

THE SECULAR JUGGERNAUT

The 2015 Smith Lecture

Delivered by Roy Williams

Let me begin with a personal confession. Not very many years ago, it would have been quite inconceivable to me that, one day, I'd be extolling the greatness of Christianity – let alone be invited to give a public lecture on the subject.

For the first 35 years of my life, when it came to religion, I was a disengaged agnostic – drifting towards atheism. I cannot stress enough why this was so. It was *not* because I'd had some bad experience within a church. It was certainly not because I had ever given careful thought to the question of God's existence, and then rejected the notion as improbable.

Rather, it was because, not having been raised in a religious home, and having attended exclusively state schools, I knew next to nothing about Christianity – or any religion.

And yet – and this is important – I was always keenly interested in current affairs and generally well-educated. At Sydney University Law School in the 1980s I'd worked hard and got decent marks. For nearly 20 years I worked as a solicitor doing commercial litigation at a big firm in Sydney. By worldly standards I was a "success". And – do not misunderstand me – I am extremely grateful for that experience. The law taught me how to marshal arguments, to assess evidence, and to write with precision.

So at age 35 I was highly informed about many things of this world. But I was badly ignorant of the most important questions of all. Is there a God who created the Universe – and created me? If so, what does that God expect of me?

I was the epitome of the "average" Australian citizen of whom Bishop Tom Frame has written this:

The majority of Australians have either no idea what the Christian religion is offering or they have rejected what they mistakenly think it is offering.¹

It was not always so in Australia. At Federation in 1901, according to the census of that year, 96% of people identified as Christian. Of course, even then, there was plenty of nominalism. But one-half of all adults went to church regularly. And most children went to Sunday school.²

Furthermore, levels of religious *knowledge* were reasonably good: the average citizen had been taught the basics of Christianity as a child; had some familiarity with the Bible; and knew that Christianity had played a seminal part in the formation of the Western world.

Until the 1970s, the educated classes of Australian society were steeped in this knowledge. And I am talking not only about people of conservative disposition – the wealthy ruling class – but progressives and reformers too. Most of the leaders of the early trade union movement in Australia were Protestant Christian socialists – the genuine article. So too were many of the founders of the Australian Labor Party in the 1890s.³

I hope that each of you in the audience has taken a copy of the three handouts I've prepared, outlining the enormous positive contribution of Christianity to the West in general – that's handout A – and to Britain and Australia in particular – handouts B and C. Scan them at your leisure. I'm happy to take questions at the end on anything in them.

Now, I admit unashamedly that these are lists of positives. Of course, there are also negative aspects to each story. I'm going to talk about some of them tonight. But I make no bones about putting the Christian case forward. I truly believe that the positives far outweigh the negatives.

What is the state of Christianity in Australia today?

Most of our political and media class is now ignorant of religion – if not openly antagonistic towards it. As for the general population, according to the 2011 census, nominal Christianity is now at 61% and falling – I'll predict here tonight that it will be much closer to 50% when next year's census is taken, perhaps even below 50%. And that's nominal

¹ Tom Frame, *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia* (UNSW Press, 2009), p. 294.

² See Hugh Jackson, *Australians and the Christian God: An historical study* (Mosaic Press, 2013), pp. 93-94.

³ See Roy Williams, *Post-God Nation? How religion fell off the radar in Australia – and what might be done to get it back on* (ABC Books, 2015), pp. 125-28.

Christianity only. Perhaps a more telling statistic is this: only around 8% of people go to church regularly.⁴

By contrast, more than 20% of Australians are prepared to state that they have “no religion”. Many say it proudly. Many admit that “no religion” is what they want for their children.

Now, the sixty-four thousand dollar questions are – Why is it so? And: Why does it matter?

Tonight I will suggest reasons why levels of religious belief and churchgoing in Australia have fallen so sharply since Federation – and especially since the 1970s.

It is not because most citizens have made a careful study of the Christian religion and, weighing all of the relevant evidence, have decided in good conscience that it is not true.

And it is not because most citizens have decided, likewise after careful study, that wherever the truth might lie, the issues involved are unimportant – not worth considering.

That must be right. If pressed, any sensible person must admit that the question whether Christianity is true or false is one of vital importance. For, if it is true – I repeat, if it is true – what is at stake is nothing less than the fate of each person’s soul for eternity.

