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Australian Secularism, the Sexual Revolution and the Making of the New Christian Right

TIMOTHY WILLEM JONES

This article seeks to explain the origins and continued rise of the New Christian Right (NCR) in Australia since the sexual revolution. Australia is an increasingly secular country, yet conservative religion continues to strongly influence sexual discourse in Australia. The success of the NCR in Australia thus requires explanation. Proportional representation in the Australian parliamentary system explains the unique role that the NCR political parties have played in the Australian sexual polity. The article suggests that Australia's pragmatic and pluralistic secularism was a necessary condition for the making of the NCR. It argues, following Janice Irvine, that the rise of the Right did not simply trigger bitter conflicts over sexuality; it was accomplished through them. They produced a new, conservative, ecumenical, and politically engaged Christian movement that was defined by sexual politics.

In October 1973, British morals campaigner Mary Whitehouse toured Australia to help launch a new conservative morality campaign, the Australian Festival of Light (AFOL). Her tour attracted tens of thousands of Australians to public events, and garnered considerable media attention. The *Sydney Morning Herald* dubbed the AFOL 'A Festival for Wowsers'.[1] Whitehouse was unfamiliar with this term – distinctive Australian slang for 'a person whose values were "puritanical" and who zealously sought to reform the morals of others' – and seemed bemused when the press accused her directly of being one.[2] 'What's a wowser?', she asked the journalist, 'a fuddy duddy? Oh, that's outdated stuff as far as I'm concerned'.[3] While Whitehouse was unruffled by this reception, others were more wary. As one clergyman wrote, to 'be smeared, justly or unjustly, as a "wowser" [was] enough to have one's message and motivation

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[1] 'A Festival for Wowsers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October 1973, 13.
[2] Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, 'Wowser', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, eds Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Keith Dunstan, *Wowsers* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1968).
[3] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1973, 2.

ridiculed, caricatured, belittled'.[4] For thirty years following the launch of the AFOL and Whitehouse's first Australian tour, mainstream Australian media and scholars were largely content to dismiss conservative Christian political lobbying in Australia as inconsequential wowserism: a relic of outdated Victorian morality in a new sexually permissive, feminist, and secular age. Yet the AFOL transformed conservative religious lobbying in Australia and was the beginning of a remarkably successful New Christian Right (NCR) political movement in Australia.[5] This article tells the story of the formation of the AFOL, its impact on Australian secularism, and the increasing significance of sexual politics in conservative Australian religion.

The history of Australian Christianity has recently garnered renewed scholarly attention, particularly in the wake of its prominent place in the political rhetoric of John Howard's conservative coalition government (1996–2007). Yet puzzlingly, NCR lobby groups like the AFOL remain largely unstudied. Neither Stuart Piggin and Robert Linder nor Meredith Lake gives them any detailed attention in their otherwise comprehensive recent histories of Evangelicalism and the bible in Australia.[6] They are present, but remain peripheral to Hugh Chilton's research on mainline Evangelicalism.[7] Marion Maddox's persuasive study, *God Under Howard*, focuses on their part in Howard's deployment of conservative family values in the service of neoliberalism.[8] However, the preceding twenty-five years of conservative religious activism, prior to Howard's mainstreaming of its core themes, has not been examined beyond a handful of case studies and biographies.[9] In this article, I begin to address this lacuna by outlining

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[4] George Coughlan, 'Hello Mary Whitehouse, Some of Us Have Open Minds on Anti-Porn', *National Times*, 8–13 October 1973, 26–7. Rev. W.G. Coughlan was an Anglican clergyman.

[5] Jonathan Malloy questions the applicability of the NCR model to Australia, where conservative religious activism has been more embedded in the cultural and political establishment than elsewhere. It is also not a term embraced by conservative religious activists. I use the term for its convenience and broad legibility, acknowledging that it is not unproblematic. See Jonathan Malloy, 'Political Opportunity Structures, Evangelical Christians and Morality Politics in Canada, Australia and New Zealand', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 3 (September 2017): 402–18.

[6] Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018); Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder, *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History, 1740–1914* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2018); Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder, *Attending to the National Soul: Evangelical Christians in Australian History, 1914–2014* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2020).

[7] Hugh Chilton, *Evangelicals and the End of Christendom: Religion, Australia and the Crises of the 1960s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

[8] Marion Maddox, *God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); see also Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The End of Australia's Egalitarian Education?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014); Gareth Sobey, '"Ticking the Faith Box": Reinterpreting the Place of Conservative Christianity in Australian Electoral Politics', *Traffic* (Parkville) 10 (2008): 17–36.

