

## Article

# Religion in Coalition: Balancing Moderate and Progressive Politics in the Sydney Alliance

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**Abstract:** This article examines how the engagement of diverse religious organisations and individuals in grassroots politics impacts the nature of politics and coalition building through a case study of an urban grassroots political coalition in Australia: the Sydney Alliance. Based on eight-months of exploratory ethnographic fieldwork in one campaign team, this article argues that whilst religious organisations bring significant symbolic and institutional resources to political coalitions, and can be flexible coalition partners, they tend to moderate both conservative and progressive political tendencies within a coalition and demand focused attention from organisers and leaders to manage the coalition dynamics. This article examines the way many religious activists understand their political action to be an inherent and necessary part of their religious practice: problematizing the characterisation common in much social science literature that religious engagement in more progressive politics primarily serves political, and not religious, ends. In doing so, it shows how political action can be directed both outward towards the work, and inward towards the ‘church’.

**Keywords:** community organizing; religious diversity; political participation

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I examine the work of one urban grassroots political coalition in Sydney, Australia, that brings religious actors from multiple Christian denominations, Jewish organisations, and Islamic groups into political coalition with trade unions and secular community groups. The Sydney Alliance is a broad-based community organisation with 40 partners who organise on issues like affordable housing, renewable and affordable energy, work-life balance, and in support of people seeking asylum to create ‘a fair, just and sustainable city’ (Sydney Alliance 2019). The coalition works to position itself as politically non-partisan and neither progressive nor conservative. Significantly, the religious participants in the coalition are mobilised as religious actors: their religious identity and membership in a religious community is viewed positively by the coalition as a source of political power.

I use this case study to argue, firstly, that while religious institutions and communities bring significant symbolic (and other) resources into political action, having religious people engaged in political life as religious people—not leaving their religious identity and beliefs at the door to the public sphere—requires constant management, negotiation, and compromise. The deep and ongoing work the Sydney Alliance put in to managing the religious diversity of the coalition, however, pays off in the form of unusual—and politically powerful—alliances. Secondly, for the religious participants in this study, religion is always and necessarily political. These highly political religious actors are an example of the complex interplay between religious belief, practice, and political life. Indeed, I argue that there is no easy division to be made between ‘the religious’ and ‘the political’—inasmuch as some religious participants in the Sydney Alliance view their political action as a necessary part of their religious practice, others also speak of taking political action to—in some sense—redeem or reform

their religious communities. Politics is thus a practice directed both outward towards the world, and inward towards ‘the Church’.

This study is significant in its analysis of religious actors working in political coalition across religious diversity—including with non-religious groups. Although the religious participants in the Sydney Alliance are mobilised as religious actors, they are able to identify common political values and goals with participants from other religious communities, and with avowedly secular organisations. Further, they do not check their religious affiliations and beliefs at the door to the public sphere: the political relationships across religious difference are built on an acknowledgement of the political power of diverse religions, and an acceptance of the religious actors’ ‘whole selves’. Finally, although the particular issues the Sydney Alliance campaigns on would be broadly congruent with progressive politics, the coalition positions itself as politically non-partisan and neither progressive nor conservative. Studies of religious engagement in politics have typically addressed either religious action for conservative political causes, or religious action for progressive political causes—characterising religions as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘hegemonic’ or ‘inclusive’ in the process. In examining religious engagement in a more centrist political group, this article aims to present a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between religion and politics within civil society in Australia.