That said, let me make another thing absolutely clear at the outset. I am not going to argue tonight that, in this earthly life, it is impossible to be a good citizen without practising religion. There are, and always have been, many badly-behaved people who profess to be believers – and many comparatively well-behaved citizens who rarely give religion a thought.

Before my conversion to Christianity, I was not an obviously “bad” person. My parents were ethical people who taught me right from wrong. I was a “respectable” citizen. But something was missing – something big.

I was an unconscious product – victim – of the Secular Juggernaut. I now realise that I made all kinds of assumptions which are seriously questionable. I did not understand the good news at the heart of Christianity. I did not know nearly enough history – both ancient and modern. I did not properly understand the history of my own country.

What were the main factors working upon me? I now believe they were typical of the factors working, and still working, on most Australians. In my opinion there are four really big factors. I’ll come to those in a moment. But before I do, I had better clarify what I mean by “Christianity”.

⁴ See mccrindle.com.au/the-mccrindle-blog/church_attendance-in_australia-infographic (28 March, 2013).

At its absolute core, Christianity is a worldview that encompasses belief – sincere belief – in the following three things⁵ :

- First, an all-knowing God who created and sustains the Universe, and who is vitally interested in the thoughts and conduct of each individual human being – in short, a personal Creator God
- Second, an afterlife, in which each of us will be called to account by God for our conduct in this life – in short, divine judgment
- Third, the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, on that third point, Jesus' divinity, I need to expand just a bit. Almost all serious historians agree that Jesus was, at the very least, a real, flesh-and-blood human being who lived in Palestine from c. 6 BC-c. 30 AD.⁶ But Christians believe a lot more.

They believe that Jesus was actually God, in human form. Most believe that His divinity was demonstrated by – among many other things – His *bodily* resurrection from death. And most believe that the primary purpose of His death was to spare those who *choose* to put in their faith in Him from the adverse judgement in the afterlife that each and every one of us will otherwise deserve. That's what I believe.

Now, it's conceded in the New Testament itself that these beliefs will seem like "foolishness" to the rest of the world (1 Corinthians 1:18). But please suspend any disbelief for a moment. If Jesus really was God in human form, then everything He said and did must be understood in that context. The whole of the Bible must be read in that context.

The divinity of Jesus is also integral to the two other core Christian beliefs I have specified. Christians believe that the Universe was created by and for Jesus (Colossians 1:16), and that Jesus will be the judge of each person in the afterlife (John 5:22).

⁵ Alert Christian purists may instantly object: my three-pronged formulation is inadequate, even as a brief summary of orthodox Christianity. Indeed, it would encompass various heresies rejected in the fourth and fifth centuries. This I concede. And I have not even attempted to grapple with the differences between, say, Protestantism and Catholicism. But as C. FitzSimons Allison has written, 'Christian orthodoxy is a strange and wondrous thing, unknown to many scholars and to many conventional Christians'. (See *The Cruelty of Heresy: An affirmation of Christian orthodoxy* (Morehouse Publishing, 1994), p. 159, where Allison discusses a definition of core Christian beliefs not dissimilar to mine, that was proposed by the US writers Charles Glock and Rodney Stark in their 1968 book *American Piety*.) To mandate belief in the full package of orthodoxy, as a precondition to a person holding an essentially Christian view of the world, would disqualify, in my judgment, all but about 0.1 per cent the Australian population – now or in any era.

⁶ There are countless books on this subject. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *Evidence for Christianity: Historical evidences for the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), esp. pp. 169-92.

If you really believe those things, life becomes an amazing mixture of hopes and fears. Nagging fear of God's judgement, but hope in His ultimate mercy through Jesus.

Which brings me back to the Secular Juggernaut. In trying to explain secularisation, what we are looking for are phenomena that, as a matter of cause and effect, have undermined the hopes, or assuaged the fears, that are central to the Christian worldview. Let me state the three bedrock essentials again. They are belief in:

- A personal Creator God
- Divine judgment
- The divinity of Jesus.

Now, with all that in mind, let's take a look at the causes of secularisation in Australia.

There are many competing theories. I want to start with three possible causes that do not make my list. These factors are not irrelevant, but I regard them as secondary – even minor.

Multiculturalism

It could be said – “Roy, you were born in 1963 and so grew up the era of multiculturalism in Australia. The three waves of post-WWII immigration changed Australia irrevocably – and this has harmed Christianity.”