[9] See, for example: Maxwell Edwards, 'Moral Reform Organisations in Australia: A Political Response to the Sexual Revolution' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1997); Paul Strangio and Brian Costar, 'B. A. Santamaria, "A True Believer"?', *History Australia* 1, no. 2 (2004): 256–78; Judith Peppard, 'Culture Wars in South Australia: The Sex Education Debates', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 43, no. 3 (2008): 499–516; David Furse-Roberts, 'Keepers of the Flame: The Australian Festival of Light, 1973–1981', *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review* 2, no. 2 (2010): 47–66.

the emergence and continued rise of a new, politically engaged conservative Christianity from 1972, and analysing its relationship to the sexual revolution and secularism. I show how both the performative politics of the sexual revolution and the particular conditions of Australian secularism were key to the making of Australia's New Christian Right.

The formation of the AFOL was a turning point in the organisation of conservative Christian politics, and the point at which a new conservative religious orthodoxy began to emerge. This article, therefore, focuses on that moment in Adelaide in the early 1970s, and the set of circumstances that led to the foundation of the AFOL. I trace how the AFOL became the principal NCR lobby group in Australia in the 1970s, before the NCR diversified. There are limited archival papers relating to the early years of the AFOL, beyond its early newsletters, pamphlets and publications, held in the State Library of South Australia. I have reconstructed the AFOL's early history by reading this archival base against contemporary media reports and interviews with founding members and participants.

International historical scholarship has productively explored the relationship between the sexual revolution and religious history. Sexual liberation has been positioned as a fulcrum, sign, or catalyst of secularisation.[10] This is reflected in Australian scholarship too. As Piggin and Linder write, gender and sexuality became the great dividing issues for evangelicals; in broader society, the bible 'was no longer accepted as foundational to societal views on sexuality' and the 'new feminism of the 1970s' caused ruptures within the churches.[11] Lake comments that, in the cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, many 'found the churches' teaching on social and moral issues unhelpful, even oppressive … and as a result left their former community of faith'.[12] While the impact of the sexual revolution on declining religious affiliation has been widely studied and debated, less attention has been paid to the transformative effect the sexual revolution had on religion, particularly conservative Christianity. As Callum Brown suggests of Britain, through the permissive social changes of the 1950s and 1960s, 'sex became complexly and intensely entwined in post-war conservative Christian thought'.[13] This complex entwinement is also evident in the history of Australian conservative Christianity, as I elaborate below.

I argue, following Janice Irvine, that the rise of Australia's NCR did not simply trigger bitter conflicts over sexuality; rather, it was accomplished

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[10] Hilary Carey, *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996). See also Callum Brown's influential thesis in his *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); recently extended in his *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation, 1945–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Sam Brewitt-Taylor's converse analysis in 'Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain, 1963–1967', *The Historical Journal* 60, no. 2 (2017): 519–46.

[11] Piggin and Linder, *Attending to the National Soul*, 346, see also 337–40.

[12] Lake, 302–3. See also Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 237.

[13] Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain*, 4.

through them.[14] Irvine persuasively demonstrates how the NCR in the United States formed in opposition to the sexual revolution. United States NCR groups were formatively structured by the politics of sexual liberation and rose to political, social and cultural prominence through performative public contests over sexual values. The dynamics and success of these 'culture war' politics were paralleled in Australia. However, differences in the religious histories of the two countries mean that Irvine's argument requires further development to fit the Australian context. Whereas the rise of the NCR in the US occurred against the background of sustained religious participation, exceptional among modern Western democracies, Australia's NCR gained purchase in what had, by the late twentieth century, become a relatively secular country.[15] Depending on the measure used, between eight and twenty per cent of Australians were actively involved in organised religion, and 'no-religion' was the largest and fastest growing category of 'religious' identification in Australia.[16] This decline in religiosity began in the 1970s and has accelerated in recent years.[17] Yet conservative religion continues to play a significant role in shaping sexual discourse in Australia, despite these changes in belief.

I also suggest that Australia's pragmatic and pluralistic secularism was a necessary condition for the making of its New Christian Right. In order to explain the conditions and mechanisms by which the Australian NCR formed the moral contests about sexual values in the 1970s, the postsecular analysis previously deployed by historians such as Stuart Macintyre, Al Gabay, Frank Bongiorno, Bruce Scates and Judith Brett needs to be extended.[18] This postsecular

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[14] Janice Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[15] Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2016 Census Data Reveals "No Religion" Is Rising Fast', 27 June 2017, https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7E65A144540551D7CA258148000E2B85 (accessed 9 January 2020).

