

# RELIGION, POLITICS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

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As Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister in 2006, Kevin Rudd contributed an article to *The Monthly* entitled *Faith in Politics*.<sup>1</sup> Naming the German theologian Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a role model<sup>2</sup> and describing Bonhoeffer's Christianity as 'muscular',<sup>3</sup> Rudd said Christianity '... must always take the side of the marginalised ...'.<sup>4</sup> Rudd also suggested that he would develop a policy on asylum seekers based on 'the biblical injunction to care for ... [the] vulnerable stranger in our midst'.<sup>5</sup> As Rudd noted before the publication of his article, he wrote this essay to win Christian voters to the Labor Party, describing his own religious values as energetic; not preoccupied with sexual morality; and concerned about working families.

This article concludes that the Rudd Government's policies on asylum seekers ultimately fell short of the Christian principles set out in Rudd's essay, while acknowledging the difficult political circumstances Rudd faced. His 2006 essay, among other statements, then, might be construed as a cynical use of religion to try to win votes. At the same time, I ask why there was so little serious criticism of Rudd's use of religion in politics, particularly as his government did not meet the admittedly high standards on caring for asylum seekers he had espoused in *Faith in Politics*. I suggest that Australians may be reluctant to challenge moderate Christian beliefs, perhaps believing that a person's religious values are essentially private and personal, even when expressed as part of a political campaign.<sup>6</sup>

## Faith in politics

### *The Good Samaritan*

In the 2006 opinion piece, Kevin Rudd cited the bible parable of the Good Samaritan as the proper political basis for caring for asylum seekers. In the Gospel of Luke, responding to a lawyer's urgings for Jesus to provide a clear definition of 'neighbour', Jesus tells of a Jewish traveller who is beaten, robbed and left for dead along a road. One traveller after another sees the man by the side of the road and avoids him. Later, a Samaritan comes by and helps the injured traveller. The Samaritan not only bandages the man's wounds and pours oil and wine on them, he takes the man to an inn and then pays the innkeeper to look after the traveller. This tale of an act of kindness is striking because Samaritans and Jews were known to despise one another. The message is clear — people are to treat even their enemies with the same love they bestow upon themselves.

Rudd wrote that the parable of the Good Samaritan was why the [Howard] Government's proposal to excise the Australian mainland from the entire Australian migration zone and to rely almost exclusively on the so-called Pacific Solution should be the cause of great ethical concern to all the Christian churches.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by Bonhoeffer's writings, Rudd's vision of Christianity as being 'muscular' stood in contrast with the stoic, even stagnant, beliefs of the then Prime Minister John Howard, portraying Rudd as a doer and not merely dour.

