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### **Australian values: secular of Judeo-Christian?**

A minor fuss has been created by the suggestion that potential citizens of Australia be asked to acknowledge the Judeo-Christian ethos of our culture. The main criticism has come, I believe, not so much from those who embrace some other religion, but from those who represent secularism. They seem to think that their belief system is the natural one and must be the default position in any discussion of what Australia stands for and what Australian values consist of. Secularism, understood as non-religion, rules.

For a long time Christians in Australia have allowed this sort of thinking to pass almost unchallenged. I think that we have believed that it so self-evidently wrong that there is little need to refute it. But when a position is often repeated and never challenged, it gradually becomes a sort of orthodoxy and people start act as though it is true, or, at least the whole truth.

In particular, we often hear a phrase about the separation of church and state which is taken to mean that the churches have no right to speak about matters to do with the public good, and should have no influence in policy. Furthermore, Christian politicians should leave their convictions at the door when they enter Parliament House and never allow their Christianity to influence their legislative duties, although, of course, a secular philosophy may do so.

Whether secular thinkers like it or not, church and state in Australian society have many points of intersection. The relationship could not possibly be unravelled without immense harm to the state and to the nation. On the one side there are the financial advantages which the state has always conceded to religious organisations. On the other side there is the immense range of good works which are carried on by religious organisations in areas such as welfare, health and education, works which again and again the churches have pioneered and sustained with or without funding from the state.

In fact I believe we ought to go further without hesitation. I would say that a community, a town or suburb, is far better off when it has thriving churches. They

add to the vital social capital of the community in ways hard to measure but real all the same. This is increasingly the case when the community has become socially fragmented and unwilling to commit. Thus when we hear the good news that more people are jogging to keep fit, this is not accompanied by any news that they are joining together in clubs to do so. We run alone and lonely except for the inevitable self-chosen music pounding in our ears. It is therefore in the interests of the community that government ensures that development of new settlements and suburbs has space for parks, clubs and churches.

In particular, with the drought still gripping so much of the State, the ministry of the churches in the countryside, its towns and villages has rarely been more significant. As we all know, drought has brought in its wake not merely economic difficulties, hard as they are to cope with, but emotional and relational difficulties. In the end there are spiritual issues of a profound nature involved here. Counselling, self-help, the care of neighbours are all important. But the pastoral ministry of the word and sacrament is increasingly being recognised as a vital component of the care which needs to be offered. We cannot divide people up into physical, emotional and spiritual zones; we are whole people and our needs should be addressed in a holistic way.

### **Separating Church and State**

That in two ways church and state should be separate goes without saying. The separation is after all a Christian invention, aimed at making sure that the state does not run the church or interfere in its internal affairs. The church must be free to preach the biblical gospel without fear, even in the face of unpopularity or criticism and it must also be free to do its work in the world in ways which conform to the teaching of God's word. Likewise, it would be a sad day if the state ever became a department of the church and ministers of the state became the mere mouthpieces of the hierarchy of the institutional church. For our part we need the constant reminder that while the church may be the product of the kingdom of God, it is not the same thing as the kingdom.

The Christian in politics has a duty – but it is the same duty that we all have. It is the duty to obey God as he reveals himself to us. Our conscience must be shaped by the word of God. From time to time such a conscience may find itself at odds with the current teaching of the church on a particular subject. The choice must be made in the knowledge that neither church nor conscience are infallible.

To take an example of this: For myself, I think that the politicians who voted in favour of embryonic stem cell research were wrong to do so. Naturally, I am heartily in favour of stem-cell research as such, and also, like you, long for the day when disease will be able to be treated successfully as a result of research. But, if I understand the technology correctly, embryonic stem cell research involves both the destruction of embryos and the cloning of human beings. This is a step too far for us to take, even if the results were shown to be marvellous. I believe that I have the right to indicate this, and the right – as do all citizens – to speak on the subject. But I am also aware that many of our Federal politicians agonised over this matter and sought advice. If the decision to support this research was made in good conscience, I can only honour them for it, admitting readily that my view may be wrong and recognising that in the end it is to God that we give account. Unfortunately it is not an issue where we can remain uncommitted, and I understand that the matter will shortly be before the Legislative Assembly of NSW.