[16] Roy Williams, *Post-God Nation? How Religion Fell off the Radar in Australia and What Might Be Done to Get It Back on* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2015). See also Mark McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia: A National Study on Religion, Spirituality and World View Trends* (Sydney: McCrindle Research Pty Ltd, 2017).

[17] John McCallum, 'Secularisation in Australia between 1966 and 1985: A Research Note', *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 3 (1987): 407–22. See also Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Religion in Australia, 2016', 2071.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia – Stories from the Census, 2016, https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20Article~80 (accessed 27 March 2018).

[18] Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991); Al Gabay, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Al Gabay, *Messages from Beyond: Spiritualism and Spiritualists in Melbourne's Golden Age* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997); Frank Bongiorno, 'In This World and the Next: Political Modernity and Unorthodox Religion in Australia, 1880–1930', *Australian Cultural History* 25 (2006): 179–207; Bruce Scates, *A New Australia: Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Judith Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017). For an elaboration of my use of this 'postsecular' analysis, see: Timothy W. Jones, 'Postsecular Sex? Secularisation and Religious Change in the History of Sexuality in Britain', *History Compass* 11, no. 11 (2013): 918–30; K. Smiet, 'Post/Secular Truths: Sojourner Truth and the Intersections of Gender,

approach moves beyond the question of the temporality of secularisation to questions about the function and nature of secularity and religiosity in Australia after the sexual revolution. From 1971, sectarian divisions between Australian Catholics and Protestants declined in significance. The cultural fissures emerging instead were primarily political, rather than religious. Significantly, this new political divide was characterised by the new personal politics of the sexual revolution, and the attendant women's and gay liberation movements. These cultural contests over social policy, community standards, and sexual morality have been genuine contests involving people of faith and no-religion on both sides. They elicited a new religious culture: conservative, ecumenical, and politically engaged; a Christian movement defined by sexual politics.[19] For this New Christian Right, anti-feminist and anti-homosexual sexual values became not only a litmus test for religious orthodoxy, but also a new 'religious' orthodoxy in its own right.[20]

Protesting moral pollution

The origins of Australia's New Christian Right can be traced directly to a particular set of political contests provoked by liberalising attitudes towards sexual conduct. The build-up of a new progressive movement in the 1960s led to an efflorescence of political activity from the early 1970s.[21] New progressives championed civil liberties, individual freedoms, and began to challenge long-held moral and religious views on homosexuality, abortion and censorship. In 1969 the first Australian homosexual law reform society was established in the Australian Capital Territory.[22] The Supreme Court of Victoria also ruled that abortion was lawfully justified if it were 'necessary to preserve the physical or mental health of the woman', a precedent followed in other Australian jurisdictions.[23] It was liberalisation of censorship law and practices, however, which became the catalyst for the political reorganisation of conservative forces against sexual change in Australia.

Race and Religion', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 7–21. See also Timothy W. Jones and Clare Wright, 'The Goldfields' Sabbath: A Postsecular Analysis of Social Cohesion and Social Control on the Ballarat Goldfields, 1854', *Journal of Religious History* 43, no. 4 (December 2019): 447–9.

[19] This contests the interpretation proposed by Chavura *et al.* that characterises the 'culture wars' that have been waged in this period as a new sectarianism between 'religious' and 'secular' Australia. See Stephen A. Chavura, John Gascoigne and Ian Tregenza, *Reason, Religion, and the Australian Polity: A Secular State?* (London: Routledge, 2019); Timothy Stanley, ed., *Religion after Secularization in Australia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[20] David Hilliard, 'Homosexuality', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 9*: World Christianities, c.1914–2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 555.

[21] Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019).

[22] Graham Willett, *Acting Out: Canberra's Very Queer History* (Canberra: ACT Government, 2020).

[23] R v Davidson (Menhennitt ruling) [1969] VicRp 85, [1969] VR 667 (3 June 1969), Supreme Court (Vic, Australia).