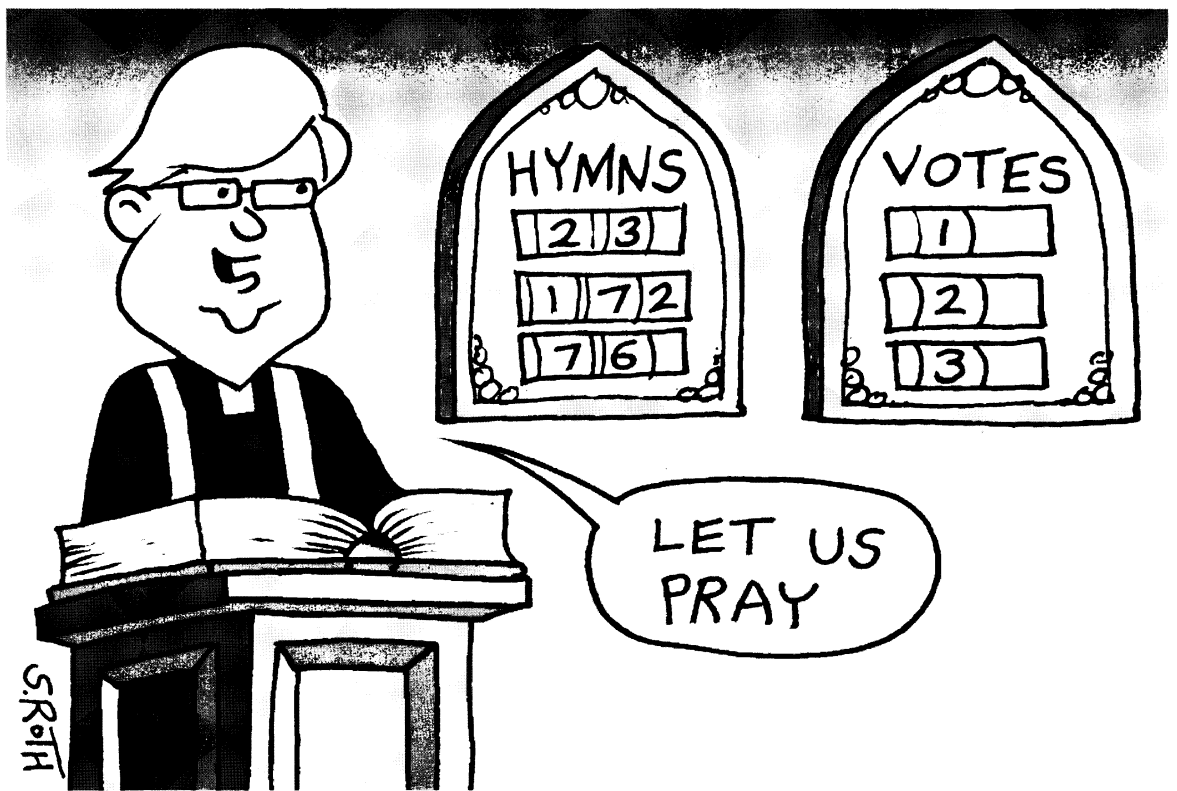
Rudd was aware that many Australians saw great significance in Christian teachings. In the same article Rudd used biblical language not only in relation to asylum seekers but also when calling for action on climate change, referring to Australians' obligation to be 'proper stewards of creation'.<sup>8</sup> So confident was Rudd of the currency of Christianity in the public sphere that a little over a year after the publication of *Faith in Politics*, he used the language of the Apostle Paul when making the much-awaited apology to the Stolen Generation saying '... unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong'.<sup>9</sup> When speaking about the global financial crisis at a forum at St Paul's Cathedral in London in 2009, Prime Minister Rudd deplored the worship of a 'false god' (referring to unfettered free markets).<sup>10</sup> As Prime Minister, Rudd often gave Sunday morning television interviews outside his church (his wife, Therese Rein, at his side); he was comfortable making reference to his religion.

