constitutional reformer, Sitiveni Rabuka. As well as living exemplars, students study historical leadership models such as Jesus of Nazareth, missionary Albert Schweizer and Mother Theresa[41].

Costello tied his discussion of faith and values to events of the day:

> You would have seen yesterday, the big explosion in Jerusalem, maybe like me you watched the TV and you have seen video of the suicide bomber who did that. He was holding a rifle in one hand and a Koran in the other. He had faith and he had values, you can’t deny that. He probably had more faith than all of us put together, but were they the right values?

The example of the suicide bomber proved that not any values would do. Instead, students were better off with ‘the ethic and the faith background that we come from’, which Costello praised for recognising ‘the value of life over death’.[42]

Costello’s speech provides a telling link between the Howard government’s explicit casting of Muslims as a religious ‘them’ through references to community tragedy, women’s dress, the school system and even suicide bombing, and the more muted, between-the-lines conversation about Christianity. Like the values in schools debate, Costello portrayed ‘Christian values’ as ‘tradition’, related to nationalism, civic order and public safety. In Costello’s speech, the traditions of Jesus of Nazareth, Mother Teresa and Albert Schweizer became ‘our’ values and ‘faith background’, contrasted to the misguided faith of a Qu’ran-clutching suicide bomber. Such a blatant comparison between ‘our’ fine spiritual values and ‘their’ dangerous religion was the

exception. Usually, the fear of 'them' is most effective when 'we' and 'they' are only obliquely marked out, because any more specific definition is liable to be contradicted, losing its force. The confluence of the two religious conversations in Australian public life during the Howard government's second and third term created a space in which the pictures of an embattled 'us' protecting 'our' values and a menacing 'them', driven by the frightening values of a strange religion, could flourish, half-articulated and, consequently, barely challenged.

Religion, race and values

Why should it matter whether vilification and harassment of a particular marginalised group is the product of racism or religious prejudice? In an important sense, of course, it doesn't—the bullying of already vulnerable is the problem, not any putative justification. However, I think that the specifically religious form the vilification took in relation to the Howard government's most prominent third-term 'Them' is a worrying straw in the wind. In my forthcoming book[43], I demonstrate that the Howard government has overseen a period of Americanisation of Australian religion-state relations, drawing on the strategies and, increasingly, the rhetoric, of the US Christian right in support of a distinctive blend of social conservatism and economic liberalism which there are good reasons to see as an enduring trend, not an aberration of the current leadership. The identification of a religious enemy in this phase of Australia's culture wars is one more step down that path.

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[1] Pamela Williams, *The Victory: The inside story of the takeover of Australia* St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin 1997, p 159

[2] Eg 'Having the Courage to Face Reality', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2001; Mark Day, 'Tolerance Needs a Reality Check', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 2001; Will Temple, 'Gang Admits to Ethnic-Based Rape', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 2001; 'Commissioner Warns on Rapes', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2001

[3] ibid., p 60

[4] Ronald Wilson, response to questions following his paper, 'Reconciliation and Human Rights', Fulbright Symposium, University of Adelaide, 14-16 April 1998

[5] Hugh Mackay, *The Mackay Report*, 'Mind and mood' July 2001, pp 30-31

[6] Quoted in David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin 2003, p 45

[7] ibid., pp 45-46

[8] Suvendrini Perera, 'A Line in the Sea', *Race & Class* 44(2) 2002: 23-39

[9] ABC Radio, *The World Today*, 28 August 2001

[10] Marr and Wilkinson *op. cit.*, pp 280-281

[11] cited in *ibid*, pp 189-190

[12] Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign strategy, implicit messages and the norm of equality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001, p 120, 126-127

[13] See eg Janet Albrechtson, 'Talking Race Not Racism', *Australian*, 17 July 2002

[14] cited in Marr and Wilkinson, *op. cit*., p 279

[15] William Walker, 'Bush's Rhetoric Fuels Violence, Critics Charge: Influence of 'war drum' words feared', *Toronto Star*, 19 September 2001

[16] *ibid*.