The job of the preacher and the job of the politician are different as was the task of prophet and king in ancient Israel. Those who know and teach the word of God have an invaluable role to play in society. When so many decisions are taken on pragmatic grounds, when it is so easy for us to pursue our course as a nation driven by economic motives alone, we need our prophets who will remind us of virtues and standards, of compassion, of justice, of generosity. But the prophet has the luxury of speech without responsibility for action. The task of government is complex and demanding. It requires many compromises. The constant criticism by those who claim to know better but do not actually have to be responsible is wearying and eventually becomes a mere cacophony of noise. We need to acknowledge the limitations of our callings.

### **Christian faith and our civilisation.**

But as well as the proper intertwining of church and state in a modern democracy, the secularist challengers need to be reminded of the way in which the Christian gospel is part of the very nature of our civilisation and that we cannot be explained without it. Without thinking for too long about it, and without becoming boring and repetitive, let me suggest the following indications of the depth of the Christian foundations of the nation and its life.

Take the English language. It is studded with biblical and ecclesiastical phrases: a Good Samaritan, a far country, vanity of vanities, to follow one's star, Judas, doubting Thomas, Gethsemane, an eye for an eye, the extra mile, the eye of a

needle, a widow's mite, the holy grail, gospel truth, the Bible of fishing... the list would be endless.

Take the countryside and the suburbs. Church buildings are so numerous and so prominent, that they receive a special place of their own in every street directory, these days with synagogues, temples and mosques. On the other hand, there is no need to list halls of secularism or temples of atheism. The Christian school system and the Christian aged care facilities are, likewise, ubiquitous. Even in secular schools, the teaching of scripture is mandated – for secular does not mean godless when properly understood, but merely 'of this world'.

Take the hospitals and gaols. Faith is recognised through the provision of the chaplaincy system, and these days there is a growing sense of the importance of faith for people in distress. Rightly or wrongly the federal government has recently allotted money for school chaplains, as a recognition of the contribution that can be made through a faith which will inevitably be largely Christian.

Take the shape of the calendar. The foolish attempts by secularists to replace the familiar BC and AD with 'Common Era', merely serves to underline the vast historical importance of Jesus Christ in that the whole of history as understood in our civilisation pivots around his life. I am also noting a tendency nowadays to print the word 'God' as lower case 'god' lest any suggestion be made that it is a reference to reality or to a God whom we know. Once again here is an unwitting tribute to the on-going power of the Christian faith in the daily life of our culture. Of course we see the same tendency at work when people try to change the language of the great Christian feasts: even then they cannot destroy the rhythm of the year with Christmas and Easter being the holidays without parallel in our calendar. To this one could add the seven day rhythm of the week and the way in which even now Sunday is most typically the day on which society rests.

I once heard a community leader say that she was 'a Protestant atheist', a phrase which I savoured. She was the daughter of a prominent Anglican clergyman, and her self understanding was accurate. Atheists generally take their shape from the God to whom they are objecting. From one point of view, we Christians are atheists, because we reject the myriad of gods who have been believed in by men and women down through the ages, and our rejection tells you something profound about us. Even the sort of atheism which we experience has the marks on it of its Christian history.

The fundamentals of our ethics come from Christ and the Bible. To this day the golden rule is usually cited in the language of the Authorised Version, 'Do unto others...' This powerful and universal rule continues to shape our view of the world and those who inhabit it. It is true to say that there are other forms of the rule and true also to say that we often fail to keep its exacting standards, but its presence in our minds and sometimes on our hearts is patent. I was told recently of a hospital in a tribal country where patients died far more frequently than they should have. Investigation revealed that the deaths were related to neglect. Trained medical staff were neglecting those from a different tribe. Likewise a non-Christian TV crew told me of their experience in another culture in which they became aware that a helping hand was extended to family members, but not to others. They said to me, this culture needs Christianity – in a Christian context all would be cared for.

I do not have to argue that it is only Christians who care for others, or that Christians always succeed. I am only saying that we are who we are because of the impact of that teaching from the one who is the Master. It is interesting that according to American Sociologist Professor Russell Stark, it was the determination of Christians to protect the lives of infants and to nurse the sick in time of plague which made a huge contribution to the spread of the church. At a very practical level, the Christian way of life was one in which people survived far better. Stark has also documented the way in which science arose in a specifically Christian context and owes much of its shape and influence to Christianity.

We could look at the history of Australia and canvass the leading role played by convinced Christians in so many ways in the nation's life – in government, in science, in the professions, in civic affairs, in the Universities, in the great mercantile enterprises of the nation, in the arts, in sport, in charitable organisations. Take Christianity out of the history of Australia and you will not have the same place. And that influence has by no means ceased. In each of the areas I have just mentioned you can easily name committed Christians who are prominent in the area today.