What do I say to that?

It is true that since World War Two *mainline Protestant* Christianity has been diluted. It is also true that people of non-Christian faiths now comprise a not insignificant portion of the Australian population. But it is still a relatively small proportion – according to the 2011 census, 7%. The biggest three faiths are Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism – roughly 2% each. So let us keep things in perspective.

I would also say this.

Australia has *always* been a multicultural society – the great social commentator Donald Horne made this point passionately.⁷ From the very beginning in 1788 our population was a roiling mix of English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Jewish and Indigenous. The divisions between Protestants and Catholics; between Anglicans and non-conformists; between the free settlers and emancipists; between the Europeans and the Indigenous, were every bit as strong as any that exist today. Religion still endured – indeed thrived.

⁷ Donald Horne, *10 Steps to a more tolerant Australia* (Penguin Books, 2003), p. 81 ('the "settlement" of Australia was a multicultural experience long before the word was invented').

I would also stress that post-World War Two multiculturalism was actively facilitated by the Christian Churches – especially, in the initial stages, the Catholic Church.⁸

Furthermore, by and large, the Churches in Australia have an excellent record on issues of race: especially on Indigenous issues.⁹

Did you know that it was largely Christian missionaries, and other passionate Christian voices, who saved the Indigenous population from total extinction? Almost all competent historians now accept this. I will quote the words of one of them, Robert Kenny:

In the mid-nineteenth century a *secular* belief in a future for Aboriginal Australians, or a right to that future, was difficult to find. Those who believed in such a future were driven not by visions of ‘democratic equality’, still less by ‘Enlightenment’ philosophy, but by dogged Christian faith.¹⁰

More recently, the Australian churches have had an honourable record on matters affecting immigrants and asylum-seekers and foreign aid.

So there is no dichotomy at all between multiculturalism and Christian belief.

As to non-Christian religions, it cannot be denied that there are very real differences between them. Even so, I’d suggest that believing Christians have rather more in common with people of other faiths than with people of no religion at all.

The Churches’ perceived hostility to women

Let us move to another hot-button topic.

It could be said – “Roy, you are a man. Christianity is a patriarchal religion. Of course modern women are not interested in it!”

A prominent Australian atheist, Jane Caro, typifies this mindset. She recently quipped: “The idea that women are fully human is something man-made religions seem to struggle with.”¹¹

⁸ See Edmund Campion, *Australian Catholics* (Penguin, 1987), pp. 176-84.

⁹ See Williams, *Post-God Nation?* pp. 51-57, 157-69.

¹⁰ Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming Nathanael Pepper and the ruptured world* (Scribe, 2007), p. 30. See generally John Harris, *One Blood: 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity – a story of hope* (2nd edition, Albatross Books, 1994), a superb book.

¹¹ Jane Caro, in Caro, Anthony Loewenstein, Simon Smart and Rachel Woodlock, *For God’s Sake: An atheist, a Jew, a Christian & a Muslim debate religion* (Pan Macmillan Australia, 2013).

The first thing I would say in response is that women's rights as we know them began with Christianity. That's a multi-faceted historical argument¹² and I'm happy to elaborate later in question time if need be.

Today, it is true that there are several controversial issues of Christian doctrine peculiarly affecting women – female ordination, contraception, divorce, and abortion, for example. It is also true that over the decades the stances taken on these issues by many of the Churches have been a “turn off” for some women.

But as a major cause of secularisation this argument runs into a blunt demographic fact: 60% of practising Christians in Australia today are women, mostly educated women.¹³ And – at least since the mid nineteenth century – Australian women have been better churchgoers than men.

If “sexism” were a core problem, you would expect the Churches to be full of men. They are not. They never have been.

The plain fact is that religious women do not think in the way their secular sisters believe they ought. Take three of the absolute giants of early Australian history – Elizabeth Macarthur, who was *the* key person in the founding of the local wool industry; Caroline Chisholm, perhaps our greatest ever charity-worker; and Mary Mackillop, our only official saint – all three of them were extremely devout Christians.¹⁴ So were most of the suffragettes, who fought successfully for votes for Australian women in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵

They would all have been surprised to be told that their Christian beliefs were somehow incompatible with their status as achieving women. To the contrary, they repeatedly said that their achievements were motivated or made possible by their faith.

