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Podcast Transcript

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Religion, Education and Politics in Australia and NZ

Podcast with **Marion Maddox** (26 November 2018).

Interviewed by **Thomas White.**

Transcribed by **Thomas White** and **Helen Bradstock**.

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Thomas White (**TW**): *Well it is a beautiful morning here on the penultimate day of the EASR in Bern, and I'm delighted to be joined by Professor Marion Maddox of Macquarie University in Sydney. Marion is a Professor of Politics at Macquarie and she has PhDs in Theology from Flinders, and another PhD in Philosophy from the University of New South Wales. It is probably no exaggeration to say that Professor Maddox is the leading authority on questions of religion and politics in Australia, and it is an absolute pleasure to have you with us in the recording studio this morning. Professor Maddox, welcome!*

Marion Maddox (**MM**): Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

TW: *So, your paper was delivered on Monday. Today's Wednesday, so we're a couple of days down the line. But I thought perhaps before going into the paper, as a first question to ease us into the interview, could you please tell us a little about how you became a Professor of Religion and Politics in Australia?*

MM: Yes, well, sort-of by mistake! I did a PhD in Theology, and by the time I'd finished I was very sure that I didn't want to work for the Church – which is pretty much the only thing you can do with a PhD in theology in the normal kind-of career progression in Australia. So I applied for jobs all around the place. And the one I happened to get . . . which was not what I imagined myself doing, but you know how it is when you finish your PhD and you apply all around the place, and you get what you happen to get. The one that I happened to get was in a fabulous department that no longer exists in the University of South Australia. And what we did was provide teacher training to teachers of Religious Studies. Because, in those days, South Australia had thought that it was going to have a non-

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confessional RE programme for teachers in public schools, and they had set up this whole department to train the teachers for it. But what had actually happened was that that programme was never implemented, and instead we provided teacher training for Catholic schools mainly. Our main clientele was Catholic schools' deputy principals, who had to get a degree in Religious Education in order to get the next step on their promotion. And so we were kind-of a service provider for the Catholic Education Office. And then ACU (the Australian Catholic University) got set up and so we lost that client base, and the department isn't there anymore. But it was a fantastic department, and I learnt there what non-confessional RE – Religious Education, education about religions – is, because we were providing it to all these Catholic school teachers. We would see them come in and think that Religious Education was catechesis, and then they would go through this programme and they would discover that there is this whole other way to think about religion. I worked there for 5 years as I was on contract, and then my contract ran out. Then I cast around and applied for jobs, and the one that I happened to get, again, was in Australian Politics, at the University of Adelaide. And while I was doing that I thought, "Hang on a minute! There's all this work on religion and politics in America, but no one is doing anything on religion and politics in Australia. But there is a huge story here!" And while I was doing that two-year contract in Politics at the University of Adelaide, a big story was in the paper every single day, on, and on, and on. In fact, it started while I was still in Religious Studies at the University of South Australia. And that was the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission, which anybody who lives in South Australia will still know what that is about straight-away – it was on the front page of the *Adelaide Advertiser* for a couple of years. It was an inquiry into whether a group of Aboriginal women from South Australia had fabricated so-called "secret women's business" – which is now a phrase in Australian vernacular but it wasn't until then – which was a set of traditional beliefs that, because they were secret, they hadn't talked about before. So wider Australia went, "We've never heard of this, you must have made this up!" But the point of it was that these beliefs were about a tract of water between Hindmarsh Island and the mainland. And its sacredness, these women said, should prevent a marina being built, that was wanted to be built by some developers. And so this whole question of "Should sacred sites stand in the way of development?" blew up into a question about "Do Aboriginal peoples make up traditions in order to stop development?" and "Are they being manipulated by 'Greenies'?" And so there was a series of inquiries. So this question of how non-Aboriginal Australia deals with questions of sacredness seemed to me to be a very religions-and-politics question that mainstream Australia did not have a vocabulary to deal with. So I wrote quite a lot about that. And then, when my University of Adelaide ran out (laughs) . . . . It seems my academic trajectory has been really shaped by the conditions of the labour market! I then applied for, and got, the Australian Parliamentary Fellowship which was a fantastic programme run by the parliamentary