## 2. Religion and Politics

In contradiction to the claims of secularisation theorists in the mid-Twentieth Century, who claimed religions would wither as modernisation advanced (for example, [Berger 1967](#)), the latter part of the Twentieth Century saw what is often called a religious ‘resurgence’ or ‘revival’. Religious ‘resurgence’ is characterised by ‘increased intensity of commitment, increased salience of religious identity, the rise of puritanical extremes, and a return to using political engagement to apply faith’ ([Bouma and Ling 2007](#), p. 84). Scholars of religious resurgence have documented the rise of evangelical Christianity, often focusing on the United States and Africa (for example, [Kalu 2008](#); [Westerlund 2009](#)) and noting the dramatic expansion of Pentecostalism across the globe ([Hefner 2010](#); [Thomas 2007](#)). The Islamic revival that sought to ‘re-establish and re-institute Islamic teachings, in their broadest sense’ in societies across the world ([Sinanovic 2012](#), p. 3) has been tied to the Iranian revolution, to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the electoral success of Islamist political parties in Turkey, Egypt, and Malaysia ([Hefner 2010](#)). Some scholars note distinctive features of religious revivals, like that of Theravada Buddhism across Southeast Asia, which is characterised as ‘popular, voluntary, and laity-based [ . . . ] marked by the heightened participation of women, although [ . . . ] not by explicit normative affirmations of gender equality’ ([Hefner 2010](#), p. 1031).

A strand of literature examining religious resurgence and revival conflates ‘serious religiosity with fundamentalism’ ([Thomas 2007](#), p. 22), and many of the examples given of the relationship between religious resurgence and political life are of conservative and hegemonic, if not illiberal, cases. For example, ([Bouma and Ling 2007](#), p. 84) give three examples of religion returning to politics: the implementation of Shariah law in Malaysia, the teaching of creation science in the United States, and the condemnation of certain ‘patterns of sexuality’. Scholars of the Islamic revival have fiercely debated the role of women in Islamist movements ([Mahmood 2005](#); [Masquelier 2009](#); [Rinaldo 2014](#); [Zaman 2019](#)). The politically powerful alliance of evangelical Christians with the Republican Party in the United States since the late 1970s has generated ongoing debate and analysis ([Williams 2010](#)).

Australia is commonly thought to be highly secular. However, secularism in Australia historically took the form of a ‘rechannelling’ rather than ‘repudiation’ of Christianity in political and social life ([Chavura and Tregenza 2015](#), p. 4). As a result, Australian secularism provided de-facto privilege to a particular kind of Christianity, tying Australian democracy to ‘the specific religious values of the predominantly British, Christian settlers’ ([Randell-Moon 2013](#), p. 353). As explained below, religious groups—particularly Christian—have had significant influence on Australia’s political life, although scholars argue Australians have, until recently, been hesitant to speak about religion openly ([Bouma 2006](#)). Despite the continued influence and public visibility of Christian groups in Australian

political life, Australia is (and always has been) a religiously diverse country (Bouma 2015, p. 214). However, even though supposedly ‘post-secular’ (i.e., a qualified acceptance of religion in public life and debate (Habermas 2006) attitudes towards religion in Australia may be evident, it is still the case that only certain kinds of religious expression are acceptable (Possamai 2017).

Scholarship on religion and politics in Australia mostly falls within two broad strands. The first examines the relationship of Christian groups to (usually conservative) political parties, analysing the influence of Christianity on voting patterns, political parties, and politicians. Marion Maddox (2005) book *God Under Howard* documented the influence of conservative Christianity on Australia’s Liberal Party, arguing the Australian Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) adopted a US-style strategy of campaigning on polarising, socially conservative issues to shore up his political power (see also Smith and Marden 2013). Studies suggest that the changing nature of religious affiliation in Australia has favoured the conservative Liberal-National coalition (Bean 1999; Warhurst 2007) and that despite falling religious affiliation across most major Christian denominations in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018), the use of Christian language by Australian politicians in speeches to Parliament has increased (Crabb 2009).

The second strand of literature on religion and politics in Australia examines the impact of religiosity on political participation and tends to focus either on Islam (for example Harris and Roose 2014; Peucker 2018; Vergani et al. 2017) or on migrant communities (Jiang 2017). These studies are often framed around the common anxiety that migrant communities do not engage in democratic life or, in the case of Islam, are incompatible with liberal democracy. This literature either finds that religiosity is positively correlated with civic and political participation (Jiang 2017; Vergani et al. 2017; Peucker 2018) or that factors other than religion account for low levels of participation (Harris and Roose 2014).

