

Albanese need not shy away from his Catholic roots

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Australian historian Manning Clark described the Australian attitude to spirituality as “a shy hope in the heart”. We are uncomfortable with overt displays of religiosity or, indeed, strident atheism.

For most Australians, to be asked by a stranger (as happens in the US) if they know Jesus as saviour would be cringe-making. This is the cultural context in which Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who visited the newly installed Pope Leo XIV last month, claimed a strong Catholic heritage, then almost immediately repudiated that by telling journalists his faith played no role in his politics.

It seems that Albo’s faith is not so much shy as painfully introverted. It scarcely figures in his discourse compared with, say, his struggles growing up with a single mother in a council house. This is not to doubt his personal faith, but to suggest that he is constrained in the public arena.



Anthony Albanese and Pope Leo XIV met for about 45 minutes. *Credit:Vatican Media*

His papal visit and later counter-balancing remarks were carefully calibrated to please – or, at least, appease – both sides of the divide. Catholics are a quarter of the population, and agnostics probably more than half.

Many people believe that for a politician to express faith is to betray the separation of church and state. Former PM Tony Abbott particularly suffered this because of his strong public Catholic identity, with one commentator calling him “Pell’s puppet” (a reference to the late Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney at the time).



Albanese invites Pope Leo XIV to visit Australia in private meeting at the Vatican

This is a terrible misunderstanding. Politicians who are believers cannot help but bring their faith to their work because it shapes their values and convictions. They should and they must. This doesn't mean seeking to advance the cause of religion, but that denying their core convictions would be hypocritical and inauthentic.

Further, importantly, this is true not only of Christian politicians. Atheists, agnostics and people of other faiths are equally shaped by their values and convictions, and they owe it to their conscience and constituents to honour these. Those who don't risk becoming venal or corrupt.

Philosopher Willard Quine provided a helpful analogy with his web of belief, in which the outer strands are contingent but the innermost and strongest are foundational, first principles that may never even be examined. This applies to all of us.

The great 18th century political philosopher Edmund Burke said an MP must not sacrifice "his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience ... Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

What I don't want in Albo or others is what Groucho Marx expressed delightfully in the film *Duck Soup*: "These are my principles, and if you don't like them, well, I have others."

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