library which still exists but, I think, in not as a good a form. But in those days it was a one year programme where you worked in parliament as a research fellow for a year, where you spent half your time doing an individual independent research project, and the other half of the time supplying information for members and senators on anything they ask about. And my independent research project was about religion and Australian parliamentary processes. And I wrote my first book which was called *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*, which was the only Parliamentary Fellowship monograph ever to sell out, and go to a second printing! And it is now available on-line for a free pdf download. And then, after that, I got my first permanent job – Yes! – at the Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand. And there we had a course on Religion and Politics. So there's a long answer!

TW: *Oh well, OK! This segues nicely with a question that I was going to ask towards the end but: the situation of politics and religion in Australia, and the situation of politics and religion in New Zealand – was it quite a shift going to Victoria, after developing all your expertise on your situation in Australia?*

MM: It really was. I was quite, well . . . I had been to New Zealand once. I did the interview over the phone, so I had only been there once, years earlier, for a conference. So I did not really know anything about New Zealand, except that I heard this rumour that they have really good coffee – which proved to be true!

TW: *Excellent coffee, yes!*

MM: Yes, yes! And that was such a wrench, coming back! But when I got to Wellington, I remember going to my first faculty meeting and thinking, "I'm going to have to get a dictionary!" Because there was so much Maori language which is used as just a matter of course, in everyday discourse, from university management and in university processes. And I didn't know what all these words meant. So if you are a student, and a student has a problem, you are allowed to bring *whanau* support, you know, so I didn't know. I learnt. But it was a very sharp learning curve, and that required a whole sort of cultural shift. And when I moved back to Australia it was a culture shock again, to have that indigenous perspective suddenly not present in university processes. So that was one thing that I noticed. And the political system, when we moved to New Zealand. New Zealand had only quite recently made the shift to MMP, multi-member proportional voting, whereas Australia uses single transferable vote in the lower house and a version of proportional representation in the upper house. And so I learnt that the voting system has quite a strong effect, which I hadn't really . . . I'd kind-of

intellectually known, but I hadn't really seen it in action. And so I hadn't really, viscerally, appreciated the effect it can have on, like, the way that religious interests can have an effect in electoral politics. And while we were in New Zealand there was that dramatic election when a religiously influenced party, United Future New Zealand, got an unexpectedly big vote and, effectively, the balance of power in the New Zealand parliament. So, I learnt a lot things and I did have to go on a sharp learning curve, and I couldn't kind-of, be an expert on New Zealand politics straight away. I had to make a quick catch-up.

TW: *Well, that's interesting. So trying to rephrase that in very broad brush, and perhaps overly clumsy positioning: is there the implication that New Zealand is a bit more open to ethnic difference – in terms of the Maori having much stronger representation within the political system – this is carried over to more access for religion within the public space, or more representation for religion in the public space in New Zealand, than in Australia?*

MM. Well, I would say it is a different kind of presence. Australia has a history of a strongly articulated policy of multiculturalism, which has been under increasing attack over the recent decade or two. But multiculturalism became official policy in 1974, and for a long time there was quite a strong infrastructure of policy and practice to support that. Whereas, New Zealand's policy is biculturalism, so that has kind of made different spaces for religious communities to be present in the public space. New Zealand is further down the secularisation path than Australia is, if we think of secularisation meaning the religious practice of the majority of the population. So in the last Australian census, 54% of Australians claimed to be of some sort of religious adherence. I'm not sure what the figure is for New Zealand, but New Zealand got to that 50%, just over that 50%, a couple censuses ago. So I imagine it's lower now. But the striking difference about religion in the public space that I noticed when I lived in New Zealand is that, in New Zealand Maori make up not only a bigger proportion of the population, but also a much more cohesive proportion of the population than Aboriginal people – Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders – do in Australia. So indigenous Australians are about 2-3% of the population whereas Maori, at the time I was living there, were about 15%. And the other big difference is that Maori have a common language, whereas Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have many different language groups: there were about 500 different language groups at the time of European contact. So, for example, when I enrolled my daughter in primary school in Wellington, on her first day, when she was 5, we went along to Newtown primary and there was a ceremony to welcome to the new students. And it was forty-five minutes long and every last word of it was in Maori! And all the little *pakeha* kids, like my daughter, just had to sit there and . . . sit there politely and listen. And the principal made a quite long speech – I