Another point worth stressing is this. In respect of all the really controversial issues today – female ordination, abortion and so on – the Australian Churches themselves have held a range of positions down the years. Many religious women (and men) have fought for

¹² For an introduction to the historical arguments, see Edwin Judge, *Engaging Rome and Jerusalem: Historical Essays for our Time* (selected and edited by Stuart Piggin, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014), pp. 199-226.

¹³ Australian National Church Life Survey 2011, available online at www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6988.

¹⁴ See Williams, *Post-God Nation?* pp. 46-48 (Elizabeth Macarthur), 48-51 (Caroline Chisholm) and 132-33 (Mary Mackillop).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 135-37. See generally Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A gift or a struggle?* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

change from within – and they are still doing so.¹⁶ None of these things need be absolute show stoppers.

The child sex abuse scandal

We now come to a third hot-button issue: perhaps for some of you it is the elephant in the room.

One religious commentator, Michael Hogan, has suggested that “if anything has affected belief and unbelief over the last twenty years, surely it has been the stream of headlines about clergy misconduct”.¹⁷

I disagree. But please do not misunderstand me.

Unquestionably the abuses and the cover-ups within all the major churches were morally indefensible. Disgusting, in fact. The Churches have provided their critics with powerful ammunition.

Unquestionably, too, the ongoing fallout from this scandal makes the Churches’ task harder today – as institutions, they have seriously undermined their own authority, especially on issues of sex, gender and personal morality. That is a huge shame because the Churches have always played a most valuable role in shaping social policy in this country.¹⁸ On a whole raft of issues, from alcohol consumption to pornography to working hours, they have been a tempering, cautionary voice, and have often been proved right – I would ask you to scan page 7 of handout C.

This ongoing child sex abuse scandal is a huge black mark against institutional religion. But the evidence does not establish that it has been a major cause of secularisation.

For a start, it was not public knowledge until the 1990s. Indeed, the full extent of the problems was not known until very recently, and the trend toward secularisation had well and truly set in before then - decades ago, in the 1960s, if not earlier.

I would also add this thought, which is very sobering – studies conducted in Ireland show that a good many victims of abuse emerged *strengthened* in their personal religious faith,

¹⁶ See, for example, Muriel Porter, *The New Puritans: The rise of fundamentalism in the Anglican Church* (Melbourne University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Michael Hogan, ‘Is Australia losing its religion?’ (*Australian Review of Public Affairs*, November 2009).

¹⁸ Williams, *Post-God Nation?* pp. 154-57.

albeit understandably hostile to religious institutions. In the words of Irish writer Susan Shooter, “They experience the authentic spirituality of the annihilated soul”.¹⁹

I believe the child sex abuse scandal is not so much a cause of secularisation as yet another proof – if any were needed – of the reality of human evil.

The “Big Four” Factors

I am now going to look at what I think are the four most important factors in the Secular Juggernaut. It is hard to place them in any order of importance. But in combination, they have created a “perfect storm”.

Ignorance

Most people in Australia today simply do not know much about Christianity – or any religion. The well-educated professional classes are no exception.

Who or what is to blame for this state of affairs?

In a nutshell: the education system. At least two generations of Australian children have grown up without any proper teaching about religion – and here I include myself, schooled in the 1970s and early 80s. To tackle the Big Questions, you need at least a basic grounding in theology, philosophy, ethics, science and history.

Let us be honest: there are many religious issues that are genuinely puzzling. Sceptics often ask tough questions – and I can understand why! Here are three I’ve often been asked – and used to ask myself. If God exists, why isn’t he obvious to everyone? If human beings are central to God’s plan, why is the Universe so vast and so old? Why would a loving God permit so much suffering and evil?

All of these questions – and many others – have been tackled by the finest human minds for over 3,000 years. It is worth *everyone’s* while to know what answers have been proposed.

Today, about two-thirds of Australian children are educated in State schools. The plain truth is that, at both the primary and secondary levels, these schools are largely religion-free. This is despite the best efforts of SRE volunteers in all states and territories. In Victoria, such volunteers have now been banned altogether from teaching inside school hours.

