

2000 Presidential Address

‘With Hope in God’ - Religion, the Preamble Debate and Public Values in Australia

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The 1998 Constitutional Convention, held in Old Parliament House between 2 and 13 February 1998, had as its main task to determine a republican model to be put to a referendum. However, it also addressed the suggestion that a constitutional change as fundamental as the shift to a republic would require, or at least provide a good opportunity for, reviewing the constitutional Preamble. The Convention recommended that there should be a new Preamble, containing, *inter alia*, ‘reference to “Almighty God”’¹.

When the Preamble and republic questions were tested at the November 1999 referendum, the people voted a resounding ‘no’ to both. An observer of secular Australia might expect that the mention of God in the Preamble would be a significant contributing factor in its rejection. In fact, however, public debate in the period leading up to the referendum showed negligible interest in the phrase ‘With hope in God’², focusing instead on a range of matters including the draft Preamble’s statements on Indigenous peoples and returned armed service personnel. What little objection there was to God’s mention tended to be made on religious rather than anti-religious grounds (eg Murray, 1999; McGillion, 1999). The lack of public debate might indicate either indifference or acceptance of the phrase; it is hard to read it as an expression of hostility.

In the near-silence in which the proposed God reference was greeted, the main clue to how the phrase stood in the public mind is the debates at the Constitutional Convention itself. The debates which led to this recommendation provide perplexing evidence about the esteem in which religion is held in turn-of-the-century Australia. Exploring the perplexities reveals much about religion’s public significance in this highly-secular milieu.

The existing (1901) Preamble begins:

Whereas the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth ...

The Convention records reveal some confusion among delegates as to whether a new Preamble would replace the existing Preamble. Delegates repeatedly spoke of the recognition clause in any new Preamble in terms of ‘keeping God in’, as though the alternative were God’s removal³. In fact, the motion to which the Convention finally agreed included the statement that ‘the existing Preamble ... would remain intact’⁴. Thus, any new Preamble would be an addition, not a replacement. Despite Professor George Winterton’s repeated warnings that to have two Preambles, both referring to Almighty God, ‘would look ridiculous’ God seemed assured of doubled representation in any revised Constitution (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:796).

The constitutional second coming

From speeches in the Convention and writings after its conclusion, it is clear that some delegates regarded God’s inclusion as controversial, and the task of ensuring it as precarious. Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane Most Reverend Peter Hollingworth alerted the Convention to ‘a move to delete the God reference’, a sense that ‘people want it out’ and even the idea that ‘the reference to God is offensive’ (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:426). Rev. Tim Costello detected ‘quite a lot of debate’ about whether God should be retained, adding, almost defensively, ‘I think that is a very refreshing value’ (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:486). More militantly, former Senator and Republican Karin Sowada described the mood among Christian delegates:

Despite our differences, one issue on which we were all united was the maintenance of the words ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’ in the Preamble to the Constitution.

Alerted by a recent vote of the Constitutional Centenary Foundation to have this reference deleted, a number of us were conscious of a possible attempt to repeat this at the Convention. Some informal networking prior to the ConCon ensured that intelligence was shared so we were ready for the debate, and prepared with the numbers to work whatever committees were established to investigate the matter (Sowada, 1998:17).

But read the Convention’s *Transcript of Proceedings* and this edginess on the part of God’s self-designated defenders becomes perplexing. Whoever was advocating God’s removal must have done so behind the scenes; those who spoke on the record were unanimous for God’s inclusion. The only objections were that the so-called ‘recognition clause’⁵ is inappropriately narrow: critics wanted the Preamble to embrace more religion, not less. Delegates lined up to declare their enthusiasm for God. The Christian vanguard politics described by Ms Sowada were either unnecessary or extraordinarily effective.

God and the Covering Clauses

The Convention organised its debate on the Preamble around a number of themes. First, it considered the introductory, or ‘covering’, clauses. In that context, Australian Republican Movement delegate Ms Janet Holmes a Court asked:

Mr Chairman, ... we heard this morning ... that about 30 per cent of our population are not Anglo-Saxon. As a Christian who cannot take the step of believing in God and therefore is not allowed to be a Christian, I do not have difficulty with the words 'on the blessing of Almighty God'. But I wonder ... how Buddhists, Muslims, Aboriginal people and so on feel about having that. I do not want to take that out, but is it possible that some extra phrase could go in which is more inclusive? (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:425)