In 1969, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) adopted a new censorship policy that, as a general principle, adults should be able to 'read, hear or view what they wish in private or public'.[24] In 1970, the Gorton government's Minister for Customs and Excise, Don Chipp, followed suit, initiating changes liberalising censorship law and practice.[25] He largely abolished the censorship of printed material, making available previously banned novels such as *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as well as classifying for sale soft-core pornography, such as the iconic *Playboy* magazine. Rather than censorship decisions being made in secret by customs officers on the docks, a new Australian Classification Board was established. In addition to 'G', 'NRC' (not recommended for children), and 'M' categories, an 'R' certificate for films was introduced, which allowed previously banned films to be re-rated and shown to adults (for example, *Easy Rider, Last Tango in Paris* and *Clockwork Orange*). The R certificate included enhanced protections for children, so that 'for the first time, children between six and eighteen would be properly excluded' from adult films.[26] Significantly, rather than texts and films being censored and banned in order to protect the community from obscenity, in the new regime operating from 1971 they were to be classified according to contemporary community standards; viewers could make informed choices about media they consumed.

It was not *Playboy*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Last Tango in Paris* or even the notorious high school sex education text, *The Little Red Schoolbook*, that triggered the political (re)mobilisation of Australia's conservative Christians, however, but the proposed staging of Kenneth Tynan's erotic revue, *Oh! Calcutta!*, in Adelaide in 1971.[27] *Oh! Calcutta!* was conceived by Tynan and Harold Pinter in 1966 as a celebration of sexual liberation and the permissive society, and contained extensive nudity and sexually explicit content, including 'masturbation, rape, intercourse, homosexuality and sadism'.[28] It was first performed off Broadway in New York in June 1969. While it was nearly universally dismissed by critics, as a cultural event it had significant impact.[29] Its 'tacky eroticism' drew crowds, playing to over 80 million people in over 140 cities, in 15 countries.[30] In August 1971 it was due to be staged at the newly refurbished Chequers Place Theatre in Adelaide, directed by Aboriginal Australian actor Noel Tovey, who had starred in the London production.[31] Having already been banned in

[24] Nicole Moore, *The Censor's Library: Uncovering the Lost History of Australia's Banned Books* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 254.
[25] Chipp was a notably liberal Liberal Party MP who went on to become the first leader of the Australian Democrats in 1977. See Lyndon Megarrity, 'Chipp, Donald Leslie (1926–2006)', *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate* 4, 1983–2002 (Canberra: Department of the Senate, 2017), 417–23.
[26] Moore, 267.
[27] See Edwards, 15–21.
[28] 'The Law and Censorship Debate', *Bulletin*, 18 September 1971, 25.
[29] Graham Saunders, 'A Last Hurrah? Joe Orton's *Until She "Screams"*, *Oh! Calcutta!* and the Permissive 1960s', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 37, no. 2 (2017): 221–36.
[30] David Nathan, 'Bottoms Up', *Observer Magazine*, 29 July 1990, 35–7.
[31] Noel Tovey, *And Then I Found Me* (Sydney: Magabala Books, 2017).

Melbourne, Tovey was doubtful the revue would be allowed to go ahead in the 'city of churches', but the South Australian premier Don Dunstan apparently assured the producers, 'there would be no problems if *Oh! Calcutta!* was staged in Adelaide'.[32] As Clare Parker shows, Adelaide had been at the forefront of permissive social change in Australia, with liberalisation of liquor licensing, gambling and abortion in the late 1960s.[33] Moreover, Dunstan had been a key voice in the ALP promoting the relaxation of censorship as South Australian attorney-general in the 1960s, a position he continued after his election as premier in 1970.[34] However, Dunstan's assurances proved optimistic. As Tovey recalls, 'we had no sooner moved into [the theatre] to begin the final rehearsals when the South Australian Moral Action Committee put a restraining order on the production'.[35]

The Moral Action Committee was formed specifically to prevent *Oh! Calcutta!* from being staged in Adelaide. News of the imminent arrival of the sex revue first reached Adelaide's Christians in February 1971. Columnist John Miles condemned it in the Adelaide *Advertiser*. A public meeting was called at Holy Trinity Church, an evangelical Anglican church in the city, by the rector, Lance Shilton, one of the best-known clergymen in Adelaide. Journalist and Holy Trinity parishioner Helen Caterer promoted the meeting in the *Sunday Mail*, and later reported that three hundred people from a range of Christian backgrounds attended the meeting to take action against the revue 'because of the harm it could do in the lowering of standards for the well-being of the community'.[36] The Moral Action Committee was formed at that meeting. Lance Shilton was elected chair. John Court, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Adelaide, was a prominent committee member.

