

THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF A FREE POLITY

Samuel Gregg talks to Archbishop Dr George Pell

Since the time of Daniel Mannix, it is difficult to remember a bishop who has made quite so rapid an impact upon the Australian public consciousness as Dr George Pell, who now fills Mannix's shoes as Archbishop of Melbourne. Apart from being one of the better-known members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Australia, Dr Pell is unquestionably one of its leading intellectuals. His academic qualifications include a Masters of Education from Monash University, a Licentiate in Theology from Rome's Urban University, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Oxford University. Alongside stints as a visiting scholar at both Oxford and Cambridge universities, Dr Pell was the Foundation Pro-Chancellor of the Australian Catholic University between 1991 and 1995. Dr Pell is also the author of many articles and papers on theological, moral, philosophical and historical issues as well as questions of social ethics. He has been widely published in both secular and religious journals as well as by Oxford University Press, and has lectured extensively in the US, England, New Zealand and Australia.

But neither Dr Pell's intellectual interests nor his pastoral responsibilities have inhibited him from commenting upon public affairs when he feels that it is his obligation to do so. His criticism of aspects of One Nation's political program, as well as his very public intervention during the 1998 Federal election campaign, are ample evidence of this.

Given Archbishop Pell's prominence and intellectual stature, it was felt that he was eminently qualified to deliver the CIS's inaugural Acton Lecture on

Religion and Freedom, to be held in Sydney in August 1999. The lecture is named after Lord Acton, the nineteenth century English historian and religious thinker, who was deeply concerned with the idea of freedom and the free society. Samuel Gregg, Director of the CIS's *Religion and the Free Society* Program, recently interviewed Dr Pell to explore his thinking on Lord Acton and other matters.

SJG: Archbishop, I suspect that most people don't know that you did your doctorate at Oxford in history. Why did you choose to pursue higher studies in this particular discipline?



GP: This is the first time that I have ever been asked that question. My school years were spent at St. Patrick's College, Ballarat. This was a heavily traditional school and we did a great deal of church history. As I grew up immediately in the aftermath of World War II, we were taught all about the Catholic heroes of the Cold War: Wyszynski, Mindszenty,

Stepanic, Slipyi. In my first year at the seminary, I was introduced to Chesterton and Belloc, and they were very into history. Moreover, while neither of my parents was well-educated, my mother was very fond of Irish-Australian history. Hence, it is not surprising that I was interested in history. But, more specifically, my bishop, Bishop O'Collins, wanted me to answer some of the

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arguments about church and state advanced by Max Charlesworth. So he sent me to Oxford to do theology: a historical theology. My thesis was entitled 'Concepts of Authority in the Catholic Church from 170 to 270'. This involved study of the great Eastern Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and in the West, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Cyprian.

SJG: Did you pay any attention to the thought of Lord Acton in your study of history?

GP: I did, although I'm not quite sure how I got on to him. I recall noting in 1964 that Cardinal Cushing quoted Acton in the third session of the Second Vatican Council to the effect that freedom is the highest political end.

By my standards, Acton was somewhat of an idiosyncratic Catholic. His great work was to be 'The History of Freedom' which he never wrote. Acton was very severe on the tyranny of the popes. I would probably be more inclined to relativise that. I'm not as much of a Whig as Acton. Acton was a bit sceptical about progress; he believed very much in the constraints of custom and society; he was also somewhat of a historical pessimist and viewed nationalism ambivalently. Acton also believed in the organic nature of society and that this was preserved in a whole host of ways rather than, as he said, by kings, popes and bishops. I'm very sympathetic to that view.

SJG: One secular philosophical figure who greatly admired Acton was Friedrich von Hayek. I suspect that most people don't know that in 1947, Hayek proposed that what is now known as the Mont Pèlerin Society should be called the 'Acton-Tocqueville Society'. I note that during a meeting of prominent Melbourne figures last year, you pointed out that the nineteenth century French philosopher of democracy, Count Alexis de Tocqueville, believed, despite his own life-long struggle with faith, that religion had a tremendously important role to play in free societies. Would you like to elaborate on the significance of that observation?

GP: I have read a great deal of Tocqueville. Cardinal Ratzinger has a good phrase that sums up well what

Tocqueville is saying. It is that democracies can't live by their own energy: that has to come from somewhere else. Tocqueville said that in any decent society there has to be a strong sense of morality. He found in America – where there was no hereditary class – a mobile, restless, changing society in which he felt that religion was the primary force in generating this sense of morality and that this morality, in turn, developed and protected the sense of law.

Another point is that you have to inspire altruism from somewhere. I think that in our type of society, as Tocqueville noted, the traditional source has been religion and there doesn't appear to be any ready alternative. I've seen, for example, the moral devastation throughout Eastern Europe and Russia that has proceeded, in part, from the hostility to religion in the Communist world. Even our seminarians there say that inside themselves is what they call 'Soviet man': that is, a selfishness, aggression, and a disregard for others.