### *A coalition monopoly on religion*

Christian values were an abutment to coalition policy under the former Prime Minister John Howard, an era during which, as Maddox elegantly describes, 'Howard maintain[ed] a Pilate-like distance from the messy political work, quarantined behind an imaginary white picket fence.'<sup>11</sup> According to Maddox, the Howard Government's decisions conferred an aura of moral and religious legitimacy on policies whose effects could otherwise seem merely self-serving, cynical or racist.<sup>12</sup> As a result, in 2006, despite Labor's strong historical connections with Catholicism throughout the 20th Century,<sup>13</sup> Rudd had good reason to believe that the Howard Government had corralled the Christian vote. Further, it was clear that during the 2004 election, Family First had won the votes of many religiously-inclined voters and directed its preferences to the coalition.<sup>14</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. In November 2006, the then Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs published a second article, also in *The Monthly*, entitled *Howard's Brutopia*.
2. Kevin Rudd, 'Faith in Politics', *The Monthly*, October 2006, 29. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and executed a month before the end of WWII for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Rudd described Bonhoeffer as 'the man I admire most in the history of the twentieth century', 22. Early on as PM, the Opposition regularly taunted Rudd, asking 'What would Bonhoeffer say?': see Brian Rosner, 'To Kevin from Dietrich, a few words of solace', *The Australian* (Sydney), 2 July 2010, <theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/to-kevin-from-dietrich-a-few-words-of-solace/story-e6frg6zo-1225886885078>. at 24 July 2010.
3. Rudd, above n 2, 24–25. Rudd described Bonhoeffer's political theology as '... one of a dissenting church that speaks truth to the state and does so by giving voice to the voiceless'.
4. *Ibid* 25.
5. *Ibid* 29.
6. Crabb's 2006 study found, eg, more than 20% of speeches by well-known Australian politicians referred to Christian terms such as *Christ, church, faith, pray, Jesus and Bible*: see Anna Crabb, *Invoking Religion in Australian Politics* (2009) 44:2 *Australian Journal of Political Science* 259–279, 263.
7. Rudd, above n 2, 29.
8. *Ibid* 28.
9. See ABC News 'The Apology', 2 February 2008, <abc.net.au/news/events/apology/text.htm> at 24 July 2010.
10. See ABC News 'Rudd decries "false god" of free markets', 1 April 2009, <abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/04/01/2531585.htm> at 24 July 2010.
11. Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard — the Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* (2005) 69.
12. See Marion Maddox, 'An Argument for More, Not Less, Religion in Australian Politics' (2009) 3 *Australian Religion Studies Review* 346.



13. For example, Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix sponsored Catholic lawyer and political activist BA Santamaria. Mannix (and other clerics) supported the political careers of former Irish Catholic Labor politicians including Scullin, Lyons and Calwell.

14. In the 2004 federal election, the Coalition exchanged preferences with Family First; PM Howard encouraged the link. This exchange assisted the Coalition while allowing Family First to win a Senate seat in Victoria: see John Warhurst 'Religion in 21st Century Australian National Politics' (Australian Senate Occasional Lecture Series, Theatre Parliament House, 5 May 2006) 13.

15. See *Lateline*, Kevin Rudd (Labor Foreign Affairs Spokesman), interview with Tony Jones, 2 October 2006, <abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1753915.htm> at 24 July 2010.

16. See Paul Strangio, 'Beazley's inner demons have a lot to answer for', *The Age* (Melbourne), 1 July 2003, <theage.com.au/articles/2003/06/30/1056825333361.html> at 15 August 2010.

17. See, eg, Kim Beazley (Speech to the Australian Christian Lobby, Canberra, 29 October 2005) <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/> at 15 August 2010. In his speech, Beazley refers to Bonhoeffer as one, amongst others, who 'transformed their societies by living out their strong faith-based values'.

18. See Maddox, above n 11, 101.

19. Warhurst observes that most leading humanists in parliament are in the Labor Party and notes federal Labor MP Carmen Lawrence formed a cross-factional Humanist Group in 2000 to counter what they saw as the growing influence of religion in parliamentary debates and decisions: see Warhurst, above n 14.

20. See Nicola Berkovic, 'Women in power as Julia Gillard sworn in as Australian Prime Minister by Quentin Bryce' *The Australian* (Sydney), 24 June 2010, <theaustralian.com.au/politics/women-in-power-as-julia-gillard-sworn-in-as-australian-prime-minister-by-quentin-bryce/story-e6frgczf-1225883800485> at 24 July 2010.

21. In a study about the involvement of churches in the Rudd government's 2007 election, Smith notes Festival of Light and Australian Christian Values Institute would have voted: Christian Democrat or DLP, Family First, then Coalition;

Interviewed in October 2006 about the forthcoming article in *The Monthly*, Rudd revealed that:

We became very concerned at the last Federal election that Family First ... decided to direct all of its preferences, in effect, to Liberal and National Party candidates ... I concluded it was time to speak out and I've done so with the support of my caucus colleagues are well.<sup>15</sup>

