

## Religious Freedom v. Sexual Discrimination

Report on ASSA Workshop: Religion and Sexual Politics in Postsecular Australia,  
30 September – 1 October 2013

Australia is one of the more secular societies in the world today. We have no established church and 'no-religion' is the fastest growing category of religious affiliation in the census. Yet despite this secularisation, or perhaps because of it, conflict over religion in Australia shows no sign of abating. Religious tensions have been particularly evident in the field of sexual politics. As social and cultural attitudes about marriage, family, and sexual identity have shifted, ostensible conflicts have emerged between religious liberty and sexual discrimination. Simultaneously, it has become apparent that the relationship between religion and sexual politics in Australia is not well understood. Models used to explain the nexus of religious and sexual discrimination in other places, such as Europe and the USA, are not well suited to the Australian context.

A workshop held at La Trobe University on 30 September and 1 October 2013 brought together a number of scholars researching the intersection of religion and sexual politics in Australia. The aim of the workshop was to shed new light on the relationship between religious freedom and sexual discrimination in Australia compared with the wider world, through the analytical frame of the 'postsecular'.

Until recently, much scholarship in the humanities and social sciences was heavily influenced by the 'secularisation thesis,' the idea that a decline of religious belief and influence is concomitant to modernisation. This understanding of secularisation was dominant from its inception in the work of nineteenth-century pioneering sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Over the last decade, however, the secularisation thesis has been subject to mounting critique. Outside some parts of Western Europe and Australasia, religion does not seem to be in decline. Secularising societies might even be viewed as an exception to, rather than the vanguard of, modernity. And even within apparently secular societies, religious faith, practices and conflict persist, and religion continues to be influential.

Scholars of religion have begun to use the term 'postsecular' to describe the place of religion in the contemporary world, and also to understand the continuing influence of religion in secularised states. 'Postsecular' has been used in three main ways. Firstly, to describe the return and resurgence of religion in societies that were once secular. Secondly, to describe a political theory by which previously excluded religious voices can be included in public debate. And thirdly, to describe a mode of analysis that is divorced from the 'secularisation thesis' – the question of religious decline – and rather researches how the religious (and nonreligious) functions in particular social and cultural contexts.

These three approaches to the postsecular each provide new ways to understand the continued influence of religion in contemporary Australian sexual politics. At the workshop, they were applied to five areas of contest between religious and sexual freedom.

The first area of contest was understandings of child sexual abuse in religious institutions. While there is considerable evidence of long history of widespread abuse in many religious institutions, this abuse only emerged as an urgent social problem in Australia in the 1990s. Responses to abuse since that time have repeatedly been judged as inadequate, leading to the present Royal Commission. Papers explored the relationship between church and state

authorities in opening or closing discussion and policing of abuse, and the significance of religious gender roles in the churches' maintenance of secrecy. Shurlee Swain, for example, argued that a key development in victims of abuse being heard was the development of new ways of talking about what had happened to them. Traditional religious understandings of sexual sin limited the capacity of survivors of abuse to protest by making them accomplices in the 'sin'. Feminist articulations of sexual politics from the 1970s provided a language for survivors to position themselves as innocent victims, exceeding the limits of religious understandings of sin. This equipped survivors to resist the attempts of those in authority to silence their complaints.

The second area was the continuation of religion's influence on the politics of censorship. For the past forty years, censorship in Australia has been implemented on the basis of community standards, rather than fixed moral or religious values. The papers in this session showed how religious ideas have persisted in an apparently secularised domain of sexual regulation. Brian Simpson, for example, argued that discussions of childhood sexual innocence, framed through the imperatives of 'rescue' and 'salvation', have strengthened the place of religion in contemporary definitions of childhood. Helen Pringle argued that critiques of pornography have been ineffective because of their unconscious association with Christian Puritanism. She suggested that a more secular approach grounded in conceptions of human dignity might have more purchase. Zora Simic, on the other hand, suggested that Western representations of Pussy Riot and Femen as a new wave of radical feminism have been inadequate to the extent that they fail to appreciate these groups' postsecular context: the post-Communist revitalisation of state sanctioned Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The third area was the role of religion in the public regulation of homosexuality. Alpha Possamai-Inesedy, Bryan Turner and Gary Bouma explored the ways in which explicitly religious views on gay marriage could be articulated in public debate. They questioned whether the inclusion of religious and spiritual arguments in public debate enhanced the democratic process in negotiating social change, or whether it is ultimately divisive. Can a postsecular political process, in which all voices may be included, contain seemingly incommensurable attitudes towards gay marriage and religious freedom? Similar radically opposing views dominate discussions of the so-called 'ex-gay movement' in Australia. Rather than attempting to reconcile or contain them, however, Tim Jones analysed the role of gay conversion therapy in Australia, arguing that rather than turning gay people straight, its main function has been to bolster and maintain particular conservative religious understandings of heterosexual relationships.

The fourth area was the role of religion in the politics of reproduction. Discussion compared the regulation of reproduction in Christianity and Islam. By comparing the reproductive politics of two different religious traditions, operating in secularised and religious contexts, the papers emphasised the complex and unexpected roles that sexual regulation can play in religious politics. Cath Kevin analysed how the ostensibly secular legal debates about miscarriage and assault have been co-opted by anti-abortion advocates to bolster religious arguments for foetal personhood. By contrast, Kate Gleeson showed how, for the religious right in Australia, abortion politics have been less about the rights of the foetus, and more a powerful cipher for socialism and atheism in a long running culture war with roots in the politics of the Cold War. Lisa Wynn, Shakira Hussein and Alia Imtoul presented contrasting and much more plastic relationships between religion and reproductive regulation in Islamic groups. While, especially in Western contexts, Islamic rhetoric around sexual regulation can appear similar to conservative Christian discourse, its ethical basis varies considerably. For

example, hymenoplasty and abortion are permissible in Islamic societies. They are regulated not as unlawful acts, but because they are regarded as mechanisms by which women may conceal the evidence of sexual transgression.

The final area contrasted attitudes towards religious and sexual education in schools. Australian public schools were shaped in the nineteenth century around the principals of free, compulsory and secular education. These principals have been repeatedly tested in developments in religious instruction and sex education. Daniel Marshall relayed the history of conservative Christian opposition to sex education in public schools and their uses of media to articulate this opposition in the 1970s and 1980s. Anna Halafoff showed how a focus on the impact of predominantly Christian Special Religious Instruction on religious minorities has obscured the significant impact of these programs on LGBTIQ young people. Mary Lou Rasmussen provided a critique of the secular basis of the Australian education system, arguing that excluding religion from the mainstream syllabus removes it from effective critique.

In these five areas, the workshop complicated understandings of Australia as a secular society. It showed how religious ideas and movements continue to influence contemporary debates about education, censorship, reproduction and marriage. Ostensibly secular language – in education syllabuses or abortion law reform debates – does not mean that religious dynamics are not at work. It also showed how religious sexual politics respond to changes in wider contexts, or function in counterintuitive ways. Religious opposition to abortion, ostensibly about the rights of the ‘unborn child’, could function as cipher for anti-communism, or as a means to regulate women’s sexual freedom. Finally, participants questioned whether religious and sexual freedom is best maintained by the exclusion of explicitly religious arguments from public debate. Excluding discussions of religion – from law reform or education syllabuses – paradoxically privileges the religious by placing it beyond critique. Researching religion through a postsecular analysis provides a way to bring religion back into critical view.