In both international and Australian literature, scholars have brushed over religious engagement in ‘progressive’ (or even centrist) politics. Religious engagement in public life is typically characterised *either* as conservative and exclusivist *or* as a form of ‘social service’—i.e., insufficiently political. This can be explained by a tendency within social science to a ‘myopia of the visible’ (Melucci 1989, p. 44): conservative religious interventions in political life are often more controversial and thus attract more academic and media attention. There are some notable exceptions: a few social movement scholars have examined the role of religion in the US civil rights movement (Morris 1984), in the US central-American peace movement (Nepstad 2004), in the European alter-globalisation movement (Peace 2015), in US immigration activism (Yukich 2013), and in Islamic environmentalism in the US and UK (Hancock 2015a, 2015b, 2018); and there is a cluster of literature on the involvement of various religious communities in community organising initiatives in the US and the UK (Bretherton 2014; Braunstein 2017; Warren 2001; Wood 2002).

Many of these studies (although by no means all) have a tendency to instrumentalise religion: religious communities and institutions are seen to have important resources—physical infrastructure, money, social networks, and symbolic meaning—that can be mobilised in service of political ends (Yukich 2013). Social capital theorists have argued that religious institutions and communities facilitate the development of the ‘civic skills’ (Weithman 2002) or ‘social capital’ (Putnam and Campbell 2010) necessary to participate in democratic life. However, literature on social capital and religion examines how participation in the regular activities of a religious community can provide religious citizens transferable skills to be used in the public sphere, for political ends—religion still plays second fiddle to politics.

Scholarly investigation into the role of religion in grassroots politics in Australia is relatively underdeveloped. As discussed above, we know a lot about the influence of Christianity (in particular) on institutional politics in Australia: political parties, politicians, and voting behaviour. Whilst the studies of religiosity and political participation in Australia mentioned above do tend to define participation so it includes civic engagement as well as voting, these studies by-and-large establish the degree of correlation between religiosity and political engagement rather than investigate in detail the

complex interaction of religion with politics at the grassroots level. This article thus addresses two areas of scholarship on religion and politics in Australia requiring greater study: religious engagement in non-conservative politics; and ethnographic detail regarding religious actors' involvement in grassroots politics.

### 3. Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork with the Sydney Alliance, an urban coalition of 40 partner organisations including trade unions (n. 5), religious congregations and organisations (n. 20), and secular community groups (n. 15) based in Sydney, Australia. Of the religious congregations and organisations, 14 are Christian (6 Catholic, 6 Uniting Church, 1 Baptist, and 1 Ecumenical), 3 are Islamic, and 2 are Jewish.<sup>1</sup> The Sydney Alliance was founded in 2011 and is explicitly modelled on the model of community organising pioneered by Saul Alinsky in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood in Chicago in the 1930s. Alinsky recognised that to improve the living and working conditions of the people of the neighbourhood, and to secure much-needed investment from a City Government that had long failed to provide adequate services and infrastructure, the established institutions that *already* had legitimacy and deep networks within the neighbourhood—primarily the trade unions and churches—needed to work together to generate sufficient political power to make change. Whilst Alinsky's community organising political model is widespread and well established in the United States, it is a relatively recent addition to Australia's political landscape. The Sydney Alliance was the first official 'broad-based community organisation' in Australia and is an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (see [Tattersall 2015](#)).

The data in this article were gathered from May 2018 until December 2018, with the Sydney Alliance's People Seeking Asylum (PSA) team. Whilst the Sydney Alliance is a coalition of diverse partner organisations, its organising work occurs through action teams that are facilitated by paid organisers (employed by the Sydney Alliance) and these teams conduct their work under the name of the Sydney Alliance. Any member of a partner organisation (religious congregant, union member, employee, etc.) is able to join any of the Alliance's teams. Throughout this time, I was an ordinary, contributing participant in the Sydney Alliance and the PSA team: I attended monthly PSA team meetings and more frequent meetings of a campaign working group, quarterly council meetings and the AGM, I undertook the six-day residential training in community organising and acted as a trainer for the two-day foundations training, I attended a 'table talk' organised by the PSA team, was in a delegation to my local member of parliament, and conducted 12 'relational meetings' with members of the PSA team. In addition to this participant observation, I also conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with staff organisers (n. 2) and members of the PSA team (n. 11).<sup>2</sup> This included 10 from Catholic organisations, 2 from Uniting Church organisations, and 1 from a Jewish organisation. Not all the participants are themselves religious or practice the religion of the organisation they represent within the Alliance, as they include some paid employees of religious organisations. The PSA team does include members from non-religious organisations, but I was unable to interview them during this preliminary phase of research. The participants in this study spoke to me in a dual capacity—as active members of the Sydney Alliance, and as representatives within the Sydney Alliance of their organisation.

