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Christianity is dwindling in Australia and America



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by Julian White

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There is a general understanding and even you must have heard about it; it's about the way religion is viewed in Australia and America, it's a popular belief that 'USA is a very Christian country, whereas Australia is very secular'; 'Americans flash their religion openly, whereas Australians have a natural aversion to public displays of religion, and to religion in politics.'

But under Rudd and Obama's leadership era there are new parallels and convergences being drawn with regard to religion in the two countries. Firstly, both of them are publicly practicing Christians, and acknowledge the place of Christianity in forming their center-left political views. Secondly, Rudd who is the first Labor leader since the bitter split in the 1950s has defied the party's aggressively secular tradition, and openly accepted the role of Christianity in his thinking.

In a 2005 interview with ABC TV's Compass, Rudd, who was still in opposition, said that his views came at the risk of being seen by his Labor party colleagues as some slightly besotted "God botherer", but he didn't want God to become a "fully owned ancillary of political conservatism in this country." Rudd who has described himself as a Christian socialist, has said that it is important for "Christians in politics not to cherry-pick the gospel, but have a full understanding of it, including its social dimension". He added that keeping in view what's happening on the political right in this country, and in America, it's important that people on the center-left of politics initiate the argument from a different perspective but from within the Christian tradition.

This could have been re-iterated by Obama who has been brought up in a non-religious household, and it was only as a young adult community organizer in Chicago that he embraced Christianity, primarily because of its emphasis on social justice, and this has been emphasized in his book, Audacity of Hope. Since coming into power he has faced a tough time in defending the view that Christianity does not have a privileged position in America. His further remarks at a press conference on his recent visit to Turkey, considering USA as a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values and not being a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation, has irked many conservative evangelicals.

Kevin Rudd would happily agree with these views of Obama. But the similarities in views don't end with the political leaders. Statistics reported in the recent Easter edition of Newsweek magazine created uproar in America. Written in the form of a cross, in bold red letters on a black background, its provocative cover read "The Decline and Fall of Christian America". The article analyzed the results of the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) published in March this year, and threw light on some intriguing facts surrounding these two startling statistics.

Firstly, in the last 18 years the number of Americans not affiliated with any religion has nearly doubled from 8% to 15%, matched by a similar decline in the percentage of Christians. The numbers of Australians who are not affiliated with any religion are slightly higher. Our 1991 census revealed this as 12.9%, which has grown to 18.7% as reported in the latest census of 2006.

Secondly, the biggest decline in religiously affiliated people was concentrated in the north-east of US, which is considered the Christian heartland of the country. This massive decline in has agitated many conservative Christian leaders to claim America has become a

post-Christian country. But this alarmist tendency is skewed because though the percentage of Christians may be shrinking, rumors of the death of Christianity are greatly exaggerated. Being less Christian is not equal to America being post-Christian.

Meacham has demonstrated the percentage of Christians in his presentation of ARIS which shows that some 76% call themselves Christian (in Australia, 64% are Christians). The largest Christian group in US is Catholics, making up 25% (almost identical to Australia's 25.8%).

The major difference which the statistics show with Australia is the massive conservative evangelical base in the US; 45% of American Christians, or 34% of the total adult population, define themselves as being 'born again' Christians. In contrast, in Australia, in the 2006 census, only 1.1% described themselves as Pentecostal, but 'born again Christians' also reside in other denominations. In a survey conducted for Sydney's Center for Public Christianity, 15% of 2500 respondents identified as 'born again Christians'; it's a significant number, but is still much smaller than the percentage in the US.

So, after the Bush era and the Religious Right, the landslide election victory of Obama, has swung the religious pendulum in such a way that now the perception of Christianity's place in America is suddenly very different, and with this 'change' maybe it's not so different than Australia.

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