### **Implications**

Why am I choosing to say all this at our Provincial Synod?

For three reasons.

## **Christian confidence**

The first is the need to remind us that we can be completely confident in the gospel we profess. The church is not a club. Over the years, people have often banded themselves together to pursue a common aim. Such clubs and societies come and go for a variety of reasons. But the life of the churches rests upon God and what God has said to us: 'In the past God spoke to our forbears through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe.' (Hebrews 1:1-3). As God cannot disappear, die or grow weary, so too the church founded on his revelation of himself cannot and will not disappear. God's hand is in our ministry and mission. We are doing his work and he blesses those who seek to do his will in accordance with his commands.

The message he has given to us, simply summarised by the Bible as 'the kingdom of God' or 'Jesus Christ as Lord'. Calls for faith and repentance in those who hear it. That is, we are to believe the message and to commit ourselves to align our lives to the will and purposes of God. At the heart of what God gives us as we accept his message is the forgiveness of sins and the presence of his Holy Spirit. Again and again we see that the message has the power to transform lives – to bring hope, to create love, to galvanise action for justice, to strengthen virtue, to break us free from ugly and disfiguring sins, to introduce us to friends who will care for us. Christian faith is a potent force for good.

The church can never die. But individual churches may and do perish for a variety of reasons. Population may decline, for example and there may simply be no more people left. But we also see churches perish where vision and energy fade and the church becomes inward looking. We lose confidence in the gospel and accept the verdict of the world that we are no more relevant to the wider community than say a stamp club. Another reason for the loss of churches is that the world appears to offer an alternative and superior belief system and numbers of people leave Christian faith for the new way. Frankly, the evidence appears to be that we are having trouble transmitting the faith to our own children. If they are unbelieving, we can scarcely be surprised if the general community does not hear and accept the message.

In the West, including Australia, there are at least three actively competing beliefs which appeal to some people. The first is Islam, like Christianity a missionary religion; the second is Buddhism, which has gained adherents through its emphasis

on peace and contemplative techniques; the third is aggressive secularism. The first two, and especially Buddhism is attractive in a milieu in which spirituality has become acceptable. It is interesting to note also that in the last few months no fewer than four books have appeared giving strong arguments for atheism and that at least two of these books have received wide favourable publicity. It is as if in the post 2001 world, rationalistic atheism has woken from its slumbers and become vigorous and combative.

Such challenges need to be met at an intellectual and spiritual level. Thus, for example we need to analyse the appeal of Buddhism, understand why it may attract people in a violent and over-busy world, but also challenge the western individualism which forms much of the favourable response. Christianity is irreducibly a religion of fellowship, and even if it lacks contemporary appeal at this level we cannot compromise. But we do need to address the underlying difficulties of a society which values individualism over fellowship, even in spirituality.

It seems to me, however, that there are two areas in which the Christian perspective is being challenged far more deeply than by books of atheism. In both these areas we as Christians should have something to contribute. The first is the fixation of many in our community with economic well-being and the impact that this is having on relational life. Put simply we are working too hard and neglecting the things which matter for human contentment and well-being. Furthermore, work patterns are showing an increasing tendency to neglect the need for shared family time – and shared time for worship. The unrelenting and frantic pace of life gives far too little time for rest and fellowship. The absolute necessity for two incomes means that those who would prefer to give their personal attention to full-time child-rearing at a crucial moment in the child's life find it impossible to do so. If this country in fact derives its values from the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is startling and dismaying to see that tradition of the value of relationships and the proper rhythm of work and rest succumb to an officially sanctioned greed for more.

The second area is rather different, although my concern here is also in the area of human relationships. It is the powerful effects of the technological revolution as it impacts on human communication. Let us think of an example close to home. The Anglican Communion is in turmoil, as we all know. If you have been involved at all in this turmoil, you will have noticed the impact of the immediate. No one can do anything without the action being noticed and instantly commented on from all corners of the globe and often under the mask of anonymity. In all human relations

there is a need for space, for time, for thought, for perspective. All of this is now horribly foreshortened.

I am no Luddite. I value the internet as a working tool and appreciate the amazing way in which material which was once inaccessible is now made available so painlessly. I value the email system. But the problem is that our success knows no boundaries and human beings are sinful creatures. We are sinking under the weight of emails. We are answering each other too quickly. We are communicating on the email or through text-messaging with people in near proximity. In all this, we are overloading our brains with information and stimulus and we are neglecting the face-to face community which makes us human. Our churches must be technologically savvy; but technology at the service of faith and hope and love not as a substitute for them.