This suggests that Rudd published the article in *The Monthly* at least in part to win back 'religious votes'. His attempts to position himself as an alternative prime minister with overt Christian values set him apart, to some extent, within the ALP leadership. Kim Beazley, despite having strong religious convictions deriving from his youth work with *Moral Rearmament*,<sup>16</sup> was generally uncomfortable discussing his religious beliefs in public (at least until relatively late in his political career).<sup>17</sup> Mark Latham — an agnostic<sup>18</sup> — showed no interest in religion.<sup>19</sup> Julia Gillard freely admitted to having no religious beliefs, taking an affirmation rather than swearing an oath when replacing Rudd as Prime Minister.<sup>20</sup>

### *Religious messages for political purposes*

I suggest, then, that Rudd used *Faith in Politics* not only to influence public debate on the relationship between politics and religion but also to win power at the upcoming federal election.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, he trod a fine line in casting himself as a dedicated Christian but, at the same time, very much of the mainstream. Since some brands of Christianity (especially those with an evangelical message) can be offensive to Australians with secular or religious convictions other than Christian, he was careful to make sure his audience knew what kind of Christian Rudd *wasn't*.

First, Rudd portrayed himself an active Christian — a *worker* — and inclusive enough in outlook as to not seek to challenge peoples' spiritual or moral beliefs. His commitment to Bonhoeffer's 'muscular Christianity' — was buff Christianity — active and energetic, but not inclined to challenge non-believers, including atheists and voting Australians with non-Christian religious beliefs, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or Jews.

Further, Rudd's vision was a moderate one and the *political* implications of his religious invocations involved little more than calling on Australians to be kind to those in distress. Unlike the claims of evangelical Christians, who may suggest that those with alternative views lack spiritual enlightenment or moral value, Rudd's message conveyed no judgments about sinfulness. On occasion, the former Prime Minister used the expression 'fair shake of the sauce bottle', to describe the notion of giving others 'a fair go'.<sup>22</sup> And he transposed this attitude into the asylum seeker debate, suggesting that the Australian electorate might follow the example of the Good Samaritan and endorse a Rudd Government policy on compassionate treatment of asylum seekers.

But, crucially, by delivering a message of caring for strangers, there was little risk of Rudd losing political traction with those religious believers who may see the primary goal of Christianity as being to preach a message of spiritual salvation. All things being equal, even evangelical Christians are likely to support a politician with strong (and stable) religious convictions even if those stated beliefs come with the trappings of a social gospel. Accordingly, Rudd could potentially win the votes of bible-believing Christians without appealing *directly* to their interests.

A more difficult balancing act for Rudd was that of winning the favour of liberal (small l) Christian voters while not disenfranchising that same group of evangelicals by implying he held liberal views on sexuality. Sensing the mood of his audience, Rudd described himself by reference to a second characteristic, namely he was *not* the kind of Christian politician who is preoccupied with sexual behaviour. As Opposition Leader he claimed there was 'very little evidence that this pre-occupation with sexual morality is consistent with the spirit and content of the Gospels'.<sup>23</sup> Rudd thus avoided disenfranchising the majority of Christian believers who are similarly dispassionate about what happens in others' bedrooms. Rudd's strategy of distancing himself from questions of sexual morality did, however, risk alienating conservative Christians. The Shadow

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Minister presumably felt it was worth disappointing the evangelical rump for the sake of gaining wider political traction for his views.

Third, Rudd was keen to distinguish his position from other possible forms of political engagement such as the mere professing of Christian beliefs. For example, he described as 'most repugnant' the model of faith which says that 'simply on the basis of my external profession of the Christian faith, those of similar persuasion should vote for me'.<sup>24</sup> Rudd also rejected the kind of political message that chants a mantra of 'family values' and states 'vote for me because I have a defined set of views on questions of private sexual morality'.<sup>25</sup> He argued that the 'concept of family values ... is invariably a narrow one, and invariably leaves to one side the ability of working families to survive financially'.<sup>26</sup> Distinguishing his brand of Christianity from Family First, he presented himself as a man who stood for working families rather than the more amorphous concept of family values.