[17] The phrase was most famously used in his 28 Jamuary 2003 State of the Union address, repeated in numerous speeches since.

[18] Katherine Shine, 'PM Outraged as Arson Destroys Mosque', *Sun Herald*, 23 September 2001

[19] Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 'Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians', Lakemba, 10 September 2003, www.humanrights.gov.au on 10 April 2004

[20] ABC TV *7.30 Report*, 30 October 2002

[21] 'Australia: Religious minorities—down and under', *Human Rights Feature* (publication of the Asia Pacific Human Rights Network and Human Rights Documentation Centre), 6(2) 2003, 24-31 March, www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfchr59/Issue2/Australia.htm on 10 April 2004

[22] eg Morgan Poll Finding No. 3566, 8 November 2002, 'L-NP Jumps in Wake of Terrorist Attack in Bali'

[23] Mark Riley, Matthew Moore and Paul Daley, 'ASIO Raids Justified, Claims PM', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 2002; see also 'Australia: Religious minorities: down and under', *Human Rights Feature* 6(2), 24-31 March 2003

[24] *Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004* For discussion, see Kirsty Magarey, *Bills Digest* 110, 2003-04, Information and Research Services, Department of Parliamentary Services, http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/Repository/Legis/Billsdgs/W31C61.pdf on 15 April 2004

[25] Interview, Radio 2UE, 21 November 2002

[26] Orietta Guerrera and Andra Jackson, 'Minister Urges Watch on Islamic Schools', *Age*, 28 March 2003

[27] Matt McDonald, 'Be Alarmed, Be Very Alarmed: Fear, security and Australia's anti-terrorism kit', Unpublished paper presented at Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 25 September 2003, p 5

[28] See eg Jenny Hocking, 'Counter-Terrorism and the Criminalisation of Politics: Australia's new security powers of detention, proscription and control', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 49(3) 2003: 355-371

[29] 'Values learnt in schools', *SMH*, 21 January 2004

[30] Linda Doherty, 'Class divide: Why parents are choosing private', *SMH*, 12 February 2004

[31] Interview with Alan Jones, Radio 2GB, 28 January 2004, www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview659.html on 21 February 2004

[32] See *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, Supreme Court of the United States case no. 02-1624

[33] Mary Diebel, 'Ten Commandment Displays Contested Across the Nation', *Detroit News*, 27 August 2003

[34] The relevant case is *County of Allegheny et al. v. American Civil Liberties Union, Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, Supreme Court of the United States 492 U.S. 573, 3 July 1989

[35] William Connolly, *Why I Am Not A Secularist* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999

[36] See eg Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion* Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980, pp 236-7

[37] Linda Doherty, 'Blow-out in private school aid', *SMH* June 24, 2003

[38] Kelly Burke, 'Giving children what parents can't—values' *SMH* June 23, 2003

[39] Linda Doherty, 'Class divide: Why parents are choosing private', *SMH* January 24, 2004 A more cynical view was put by Frank Moorehouse in a *Herald* opinion piece, arguing that the main 'spiritual value' elite private schools teach, and 'all without having to utter a word', is a sense of superiority and automatic entitlement to privilege. See Frank Moorehouse, 'A Sense of Privilege Poisons our Schooling', *SMH*, 7 April 2004

[40] For discussion of the former, see Marion Maddox, 'Women, Religion and the Australian Right' (Penny Magee memorial lecture), *Australian Religion Studies Review* vol 15 no 2 2002, pp 13-28; on the latter, see Marion Maddox, 'Blackleg Churches? The Changing Relationship Bewtween Churches and Executive Government' in Brian Howe and Philip Hughes (eds), *Spirit of Australia: Religion in Citizenship and National Life* vol 2, Melbourne: Australian Theological Forum 2003, pp 145-163

[41] See 'Resources' on the Forum's web page, http://www.nslf.org.au/

[42] Peter Costello, 'Address National Student Leadership Forum, Parliament House, Canberra', Thursday 12 August 2003, www.treasurer.gov.au/tsr/content/speeches/2003/013.asp?pf=1 on 4 December 2003

[43] Allen and Unwin, 2005