### **A spiritual vacuum**

The second reason for speaking on these themes at the beginning of our Synod is this is to remind those around us that a spiritual vacuum is the worst recipe for our nation. For the government to remind new citizens of our Judeo-Christian heritage is simply an historical and contemporary fact. But it is not a fact which will endure as a reality merely on its own. It needs to be reasserted and reassimilated in every generation. At this level the new assertiveness of Islam and the Islamic presence in our midst is a blessing. I need hardly say, I hope that we welcome our Islamic neighbours and accord them the rights and privileges which belong to us all. But, as a powerful monotheistic missionary religion, it rightly forces western societies to ask what it is that we stand for.

Secularism has not taken the place of human spirituality. On the contrary, we now know that there is a deep spiritual interest and hunger in western societies such as our own. This should not surprise us; we have always believed that humankind is naturally religious, whatever some individuals may profess about themselves. Islam in our midst confronts us with the question – what do we stand for? What is our religion? Those who give the standard secular answer that we stand for the liberal values of the Enlightenment, ought to reflect on the way on which these liberal values owe something also to the Christian faith. They ought to reflect, too, about what meagre fare secularism provides for living the human life. Put at its most stark, our secularism endorses individualism; Christianity endorses fellowship. Where does humanity best fit?



In the end, we must take sides. For example, I cannot see why on secularist terms we should resist the idea of polygamy as a valid form of marriage in this community. If it is what people want; if marriage has become so watered down that our own children are not sure that they need it; if we already have serial monogamy; if divorce is so simple; if we are interested in respecting the rights of others in a multi-cultural community, why not endorse this strongly held practice? I can see that polygamy and polyandry are not in accordance with Christian values I can resist it on those terms. I am not sure why it should be resisted by secular liberals.

### **NSW Anglicans**

The third reason for adopting this theme is to set the scene for the main activity of our gathering. We do have some business to transact, though probably not too much. At least one member has asked the obvious question of why we are meeting like this when we could do our business in a few hours and then go home. To my mind, the chief purpose is this: to get to know one another and to pray for one another, face to face. I suppose the day is not too far off when we will seriously contemplate meeting via a hook-up of some sort. But that is the problem with technology – it cuts down the relational. Christianity is a religion of fellowship, of community.

Sometimes there are tensions and difficulties in the relationships of Anglicans in New South Wales. Very well, let us by our efforts make sure that these difficulties are minimised and placed in perspectives. Let us meet to listen to one another; let us meet to actually see one another; let us meet in order to share worship together; let us meet at the table of the Lord; let us meet in order to hear about our common problems and our particular problems; above all, let us meet in order to bring each other's concerns to the throne of God in prayer and concern.

But let us meet not merely for ourselves and our own concerns. I have been trying to put our synod into a much bigger picture of the state of our society and its spiritual needs and our role as Christians in this society. Of course you may agree or vigorously disagree with what I have said. But as we meet to pray for one another, let us never forget the multitudes of people in our community who have not yet heard about our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and who need to hear about him. Love that is inspired by the Spirit of our crucified and risen Lord will always move us in that direction. Can we help our churches be more effective 'colonies of heaven', places where people may encounter Christ?

May I make a plea in one area of special concern? Amongst the vulnerable people in our state, those in prison particularly deserve our concern as Christians. Here we see how our society deliberately treats people it has in its care. No doubt it is better to be in gaol in NSW than in many other parts of the world. Nonetheless the sight still does not reflect well on us. There are too many people in custody. There are too many mentally ill people in custody. There are too many indigenous people in custody. I am glad to say that there is a commitment by many Christians to the detained which works at very practical levels. But more needs to be done and more needs to be done to help the process of release back into the community. This is not a popular vote winning cause for politicians. They need the help of our interest to keep it on the agenda of the State.

**Last time we met I gave a challenge about this to us all. I close by repeating it:**

**'What if we have as our aim the conversion of NSW? What if we were to look at every hamlet, village, town, and ask what Christian group is meeting there? How can I strengthen it? How can we add to it, or multiply it? How can we inspire it to reach out to others? How can I serve it?**

**I cannot even begin to tell you how to live out this missionary mandate, but I am confident that unless we do, the gospel will pass from us to those who will not bury it in the ground, but who will multiply it with a view to the Master's return.'**

**This call has become even more urgent than before.**