In at least two areas, Ms Holmes a Court's intervention set out ground which would become important as the debate progressed. First, she appealed to a statistic, '30 per cent of our population are not Anglo-Saxon'. The implication was that the non-Anglo 30 per cent would be the part of the population likely to have difficulty with God's inclusion. In fact, the non-Anglo-Saxon component of the population includes groups who are among the most devoutly Christian in the Australian community, such as Eastern and Oriental Orthodox and Roman Catholics from Vietnam, Italy, the Philippines, Malta and Croatia (Hughes 1997:49). A more apposite statistic would be that only between 70 and 75 per cent of Australians profess belief in God⁶, leaving somewhere between a quarter and a third outside the (mono)theist fold. Ms Holmes a Court might have argued that such a substantial body of non-believers should not be obliged to recognise God in their Constitution.

In fact, however, that argument was precluded by the second aspect of her intervention which was to be revisited throughout the Preamble debate. This was her insistence that she personally finds atheism no bar to 'relying on the blessing of Almighty God'. By placing the statistical argument alongside a statement of her own atheistic support for God, she set the agenda as intercultural sensitivity. Potential objections to the clause arise not from the absence of religious conviction, but from belief in some other kind of divine presence.

Spiritual wealth and citizens' rights

Another theme through which the Convention debated the Preamble was citizens' rights. A group chaired by Real Republican delegate Ms Moira Rayner proposed that the Preamble's recognition of rights should include acknowledging the nation's 'spiritual wealth':

We referred specifically in item (b) to the recognition of the spiritual wealth of people. That was to address the issue that you have all heard a number of statements of personal faith about this afternoon. That is an acknowledgment that, for the vast majority of Australians, we have a spiritual commitment which we reflect in many different ways and which in its own wealth and diversity is part of our treasury of the nation (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:435).

Like Ms Holmes a Court, she hastened to emphasise that the call was to strengthen rather than weaken the recognition clause:

We did not specifically adopt the language of 'humbly committing ourselves to

Almighty God' not because we rejected those words, but because we thought there should be discussion of the possibility of wider language to include those of other faiths entitled to equal respect in a nation which respects freedom of conscience, religious beliefs and expression.

Thus, in the discussions of the recognition clause examined so far, the only caveats to God's inclusion took a common form. Belying Christian delegates' fears, the call was not for less preambular religion, but for more. No one wanted to expunge 'Almighty God', still less to abolish any kind of recognition clause, but some wanted to widen the clause's embrace.

Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God

As well as these incidental references to God in the course of discussing other issues, the Convention tackled the divine head-on by debating a proposal to retain the phrase 'humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God'. The motion read:

It is recommended to the Convention that the present [ie 1901] formula, 'humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God', be retained in any subsequent amendments to the Preamble.

This action will keep our Constitution clearly in line with nearly all other constitutions of nations in this region and beyond where reference is made to the Divinity as the source of all power and be a unifying statement for people of all religious faiths throughout Australia (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:426).

Moving the motion, Archbishop Hollingworth anticipated controversy, partly because of events which preceeded the Convention. The Constitutional Centenary Foundation⁷ and the Women's Constitutional Convention⁸ had both recommended removal of the reference to God. Numerous unofficial draft Preambles had been circulated in which there was no mention of God. The Archbishop also detected hostility within the Convention (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:426).

It was ironic, then, that his speech provided the Convention's only sustained critique of God's inclusion:

What lies behind the move to delete the God reference? Why do people want it out? ... One [reason] is that it is a problem because Australia is a pluralist multicultural society and therefore the reference to God is offensive. A second reason is that the number of professing Christians in the latest census is now down to seventy per cent, though, of course, if you take into account other believers in God, that percentage is considerably higher. A third reason is that a small minority of non-believers believe—with some good reason, I concede, from past experience—that religion is a divisive force and they would want to remove the reference in the preamble and make Australia a strictly secular republic without any reference to the Divinity (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998: 426).

He answered those objections, first, by emphasising the contribution of religion to Australia's heritage, returning to the multicultural concern raised by Ms Holmes a Court:

There is no question but that one of the things that people brought with them when they migrated to this country and settled here is their religious faith. Australia is stronger for it. It is not true that multiculturalism or cultural diversity implies the diminution of religion or belief; the opposite is the case (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427).

Religion, he maintained, can be a unifying force:

The reference to Almighty God is meant to unite all the citizen subjects of this nation, which is a multicultural and multi-religious society whose residents have brought with them faith traditions, and they have immeasurably strengthened the basic faith of this country (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427).