Interview transcripts, field notes, and textual data (a random sample of the weekly email newsletter sent by Sydney Alliance organisers to members, n. 12) were entered into NVIVO for coding. As this eight-months of fieldwork is the first part of ongoing ethnographic research with the Sydney Alliance, and was primarily exploratory in nature, I used a grounded theory approach for the coding and analysis of data ([Glaser and Strauss 1967](#)). I manually coded two interviews to generate a coding

<sup>1</sup> Religious organisations include congregations and representative or service-delivery organisations either run by or affiliated with a religious community, for example, St Vincent de Paul Society or the National Zakat Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> This project received clearance from the University of Notre Dame Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee on 7 May 2018 (018035S). All participants in the study gave their informed consent.

schema, and then applied this coding schema to the other texts—refining and iteratively re-coding as I worked through the data.

#### 4. Religion in Coalition

In late November 2018, a large supermarket chain in Australia announced they would roster workers for Christmas Day to stock shelves in preparation for Boxing Day. On a weekday in early December 2018, the Shop Distributive & Allied Employees Association (SDA)—a major Australian union representing retail, fast food, and warehouse workers—organised a march to NSW Parliament House. Amongst the throng of union employees in brightly coloured shirts marching up Macquarie Street, Sydney beneath the union banners was a small contingent of religious congregants and leaders from across Sydney—including a robed Orthodox priest, and a veiled Muslim woman. So unusual was the sight of visibly religious figures marching in solidarity at a Union-organised protest that these two religious leaders featured in many of the photographs circulating in the days after the protest (Sydney Alliance 10 December 2018).

The visible solidarity between diverse religious communities (particularly religious communities often perceived to be conservative) and trade unions is politically powerful. The model of community organising adopted by the Sydney Alliance involves mobilising pre-existing civic institutions with deep networks. Using ‘pre-existing associational ties’ for recruitment is recognised as a key pathway to success for social movements (Wood 2002, p. 29). But the Alliance does not just use established institutions to recruit new participants in their political action: by recruiting an institution or organisation itself (rather than individuals) any individual member of these institutions stands for the whole. They ask religious leaders to attend actions in their religious dress, or union members to wear their union t-shirts or badges, and organisers encourage participants in the Alliance to attend actions in solidarity with other member groups which are often advertised in the weekly email newsletter. For example, the march outlined in the previous paragraph occurred immediately after the Alliance’s 2018 annual general meeting, and in the emails sent out to Alliance members leading up to the annual general meeting containing meeting logistics and documents, we were also entreated to stay behind afterward and join the march, led by members of the Rail, Train, and Bus Union (RTBU)—a Sydney Alliance partner—who were also organising to march in solidarity with the SDA. Having participants from multiple religious communities, and multiple trade union and civil society groups at their political actions, the Sydney Alliance can legitimately say they represent a broad swath of Sydney’s civil society.

