

‘Woke’ religion filling the void in modern societies

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Post-materialist activists and ultra-moralist guardians are tuning in and turning up everywhere. On Twitter and the ABC, of course, but time-rich “wokerati” also can be found on forlorn anti-coal convoys, sprinkled over ballot papers and, somewhat surprisingly, within the top ranks of corporations. Last week Scott Morrison castigated business leaders for losing the plot on bread-and-butter issues: jobs, growth and profits. The Prime Minister was echoing his department’s assistant minister, Ben Morton, who declared corporate chieftains were busy on the frontline of activist causes and missing in action on economic ones. “Too often I see corporate Australia succumb or pander to similar pressures from noisy, highly orchestrated campaigns of elites typified by groups such as GetUp or activist shareholders,” Mr Morton told a business gathering.

In the wake of the global financial crisis, with a focus on the excesses of the uber-rich, capitalism, at times, has been on the nose. A demoralised populace has asked questions of the chief executive class, which has responded via modish social responsibility programs. Go “woke” or go broke. The noisy Australians are spouting a new secular religion — of social justice, affected grievances and a tendentious “diversity” edict — that is spreading across a tinder-dry polity. Is nothing sacred? To the contrary, given so much ground has been won in liberal democracies for minority rights — and rightly so in cases of historical dispossession and discrimination — niche identity is all.

This rapid onset progressivism has come about because of a void of meaning in our culture. Traditional religion is in abeyance, abuser-ridden and ripe for demonisation. Political dysfunction — illustrated here by six prime ministers in eight years, the ever-fluid Senate crossbench, section 44 disqualifications, foreign donation scandals and national energy policy, to name only a few prime examples — has diminished voter trust in the system. The times are ripe for exploitation.

On Saturday we ran an extract from a new book, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*, by British journalist Douglas Murray. Despite the tumult, Murray has caught the spirit of the febrile age with an understandable snapshot of an often internally incoherent ideological push. He shows how the progressive assault fits together in a series of hot-button fields such as race, relations between the sexes, and the gender-bender explosion. These ideologies are filling a vacuum, which has come about because of the postmodernist demolition of grand narratives, the failure of the Marxist economic agenda and the post-1960s rise of the New Left. The result has been crude identity politics and a relentless politicisation of society, arbitrarily divided into oppressor and victim groups. This

ambitious ideological project threatens to become dogma in Anglophone countries, already having considerable influence in politics, the public sector, business, education, health and much mainstream media.

Part of the reason for its encroachment is digital technology. Like the internet itself, social media began with idealistic, sometimes utopian, hopes. For people who are sensible about this tool, it has brought increased productivity, cultural connection and the interchange of ideas across vast distances. But it also has had some hideous unexpected effects, especially on our young people: working on our primitive in group/out group makeup. Facebook and Twitter have amped up and spread tribalism and political polarisation; they seem purpose-built for policing orthodoxy. Social media has coarsened debate, with participants being abusive in a way they would never be in a face-to-face encounter. In politics, these digital modes have supercharged unreason, sloganeering and the bullying of individuals and sceptics. Murray shows how social media and identity politics are a toxic combination; the transgender area is perhaps the most toxic because it is the first form of identity politics native to social media.

His new book offers some sensible solutions. “Compared to what” is the suggested response to the latest hyperbolic complaint about the miserable injustice of Western society. Murray also calls for generosity in debate, not immediately attributing bad faith to opponents. And he makes a case for less politics, more variety in life: “Politics may be an important aspect of our lives, but as a source of personal meaning it is disastrous (because) finding purpose in politics laces politics with a passion that perverts the whole enterprise.” The woke movement is destructive, it only pretends to care about the problems it inflames. Yet precisely because of the “madness of crowds”, it may seem daunting to get a nuanced and sensible message through to mass audiences.

Still, we suspect Murray is not naive in hoping in time intelligent young people will be repelled by the futility and exhausting anger of this pseudo-progressive campaigning. The first step is to keep pushing common sense into the public square, as Murray has done. It’s certainly a conversation starter, a stimulus to honest debate that ultimately outflanks activist folly.