guess about 15 minutes long – and every now and then a smattering of people in the audience laughed and the rest of knew that he'd made a joke! And there was a *haka*, and my daughter had never seen a *haka* before – having just come from Australia – so she was just kind of gobsmacked! And then, once she started at school, everyday started with a *karakia* – which is a Maori prayer which is offered at the beginning of something important – which is in Maori. And the children who didn't speak Maori didn't know what the content of the *karakia* was. They just knew this was something that they had to pay respectful attention to. And then, one day we were sitting in a church service and the vicar said, "We will now chant the Lord's prayer in Maori", and my daughter said in a triumphant state, "I know this!" And only at the point did she realise that what she had been saying every day in school was actually with Christian content, but delivered in Maori language. So there is a lot more kind-of theological presence in New Zealand public life through the Maori traditions than there is in Australia – partly because of the Treaty obligation to respect Maori tradition, much of which has Christian content. So that was a bit of an eye-opener to me, in the way that religious meaning can be present in public life.

TW: *Yes, it gets carried in the representation of Maori voices, yes. Excellent, that's an interesting contrast taking place there. So throughout your career very much looking at public policy, you mentioned in your paper that you take great value from Bacchi's approach to public policy in terms of "framing the problem". Could you, perhaps, please explain to our listeners what that's about?*

MM: Well, yes. So Carol Bacchi was, in fact, one of my colleagues at the University of Adelaide. And see developed this approach called 'What's the problem represented to be?" which is a problem-framing analysis technique that she has very successful disseminated – particularly to Australian public policy practitioners, and the people working on the boundaries of academia and public service. And so it's taking off from the observation, that anyone working in policy-framing is aware of, which is that how you frame the question has a big influence on how you find the solution. So if the problem is traffic congestion, if you think the problem is not enough roads, then you build more roads. But then you'll still end up . . . because all that happens is that everyone takes their cars out, and you end up with still more blocked roads. So is the solution to traffic congestion more roads? Or is it having to think about traffic in a different way? So she developed this six-point technique, based on a Foucauldian set of assumptions, where you ask, in any particular policy framework: what is problem represented to be? Why is the problem represented to be this way? What assumptions underlie this problem representation? How could it be represented differently? And whose interests are being served by representing it in this way rather than some other way? And, what if we represent it in a different way? Or what different problem representations can we come up with? And who would

benefit or lose when we represent it in different ways? And what consequences would flow from different problem representations? So I was applying that approach to looking at the way questions about secular education have been framed and applied in the 19th and 21st Century in Australia and France.

TW: *Yes. So, I really enjoyed the paper.*

MM: Thank you.

TW: *It think it got a really good response from the audience: the comparative analysis of the trajectories of religion in schools in France and Australia. I think probably, most of our Listeners, they would be more familiar with the France situation because of the veil, and that's received a lot of popular attention. So, starting with Australia, what's the story regarding religion in schools in Australia? How has that developed?*