The religious partner organisations are valuable for more than their deep social networks. Religious congregations ‘represent one of the most stable institutional bases for democracy [ ... they] embody strong traditions through which people can learn and express the value of community [ ... and they] can offer a moral vision for political action’ (Warren 2001, p. 21). Whilst the Alliance does not usually engage in overt displays of religiosity or public prayer (unlike entirely faith-based organisations in the US, see (Wood 2002, 2007), they do occasionally use religious ritual to strategic effect, and often make use of the symbolic authority of religious leaders. For example, an ecumenical service of mourning for seasonal agricultural workers killed on the job was held as part of a campaign for justice for exploited seasonal workers. When the State Minister identified as the key decision maker threatened to back out of attending the service, the Alliance sent a Priest to the Politicians office to sit in the waiting room until he would agree to attend. Religious and secular members in the Alliance can also be used in concert for strategic political pressure. At a meeting of an action team organising delegations to local politicians about changes to the support provided to people seeking asylum in Australia, an organiser noted that a delegation needed both a union member and a religious member: the union person to make the argument that asylum seekers will enter the black market and drive down Australian wages if they do not receive sufficient support, and a faith person to make a moral argument against deportation (Field notes 22 August 2018).



Unlike many of the smaller community partners and some of the trade unions, the religious members often do not have particular issues they need to push. This flexibility is useful in managing the various competing priorities of the coalition partners. An organiser reflected on the first discernment undertaken by the Alliance,

We were working out what we were going to campaign on. And for organisations that are issue focused, it's a real challenge to work out, on the one hand the Alliance is a space to negotiate your interest, so in an ideal world you want to see the Alliance working on what you're working on. At the same time it's about the common good, so you accept it might not be your issue, but that will always be a challenge and an internal conversation. Whereas in the, in my experience in the faith communities, there may be a set of things [they] can't work on, certainly in [the religious community] there are a set of things [they] could say no, that is off the table for us, but there were very few things [they] had to work on, virtually nothing. And I remember a leader who was very very involved for a time from one of the [Catholic] Parishes saying, you know what? As long as it aligns with one of the beatitudes, I'm good. Like—we just want to do something. So there was this detachment from what the actual issue is, which creates a lot of opportunity. (Participant Eight)

Whilst the broad commitment to the 'common good' over and above any particular issue makes the religious partner organisations flexible coalition partners, as the organiser noted, there are some issues that are deemed 'off the table'. Community organisations like the Alliance balance the political power that comes with a broad and diverse membership with the need to maintain a fairly centrist political position in an effort to resolve a major tension in political culture: the 'fault-line' between progressive and conservative political groups (Swarts 2008, p. 46). This means Alliance does not take action or a public position on controversial political issues that would divide the coalition—such as the Australian referendum on same-sex marriage held in 2017. Balancing the needs of the religious and non-religious partner organisations means the Sydney Alliance is necessarily a fairly centrist political coalition. Community organisations in the US, particularly those with predominantly faith-based partners, are also generally moderate: they 'implicitly accept the fundamental institutions of democracy and the market economy, but work to project sufficient political power to hold these institutions accountable' (Wood 2002, p. 148). They also demand that 'no single religious outlook can be taken for granted as a framework for discussion (Stout 2010, p. 226). Although the particular issues that the Sydney Alliance organises around can be characterised as broadly progressive—affordable housing, affordable and renewable energy, fair work, and fair treatment of people seeking asylum—the organisers insist the Alliance is non-partisan and welcoming of people and organisations from across the political spectrum.

Despite these efforts, the Alliance has been unable to recruit a few key, conservative religious communities in Sydney such as the Sydney Anglican Archdiocese. The coalition model of politics, which requires a partner organisation to formally join with diverse religious, union, and community groups puts off the most conservative religious groups from joining. This is a problem with mobilising religious communities through coalition politics more generally—not just community organising. The social movement theorist Zald (1982) has noted that religious organisations can feel threatened by the commitments and actions of a coalition partner, which will 'filter back and commit the denomination to activities it might not have desired, which in turn creates internal conflict' (323).

Popular anxiety about religious engagement in political life centres on the fear religious communities pursue 'exclusionary, majoritarian, and generally anti-democratic' politics (Braunstein 2017, p. 17). The Alliance tries to manage these concerns through their explicit non-partisanship and selection of moderate issues. Because they deliberately recruit diverse religious members, community organisations like the Sydney Alliance necessarily seek 'a polity in which no religious group—nor any other kind of group—dominates others' (Stout 2010, p. 196). Although religious hegemony is arguably antithetical to the very model of politics the Alliance pursues, the Alliance does sometimes struggle to keep particular teams diverse. An organiser reflected, 'a Catholic organiser is very comfortable talking to Catholics, so a bunch of Catholics join and they

recruit a bunch of Catholics. So you know, it's really easy, and I think it's been recurrent throughout the Alliance in different ways with different cultures, but it's really easy for it to tip' (Participant Eight).