The remaining one-third of Australian children are educated in private schools. Most of these schools are run by the churches. But going to a church school is no longer any guarantee of a decent religious education either. There are honourable exceptions, of

¹⁹ Susan Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God* (Ashgate, 2012).

course. But religious tokenism is common, especially at the wealthy end of the Protestant system.

Sadly, the Churches must bear a lot of blame – not only for tokenism in their schools today, but for the condition of government schools. All roads lead back to the “education debates” of the latter nineteenth century.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Churches had sole care and conduct of education in the Australian colonies. In tough circumstances, they did a valiant job. However, as a result of a steadily rising population, accelerated by the gold rushes of the 1850s, the Churches no longer had the resources to cope. Government schools became a practical necessity in order that all children would get an education.

Almost everyone agreed that state education needed to become free and compulsory. But few people wanted state schools to become “secular” in the sense of religion-free – that is a modern myth.²⁰

The real problem was that the Churches could not agree amongst themselves on what form of Christianity should be taught in state schools. Protestant-Catholic sectarianism was rife – often vicious. Reasonable attempts at compromise were rejected. In the end, politicians took the easiest option: religion was removed from the state school curriculum in all but superficial ways.

The effects were masked in the medium term by other factors, including a very strong Sunday school system until the 1970s. But in recent decades, a situation has arisen where most Australian children do not receive any decent teaching about religion, either at home or at school. By the time they are adults, the die is cast.

So it's no wonder that rates of unbelief are skyrocketing.

As the apostle Paul said way back in the year 57 AD, in his letter to the Romans: “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14)

What is the answer?

One is this: the Churches, I believe, should give religion a much higher priority in their own schools. They teach a disproportionate number of our future leaders. As for state schools, somehow Christians as a collective group must convince the powers-that-be that religion

²⁰ See generally, but with particular reference to the colony of Victoria, Gwyneth M. Dow, *George Higinbotham: Church and State* (Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1964). See also – though I regard the author's central thesis as flawed – Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The end of Australia's egalitarian education?* (Allen & Unwin, 2014), pp. 27-55.

should become a compulsory, examinable part of the school curriculum, taught by professional teachers – in primary and secondary schools. I would include instruction on all major religions, not just Christianity.

It would have to be non-confessional religion, of course, but it would be a huge advance on the present. That is the only way to give all Australian children a fair chance to make up their own minds about religion in an informed way.

It is a simple matter of a fair go for all.

As for adults, I suspect most people need to do some honest soul-searching. Am I rejecting a straw man version of “Christianity”? That was so in my case. It may be in yours.

If so, the only course of action is to educate yourself in the basics – and then see if you get interested!

Perhaps, first up, you do not want to go to a church. For me it was a revelation just reading the four biographies of Jesus known as the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But possibly, for you, the Bible itself looks too forbidding. For a crash course in theology, there are many fine works that are accessible and entertaining, but not dumbed-down – C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, for example, was a book that got me thinking.

So were various books about the historicity of the events described in the New Testament²¹, and especially Jesus’ Resurrection²², including Frank Morison’s 1930 classic, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Morison set out to write a book *disproving* the Resurrection, and ended up a Christian.)

I will just say this, as a former agnostic leaning towards atheism: Christianity won me over initially because it makes sense of the world. In particular, it makes sense of history – the history of the West, of Britain, and of Australia.

Let me mention just one example from Australian history.

Lachlan Macquarie was the governor of NSW from 1810-21. He is generally acknowledged as the “second father of Australia”. Why? Because he insisted that convicts, once they had been emancipated, should be as free as anyone else to make their way in society. He also began to build infrastructure. Under his ground-breaking leadership – which was bitterly

²¹ See generally Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986). Barnett is an Australian and this book is punchy and compelling.

²² The magnum opus is N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, 2003).

criticised by the snobs and penny-pinchers of his day – NSW went from a penal colony, pure and simple, to a nascent free society.

Macquarie was an evangelical Christian. In the words of one of his biographers, he “[harboured] deep within him ... a cardinal faith, augmented by [his wife] Elizabeth, in a Christianity imbued with the eternal themes of atonement, absolution and redemption, as well as with the belief that all human creatures were equal in the sight of God.”²³

Ignorance is a big factor but it’s far from the only one. Plenty of people down the ages have been adequately educated in Christianity, but have still rejected it.

The core reason is that they have chosen different objects of worship – things of this world. They may not have made this choice consciously, but they have made it nonetheless.