A reference to God also links us to the founders. On Archbishop Hollingworth's reading:

Sir John Downer [at the 1898 Australasian Convention] summed up the debate in these words:

. . . that the Christian religion is a portion of the English Constitution . . . is part of the law of England . . . that the Commonwealth will be from its first stage a Christian Commonwealth.

Archbishop Hollingworth went on,

Clearly, that is not the way things have worked out. We cannot claim that Australia is, ever has been or perhaps is ever likely to be—certainly not in our time—a Christian Commonwealth, but that does not imply that we should become a purely secular republic (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427).

In addition, the archbishop argued that recognition makes sense of the practice of prayer in Parliament, instituted at federation (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427).

Finally, any objectors to God's inclusion received a wry caution that things might have been worse:

We have heard much from delegates about the Irish model, particularly in relation to a president. I have listened to that with great interest. I now quote to you in proximate terms the Irish preface, for which I thank Professor Greg Craven. That preface says:

In the name of the most Holy Trinity, from whom all power is derived and to whom all acts of men are ultimately referable . . .

The committee thought about this for a brief moment, and then, humbly and reverently, decided not to hit this Convention with the full Irish monty! (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427-428)

The 'Almighty God' motion attracted comment from four delegates before the chair called time. All supported God's inclusion. Dr Baden Teague made it clear that his endorsement arose out of personal faith: 'I share those words sincerely as an individual Australian'.

Mr Geoff Hourn, representing Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, similarly supported the recognition clause but took issue with the proposed justification. Where the resolution explained that retaining the recognition clause would 'keep our Constitution clearly in line with nearly all other constitutions of nations in this region and beyond ...', Mr Hourn argued, 'It is our Constitution and it really is irrelevant what other nations think'. He flagged a number of reasons for God's inclusion which he saw as more important, and which were revisited in subsequent speeches. One was the need to keep elected representatives in their place:

Obviously, many deities have graced the floors of this chamber. The key thing here is that the reference is to the 'Almighty God', and that is important to keep in mind (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:428).

He next stressed God's multicultural inoffensiveness:

The other thing is that it does not offend the 70 per cent of Australians who indicated in the 1996 census that they believed in some form of God, nor does it offend Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims or others in that category. So ... there was a clear majority of Australians who believe in some form of God and those words would not offend any of those (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:428).

Finally, in the face of the chair's exhortation to brevity, he cautioned:

The word 'humbly' is an important inclusion. 'Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God' is a phrase that is important for all Australians to remember (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:428).

The third speaker on the recognition clause, Tasmanian Greens leader Ms Christine Milne, echoed Ms Holmes a Court's call for greater inclusivity:

I do not want to see the concept of God, the divine or the spiritual dimension taken out of the Constitution. Rather, I would like us to consider perhaps being more expansive and inclusive of the spirituality of all Australians ... I would like to ask Archbishop Hollingworth whether he has looked at the preamble of some other countries. The Czech Republic, for example, uses the term 'spiritual wealth' to describe a similar concept (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429).

She was concerned 'that some people might not see it [God] as a generic term, but, rather, something specifically Christian'. However, she shared Ms Holmes a Court's

concern that her contribution should not be taken to imply opposition to God:

I have been misrepresented in that way in the past in terms of my discussions with regard to the Constitution (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429).

On the contrary, she joined what she saw as the Convention's 'consensus that we want the divine, the spiritual dimension, in the preamble and probably a consensus that the reference to 'Almighty God' stay' (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429).

Not everyone saw 'God' as 'specifically Christian'. The final speaker on the 'Almighty God' motion was NSW magistrate and University of New England Chancellor Dr Pat O'Shane, representing A Just Republic. She entered the debate 'as probably the most committed atheist in the chamber'. In the face of procedural heckling to the effect that she should not be allowed to make 'a statement of belief'⁹, she testified:

I have heard some people have their each-way bet on the issue, but I want to tell you all that I am an atheist and I happen to respect the spiritual and religious beliefs of my fellow Australians. I personally do not have any objection to the words being retained (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429).

Dr O'Shane recalled Archbishop Hollingworth's theology in his discussion of the appropriateness of prayer in Parliament. Prayer, he said, 'should be recognised as something which all people of good faith can engage in, however they define their understanding of God—if they can' (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:427). To Dr O'Shane, this meant that 'the word 'God' is a generic term'. Consequently, she could 'find the words unexceptional' and 'endorse the proposal to retain those words in the preamble' (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429).