Whilst the Alliance may seek a model of politics in which religious communities actively participate without being hegemonic or exclusionary, the model of community organising itself makes mobilising some (predominantly Jewish and Christian) religious communities easier than others. In a study of religious organising in the United States, (Braunstein 2017, p. 89) noted that community organisers struggled to recruit Buddhist, Hindu, and certain Islamic groups because these religious communities 'either not emphasise congregational life or do not view places of worship as spaces for political action in the same way many Christians and Jews do.' The Sydney Alliance similarly found Buddhist and Hindu religious communities harder to recruit. A staff organiser, reflecting on the Alliance's struggle to formally partner with Hindu organisations, noted that 'in Sydney they don't really organise on a week to week basis. They organise for big festivals and big manifestations and it's very hard to [mobilise] out of that' (Participant Two). The community organising model reflects the context out of which it emerged—the predominantly Christian US—and so inadvertently privileges particular kinds of organisational structures: those with a defined hierarchy and organisational structure, and a defined community or congregational life.

Even within the more dominant Christian partner organisations, internal theological and organisational difference impact upon the level of participation in the Alliance. For example, the staff organiser quoted above noted that the Uniting Church, although smaller numerically than many other religious partners, is proportionately more involved, 'and that is not only a product of their theology [ . . . ] but also their governance. Because their individual churches are individual organisations in their own right' (Participant Two). Each congregation has the autonomy to decide for itself whether or not to participate in the Sydney Alliance: those that do are typically highly committed and dedicate substantial time and resources to it. On the other hand, the Catholic Church has a formal hierarchy that requires organisers to win over Bishops—and entire Dioceses. Although, because of its sheer size, the Catholic Church is 'always the single largest organisation in the room' (Participant Two), proportional involvement of Catholics in the Alliance is quite small. Winning over the leadership is not the same as mobilising lay people. A Catholic member of the PSA team reflected, 'because it was decided at the leadership level that the Diocese will join the Alliance, it's always been hard to grow it at the grassroots level' (Participant Six). In a community as large and diverse as the Catholic Church in Sydney, the work of the Sydney Alliance only appeals (and is known to) a minority within the community. A challenge to the Alliance is to grow involvement within existing partner organisations.

## 5. Religious Practice or Political Action?

That religion can be a strong motivator for political action is well established and is not a particularly novel finding. However, this characterisation of the relationship between religion and politics constructs a one-way street—religion serves political ends—which I argue is far too simplistic to adequately account for the relationship between religious belief and political action. Religious activists do not engage in political action only to achieve political ends—they may simultaneously seek to achieve *religious* ends through their action (Yukich 2013), or may intertwine their religious practice with their political action in such a way that religious and political ends become indistinguishable (Hancock 2015a, 2018). Indeed, for many of the participants in my research, their religious practice was always and necessarily political—they were, in fact, one and the same thing. For example, one participant explained his life-long involvement in political work as follows:

The servant model was really part of the whole thinking right from the jump. It was [ . . . ] a natural progression [into activism]. If you take Jesus seriously—love one-another as I have love you—where-ever it happens to come. (Participant One)

Another participant stated:

I think it's all about authenticity. If we are about the gospel then we have to live it. Not just simply go to Church on Sunday for an hour and then, you know, tick that box and come away. If we don't live it the rest of the week, we're not really being authentic to what we believe. (Participant Six)

Religious practice and political action are intimately intertwined in the experiences of these two participants—authentic religious practice *entails* or *requires* political action. For another participant, political action actually served a religious end—inverting the relationship between religion and politics typically presented by social scientists:

There is so much to be discovered about one's faith as a Christian through the practice of public engagement. Through the practice of public confrontation. All you need to do is read the New Testament to see that. So the integration of, this idea of Christianity being a political act. It was not just a spiritual act, but a political act. And to live out discipleship is not just about head-stuff, it's not just about interpersonal relationships, but it's about our public selves. (Participant Two)

Political action, for this participant, deepened their understanding of Christian practice. There may be concrete political outcomes—but importantly, the action *also* serves religious ends. There is, thus, a two-way street between 'the religious' and 'the political'.