On another level, it is fascinating to observe the civilisational influences that Christianity had upon the public life of the Roman Empire. If you look at the record of most of the noble pagan families, they had very few girls. Basically, they didn't want girls and therefore practiced infanticide. Similarly, the Christian insistence upon life-long marriage provided enormous security for women. Christianity even affected the treatment of slaves. For example, Constantine, the first 'Christian' emperor, decreed that slaves were not to be branded as slaves on their faces. You might say that is a very small advance by our standards, but it is an example of Christianity's civilisational influence.

Of course, there is another side to the coin: the crimes committed in the name of religion. However, I certainly stand with Tocqueville: you need religion to inspire altruism, self-restraint, and also some sense of the common good.

SJG: Tocqueville also warned about the danger of what he called the potential 'soft despotism' of democracy. This is something that Pope John Paul II hints at in *Centesimus Annus*. While this encyclical doesn't condemn the welfare state *per se*, it certainly points out that there are problems associated with it, such as the dependency culture.



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GP: Neither Tocqueville nor the Pope are just talking about the dependency culture, although I think that is one aspect of soft despotism. Every good thing has a down-side. The dangers, I think the Pope would say, with democracies is that they are perennially tempted to be short sighted. People will vote for the next best thing rather than in their long-term interests. One of the difficult tasks of leadership is to inspire people to look beyond their narrow interest. The Pope is also fearful about the majority in a democracy ignoring the rights of the minority and that, in many democracies, pluralism may degenerate into indifferentism and a very explicit relativism that leaves society rudderless. The dependency culture is one

aspect of that whole and it is not something that we want to encourage. There are parts of our society where families have been on welfare for three generations. I do not want to encourage a society where such an underclass exists.

SJG: Michael Novak, and indeed, other theologians more to the 'left' of him, have argued that the dependency culture that seems to have grown up with the welfare state is, in so many ways, a terrible insult to human dignity.

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GP: I recently saw an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* on Clinton's welfare programs in which Robert Reich, Clinton's first Labour Secretary, says that the President's real crime has been his cutting of welfare-spending. I don't think that it is an attack on dignity to provide a stimulus to get people to work. Nor, however, do I think that it is demeaning to encourage, almost require, young people who are illiterate to study before they get something from the government. Education is the best thing that you can give the poor. The idea of linking welfare to searching for a job and

giving some financial inducement to people to provide jobs is not a bad thing. In other words, I fully recognise that a culture of dependency is not in the interests of the people involved or of society. However, one of the greatest human indignities is to starve.

More broadly, two things in Australia disturb me. One is the increasing differential between the very highly paid people and the unemployed. Let me qualify that by stating that I realise that some of these high salaries go with very insecure positions – in short, if people don't deliver, they will be out of a job.

Secondly, when I was growing up in Menzies' time it did seem that if unemployment rose too much above three per cent, governments felt that they were in a bit of trouble. Now, eight per cent unemployment is quite tolerable in Australia. This should, however, be put in perspective. Once when I was discussing our unemployment rate with an Indian lady, she remarked: 'What are you fussed about? In India we have loads more unemployed'. Similarly, I remember when Denis Hurley, the Catholic Archbishop of Durban, was visiting Australia and someone complained to him about Australia's unemployment rate.

While Hurley was sympathetic, he pointed out that in South Africa unemployment ranged between 20 and 40 per cent. So these expectations change. I'm uneasy, however, about an Australian society where the tolerable level of unemployment has risen from three to eight per cent.

SJG: Tocqueville was fond of pointing out that the sinews of free democratic societies lay in the art of association. It would seem that private businesses meet the criteria of being the type of association that forms one of the building blocks of civil society. How important do you think business is for a free society?

GP: Obviously, I wouldn't say that it is all-important, but business is certainly of basic importance because it creates the wherewithal for our way of life and we should not take that for granted. We should be grateful for the standard of living that we have in this country and occasionally I point out in sermons how radically different it is to that of all our immediate northern neighbours.

SJG: I see that your Archdiocese is holding a conference on business this year. Is this part of an effort on the



Church's part to talk more to business?

GP: Yes, it is. We are interested in talking to all sorts of people – lawyers, doctors, and business leaders as well. We are putting our theological college and Australian Catholic University in the centre of Melbourne's transport hub so they will be more accessible to the whole of Melbourne. A good consequence of this is that they will be close to the CBD.

I certainly don't think that business is the work of the devil. It provides the material sub-stratum for our whole way of life, the education we get, our health care. If there is no wealth created, there is no tax collected, and we can't have these things.

But I do believe in original sin: that flaw that runs through the heart of all of us. This means that I have a diminished faith in the efficacy of the market left entirely to itself. Market-forces are liable to original sin because they are ultimately made up of human beings and the institutions and systems they create. Therefore, theoretically, there is a role for government: to be aware of these potential weaknesses and, without inhibiting business too much, to set standards and parameters and see that business works within the law. In every society there is a struggle between good and evil, and that takes place in business too, as it does in any vocation. Here I should mention that while we are keen to talk to business, we also want to dialogue with the union leadership. Original sin is as lively in union leaders as it is in church leaders and business leaders. Nonetheless, I believe that unions are an essential element in our society, and it would be unfortunate if they were radically weakened much further.