MM: Well, the story about education in Australia goes back to before it was a country, and was a set of colonies. The Australian colonies federated in 1901 – and, at the time, everyone thought New Zealand was going to join in as well, but it didn't – and each of the colonies started out with the schools being mainly provided by churches, because that was who had the resources to do it. And then, as they were scrambling to set up local infrastructure, gradually, they were governed directly from the UK. And then they established local parliaments and then the parliaments set up school systems. And so there is a very good record in the local Hansards, the records of parliamentary debates, about the parliamentarians debating what kind of school system they should set up. And they all, each of the parliaments in turn, debated whether religion should be put into the public schools, and should the parliaments or governments be subsidising religious schools alongside the public system? And each of them decided, for very similar reasons – and the same debates were had in parliament after parliament – "No. They should not be subsidising religious schools, and they should not have religion taught in the public schools." And both of those things for the same reason: namely, that children should be encouraged to go to public schools because they wanted to overcome the problem that they'd perceived which was sectarianism that was dividing . . . . The biggest potential division in their communities was sectarianism. And so divisions between Catholic and Protestant students was the main division. But other divisions like between . . . . Particularly in South Australia, they talked a lot about . . . they imagined a future colony where there might be Jewish and Muslim students as well, and maybe Buddhists they mentioned. In the 19th Century parliaments they thought that the best way was for all of those students to be educated side-by-side and to grow into one cohesive community.

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And they thought that any attempt . . . . They wondered, "Could there be some non-denominational Christianity?" or could there be some sort of . . . ? "Er, no. That won't work. Because that will still exclude the little Jews and Buddhists." "Could we teach some general religion that doesn't offend anybody?" But they sort-of flirted with that idea for about five minutes and then realised that isn't going work.

TW: *Yes, you're always going to offend somebody*.

MM: Yes. So, in the end, they concluded that the only way was just not to have religion in the public schools. And all the people in the debates were very religious people by and large, or fairly religious people; they were not anti-religion. In fact, some of them were very devout. And some of them said that religion is simply *too important* to let it be politicised by letting it be kicked around in the education debates: "We need to protect religion by keeping it out of the public schools." And churches also, some of them, wanted to have the Bible in schools. But some of them, like the Congregationalists in Australia, they passed a series of motions through their Synod, saying that the Bible needed to be kept out of public schools to protect it from being turned into a fetish or being turned into a political football. So there was quite a unified – surprisingly, to me – unified view across the religious and non-religious spectrum – but the non-religious spectrum in 19th Century Australia was minute – but that religion didn't belong in public education.

TW: *And we're still talking here religious instruction – a values-based religion-type education – as opposed to the RE that you might get in more contemporary schooling systems, which is just exploring descriptive aspects of religion?*

MM: Yeah. But the exception was New South Wales. And because New South Wales is so big, a lot of the debate that we have now takes the New South Wales experience as normative. But, actually, New South Wales was really the exception. And what New South Wales did was that it was the last state to pass . . . or colony, to pass its secular Education Act in 1880, and it was also the most equivocal. Because the sectarian issue was the fiercest in New South Wales. But it kept something called 'General Religious Education' in its Education Act and that was where teachers could give general religious information, which the 19th Century legislators thought was going to be a kind of non-denominational Christian RE, not education-about-religions education as we think about it now. There was going to be some Bible instruction but without dogmatic commentary. And New South Wales also kept in a capacity for ministers of religion to come in for up to an hour a day – but nobody actually did that – to instruct members of their own denomination: an in-house catechetical instruction.

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So the more education-about-religions, as an educational subject, by and large, is still not taught in Australian schools. There is a little element in the Civics curriculum, in the National Curriculum. But I think it would be true to say that most Australian students wouldn't notice that they'd received it. A bit about, you know, the religions of your neighbours. And in New South Wales, there is also a Studies of Religion which you can take in the last two years at High School as an optional subject. Nearly everyone who takes it takes it from private schools, religious schools. But it is a very good programme in that it is seriously non-confessional RE, and you can't just do it in one tradition. Like if you are a Catholic school . . . . Most Catholic schools make Catholicism one of their traditions, but you have to do another one.

TW: *Is that an initiative that is coming out of the Catholic Church itself, or is this something that is coming out of the national education body?*

MM: No, it's overseen by the Board of Studies, which is the New South Wales education. And although the majority of students that take it are in private schools, some public schools offer it as well, and some students take it as an independent study unit.