(Stout 2010, p. 197) writing of community organising in the United States, claimed that 'the separation of Church and state does not go through the heart of the believer.' The intertwinement of religious faith and political practice in the lives of the religious participants in this study amply demonstrate this. The participants themselves articulated in various ways the belief that religion *should* be political. For example, one participant stated, "I don't want religion to be within four walls. I think the Church can be everywhere" (Participant Four). Whilst another (non-Christian) participant argued:

I actually think religion should be involved in politics. If you are standing up in the Christian religion and you support Christ, and if Christ is supposed to have done all the humanitarian things that he did, why not practice that? And isn't being a good Christian having compassion towards other people? So how can you not be politically involved if there is a political injustice? (Participant Five)

Scholars of community organising in the United States have similarly found that religious people explain their commitment to political action 'through the language of religious faith' (Wood 2002, p. 139) and reject that religion 'has no place in public life' (Braunstein 2017, p. 82). Whilst the Sydney Alliance does not incorporate much religious ritual into their political action, their mobilisation of religious communities *as religious communities* is significant—they do not ask, nor want, religious activists to check their religious commitments at the door to the public sphere.

In fact, while the Sydney Alliance might typically attract religious participants who already see political action as an inherent part of their religious practice, the Alliance also actively teaches religious members that religion can be political. At a six-day residential training in community organising, which all active participants in the Alliance are encouraged to attend, the trainers led a session that drew on stories about the 'righteous anger' over injustice within religious teachings. When some participants in the training pushed back against the idea that acting from anger could be 'Christian', the trainer asked the room "was Jesus angry?" After a moment's pause, one of the older Christian women in the room responded, "oh yeah babe. He was furious" (Field notes, 29 May 2019). Community organisations like the Sydney Alliance seek to construct 'a set of shared assumptions, perceptions of the world, symbols and concepts that help them interpret and act in the political world' (Wood 2002, p. 154; see also Wood 2007, p. 182). Whilst that involves bridging work between the diverse secular and religious groups in the Alliance, it also involves creating a shared understanding that religious faith can legitimately call upon believers to act politically.



Religious practice, for the participants cited above, necessarily involves a commitment to political action directed ‘outward’ towards the world. But some of the participants made sense of the relationship between their religious faith and political engagement in a different way. This second, smaller group of people felt varying degrees of disenchantment with or alienation from their religious community. They found that by participating in the Sydney Alliance, they could remain connected to and identified with their religious communities in a way that they felt proud of. A participant whose work within the Catholic Church brings them into contact with a few such parishioners stated:

Whereas with everything that’s been going on with the Church at the moment, you know the Royal Commission [into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse], perhaps the difference locally in their Parish with their theologies between themselves and the leader of the Parish, they’ve struggled a bit to be involved in the Church, so certainly being involved in this sort of work they’ve found their space and connection to Church. (Participant Six)

A Sydney Alliance participant from a Catholic parish in a relatively wealthy suburb of Sydney complained that, despite meeting with his Parish Priest a number of times to discuss Pope Francis’ statements on the economy and inequality, the Priest would not speak about economic inequality within the Parish, claiming that, “well, the people here wouldn’t like to hear that sort of thing” (Participant Seven). He characterised Church leaders as, “more interested in making people inward looking and holy, and not saying, look around you and look at others—what is happening to other people” (Participant Seven). An organiser in the Sydney Alliance reflected on the potential significance of Catholic political involvement in the Alliance both for individuals like Participant 7, and for the Church itself:

I think that the potential [ . . . ] is for community organising [ . . . ] to legitimise people who already care about social action and the common good and remind them and remind the Bishops this is core work. This is important. So, at a very basic level—I say basic but it was a lot of work—having 600 people at the founding assembly stand up on behalf of the Catholic Church did that. Because sometimes those people, having this visible commitment and sign, that this is who we are as Church is powerful I think. (Participant Eight)

Discussing the writings of Martin Luther King Jr, (Yukich 2013, p. 213) argues that King sought to transform religion at the same time as transforming the social and political world: ‘King saw religious transformation in both black and white churches as necessary for political change, but that does not mean he and other leaders did not also seek religious change as an important end in and of itself.’ Involvement in an organisation like the Sydney Alliance thus has the potential to transform the religious communities as well as politics. The same organiser quoted above noted the impact involvement in the Sydney Alliance had on particular Parishes, where parishioners were previously disillusioned by a lack of focus on social justice:

Parishioners have said to us that the Table Talk made their Priest realise that people were interested in justice in their Parish, or made their Priest realise it was possible to talk about justice things that they already cared about but may have been fearful that they would be too polarising. (Participant Eight)

Not only does involvement in grassroots political action allow some members of religious communities to remain actively involved when they may otherwise drift away, the attention to taking action in service of justice and the common good—as it manifests in the particularity of Sydney—reminds, or awakens, some religious leaders and congregations to the social justice aspects of their religious traditions.

## 6. Conclusions

Whilst there are political benefits to the engagement of religious organisations in the Sydney Alliance, the religious participants themselves do not harness religious resources simply to achieve

political ends—as is often portrayed in literature on religion and politics (Hancock 2015a). Rather, political action is often understood as being central to religious practice: participants serve both political and religious goals (Yukich 2013) by participating in the Alliance. For some of these participants, religion is always and necessarily political—and the idea of keeping religion partitioned from their political action makes no sense. For other participants, acting politically in the name of their religious community is a personal act of redemption directed towards a religious community which they may feel alienated from, or disenchanted with.

The ‘return to using political engagement to apply faith’ (Bouma and Ling 2007, p. 84) that is characteristic of religious resurgence or revival is clearly evident in the work of the Sydney Alliance, where religious members make use of religious language in their political action, make sense of their political engagement through their religious practice and belief, and call upon religious narratives and symbols in their political life. However, where some literature on religious resurgence and revival conflates ‘serious religiosity with fundamentalism’ (Thomas 2007, p. 22), the case of the Sydney Alliance demonstrates that characterising religious engagement in politics as necessarily conservative or hegemonic is overly simplistic. In the context of a polity in which Christian influence on politics is well established (Maddox 2005; Smith and Marden 2013; Crabb 2009), and given the prevalence of conservative Christian voices in recent debates on same-sex marriage and religious freedom in Australia, the very visible religious presence in the Sydney Alliance is by no-means uncontroversial. In Australia, both conservative and progressive politicians and political groups draw on religious language and narratives in debates over a wide range of issues (Lake 2018), creating a ‘political minefield’ (Wood 2002, p. 149) the Sydney Alliance must negotiate.

Scholars of Australian post-secularism have pointed out that rather than better accommodating diverse religious voices in public life, particular kinds of (Christian) religion continue to dominate in Australia (Possamai 2017). The campaign team in which I undertook my pilot fieldwork, the People Seeking Asylum team, was dominated by members of Christian organisations (and most religious partner organisations in the Alliance are Christian). I have argued that this reflects the biases of the organising model towards organised congregational life—which it does. But it may also be the case that the biases of Australian public life—which has always tended to privilege Christianity over other religious traditions—simply make it easier for Christians to participate in the Sydney Alliance. Further research is needed in this space. To the extent that the Sydney Alliance’s religious character is dominated by Christian participation, it is not a unique intervention in Australian public life, but part of the continued dominance of Christianity in Australian politics. What *is* unique about the Alliance, however, is the effort to mobilise diverse religious communities alongside Christian groups, and to create coalitions between religious and non-religious groups. Further investigation into these political relationships across religious difference—and in particular, into the efforts to build relationship between religious and secular organisations—will be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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