Drawing the discussion of the report to a conclusion, Archbishop Hollingworth welcomed her interpretation:

Can I first of all say, in response to Dr Pat O'Shane, thank you for your leadership on this matter because that is the kind of spirit I think we want to embrace. I have worked closely over many years with people who would call themselves atheists and agnostics but who also respect me and what I stand for, what the Church stands for and what religion stands for. There is a broad inclusive sense in which we can embrace and be embraced.

Incarnation of the generic God

The exchange between Archbishop Hollingworth and Dr O'Shane marks a key point in the Convention's understanding of the recognition clause. It involved at least two theological moves, each quite substantial. The readiness with which these moves were endorsed by other Convention delegates, confessing Christian and avowed atheist alike, tells a good deal about the role of public religion in secular Australia.

The first move was to clarify the scope of the archbishop's original interpretation of 'God' as incorporating all the ways in which people 'define their understanding of

God—if they can’. Given that he developed that interpretation in discussion of prayer in Parliament, there was a potential ambiguity as to whether a description relevant to spiritual practice (prayer) also applied to the meaning of God in the Constitution itself. Archbishop Hollingworth spelled out his view:

Dr O’Shane asks: are we using the term ‘God’ in a generic sense? Yes, as simply and as crisply as we can with a three-letter word (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:430).

When the motion was finally put, he reiterated the point:

The word ‘God’ is to be understood in the generic sense as every man, woman and child understands him/her to be according to their own particular experience. I think that probably covers the issue (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:527).

Where some found ‘God’ insufficiently broad, Archbishop Hollingworth argued that any attempt to broaden it would detract from its ‘generic’ inclusiveness:

Christine Milne raises the important question—and I have some sympathy with it—whether we could have a more expansive and inclusive reference that talked more about spiritual wealth. [But] ... the more you say the more you are likely to get into difficulty, create ambiguity and cause people to ask what is meant.

Therefore, brevity [is] probably the better part of valour in this matter (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:527).

He offered the somewhat elliptical Biblical gloss that ‘the term “God” ... in the Hebrew simply means “I am” or “I will be what I will be”’ (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:527). However, in the second significant theological move, he immediately added a further definition, again developing a theme first flagged by Dr O’Shane. Her speech declared that ‘this is a statement of the Australian people about who we are and the values that we hold dear’, leaving ambiguous whether ‘this’ referred to the recognition clause or to the Preamble as a whole. Archbishop Hollingworth resolved the ambiguity:

In the term God ... you really could not get a more simple, basic description of us as a people and what we might become in our unfolding destiny (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:527).

The idea that the object of any community’s worship is ultimately a collective representation of the community itself is most famously associated with the sociologist Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. However, for Durkheim, a society’s ‘consciousness of itself’ emerges from, and becomes the object of worship through, collective ritual practice (1926:230ff). The divine has a distinctive nature and form in every society, specific to the practices and collective representations to which it relates. Lacking this dimension, the Constitutional Convention’s concept of God as

a shorthand for national identity or national aspirations could be called a kind of truncated Durkheimianism. The content of the ideas and images associated with ‘God’ was left entirely open.

One might expect that this ‘generic’ theology, devoid of content beyond a vague nationalism, would have proved controversial, if not at the Convention then in religious debate thereafter. In fact, it did not. Instead, it was welcomed by delegates from a surprising range of theological positions. Even those who espoused theological views *prima facie* at odds with that articulated by the archbishop nevertheless found ways to endorse it. For example, to Ms Sowada, a self-described conservative evangelical, ‘keeping God in the Constitution’ is ‘an expression of our dependence on God as creator and sustainer of all things’. The substantial difference between a view of God as ‘creator and sustainer of all things’ and as ‘a description of us as a people and what we might become in our unfolding destiny’ did not prevent her endorsing Archbishop Hollingworth’s ‘well-chosen words’ (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:480-481).

Rev. Tim Costello, now President of the Baptist Union of Australia, saw the recognition clause in functional terms only slightly more specific than those of Archbishop Hollingworth:

In the face of crass materialism, oppressive materialism and everyone talking about the bottom line—as if that only ever can mean an economic bottom line—the value of referring to God, to spiritual reality, says that as Australians we affirm there are things much more fundamental, that there is a dimension of life much more life-giving than simply the values that seem to be so dominant with the advertisers and mind benders *today* (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:486).

What that more fundamental dimension is, however, remained unstated. Others, without identifying themselves with any religious orientation, told the Convention that the ‘generic’ theology had quieted reservations they might otherwise have felt about a modern recognition clause (for example see Ms Marguerite Scott, *Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:477).

