



## Religion in the Media - 1991 Review

*What were the most prominent stories in the Australian media during 1991 and what does this say about reporting?*

Note: the following are not in any particular order.

### 1. Women and the Church

a) Ordination of women to the priesthood of the Anglican Church - Though this issue has been prominent for over twenty years, the public presentation of the matter has been highlighted during the last few, especially during 1991 as moves toward ordination of women as priests consolidated in several dioceses.

b) The decision by the Presbyterian Church of Australia in September to discontinue the practice of ordaining women as ministers received wide coverage, including strongly worded newspaper editorials.

It is interesting to note that a significant amount of religious reporting focussed on these issues, which in secular terms are 'women's issues'. The reporting usually contained little biblical or theological reference, particularly related to more involved discussion about the nature of Christian ministry, equality and justice.

### 2. Sexuality

a) Homosexuality - While the visit of Bishop Spong and the promotion of his books re-introduced the academic debate about the place of practising homosexuals in the church, the Uniting Church in South Australia (officially at the Presbytery level) was grappling with the issue at a practical level because of an application for ordination status by a member of the church who is homosexual. (The application was not approved).

b) Abortion - In N.S.W. the matter of abortion again became a prominent church concern, due primarily to a proposed upper house Bill, which if passed would have restricted abortions to public hospitals. The proposer of the Bill was a Uniting Church minister, but the Bill was opposed by official figures in the Uniting Church. This conflict produced some controversial articles and headlines.

c) Child sexual abuse; and claims of links to satanism. - As usual issues of sexuality and religion, particularly of a lurid nature proved to be popular in the media.

### 3. Public Affairs

a) Catholic Wealth Enquiry - the draft report provoked reaction around the country, as 'expert' commentators and columnists debated its orientation and value.

b) Public statements by church leaders. - Yet again, public statements were reportable events. It is interesting to note that some politicians and media people find it difficult to cope with reaction from churches and their leaders as in the Wealth Enquiry.

### 4. Social and Moral Issues

a) Prisons - in N.S.W. the churches took strong public stands over conditions in prisons as a new Minister for Corrective Services took over in the first half of the year.

b) School Texts - Yet again, the press tried to stimulate letter writing to their newspapers by gluing together

statements and reports about school texts which offend church organisations and denominations.

c) Casinos - In most states, this issue has been effectively resolved because of their prominent existence, but again in N.S.W. churches provided significant public opposition to the proposed two-casino plan of the Coalition government.

d) Gun Laws - the debate was stimulated again by another mass shooting and churches, particularly in N.S.W., joined forces with other groups to lobby for changes to state gun laws and to pressure for uniform national laws.

e) Brothels and Prostitution - There was wide church interest and opinion in Queensland about legalisation of certain aspects of prostitution due to the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Commission.

### 5. Islam

a) Muslim population in Australia - there has been a series of articles in papers and magazines examining the impact on Australia of religions other than Christianity, particularly that of Islam, linked with the release of the ABS Report on Religion in Australia (1986 Census) and the reports on Immigration and ethnic diversity.

b) Muslim reaction to the Gulf War - various sensationalist articles and television stories had a tendency to promote stereotyped images of Moslems at the expense of serious reporting about attacks on mosques, racism and restrained debate about the range of diverse opinions which are held on many topics in Australia.

### 6. Other Significant Events

a) World Council of Churches - the Seventh Assembly dominated religious affairs reporting for the month of February, with articles and electronic reports reporting on the bizarre as well as the many social and political debates. The Gulf War overshadowed the impact the Assembly had on the Australian religious scene and its overall newsworthiness.

b) "Brides of Christ" mini-series - articles, television shows and letters to editors about the series, people's own experiences and the impact of religion in our lives dominated religious reporting during the middle of the year.

c) Mary MacKillop - reporting continued of the moves toward the canonisation of the founder of The Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart (Brown Josephites). The 150th anniversary of her birth was celebrated on January 15, 1992 and commemorated by the release of an Australia Post envelope.

d) *The Australian Financial Review* religion in Australia series (December 17 - 23, 1991)

The year ended with the most extensive and well researched series of articles about churches in Australia to appear in a mainline newspaper. This series looked at the involvement of the major churches in the fields of education, health and welfare, church property, number of members as well as the growth and involvement of smaller groups and other religious faiths.

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