The committee marshalled their combined spiritual and democratic forces against *Oh! Calcutta!* and the Dunstan government. They held a day of prayer in March, petitioning God that the government would ban the play. They encouraged concerned citizens to write to their MPs, and circulated a petition to the attorney-general to halt the production that eventually garnered 20,000 signatures. The *Bulletin* reported this action sceptically, as wowsers staging a comeback against the wave of progressive reforms introduced by the Dunstan government.[37] The government stood firm in its support of the play. However, the Moral Action Committee brought an injunction to have their concerns heard in court. *Oh! Calcutta!* was banned by the Supreme Court of South Australia, and this ruling was upheld two to one on appeal to the full bench of the

[32] Ibid., 89; 'How Much for Calcutta?' *Bulletin*, 17 July 1971, 23.
[33] Clare Parker, 'Before the Refrain: The Personal and the Political in South Australia's Sexual Revolution', *Australian Feminist Studies: How the Personal Became Political* 33, no. 95 (January 2018): 114–28.
[34] Angela Woollacott, *Don Dunstan: The Visionary Politician Who Changed Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 131–2.
[35] Tovey, 90.
[36] Helen Caterer, 'A Journalist's Account', in *No No Calcutta*, ed. Lance Shilton (Adelaide: Brolga Books, 1971), 11.
[37] 'The Wowsers Stage a Comeback', *Bulletin*, 6 March 1971, 25.

Court.[38] The dissenting judgment against prohibition, by Chief Justice Bray, provided an avenue of appeal to the High Court, but the producers could not raise sufficient support and decided to cut their losses.[39] Producer Bob Huber despaired: 'I contend the sexual revolution has ended in the rest of the world and Australia has missed it'.[40]

The success of the Moral Action Committee's 1971 campaign against *Oh! Calcutta!* breathed energy and confidence into South Australia's moral conservatives. They celebrated their win with the publication of *No No Calcutta* that December, recording 'the facts coolly for the history books to decide'.[41] The Moral Action Committee merged with and became the South Australian branch of the Community Standards Organisation, an Australia-wide morals lobby group whose genealogy can be traced back to the pre-sexual revolution Welfare and Decency League, South Australian Methodists and the Building Workers Industrial Union.[42] The League had reorganised as the Community Standards Organisation in 1970, as the national censorship regime shifted to being organised to reflect contemporary community standards, rather than prevent obscenity.[43] However, prior to *Oh! Calcutta!* their 'wowserism' had had little traction.

The Moral Action Committee's triumph before the full bench of the Supreme Court of South Australia in September 1971 coincided with the stirring of another revolution in conservative moral action in the UK, a revolution that would form a major inspiration to Australian conservative activists. A British Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL) was held throughout the UK in September 1971, launched by British morals campaigner Mary Whitehouse, journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, pop singer Cliff Richard and several prominent clergy.[44] The NFOL had two aims: first, to protest against sexual exploitation in the media, and second, to present Christianity as the key to social and moral stability. A series of public events attracting many thousands of people were held throughout the UK in September 1971. Bonfire 'beacons' were lit at 300 locations around the coast 'to warn of national danger, as had been done since the time of the Spanish Armada'.[45] A rally and a concert were staged in Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park, attracting a crowd of at least 30,000 people.[46] In its form, the NFOL borrowed from left-wing protests, but also the evangelical religious

[38] 'SA Judge Stops "Calcutta"', *The Age*, 3 August 1971, 3.
[39] 'The Law and Censorship Debate', *Bulletin*, 18 September 1971, 24.
[40] *Bulletin*, 18 September 1971, 17.
[41] Shilton, 9.
[42] Moore, 260.
[43] See the Welfare and Decency League's *National Decency News*, continued from August 1970 as the Community Standards Organisation's *Community Standards News*.
[44] See Amy Whipple, 'Speaking for Whom? The 1971 Festival of Light and the Search for the "Silent Majority"', *Contemporary British History* 24, no. 3 (2010): 319–39; John Capon, *And There Was Light: The Story of the Nationwide Festival of Light* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1972); Flo Dobbie, *Land Aflame!* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).
[45] Caterer, 20.
[46] David Hilliard and John Warhurst, 'Festival of Light', *Current Affairs Bulletin* (February 1974): 13. Caterer reports that 100,000 attended, 'two-thirds of whom were under 25'. Caterer, 20.

revivals that had been staged around Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, most notably by American evangelist Billy Graham. In combining the form and style of anti-Vietnam protests with the fervour of evangelical revivalism, the NFOL represented a vibrant transformation of conservative anti-vice, moral welfare social action.[47]