War and nationalism

This is the second of my “Big Four” factors in explaining the Secular Juggernaut.

I mentioned earlier the fact that 60% of churchgoers in Australia are women. The first significant drop in measured levels of religious affiliation and commitment in Australia occurred in the 1920s, and, overwhelmingly, it was men rather than women who lapsed.²⁴ Why? The decline can be traced to a specific historical event: World War One.

That war was a catastrophe on almost every level. It was plainly avoidable and its short-term and long-term consequences were terrible. Pope Benedict XV in 1914 rightly called it “the suicide of civilized Europe”. But Benedict was a rarity – most church leaders in all countries, including Australia, strongly supported the war throughout and led prayers for the destruction of the other side.²⁵

²³ John Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie: A biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1986), p. 134.

²⁴ Roger C. Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A history* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 96; Frame, *Losing My Religion*, p. 62. See generally on the “feminisation” of Australian religious culture after World War One, Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia: A cultural history of religions* (Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 111ff.

²⁵ The Australian Churches committed other blunders during World War One: virulent sectarianism during the conscription debates of 1916-17; the spectacle of able-bodied clerics failing to enlist, even as chaplains, while sanctimoniously urging others to do so; a thoroughly misconceived campaign of moral wowsers in conjunction with the war effort. See Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and activities of the major churches 1914-1918* (Catholic Theological Faculty and Australian War Memorial, 1980); cf. Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Openbook Publishers, 2000).

What was even worse, the Australian Churches, Protestant and Catholic, largely repeated these mistakes during World War Two and then again during the Vietnam War.

You may ask: how did this harm the cause of religion, especially among men? The answers are complex, and disputed, but I will proffer a few ideas.

Most obviously, it was twentieth-century Australian men – much more so than women – who witnessed the horrors of war first-hand, as combatants overseas.

And yet the story is not as simple as that. Let's also remember this:

- It almost always men who start wars and fight wars
- Men are more inclined than women to see “national honour” or “national security” as a primary goal of public policy
- Men are more inclined than women to see violence as an effective solution to conflict between nation-states
- Men are *much* more inclined than women to sanction the use of lethal force against defenceless civilian populations – this was the most ghastly legacy of World War Two

By buying into this mindset – as the Churches did through most of the twentieth century – they gradually lost their moral authority. They lost it most especially among the segment of the population who identify as “anti-war” – the idealistic Left. Vietnam was a turning point.

²⁶ Many people saw religious hypocrisy, and thought it repugnant.

One of my heroes, the great Australian Methodist Alan Walker, who opposed the Vietnam War, once said this: “I respect those who say the teachings of Jesus won't work in today's world, but I cannot accept the attempts to twist the teachings of Jesus to support war”.²⁷

Jesus was quite unambiguous. He exhorted us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to put away the sword (Matthew 26:52). So did the Old Testament prophet Micah.

For the first 300 years after Jesus' death, His followers obeyed these injunctions strictly – Christians spread their new faith throughout the Roman Empire without the use of force of

²⁶ See Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian war* (HarperCollins, 2007), esp. p. 277 ('this great movement wrenched Western society from its settled anchorage').

²⁷ Quoted most recently by a letter writer to *The Australian*, Geoffrey Hinds, on 29 October 2015: available online at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/letters/abbotts-london-speech-gives-hope-to-europeans/story-fn558imw-1227585879301>

any kind, though plenty of lethal force was used against them.²⁸ I think that is one of the most amazing facts of human history, and a kind of proof of the truth of Christianity itself.

Of course, things changed. Pacifism – or even strict application of Christian “just war” theory – came to be seen as dangerous eccentricity. Now, you might ask, why was that a core problem for *religion*? The perception of hypocrisy was one factor, but I think there was another, even more basic.

Back in 1914, here in Australia, a handful of visionary churchmen identified it. They issued a petition cautioning against a jingoistic rush to war. They envisaged a world in which “patriotism is the virtue which takes the place of Christian Brotherhood; the State replaces God; and the National flag replaces the Cross. Its supreme law is not the law of God, but the military safety of the country.”²⁹

Back in 1914 the jingoists had a slogan – “The Empire right or wrong!” The position is similar in Australia today. Nationalism rules. There is nothing wrong with concerned, constructive love of country, like a parent’s for a child. But far too often it’s just cheerleading: “Australia right or wrong!” The protection of the Australian nation, and Australians’ material prosperity, and Australians’ self-regard, is the supreme goal of public policy.