One thing that I do find interesting is that when I was at my old-fashioned traditional school, there was almost no encouragement given to us to go into business. The three things that the Brothers put up to us as vocations worth following were medicine, law, and the priesthood. However, I think that there has been quite a marked change in many Catholic schools of late. There is a much greater emphasis upon encouraging people to embrace business as a vocation.

SJG: Private enterprise is, of course, in the business of wealth-creation. In this connection, may I take you back to your 1992 Boston *Conversazioni* essay that was based upon a paper you delivered at Boston University the previous year. Here, you stated that '... it must be conceded that in the past and until Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*

and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, the [Catholic] Church had been excessively concerned with the distribution of wealth and paid insufficient attention to its production'. Would you like to elaborate on why you wrote that?

GP: Well, the first reason I wrote that is because I think that it is true as a matter of historical record. Some people who are committed to social justice can be inclined to look upon the amount of wealth as being static. Hence, if someone has more, they are tempted to conclude that someone therefore must have less. Now it doesn't necessarily work like that at all.

One should also remember that for much of this century, the Church was pre-occupied with the struggle against Nazism and Communism – and they were life and death struggles. Moreover, the Church's initial focus was upon looking after the poorest members of society. It was only as the middle classes grew that the Church started to think more seriously about wealth-creation. A major factor influencing this, of course, was the intellectual background of the popes before John Paul II. They were Italians, very much clerics. The present pope has quite an unusual background: not just because he is Polish but because he started at a secular university. After the German invasion, he had to work in a foundry and a quarry. He then spent the liveliest years of his adult life struggling intellectually against Marxism, a very materialist philosophy that is very much concerned with how wealth is created and who owns it. Given this background, John Paul II was much better placed to encourage people to think about these things. I was a member of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace between 1990 and 1995. As a consequence, I know that there are now continuing and regular contacts – in which the Pope himself often participates – between this Commission and some of the world's leading economists.

SJG: Moving away from matters historical, economic, and philosophical to an issue that is more overtly political: during last year's Federal election campaign, you issued a statement pointing out that there was no one Catholic





position on as complex a matter as taxation. Now I would have thought that this should be rather obvious to most people. So, would you like to elaborate on why you decided to take this action?

GP: Before the election, the Catholic bishops issued ten points on tax reform and we believed that those ten criteria could be fairly applied to assess the programs of both sides of politics. On the basis of these principles, Catholics could make their own judgements. Catholics are quite free to agree or disagree with the GST or whether food should be exempt or not.

SJG: It's not a matter of faith and morals.

GP: Certainly not. The reason, however, I made that statement during the election was that I felt that there were a number of people who were trying, quite inaccurately and unfairly, to position the Church's leadership so as to make the Catholic Church look as if it was totally and explicitly opposed to the GST. This was not an accurate representation of the Church's position. Given that this matter is so complex, and given the background of these people trying to 'position' the Church, I felt that it was necessary to specify that there is no one Catholic position on this issue.

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SJG: I wonder if we are touching on an issue that is not often understood: that there are a whole range of positions on the political spectrum that Christians can adopt and still remain under the umbrella of Christian orthodoxy.

GP: That's right – especially in public life. Just to take one dimension of that matter, there is the question, for example, of determining the difference between long-

term and short-term good. It is so difficult to decide what is beneficial in the polity's long term interest.

SJG: The Oxford legal philosopher and moral theologian, John Finnis, argued during a speech in 1997 that when it comes to questions of public policy, bishops ought not to make '...the kind of assessment of complex, contingent facts that is necessary to reach a deliberative judgement about, say, a social welfare policy or a strategy of nuclear deterrence'. They are called, rather, '...to teach in season and out all the moral principles and norms which any such policy must meet if it is to be morally acceptable to Catholics or anyone of good will'. Would you take a similar view?

GP: Not entirely. I have an inherent sympathy with it that I expressed in my 1992 paper. In our society, however, the Christian churches are one of the traditional depositories of moral information. I don't think that people would accept, and I think that their rejection would be reasonable, if we just spelt out a whole series of criteria on something like the use of nuclear weapons. People would feel cheated. I do recognise that certain contentious areas, like union reform and employment policies, are very much the province of lay people and specialists. These require specialised knowledge that often isn't the province of a cleric, bishop, or priest. But there are more basic questions where people will want to know what the bishop thinks about a particular moral issue. One issue on which I spoke quite explicitly was one aspect of One Nation's political program. I felt that it was incumbent on me to make my position clear – not on the whole range of One Nation's policies, but on their race policy. I felt that it represented one additional evil that was starting to gain ground in our society and that I had an obligation to oppose it.

There are other particular moral issues where I feel obliged to speak, but there are many issues on which I don't, beyond setting out a number of criteria.

Policy

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