The South Australian Moral Action Committee noted the success of the British NFOL in their book celebrating the successful shutdown of *Oh! Calcutta!* The following year, at the 1972 Community Standards Organisation national conference in Melbourne, the South Australian delegates suggested a similar festival of 'Christian witness' be held in Australia.[48] Lance Shilton, now chair of the South Australian Community Standards Organisation, invited Mary Whitehouse to come to Australia to speak at the Australian Festival of Light events. John Court was elected the chairman of FOL South Australia. Other state committees were established. In July 1973 Fred Nile became the state director of Festival of Light, New South Wales. Mirroring the UK NFOL, the AFOL issued a proclamation to the churches, the community, the media and the government. Whitehouse toured Australia with the festival in October 1973, holding rallies in state capitals. In Adelaide 600 individuals signed up as supporters of the festival, 2,000 women heard Whitehouse speak at a special women's meeting, 2,500 young people attended a youth event at Apollo Stadium, and 9,000 people went to a public rally at the closing of the Adelaide festival on Sunday afternoon, marching through the city carrying placards.[49] The *Advertiser* reported it was Adelaide's largest public demonstration since the anti-Vietnam war protest marches.[50] These scenes were mirrored in similar mass demonstrations and public meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.[51]

Along with its distinctively 'seventies' protest aesthetic, the AFOL marked a departure from previous Australian religious movements and morals campaigns in two other respects. It consciously and, at the time controversially, eschewed sectarianisms characteristic of Australian religious life up to this point.[52] Court remembers being surprised at the 'attractively broad coalition' involved in the festival, which included Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, Salvation Army and

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[47] Timothy W. Jones, 'Social Motherhood and Spiritual Authority in a Secularizing Age: Moral Welfare Work in the Church of England, 1883–1961', *Feminist Theology* 23, no. 2 (2015): 143–55; Timothy W. Jones, 'Moral Welfare and Social Well-Being: The Church of England and the Emergence of Modern Homosexuality', in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth-Century Britain*, eds Sue Morgan and Lucy Delap (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 197–217.

[48] Community Standards Organisation, SA Branch, *News Letter*, August 1972.

[49] Hilliard and Warhurst, 14.

[50] 'Just Light Protest', *Advertiser*, 15 October 1973; Lawrence Black, 'There Was Something about Mary: The National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and Social Movement History', in *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*, eds Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McCay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 182–3.

[51] Jacqueline Rees, 'Mrs Whitehouse Talks in ACT', *Canberra Times*, 8 October 1973, 3.

[52] David Harcourt, 'A Moratorium for Wowsers: The Blind Plead for Light', *Nation Review*, 14–20 September 1973, 14–20. See also John Warhurst, 'Catholics and the Festival of Light', *The Catholic Worker* (November 1974): 12–13.

secular feminists with no church association.[53] At the Sydney rally in Hyde Park during Whitehouse's 1973 tour, the Catholic and Anglican archbishops of Sydney appeared on the same platform for the first time ever. The significance of Christians of all creeds uniting to organise, rally, and protest in support of conservative sexual values cannot be overstated. Australia's secular political system – as Chavura, Gascoigne and Tregenza explain – did not establish any state church in order to avoid conflict between the sects of Christianity. This secular political settlement successfully, but barely, contained the tribal hostility between Protestants and Catholics through colonial and federal Australian history to this point. The perceived moral threat of the sexual revolution, however, quickly united (conservative) Protestants and Catholics, in what Piggin and Linder have described as 'a dramatic demonstration of the death of sectarianism'.[54] Opposition to sexual permissiveness, feminism and gay liberation was a better glue than formal political equality.

But the AFOL set its sights further than mere ecumenical cooperation among Christians. It framed its campaign on secular grounds in order to forge a coalition with moral conservatives outside of the fold of the Christian churches. Rather than opposing the moral challenges of the sexual revolution on Christian grounds – as 'sinful' – they deployed religiously neutral metaphors of 'moral pollution'. They did not hide their religious inspiration, but claimed that Christian moral wisdom would benefit all of society, whether religious or not. For example, against the 'growth of pornography in the media', they posited: 'When pollution of the mind becomes so widespread, quality control becomes as important as for our food and drink. Restraint on the proliferation of pornography must be exercised for the sake of the family'. The focus of the festival, in line with the Moral Action Committee and Community Standards Organisation philosophy, was to present a positive message of family values, asserting the value of Christian moral tradition for all of society, and avoiding accusations of 'being negative, "wowsers", or "paternalists"'.[55] As John Court explained:

> I have defended or attacked the censorship issue referring only to evidence and lines of argument that are open to general discussion. Although the Christian would see the protection afforded by censorship as contributing to the spiritual welfare of individuals, it would be quite improper to invoke the law for such a purpose.[56]