Whatever the technical theological objections which might attend a ‘generic sense’ of God, it clearly resonated with delegates. It enabled them to show remarkable unanimity on God’s constitutional incarnation. When the Resolutions Group returned its proposals on the Preamble, the recognition clause had been softened, but only slightly. Where the original motion proposed that the phrase ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’ be retained, the Resolutions Group wording proposed that a new Preamble should contain ‘Reference to “Almighty God”’. It was agreed to without debate (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:799). In the widely-quoted quip attributed to Convention co-chair Mr Barry Jones, ‘God had a good convention’.

God’s good convention

Why did God get such an easy run? There are many arguments which might have been advanced in the Convention, but were not. For example, objectors might

have argued that God has no place in the Constitution of a secular state. They might have maintained that, even if recognition of God is relevant to the nation's life, the Constitution is not the place to do it. They might have denounced the 'generic' God as too vague, or seen overt religious reference as culturally incongruous, given Australia's traditions of convict anticlericalism and modern urban cosmopolitanism. Republicans might have feared that the implication of a divinely ordained political order would weaken the principle of popular sovereignty. Social reformers might have worried that attaching the name of God to the Constitution improperly implies divine sanction for Australia's existing constitutional arrangements. Christians and Jews might have suspected that attaching the name of God to a human document strains the third commandment. Atheists might have felt their citizenship diminished by a religiously-framed Constitution.

In fact, only the last was raised, and only vicariously. Not only did the two speakers who identified themselves as non-believers do so while supporting God's inclusion, but it was left to a self-described Christian, Dr Tony Cocchiario (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:475-476), to move an amended wording which 'seeks to be inclusive of people who may be atheist' (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:477). No atheists reported on how included they actually felt by his proposal:

With the blessing of God and in acknowledging spirituality and humanity, we the people of Australia give ourselves this constitution (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:526).

Indeed, by moving from 'reliance' to 'blessing', his version arguably implied stronger religious commitment than the existing Preamble.

What should we make of this apparent outbreak of religious enthusiasm among believers and atheists alike? Some help comes from comparing the 'recognition' debates in 1998 with those of a century earlier. A key to understanding God's enthusiastic reception in Canberra lies in the differences between the arguments advanced there, and those put forward in support of God's earlier constitutional incarnation, at Adelaide in 1897 and Melbourne in 1898.

A century of recognition

Reluctant Recognition

Archbishop Hollingworth's quotation from Sir John Downer, given above, made the point that the recognition clause entered the Constitution in response to a need perceived by the founders. However, the founders' position was by no means unanimous. Indeed, the quotation is accurate as far as it goes; but, contrary to the impression Canberra delegates would have received without reading the Melbourne proceedings, Downer's speech was consistent with his long-standing opposition to the recognition clause¹⁰. He had been in the majority which opposed Patrick Glynn's

motion at the Adelaide Convention, the previous year (*Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates*, 1897:1189, hereafter referred to as ‘*Adelaide Report*’).

The overall impression from the nineteenth century recognition debates is that, although they took place in a more homogeneously Christian society than the Australia of a century later, yet God’s inclusion in the Constitution was considerably more controversial than it had become by 1998. Nevertheless, a number of the arguments advanced in the nineteenth century still resonated a century on.

Theological arguments 1: ultimate reliance

One strand of debate at the nineteenth-century Conventions might be summed up as between those who saw reliance on God in individual terms and those who wanted to attribute a special divine mandate to the emerging Commonwealth. Glynn saw divine intention in the Commonwealth’s origins, as compared other democracies born out of fear and bloodshed (*Adelaide Report* 1897:1185).

His opponents disagreed with the need for recognition, but not (at least, publicly) with the theology of ultimate reliance on God. As Barton told the Adelaide Convention,

I do not want a motion of this kind if it can be avoided ... It is not with any feeling of irreverence that I say this, but because I think there are some occasions on which the invocation of the Deity is more reverently left out than made (*Adelaide Report*, 1897:1186).

The same view was strong in Melbourne, where a group led by Mr Adye Douglas, President of the Tasmanian Legislative Council, feared that formal recognition would be counterproductive:

I should like to know what is the object honorable members have in view in desiring the inclusion of these words? Do these words convey to the public mind any particular idea that their insertion in the preamble of this bill would make us a religious people? The words in question are ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God.’ Now, do not we all rely upon the blessing of Almighty God in our daily transactions? Certainly. But do we set forth that fact in all our letters and documents by which we communicate with one another? Certainly not ... I presume that I am ordinarily as religious as any member of this Convention, but I do not make a parade of it (*Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates, Melbourne 1898*, 1739 (hereafter ‘*Melbourne Report*’).