More generally, it is expected that a citizen’s ultimate loyalty is not to his or her conscience but to the nation, or to some other “team” – a political party or a business or a trade union, say.

People of faith must push back against this all-pervasive mindset.

Scientism

This is the third of my “Big Four” factors in the Secular Juggernaut.

Scientism must be distinguished from the scientific method. It cannot be emphasised enough that the scientific method – empirical reasoning, tested by experiment – was and is

²⁸ The most celebrated historian of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon (1737-94), attributed the rise of Christianity to non-miraculous causes. Chief among them, he argued, was the astoundingly pacific and benevolent conduct of the early Christians. See *The Christians and the Fall of Rome* (Penguin Books, 1994).

²⁹ Quoted in McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, p. 153.

a wonderful long-term product of Christianity.³⁰ In Handout A - Christianity's secular legacy to the West - it sits at the top of my list.

It is also worth remembering that, until very recently, most of the world's greatest scientists were serious practising Christians. The men who invented science as we know it – Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Lavoisier, Jenner, Pasteur, Lister, to name a few – were all in that category. So was Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian priest, who was the first to propound the Big Bang theory.

And so also, by the way, were many of Australia's greatest scientists since 1788.³¹

The problem nowadays is that the amazing success of the scientific method has given rise to the idea that science is the *only* reliable source of knowledge.

In Australia today, what I call “scientism” encompasses a number of interrelated notions. They are often fostered in the mainstream media:

- First, the notion that that the Universe is purposeless: it consists of physical matter – transient collections of atoms guided by mindless, impersonal forces – and nothing else.
- Second, the notion that belief in the supernatural has been rendered untenable, indeed ridiculous. The afterlife, the soul, miracles, even human free-will – all are fantasies or illusions.
- Third, the notion that human beings are nothing special. In the words of Stephen Hawking, we are “just chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet”.
- Fourth, the overarching notion that modern science has disproved the Bible in key respects and generally superseded all theistic religion – there is no longer any need to invoke God to explain anything

Now, I have to admit that for years I was an adherent of this mindset myself – albeit largely unconsciously. It was because I did not know nearly enough about science.

It was reading more about science that first got me seriously interested in religion. And I soon learned that all four of those notions I have just listed – and others besides – are open to very serious question.

³⁰ See, for a short introduction to this massive subject, John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has science buried God?* (Lion Hudson, 2009), pp. 20-26. See further Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How monotheism led to reformation, science, witch-hunts, and the end of slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2003); Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³¹ See Williams, *Post-God Nation?* pp. 263-66.

Take free will, for example. Honest atheists will admit that the logical end point of their belief system is that there is no such thing.³² Each of us may imagine that we decide what we do, and do not do, but it's really an illusion. There is no "You" doing the deciding. Now, that's a very strange, counterintuitive idea. Among many other things, it undermines the whole notion of morality, of right and wrong. It renders illogical our system of law and justice, which is based on the assumption that individuals can *legitimately* be held accountable for their conduct.

As a matter of fact, science does *not* prove that free will is an illusion.³³ But science does prove many incredible, awe-inspiring things. In my opinion, some of the best arguments for the existence of God are based on the findings of modern science – cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology.

Now, I can well understand that some of you may be sceptical. If so, a book I would especially recommend is one published in 2007 by a distinguished Englishman named Antony Flew. For much of the twentieth century, Flew was the equivalent of Richard Dawkins. The title of his book speaks for itself: *There Is a God – How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind*. For Flew, the strongest arguments for the existence of a designing God centre on DNA, especially human DNA. It is just too intricate and too utterly extraordinary a substance to have arisen by unguided evolutionary processes.

I have barely scratched the surface here. But it's an utterly fascinating field of enquiry.

Prosperity

We have now reached the fourth and last of my "big four" factors: prosperity. Let me repeat that: prosperity. Material affluence. In my judgement, this may be the biggest factor of all.

Australia in 2015 is one of the richest societies in the history of humankind. There has been a threefold increase in real personal income since 1950 – in *real* terms, I stress.

It has been the same, more or less, throughout the affluent West – and it is no coincidence that it is in the West where Christianity is in decline. On the other hand, Christianity is gaining ground in many of the less affluent parts of the world: Asia, Africa, South America. Religion in general is strongest in the Second and Third Worlds.