As the AFOL continued, their public pronouncements became ever more secular, fighting on the newly established grounds of community moral standards.[57] When interviewed in 2015, John Court recalled with pleasure the coalitions

[53] Author interview with John Court, 15 November 2015.
[54] Piggin and Linder, *Attending to the National Soul*, 339.
[55] John Court, *Changing Community Standards* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1972), 46.
[56] John Court, *In Defence of Censorship: A Christian View* (Adelaide: Community Standards Organisation, c.1972).
[57] See also John Court, *The Changing Face of Community Standards* (Adelaide: Community Standards Organisation, n.d.).

the AFOL made with people from other faith traditions, people from across the political spectrum, and non-religious anti-porn feminist individuals and organisations in many of their campaigns, particularly against pornography.[58]

Unlike its British inspiration (the NFOL), the AFOL became an enduring political organisation. Merging with, and soon overshadowing the Community Standards Organisation, the AFOL continued to hold rallies and sponsor tours by international figures, including Malcolm Muggeridge in 1976, Mary Whitehouse (for return tours) in 1978 and 1984, Mother Teresa in 1981, US televangelist and NCR leader Jerry Falwell in 1982, Phyllis Schlafly in 1983, and Gianna Jessen (US abortion survivor and pro-life activist) in 1996. The AFOL maintained strong links with British Christian Right groups such as Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA). These links extended to exchanges of personnel: founding members of the UK Nationwide Festival of Light, Steve and Kay Stevens, for example, were appointed director and women's advisor respectively of the South Australian Festival of Light in 1978. John Court travelled to the UK as an expert witness for NVALA court actions, and to speak at UK censorship inquiries.

David Furse-Roberts contends the period 1973–81 saw the zenith of the AFOL's power and influence.[59] It is true that AFOL events never again attracted crowds of tens of thousands, as they did at the public rallies in 1973 when Mary Whitehouse toured the country, though Whitehouse's 1978 reprise is a notable exception. With the end of the reformist Dunstan and Whitlam governments, the AFOL's limited success in subsequent political lobbying, and AFOL national director Fred Nile's entry into the upper house of the New South Wales parliament in 1981, the appetite for large-scale festival demonstrations and proclamations seems to have declined. Until the advent of the Australian Christian Lobby in 1995, however, the Festival of Light remained the most prominent of the New Christian Right lobby groups emerging in response to liberalisation of sexual attitudes in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. It was joined by a number of parallel local lobby groups, such as Right to Life Victoria (1973, becoming Right to Life Australia in 2001), Babette Francis' Women Who Want to Be Women (1979, becoming the Endeavour Forum from 1984), and B.A. Santamaria's Australian Family Association (1980, coming out of, and remaining closely associated with, Santamaria's National Civic Council).[60] This proliferation of Australian New Christian Right groups diluted the actual and perceived size of the AFOL. However, the proliferation of New Christian Right groups may have given the impression that they represented a larger constituency of Australians, a 'moral majority', than they actually did. This illusion was significant after 1970, when political, social and cultural contests over values were measured against contemporary community standards.[61]

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[58] Author interview with John Court, 15 November 2015.
[59] Furse-Roberts.
[60] Although this shift in National Civic Council politics had been signalled a decade earlier. See Rex Mortimer, 'Santamaria's Nightmare: The N.C.C. Faces the Seventies', *Politics* 6, no. 2 (1971): 161–8.
[61] Moore.

In the 1990s, the New Christian Right movements around the world became more connected, and became strongly influenced by US evangelicals. Franchises of US NCR groups were established in Australia, for example Salt-shakers, and US NCR media was syndicated throughout Australia, such as James Dobson's 'Focus on the Family' radio broadcasts.[62] Of particular significance was the formation of a coalition of conservative non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the UN – conservative evangelicals with interreligious links to Catholics, Mormons, Muslims and Jews – to bring their family values message to the world. Jennifer Butler outlines the process through which, in the late 1990s, the NCR reversed its longstanding opposition to the language of human rights and to secular international forums like the UN.[63] It made international alliances and adopted human rights discourse to pursue its pro-traditional-family agenda. In fact, religion became almost incidental to the NCR's approach, with NCR alliances crossing religious difference, and uniting with *anyone* with a shared sexual politics, often against co-religionists of different sexual or political views.[64] From 1997 numerous conservative think tanks, research foundations and congresses formed to represent and promote these politics internationally.[65]