A century later, the idea of ultimate dependence on God was put to the Canberra Convention by Ms Sowada, who saw the recognition clause as ‘an expression of our dependence on God as creator and sustainer of all things’ (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998: 480-481). However, no one in Canberra raised the nineteenth century counter-argument, that a sense of reliance on God is properly confined to individuals rather than expressed collectively by the whole polity.

Theological arguments 2: the preamble as a prop to faith

Glynn's support for a collective expression of faith certainly did not indicate any lack of concern for individual piety. On the contrary, he argued that the recognition clause would enhance the spiritual lives of individual citizens:

I speak not as one whose mind is braced beyond the measure of his neighbours by an adamant faith, or any of those consolations that come from the larger hope. Say what we will, there are moments, short though they may be, when the puzzle of life and destiny staggers the sense, when the shadow is cast and obscures the vision, and the best of us feel our weakness and loosening grip of the unseen. Then it is that the symbols of faith and reverence attest their power and efficacy, and brace the reeling spirit with a recovered sense of the breadth and continuity of man's consciousness of an inscrutable Power ruling our lives (*Melbourne Report*, 1733).

Not all his audience agreed that it is the Constitution's job to buttress individual faith. Douglas agreed with Higgins, Barton and others, that faith works only from the inside outwards:

What is the object of inserting these words? Is it to make the people believe that they will be more religious if the words are inserted? Shall we be more religious if we put them in? Will it have any effect whatever upon us? Why, it is all nonsense—a sham and a delusion—like many other things that have taken place here! (*Melbourne Report*, 1740)

Other exchanges reinforced the point:

MR. HIGGINS—I may say frankly that I, rightly or wrongly, am one of those who think that the Christian or religious observance is no good if it is enforced by law. I am one of those who think the religious observance is of no value unless it is the outcome of a man's own character, and the outcome of a man's own belief.

MR. SYMON—You do not want to keep it always stuck up in the form of a sentence in your bathroom (*Melbourne Report*, 1736).

By the 1990s, expectations of a Preamble were arguably more modest. No one any longer thought it would make people more religious, but there remained a sense that it could reflect their hopes or memories of faith. An example is Ms Holmes a Court's wistful self-description as 'a Christian who cannot take the step of believing in God and therefore is not allowed to be a Christian', with its overtone of grieving for a lost faith. Given the tentativeness of 1990s spiritual expectations, however, the forthright objections of Douglas, Higgins and Symon were no longer necessary. At least, no twentieth-century version was forthcoming.

Theological arguments 3: a God beyond the counter

The final years of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have more in common than constitutional debate. Both were also periods of rapid globalisation, and of increasing public discussion about its consequences¹¹. That perhaps explains another set of parallel recognition arguments. Glynn exhorted the Melbourne Convention:

In these days of too-often dying ideals, when thoughts that once would burn are chilled by the besetting touch of commonplace, when utility seems the measure of virtue, and the greater passions pale under the searching rays of reason; when affection, love, duty, the divine but reckless instincts of patriotism, have been expressed in the language of metaphysics, or become the subjects of mental pathology, when the ardour that fires our noblest aims is damped by a calculating cynicism, and the glow of poetry goes out before the glare of materialism; it is well that we should set in our Constitution something that may at times remind us of ideals beyond the counter, and of hopes that lift us higher than the vulgar realities of the day (*Melbourne Report*, 1733).

Glynn did not spell out why ‘it is well’ to be reminded of ideals ‘beyond the counter’, or what effects he hoped such inclusion would bring about. Nineteenth-century critics such as Douglas interpreted the goal as primarily individual—to ‘make people more religious’. Equally, one can interpret the aim collectively, as necessary to save political life from becoming dominated by a single set of goals (and ‘vulgar’ goals at that). The same idea motivated some of God’s twentieth century constitutional advocates, as in Rev. Tim Costello’s argument that including God in the Preamble reminds Australians of something beyond the ‘crass materialism’ of an ‘economic bottom line’.

Humbly relying on everyone’s Gods

To sum up, each of the theological arguments in favour of recognition advanced at the Constitutional Conventions of the 1890s had a parallel at the 1998 Canberra Convention. A striking difference is in how the theological arguments were received. In the nineteenth century, each met a corresponding counter-argument. At the twentieth century Convention, none was contested. To understand why God’s public acceptance had apparently risen as levels of reported faith declined, it is helpful to examine another significant theme in the 1998 Convention debates.