In sum, Rudd's article *Faith in Politics* amounted to targeted political messaging — the use of religious language to reengage and re-enfranchise a community largely lost to the Coalition Government.

### Rudd in government

Seeking to bring an end to the so-called *Pacific Solution*, in 2008, the newly elected Labor Government closed the offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island.<sup>27</sup> Acknowledging it was elected '... on a platform that included ... a more humane treatment of those seeking our protection', the Labor Government claimed it would bring an end to migrant children's incarceration.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, a larger number of new asylum seeker arrivals in 2009 threatened these humanitarian policies, particularly in the face of an Opposition seeking to win votes by professing a tougher stance on refugees. By October 2009, when the Australian ship, *Oceanic Viking*, rescued 78 Sri Lankan asylum seekers in Indonesia's search and rescue zone, more than 30 boats of asylum seekers had already arrived on Australian shores that year.<sup>29</sup>

The Opposition stridently criticised the Rudd Government's asylum seeker policies. More specifically, the coalition accused Rudd of '[laying] out the welcome mat [to asylum seekers] and ... [holding] the door right open [to them]'.<sup>30</sup> On 15 October 2009, the then Opposition leader, Malcolm Turnbull,

described the arrival of asylum seekers as '... the beginning of a flood.'<sup>31</sup>

Rudd's language changed, as did the government's policies.

In April 2010, barely two years after the election of the Rudd Government, the Immigration Minister Chris Evans, with Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and the Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor, announced that 'effective immediately' the Australian government had suspended the processing of new asylum seeker applications from Sri Lanka (for three months) and Afghanistan (for six months).<sup>32</sup> The Labor Government justified this policy shift by reference to 'evolving circumstances', and an apparently more urgent need to ensure that only those 'genuinely in need' would be granted protection.<sup>33</sup>

Seeking, in part, to appeal to conservative views on this issue, Prime Minister Rudd thereafter repeatedly described the government's position on asylum seekers as 'hardline but humane'.<sup>34</sup> This rather crude binary strategy, balancing humanitarian goodwill with border control, reflected a shift in Rudd's political rhetoric. His vitriol for people smugglers was manifested by his government's introduction of much harsher penalties against smugglers who assisted the passage of people outside of legal channels.<sup>35</sup> He described people smugglers as: '... the vilest form of human life ... [he also said] they trade on the tragedy of others, and that is why they should rot in jail and, in my own view, rot in hell'.<sup>36</sup> Rudd was apparently no longer solely concerned with the welfare of the 'the vulnerable stranger in our midst', the asylum seeker.

Shortly before he was deposed as Prime Minister, on Thursday 23 June 2010, Rudd said he would not 'lurch to the right' on asylum seekers.<sup>37</sup> Earlier that week, he told church groups in a webcast organised by the Australian Christian Lobby that: '[on asylum seekers] I think the country is wise enough, I think the country is hard-headed enough and warm-hearted enough to know where the balance lies'.<sup>38</sup> Although the Prime Minister's message was confusing (for it combined a commitment to be tough but also humane), the former Prime Minister stayed on-message, such as it was, right to the end of his tenure.

No one should underestimate the rhetorical strength of the Opposition's attacks on the Rudd Government or the political difficulty of Rudd, on one hand, responding to public perceptions of a 'flood' of asylum seekers while, on the other hand, trying to maintain a perception

in contrast, Centre for an Ethical Society or Micha College would have voted: Australian Democrats, Greens, Family First, then Labor. Smith also notes the influential Australian Christian Lobby supported Family First and generally opposed both 'libertarian Labor candidates and the Greens': see Rodney Smith, *How Would Jesus Vote? The Churches and the Election of the Rudd Government (2009)* 44:4 *Australian Journal of Political Science* 632.

22. For an account of Rudd's attempts with Australian vernacular, see Tony Wright, 'His Mandarin is fine but struggles with Strine', *The Age* (Melbourne) 11 June 2009, <theage.com.au/national/his-mandarin-is-fine-but-struggles-with-strine-20090610-c3ng.html> at 15 August 2010.

