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Jul 15, 2019 by Scott Blakemore, Jane Andrews

“Disagreeing Better:” Religious Discourse in Australia [1]

Australia's 2016 census revealed that the “no religion” category was growing rapidly. In 2006, only 19 percent of Australians identified as having no religion, but in 2016 that number had jumped dramatically to 30 percent.

For a country that is increasingly identifying as non-religious, religion has made up a large part of discourse in Australian society recently. The divisive same-sex marriage survey still resonates with many Australians. Overt anti-Islamic displays from Australia's far-right parties, including one senator wearing full Islamic dress to call for a “burka ban,” drew a mixed response from Australian communities.

More recently, in 2018, Australia saw yet another change in leadership which prepared the nation for an election that produced unexpected results. The threat of Islamophobic parties, debates on religious freedoms, vocal support from the local church, and an openly religious

prime minister saw issues of faith monopolize many conversations.

Misunderstanding these conversations is dangerous. When religion is understood as a driver of culture in that it informs the identity of many, it becomes a valuable consideration in public diplomacy.

For effective public diplomacy, Philip Seib suggests (in his edited text *Religion and Public Diplomacy*), the elements of culture, including religion, must be a central feature of the construction and implementation of public diplomacy.

Fundamental to public diplomacy, as proposed by Nicholas Cull, is that public diplomacy begins with listening. Then, from this position, public diplomacy finds its place in policy and seeks credibility to be successful. The challenges of secularization mean that including religion in policy is problematic, but Australia's current environment show that these basic lessons of public diplomacy have been forgotten.

To see these lessons remembered, the prime minister is uniquely positioned to gauge the religious discourse and promote credible policies that manage the current challenges.

When Scott Morrison first became prime minister in 2018, his religious beliefs were brought into the spotlight to see how his beliefs might impact his leadership.

While Morrison has been careful to make a distinction between his faith and his politics, even stating in his maiden speech, "my personal faith in Jesus Christ is not a political agenda," his economic, immigration and social policies are critiqued as being influenced by his religious disposition.

Most recently, this has been evident in policies surrounding religious freedom and religious discrimination. In a nation that increasingly doesn't recognize religion as a significant factor in society, Morrison's 2019 re-election suggests that religion may still have a role in Australian politics.

Understanding some of the core principles of public diplomacy, namely listening, engagement, dialogue and credibility, will allow for religion to play a more constructive role than it currently is.

In a Trump-like election win, low income, low education and the Christian religion were all factors that gave a swing to the Coalition. From this, Morrison thanked these so-called "quiet Australians" for their vote.

The prime minister made religion a more approachable issue throughout his election, and this captured the attention of the electorate. The presence of a religious prime minister has given religious civil society a voice to reengage in discourse, as is evident in the case of Israel Folau's battle with Rugby Australia.

Israel Folau's contract with Rugby Australia was terminated on grounds of bringing the sport

into disrepute and breaching contract after posting to social media a paraphrased scripture stating that LGBTIQ+ people were sinners.

This event has sparked heated debate in Australia about competing freedoms of religion and expression. The Bishop of South Sydney Michael Stead remarked that this may impact how religious people express themselves at work and more secular commentators have called for clarity in codes of conduct surrounding social media posts.

Politically, MPs have pushed for a "Folau's Law" to exclude religion from employment contracts. Others have called for an Australian Law Review Commission into religious freedoms or a Religious Discrimination Act which would make anti-discrimination more prominent.

Folau's prominence in rugby has allowed secular Australians to engage in religious discussions surrounding freedom of speech. The resultant political action shows that the Morrison government is listening and, at the very least, considering the construction of policy.

As is the case with most soft power strategies, and an issue that has plagued many religious institutions throughout history, credibility remains a compelling factor of the Australian discourse.

The same religious institutions that helped the Morrison government win the election have seen declining rates of attendance after the sentencing of George Pell, a high-profile Catholic cardinal convicted of child sexual abuse.

Lay members of the church have called for greater accountability. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse proposed reforms for the Catholic Church and the Church has proposed measures in response. The highly-publicized sentencing of Cardinal Pell has also led to other reform conversations, including the inclusion of female roles, as the Royal Commission recommends.

These recommendations show that the discourse is being heard, but the policies are yet to fully form, and the damaged credibility strains the potential for effective dialogue. The Royal Commission, a secular initiative, has provided a landscape for transparent discussions on the role of religious institutions in protecting vulnerable people.

While this has sparked conversation and promoted the protection of individuals, there is still a need to manage the damaged reputation of religious institutions to see this area of civil society engage more effectively in Australia's political landscape.

Even in the presence of a growing "no religion" population in Australia, religious discourse remains potent in Australian society. Understanding some of the core principles of public diplomacy, namely listening, engagement, dialogue and credibility, will allow for religion to play a more constructive role than it currently is.

In his first speech following re-election in May 2019, the Pentecostal prime minister urged, "we must disagree better... lead discussion in a better way—disagree on things, but at the same time work together." From the perspective of public diplomacy, he certainly is correct.