³² See, for example, Sam Harris, *Free Will* (Free Press, 2012).

³³ See Alfred R. Mele, *Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

What are the links between prosperity and secularisation? There are various factors at play, I think.

One is that material comfort acts as a kind of spiritual soporific – the more pleasant this life, the less focus on the life to come.

A second factor is much increased life expectancy – for most people in the West, there is a reduced consciousness of death until old age. Comparatively few people in the West die young nowadays – a big change even from the early twentieth century, let alone earlier eras.

A third factor is sheer distraction – technology has created a world where there is far less time for quiet, uninterrupted contemplation.

But at core it's a question of personal priorities. I know realise that when I was a partner at a big commercial law firm, earning a lot of money, my own priorities became skewed. And my health badly suffered too.

It was the Apostle Paul who warned that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley observed that true religion “must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches”. That certainly happened in Australia – many of our greatest businessmen and philanthropists have been staunch Christians, steeped in the Protestant work ethic.

But the risk is that religion thus sows the seeds of its own destruction. “As riches persist,” Wesley added, “so will pride, anger and love of the world”.³⁴

I would throw in selfishness, envy – and lack of thankfulness. These, sadly, are extremely prevalent mindsets in Australia today, at all income levels. We hear it every day. “I deserve all that I own! I've earned it by my own efforts! In fact, I deserve more than I'm getting!”

What is the answer? I confess I have diminishing faith in any of the major political parties – increasingly they seem amoral, untrustworthy, technocratic, poll-driven.

And we would all be disinclined to wish on Australia and the West an economic catastrophe – though one may well come, dwarfing the GFC.

The answers are surely spiritual. With each year that passes, I am more and more convinced that it is personally-felt Christian faith which is the best insulator against inequality and

³⁴ Quoted in Frame, *Losing My Religion*, p. 9.

greed, and the best encourager of charity and compassion. Why? Because Christianity, at its purest and best, addresses the core moral issues.

Indeed, it seems to me that some of the core truths of Christianity – as stated in the Bible – are its best defence against all the main factors in the Secular Juggernaut.

Prosperity? – Well, it was Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount who rightly insisted that a man cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). He also commanded, a few verses earlier, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-10). In other words: you can’t take it with you. The state of your eternal soul is what counts.

War? – Again, it was Jesus who rejected physical violence as an answer to anything; and for 300 years Christians eschewed violence, even in the face of persecution and torture. Tens of thousands were martyred. They obeyed Jesus’ injunction to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:29).

Nationalism? – Jesus warned strongly against nationalistic self-righteousness and stereotyping. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) addressed these vices directly – one of the lesser-known features of that parable is that the Samaritan was a *foreigner* from a distrusted nearby land. And it was the Apostle Paul made what may be the most counter-cultural, cosmopolitan and anti-nationalistic of all pronouncements: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Christianity if it is to mean anything must transcend national borders.

Scientism? – Well, I think scientism is just a subset of ignorance. So ultimately any solution goes back to the education system. Australian children and university students need to be taught much more about science – the established facts and theories, of course. But also the history of science; and the limits of science; and the *implications* of what science does, actually, prove. They should be informed of these words of Johannes Kepler, the discoverer of the laws of planetary motion: “The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order which has been imposed on it by God.”

Ignorance in general? – The only cure for ignorance is knowledge. The Bible rightly says that “fools despise wisdom and instruction”. But that same Bible verse – Proverbs 1:7 – hits the nail on the head. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”.

I am sure that is right, but I am also sure that in the end hope should trump fear.

In concluding, I would like to quote a few lines from a poem by Bruce Smith, the man after whom this lecture is named. Among other things he was a distinguished poet. This is the final stanza of his poem “Being Elsewhere”:

It’s heaven itself—
the absence of fear,
the reign of love
and the prospect of bliss,
that moves our hearts
in a world like this.

Bruce Smith knew that hope is produced by genuine belief in the good news about Jesus – the Gospel.

But before anyone can have genuine belief in the Gospel you must understand it properly. Jesus’ very last instruction to the Apostles was to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) – in other words, to teach people.

Let us all go out tonight in that spirit – as teachers, with loving conviction; as seekers, with a truly open mind.