23. Rudd, above n 2, 26.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. See Chris Evans, 'New directions in detention, restoring integrity to Australia's immigration system' (Speech to Centre for International and Public Law, Australian National University, 29 July 2008)

28. *Ibid.* The Howard government had released all or almost all children from detention by well before the 2007 election, so Minister Evans was arguably restating Coalition policy.

29. See ABC Television news, 'Border control' 13 October 2009, <youtube.com/watch?v=WnUErpxO3Cc>, at 25 July 2010.

30. ABC News, Emma Rodgers, 'Rudd talking humbug on asylum seekers; Turnbull' 15 October 2009, <abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/10/15/2714957.htm> at 31 July 2010.

31. *Ibid.*

32. See [http://mia.org.au/media/File/AfghanSriLankrefugee\\_processing.pdf](http://mia.org.au/media/File/AfghanSriLankrefugee_processing.pdf) at 25 July 2010.

33. Michelle Foster, 'Refugee Obligations Violated', *National Times* (Sydney), 13 April 2008 <smh.com.au/opinion/politics/refugee-obligations-violated-20100412-s40l.html> at 25 July 2010.

34. See, eg, ABC Television, 'Rudd takes a tough line on asylum seekers', 7:30 Report, 14 October 2009, <abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2714395.htm> at 31 July 2010.

of Christian compassion towards them. Yet, no-one forced Rudd to use biblical standards for an asylum seeker policy, nor was Rudd a political novice when he put forward this bible story. Additionally, by the time he was replaced as leader of the Labor Party, he had already fallen short of his own admittedly high Christian standards, which, according to the parable of the Good Samaritan, require *totally* selfless love, even towards one's enemies. Rudd's message of 'hardline but humane' about, respectively, people smugglers and refugees, was different to the position he had proffered in *The Monthly*, of the need to protect the marginalised, vulnerable stranger, without condemning his oppressors. More pointedly, it is impossible to reconcile a claim of 'care for the vulnerable stranger' with a political moratorium on new asylum seeker applications (including with respect to refugees from Afghanistan, a country which Rudd described as a 'hell hole').

### Muted commentary

As we have seen, the parable of the Good Samaritan is a story about selflessness, about treating even those we detest with the same love we have for ourselves. The Rudd Government's policies unfortunately fell short of that high standard; the parable of the Good Samaritan gave way under the weight of political pragmatism. Yet, while commentators variously attacked the Rudd Government for either not being strong enough on asylum seekers or for being inhumane, there was relatively little public comment about the inconsistency between the high religious standards set out in Rudd's essay and his government's subsequent policies on asylum seekers. One exception was in an opinion piece in *The Age*, where Michael Epis suggested some religious hypocrisy, noting that:

Rudd needs to get back in touch with his principles and knock off the politics. His current actions betray not only his own principles, but the people who put him in power. On this topic he is failing as a politician and as a Christian.<sup>39</sup>

Maddox hails Epis' intervention as 'mark[ing] a maturity, new in Australian politics, in keeping the Prime Minister accountable to the theological principles that Rudd himself had enunciated'. While welcoming Epis' contribution, Maddox further points out that Rudd had articulated a coherent theological position rather than religious-nationalist posturing.<sup>40</sup>

But on the whole, commentators seemed more forgiving of Rudd's failure to meet his own high Christian standards. For example, Epis described Rudd as 'failing' as a Christian rather than as 'failed'. Writers such as Guy Rundle of *Crikey!* asked what side of Bonhoeffer Rudd really wanted to be on;<sup>41</sup> and a small number of church leaders criticised the Rudd Government's new asylum seeker policy for focussing on deterrence and not on those who most needed help.<sup>42</sup> In *Power Trip*, observing that Rudd talked of the example of the Good Samaritan, Marr noted that Rudd was '... responsible for the expensive vaudeville of processing on Christmas Island and [wrote that Rudd] had talked tough on the eve of the 2007 poll about perhaps towing boats back to Indonesia'.<sup>43</sup> Though painting Rudd as, amongst other things, 'an orator of

skill who can be a bore' and 'prudish', on the topic of asylum seekers Marr writes about playful repartee between himself and Rudd about whether Christ really was a refugee.<sup>44</sup> This is political criticism on a low flame.