A number of speakers in 1998 were at pains to point out the greater multicultural inclusiveness of their Convention than of those a century earlier. Prime Minister John Howard’s opening address set the tone:

Never before has this historic chamber received such a wonderfully diverse group of Australians ... It is a vastly different gathering from one of 100 years ago. There were no indigenous Australians at the convention of 1898; it was an all-male gathering; the names were overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic; and I am sure that

no delegate was aged under 25 (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:2).

Concern for multicultural inclusiveness pervaded Preamble-related debates at the 1998 Convention. The repeated reference to non-Christian religions in the 1998 debate about the recognition clause further sustains the impression of multiculturalism as a quintessentially 1990s concern.

Contrary to the impression given by 1998 speakers, however, the phrase ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’ was not originally chosen without regard for non-Christians. The 1890s conventions deliberately eschewed formulations which were too recognisably Christian. Glynn, introducing his amendment in Melbourne, saw his clause as giving ‘expression to the central fact of all our faiths’. Far from fostering Christian exclusivism, it could become a foundation for inter-religious harmony, in much the same way as that predicted by Archbishop Hollingworth a century later. Dr John Quick agreed:

The words ‘humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God’ could be subscribed to not only by Roman Catholics and Protestants, but also by Jews, Gentiles and even by Mahomedans. The words are most universal, and are not necessarily applicable only to Christians (*Melbourne Report*, 1736).

Moreover, the 1890s conventions included at least two members of a non-Christian religion. The nineteenth-century recognition clause was supported by a Jewish delegate, Mr (later, Sir) Isaac Isaacs (Ely 1976:48). For all its celebration of its own inclusiveness, I have been able to identify only one self-described member of a non-Christian religious tradition at the 1998 Constitutional Convention. No speaker on the recognition clause declared a connection with any non-Christian religion. Speakers in 1998 assumed that members of non-Christian religions would support some form of (perhaps expanded) recognition clause. Only one speaker offered any evidence about non-Christian religious reactions. Christian Democrat Mr Alasdair Webster drew on an eclectic range of anecdotal sources. His former life as Liberal Member for Macquarie had given him access to a Buddhist authority:

I had the opportunity during my life in the other parliament on the hill to speak to the Dalai Lama, for example ... I asked the Dalai Lama about this concept of Almighty God and he said, ‘At the end of the day it is the same supreme being.’ Those were his words (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:490-491).

Next, Mr Webster recounted evidence of Muslim reactions:

I was getting a suit dry-cleaned at the Springwood dry-cleaners where my dry-cleaner is Bill, a very strict Moslem. It was unusual for me to be getting my suits dry-cleaned again because I had not been doing that for a few years. Bill said, ‘Are you off to Canberra again?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘I’m on the Constitutional Convention as a delegate ... [and] one of the things that I am going to be advocating is that we make sure that humbly relying on the

blissing of Almighty God remains in our preamble, because there are moves from some quarters to have it removed.’

What happened then was an explosion, as he jumped in the air, banged his ironing machine and steam went in all directions. He said, ‘How dare they take Almighty God from the Constitution. You tell them from Bill the dry-cleaner’—as he kept banging his steamer—‘your Moslem friend in Springwood, that I will be down to see them.’ Through the cloud of steam, I could see this name ‘Salman Rushdie’. I do not know why that flashed into my mind. I said to him, just to calm him down, ‘Look, Bill, don’t get steamed up. I’ll go down and press your point and iron out the problem.’ So I am here to say that the members of the Islamic faith, I am sure, do not have any problems with the whole concept of Almighty God (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:490-491).

Mr Webster’s ‘life in the other parliament on the hill’ provided the basis for a further inter-faith comparison. A member of the Aboriginal Affairs committee, he had:

sat down in creek beds with Aboriginal leaders; I know many of them. I know that, when they talk of the great creator and the great spirit, they too equate in a measure—some varying degrees of measure, I suppose—with the Christian concept of Almighty God (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:490-491).

His final instance of non-Christian religious support was drawn from history:

The Jewish people expressed their view in the 1890s when it was proposed on the first occasion, and they agreed that the concept of Almighty God, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, would be quite acceptable to them (*Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:490-491).