TW: *OK. But as your paper was suggesting there is a wind of change blowing through the Australian education system – or ever since John Howard, anyway – where things, perhaps, are moving in a different direction. Is that correct?*

MM: Well, there are currents of change pulling in different directions. So actually, even going back before John Howard there has been a move of increasing segregation in Australia's education. So Gough Whitlam actually – the hero of progressive politics – he, in 1973, introduced a huge change which was to bring back public funding of private schools. He also greatly increased school funding across the board, so there was just so much largesse going around the schools, that it didn't create a great deal of protest. And also he directed it towards the most needy, poor Catholic schools. But every reiteration of the funding arrangements since then has been to the benefit of wealthier schools and to the detriment of the public school system. So we now have a very segmented school system where large numbers of wealthy schools are funded over their official allocation, because they've managed to do special deals where they get funding for their running costs, and on top of that for their building programmes, and for additional special projects. And the funding allocation of public schools has gone down, proportionally.

TW: *And it's the private schools that are more often the religious-run schools?*

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MM: Over 90% of private schools in Australia are attached to Christian denominations, one way or another. And whereas public schools are officially secular, the other change – that is a Howard change – is that public schools also have increasing amounts of religious presence in them. For example, through the National Schools Chaplaincy Programme, which is a government-funded programme which puts almost exclusively Christian chaplains in public schools. And another Howard change is that the make-up of the private school market has changed with the easing of the regulations for small private schools – most of which tend to be from the more conservative-evangelical end of the spectrum.

TW*: Are these changes actually done with a religious motive, or a motive of actually helping religions gain a larger foothold in education? Or is this actually due to kind-of changing educational policy in relation to the freedom of institutions to develop their own curricula, or to have more autonomy from national or state education bodies?*

MM: I think, from looking at Howard's statements for why he was making those changes, I'd say it was a combination of things. The Liberal Party, which was his government, the Liberal Government, their general preference is for private providers rather than public provision. Not on the basis of any educational evidence, but that's just . . . . They oversaw out-sourcing of public services in a whole range of areas and education was one. I do, however, think he had a deliberate strategy of courting the conservative Christian end, the conservative Christian demographic. Because, before he came to power in 1996, he had identified progressive churches as one of a series of groups, including feminists, academics, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the environmentalists, he had this list of people . . .

TW: *The usual troublemakers . . .*

MM. Yes, that's right! . . . who had blocked reforms that his predecessors in the Liberal Party had tried to implement, and liberal Christians were one his targeted groups. And so, when he got in in 1996, he embarked on a programme of telling progressive churches to get back in their box, and stick to talking about spiritual matters. And at the same he went out his way to go to Hillsong Church conventions; to do this thing of easing the regulations for small Christian schools; to make a series of statements on conservative so-called "family values" issues; to complain about political correctness, and generally sort-of court that so-called Christian-values/conservative-values end of the religious spectrum – which is actually only a very tiny proportion of the population of Australia. Australia doesn't have a big U.S Christian right market, but he was talking that sort of language. And this was

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the same time that George Bush was aligning himself with the U.S. Christian right. And Howard was echoing, in a more muted way, that same sort of language and appealing, in Australia, to . . . not so much of an existent evangelical-voter-base, but more to a part of the population that doesn't go to church, but thinks that values are a good idea: "Christians seems to have them, maybe. Society is falling apart, and maybe we ought to stick with the person who appears to know what values are and where they are to be found."

TW: *So, to summarise: where the Australian education system started out with a strong commitment to keeping religion out of its education system, in the name of openness and inclusivity, under the Howard government, religion, and specifically Christian values, are making a quiet return as an educational resource, largely to push against a liberal politics in Australia. And, indeed, confirming some of the earlier reservations in the 19th Century about religion in education becoming a political resource. Fascinating. Professor Maddox, thank you very much for your time and expertise. And thank you to our Listeners for tuning in.*

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader transcription project, please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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