How do we explain the benign critique of Rudd as an embattled Christian? For example, are Australians so cynical about politicians' promises that even a Prime Minister's failure to meet his own religious standards on an important topic like asylum seekers passes with little more than a whisper of criticism? Did the Howard era desensitise the electorate to the manipulation of Christian values in Australian domestic politics?

We have observed how Rudd disaffiliated himself from more conservative forms of Christianity thought incompatible with modern life (such as being preoccupied with sexual morality). By not challenging peoples' beliefs and arguably not even strongly confronting anyone's moral values — in essence, portraying himself as a religious moderate — Rudd likely shrank himself as a target from potentially harsher evaluation. A plausible reason for the public's lenient judgment of Rudd as a Christian is that Australians regard religious values — *particularly moderate ones* — as essentially private and personal. This may be so even for politicians who fail to meet their own religious standards in political life.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, it remains surprising just how little tough criticism Rudd endured. If politicians claim to hold to particular religious values and fail to live up to those beliefs, then Australians are entitled to call a politician on this inconsistency between belief and action, especially if the politician has raised the topic in the public sphere. I appreciate that there is a place for cautiously recognising the limits of religious criticism and that Australians should respectfully acknowledge, and not unfairly explore, our politicians' private religious beliefs. In any case, as I have suggested, Australians may be inclined to duly recognise such limits in relation to people who are religious moderates. However, Rudd's religious claims about the Christian basis for Australia's treatment of asylum seekers could have been subjected to far more penetrating scrutiny compared with his policies when in Government; and I remain surprised that his claims were not more rigorously examined.

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35. See *Anti-People Smuggling and Other Measures Act 2010* (Cth), <comlaw.gov.au/ComLaw/Legislation/Act1.nsf/0/28AA5159B9C37A87CA25773B0008ED5B?OpenDocument> at 1 November 2010.

36. ABC Radio, 'People smugglers should rot in hell: Rudd', *PM*, 17 April 2009, <abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2546098.htm> at 31 July 2010. By contrast, at no point did Jesus Christ condemn the Good Samaritan's assailants.

37. See Christian Kerr, 'PM Kevin Rudd calls on a showdown with Julia Gillard after leadership crisis talks', *The Australian* (Sydney), 23 June 2010, <theaustralian.com.au/politics/pm-kevin-rudd-calls-vote-after-gillard-meeting/story-e6frgczf-1225883430547> at 31 July 2010.

38. See Russell Powell, 'Abbott plays spot the difference', *Sydney Anglican Media*, 21 June 2010, <sydneyanglicans.net/news/stories/rudd\_and\_abbott\_play\_spot\_the\_difference/> at 31 July 2010.

39. Michael Epis, 'Rudd's hero, the people smuggler', *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), 20 October 2009, <smh.com.au/opinion/blogs/episodes/rudds-hero-the-people-smuggler/20091020-h6xn.html> at 31 July 2010.

40. Maddox, above n 12.

41. Guy Rundle, 'Rudd's hero was a people smuggler', *Crikey.com*, 23 April 2009, <crikey.com.au/2009/04/23/rudds-hero-was-a-people-smuggler/> at 31 July 2010.

42. See CathNews, 'Rudd government "gutless" on asylum seekers: bishop', October 26–30 2009, <cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=17301> at 31 July 2010.

43. David Marr, 'Power Trip — the political journey of Kevin Rudd', (2010) 38 *Quarterly Essay* 65.

44. *Ibid.*

45. The same probably cannot be said for those who espouse more extreme religious views; I suspect such people — whether political figures or in other roles — would be (and are) subject to more searching scrutiny about their religious claims.