In Australia, proportional representation in the upper houses of most Australian parliaments provided moral conservatives with the opportunity to have direct influence on legislation at key moments. Fred Nile has held his seat in the New South Wales legislative council continuously since his election in 1981, at times joined by a second Call to Australia/Christian Democrat member. Federally, Tasmanian independent senator Brian Harradine was able to influence morality legislation through shrewd deals made with the Howard government in the late 1990s.[66] And in the early 2000s, the rapid successes of the Family First party marked the entry of socially conservative charismatic and Pentecostal Christians into the political realm. Family First co-founder and prominent Pentecostal minister Andrew Evans was elected to the South Australian Legislative Council in 2002; Steve Fielding was elected to the Australian Senate in the following year. While the AFOL and the other NCR lobby groups that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s continue to exist and operate, the newer lobby groups, conservative independent politicians and Christian micro-parties

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[62] Maddox, *God under Howard*.

[63] Jennifer Butler, 'The Christian Right Coalition and the UN Special Session on Children: Prospects and Strategies', *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 8, no. 4 (2000): 351–71.

[64] See, for example: Maila Stivens, '"Family Values" and Islamic Revival: Gender, Rights and State Moral Projects in Malaysia', *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, no. 4 (2006): 354–67; Doris Buss and Didi Herman, *Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[65] https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/world-congress-families (accessed 9 December 2019); compare Buss and Herman. Masha Gessen, 'Family Values: Mapping the Spread of Antigay Ideology', *Harper's Magazine* (March 2017), https://harpers.org/archive/2017/03/family-values-3/8/ (accessed 9 December 2019).

[66] Peter Chen, 'Pornography, Protection, Prevarication: The Politics of Internet Censorship', *University of New South Wales Law Journal* 23, no. 1 (2000): 221–6.

have exceeded the AFOL's power and influence.[67] The successful entrance of these groups into the political establishment is unique among international New Christian Right groups. In this respect, particularly given their small demographic base, Australia's NCR has been more successful than any parallel movement internationally.[68]

Australian secularism and the making of the 'New Christian Right'

The success of Australia's New Christian Right after the sexual revolution, paradoxically, was built on the peculiarities of Australia's secularism. Unlike the hard-line *laicité* of France, religion has never been excluded from public life in Australia.[69] Rather, a pluralist and pragmatic political secularism emerged in Australia. This Australian secularism sought to combat sectarian conflict by limiting religious privilege, while pragmatically relying on and supporting religious institutions to provide education, health and social services. The success of the AFOL and the NCR political lobby groups, parties, and political independents that followed it, occurred at least in part because their struggle to combat changing community standards of gendered and sexual conduct was waged on secular democratic grounds. Adopting the spectacle and aesthetic of the anti-war movement and left-wing radical Christian movements, they attempted to avoid the negative wowserism of earlier moral reform movements.[70] Their motivation may have been religious, but their arguments and campaigns were carefully articulated in religiously neutral language about ethics and family values to which people of any faith (or none) could subscribe. In a population with low religious adherence and divided by longstanding ethno-religious sectarian conflict, the return of religious conservatives to social action could only have succeeded on secular grounds.[71]

The political secularity of the New Christian Right's public campaigning had some peculiar effects. The most important of these was the eclipse of almost two hundred years of bitter sectarian division, manifesting a post-sectarian Australia. This coalition of conservative Christians and allies from all denominations, as well as a wide spectrum of people without particular religious belief, united to oppose the social changes flowing from the sexual revolution. The suppression of explicit theological content in their public statements, however, meant that

[67] The AFOL changed its name to FamilyVoice Australia in 2008 to distinguish itself from the Hindu festival of lights, Diwali, and from Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party. http://www.fava.org.au/about-us/history/ (accessed 24 June 2013).
[68] Malloy, 414.
[69] Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Religion was excluded, in various ways, from public education, but as Maddox shows, even the 'free, compulsory and secular' education included scope for voluntary religious instruction. Maddox, *Taking God to School.*
[70] Hugh Chilton, '"What Does Gough Need? Jesus!" Radical Evangelicalism and National Public Culture at Kairos '73', *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review* 2, no. 8 (December 2014): 89–113.
[71] Hilliard and Warhurst, 17.

the only explicit ideological unity to the movement was its anti-permissive, anti-feminist and anti-LGBT politics. These secularised conservative 'family values' may have successfully appealed to a wider demographic base than the religious core of conservative Christians whom historians and sociologists designate as 'New Christian Right'. However, another effect of this secularised 'wowserism' was a sexualised religious politics. The enduring political unity and political orthodoxy of the Australian New Christian Right was founded not on a common faith but on a common conservative sexual ideology.

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