

Satanic verses: by calling social media the home of the Devil, the PM is breaching the church-state divide

Until now, Scott Morrison has toed a narrow line, promising that his government's policies will not be driven by his religious faith. He may just have crossed it.



IMAGES: AP/JOEL CARRETT

If Scott Morrison, like all previous prime ministers, kept his religious faith to himself and strictly separated from his public role, then there'd be no good cause to say anything about it.

Up until now, he has tiptoed a narrow line, promising that his government's policies will not be driven by his beliefs, while occasionally putting his religious observance on very public show. Fair enough; it is a tricky balance for any leader and society is accustomed to respecting that.

It wasn't Morrison who released the video of his speech to the Australian Christian Churches conference on the Gold Coast last week. However, he flew there and back on a government plane at taxpayers' expense and was explicit that he was speaking as prime minister, not a private citizen. The content of what he said left that unarguable anyway. It is a matter of legitimate public interest to appreciate the full meaning of his words.

Assuming that Morrison was speaking honestly to his audience (surely he was?), he said several things of significance:

- He believes that he and Jenny have been called upon to do God's work as prime minister and wife;
- He does not believe that he can "save the world" on his own, and called on Christian leaders to help God with that task by propagating their faith to the people;

- He has “been in evacuation centres where people thought I was just giving someone a hug and I was praying, and putting my hands on people ... laying hands on them and praying”;
- He believes that the “weapons” of social media can be “used by the evil one and we need to call that out”.

The problem here is one of elision. It’s easy to fall into the bias-trap of eliding Morrison’s genuine faith — in which context his belief that he is doing God’s work is hardly surprising — with a claim that he has impermissibly crossed the church-state divide. That would be unfair and ignorant of history. Most of our prime ministers have publicly held religious faith of one sort or another.

An atheist, or a religious believer who draws a clear personal boundary between personal faith and secular society, may be unhappy about a prime minister who believes that that boundary doesn’t exist. But that is a political question, not a legal one.

Likewise, one might be personally upset by the thought that the prime minister has been going around the country surreptitiously performing religious acts (laying of hands) on unsuspecting citizens under the guise of simple empathy. That does raise a legitimate question of consent; arguably, it may even be a form of assault. Essentially, though, it’s still a political concern — is that the kind of thing you want your national leader to be doing?

The revelation that Morrison believes that the “evil one” — presumably synonymous with Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, the Antichrist, etc — is actively participating in social media is in a different class. This is an elision of which we should take notice.

The federal government makes and enforces many laws that affect communications, including broadcasting and online media. For example, the government has been actively legislating and regulating social media via the digital platforms review being conducted by the ACCC to inform competition law; the media bargaining code, which directly regulates social media platforms; the regulation of social media’s content by new criminal offences created in the wake of the Christchurch massacre; legislation relating to online grooming and child abuse materials; actually there’s a lot of this, and it’s constantly growing.

The point is that social media is an extremely active area of policy-making activity by the Morrison government, all of which falls under a completely new light now that we know the prime minister believes that some or much of the problems with social media are literally the work of the Devil. I’m not mocking that belief, merely saying that it is a very particular and significant perspective.

It also clearly crosses the church-state divide. The separation of church and state is intrinsic to western democracy, a principle established in direct response to the horrors of sectarian government exemplified during the reigns of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs of England.

The principle is enshrined in the Australian constitution, by its explicit prohibition on the establishment of a state religion or imposition of “any religious observance by law”.

The second part of that admonition is dangerous ground, on which it can be argued that the prime minister has apparently been stepping. If the laws that his government has been promoting, including

its advocacy of a religious freedom bill, are in fact being driven by a belief that what those laws are combating are not secular problems (people and corporations behaving badly) but evil *per se*, which is a strictly sectarian belief, then we are in the realm of converting a form of religious observance into the law of the land.

That is the problem when politicians proclaim their faith while wearing their public suits. Our prime minister is tilling perilous soil.

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