In the absence of any further discussion, possible responses were not aired. For example, there was no discussion of the different strands of Buddhism, only some of which speak in terms of a ‘supreme being’. The varying political experiences of non-Christian migrants, leaving some communities suspicious of any association between religious and political authority, were likewise left unexplored. Multiculturalism featured in the 1998 recognition clause arguments less as a response to specific communities’ stated concerns than as a general expression of the desire to be inclusive.

Why religious inclusiveness mattered in the late twentieth century

The evidence of multicultural inclusiveness as a major concern in late-twentieth-century recognition debates suggests that the conundrum of God’s increasing constitutional acceptability with increasing secularisation is best explained by a shift in what ‘God’ signifies. In the nineteenth century, a groundswell of public passion supported both advocates of the recognition clause and advocates of separation between church and state. For both, ‘God’ was the object of widespread religious practice, overwhelmingly Christian. Now, the weight of opinion in favour of God’s

inclusion comes from people who think God's inclusion is what *other* people want. Those who oppose God's inclusion are likely to do so less on grounds related to their own beliefs than because they fear it violates the beliefs of others. The Preamble debate suggests that, in Australia at the turn of the twenty-first century, religion is a serious topic deserving consideration and respect. By and large, however, Australians regard religious passion as something that other people have.

In 1998, Frank Sulloway and Michael Shermer asked a sample of Americans whether they believed in God, why they believed in God (if they did), and why they thought other people believed. They found a substantial difference between the reasons people gave for their own faith and the reasons they attributed to others. They propose an 'intellectual attribution bias' in which 'we consider our own actions as being rationally motivated, whereas we see those of others as emotionally driven' (Shermer, 2000). I suggest that the heightened sensitivity to others' beliefs in the Preamble debate at the turn of the twenty-first century reveals a comparable 'tolerance attribution bias'. 'We' may or may not have strong religious convictions, but 'we' can live with or without constitutional recognition of those convictions. However, we know that 'others' are religiously passionate. Moreover, 'we' expect those 'others' to be less accommodating than 'we' are. 'Our' convictions (theistic or atheistic) can make room for a God whom most of us either do not believe in or do not feel strongly about, because we know how strongly those 'others' feel.

In a society in which soul-searching about its social and ethnic diversity was arguably the dominant intellectual trend of the preceding decades (eg Manne, 2000), God's inclusion in the mooted Preamble became an opportunity for Australians to demonstrate their mutual openness to one another's values. Lacking specific theological reference, the Convention's 'generic' God is a gift from all to all.

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Notes

¹ For a full list of recommendations, see Resolutions B 1-10, C 1, 2 & 4, D2 & 3, Minutes of Day 8, Constitutional Convention, Old Parliament House, 2-13 February 1998, see: <http://www.dpmc.gov.au/convention/report2/minutes8.htm>.

² For example, the official 'No' case on the Preamble question did not mention God, focusing instead on popular distrust of politicians and the Preamble's circumlocutory recognition of Indigenous peoples. See text of the official 'no' case, appended to Peter Andren MP, Press Release, 9 September 1999, 'Official Preamble 'NO' Case Released'.

³ See for example, speeches by Ms Sowada *Transcript of Proceedings* p. 480) and Archbishop Hollingworth (*ibid.*, p. 426)

⁴ Recommendations as per endnote 1.

⁵ The existing phrase, 'humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God' is known as the recognition clause, following the nineteenth century constitutional conventions' debates as to whether God should be 'invoked' or only 'recognised'.

⁶ Adding together the numbers for all the broadly 'theistic' answers to the religion question in the 1996 Census produces a figure of around 69 per cent identifying with a Christian denomination and around 4 per cent nominating a non-Christian theistic tradition. This figure does not include those who did not answer, or who answered 'no religion' but who do believe in God. However, it is broadly consistent with other findings. For example, an *Age* Saulwick poll in 1994 recorded 75 per cent of respondents claiming belief in God (*Age*, 17 October 1994).

⁷ Established in 1991 and funded by the Commonwealth and state governments to undertake public education on constitutional reform matters. See Warhurst 1998-99.

⁸ Held in Old Parliament House immediately before the official Constitutional Convention

⁹ Interjection by Brigadier Alf Garland, *Transcript of Proceedings*, 1998:429.

¹⁰ On Downer's stance, see Ely 1976:49. The Melbourne amendment was carried on the voices

and no individual votes are recorded. His Melbourne speech gives no indication of any change of heart from Adelaide.

¹¹ On the similarity of nineteenth and twentieth century periods of globalisation, see for example, Gill 1999. On globalisation's nineteenth-century form, see Polanyi 1957[1944].