

Christian Research Association

Shaping Australia's Spirituality: A National Roundtable

Tuesday 31 August – Friday 3 September 2010

SHAPING THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHURCH

HOW DO WE ACT OUT OUR CRITIQUE OF THE CULTURE?

Bruce Kaye

This section of our conference is designed to address the way in which the spirituality of the Christian Church might be shaped. In this particular discussion I want to direct attention to the way in which Christians seek to witness to their Lord in the circumstances of their daily lives.

The question of how the church relates to its host society has often been discussed under the heading of church state relations. In part this is because of the influence of long centuries of the institutions of Christendom. In this context the state was the partner of the Church and the church was necessarily conceived of in its institutional form in order that it could be regarded as in the same institutional category as the state with whom it was in partnership. That way of conceptualizing the issue has been dominant in those church traditions where church state relations have been integral to their history and identity. The Treaty of Westphalia and its principle of *cuis regio cuius religio* set this in concrete for the Reformation traditions, but it had long been the pattern for the Holy Roman Empire and for Christians in England.

That tradition has long since passed by. We now live in a situation where, by degrees of secularisation and the changing pattern of democratic societies, particularly in western cultures, the idea of the state as being the dominant and singular expression of the communities of the nation is no longer with us. In Australia we live in a nation in which public institutions have immense influence on the shape of national life. The

parliament and the government are undoubtedly crucial players in the protection of the community and in the sustaining of its life and character. But for most people their lives are also shaped most directly and immediately by the particular institutions within which they work, take their leisure and pursue their interests. The particular characteristics of the business corporation in which people work shape the understanding, and influence the character, of people's working lives to an extraordinary degree.

John Keane¹ in his history of the rise and fall of democracy and a number of other books has drawn attention to the variety of social institutions that go to make up participation in society in democratic countries. The pattern of a citizen's life in Australia is shaped by interactions with and within all sorts of institutions.²

I want to approach this question therefore not from the point of view of what is going on internally in the church and how that might be applied to the different circumstances in the broader society. I think that is not an inappropriate thing to do. Certainly the church through its institutions has a responsibility to respond to the issues that arise for Australians. Churches should indeed have social issues committees or public affairs commissions in order not only to respond to public events and debates but also to inform the church community. However by approaching a question of witness in this way, that is to say from the perspective of the life of the church runs the risk of privileging the inherited patterns of church life and thinking both in terms of their power structures and their priorities about the nature of social organisation.

Rather it seems to me that most Christians actually find themselves engaged day-to-day in trying to make sense of the circumstances of working in a small-business a large corporation, a public service department, school, university or whatever. The challenge they face is how they should fulfil their obligations to their employers and

¹ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1st American, 2009).

² There is an extensive literature on institutions within different sub disciplines in the social sciences, but for a convenient Australian discussion see Geoffrey Brennan and Francis G. Castles, *Australia Reshaped : 200 Years of Institutional Transformation* (Cambridge ; Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, Reshaping Australian Institutions, 2002).

colleagues and also in the process also fulfil their obligations as Christians to witness to the faith that inspires their lives.

I want to ask how might research of the kind done by the Christian Research Association contribute to a more effective witness for Christians in our multi institutional and variegated community. How we might act out our critique of the culture in which we live. I want to look at; occasions, where life happens and also agency, how are Christians effectively motivated and shaped in their witness in these occasions.

OCCASIONS

It seems to me that there are three areas that warrant attention in this discussion; public institutions, civic institutions and social institutions.

By public institutions I mean those institutions that had been established by the community as a whole primarily through the action of government. I have in mind here those financial institutions upon which our society is based business corporation financial institutions banks stock exchange, the Reserve Bank of Australia and the various arms of government federal, state and municipal and the justice system of the courts and law enforcement.

As a result of the recent federal election we are presently witnessing an attempt to change the character of a public institution, the parliament. The independent members of the House of Representatives have set their minds to enter into negotiations to form a government in such a way as to change the operation of the House of Representatives. They wish to move away from the strict and rigid two-party system to a more inclusive loose limbed approach to debate in the parliament. The parliament, of course, is established under the Constitution but the changes that are being attempted do not in themselves require any change in the constitution. They require some changes in procedures, some changes in the way in which things are done. These changes are being sought not just in the name of democracy but in the name of the people and the nature of representation, of decision-making with principles of moral significance such as respect and inclusiveness. The argument is that these essential moral principles have been hollowed out of the parliament.

In the last decade of the twentieth century the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University conducted a project on the Reshaping of Australian Institutions. A series of books were published through Cambridge University Press. In the Introduction to the last volume Geoffrey Brennan and Francis D Castles reviewed the work. They noted a consensus that ‘something significant had been happening in Australian institutional life over the last two decades or so – a kind of institutional repositioning, a move to a more ‘competitive’ institutional order increasingly like that of the United States and increasingly unlike the Australian egalitarianism of the past.’ ... ‘In any event there seems to be widespread agreement that there has been a change, that the change is significant, and that it is to be identified as essentially an “institutional” matter.’³ They suggest a variety of possible causes for this change. I wish here to mention two things which seem to me to both reflect this change and to contribute to it.

The first has to do with the adoption of a national competition policy. The operation of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission⁴ began in 1995 on the basis of the Hilmer report on competition in Australia.⁵ That report proposed competition as the principle of operation for commercial activity, and there were some implications about its wider significance in other areas. The ACCC has become a significant player in commercial activity in Australia.

³ Geoffrey Brennan and Francis G. Castles, *Australia Reshaped : 200 Years of Institutional Transformation* (Cambridge ; Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, Reshaping Australian Institutions, 2002), pp1f..

⁴ The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission is an independent statutory authority. It was formed in 1995 to administer the *Trade Practices Act 1974* and other acts.

The ACCC promotes competition and fair trade in the market place to benefit consumers, business and the community. It also regulates national infrastructure industries. Its primary responsibility is to ensure that individuals and businesses comply with the Commonwealth's competition, fair trading and consumer protection laws. <http://www.accc.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/54137> Accessed 26 August 2010

⁵ *National Competition Policy*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993. <http://ncp.ncc.gov.au/docs/Hilmer-001.pdf> accessed 26 August 2010

The opening statement of the report sets out the social agenda. ‘If Australia is to prosper as a nation, and maintain and improve living standards and opportunities for its people, it has no choice but to improve the productivity and international competitiveness of its firms and institutions. Australian organisations, irrespective of their size, location or ownership, must become more efficient, more innovative and more flexible.’

The Hilmer approach came after a vigorous debate in the corporate world led by people like Milton Friedman and the so-called economic rationalists about the purpose of business, that is to say the purpose for which corporate entities exist under the law. The slogan was ‘the business of business is business’ that is to say making profits and returning a yield to the owners, the shareholders.

The history of limited liability for corporations, however, sets the matter in a somewhat different light.⁶ In the middle of the 19th century governments became aware that the development of the industrial revolution needed capital. Large-scale business activity was needed to enable society to provide goods and services and there needed to be ways of persuading people that it was worthwhile investing in projects of development without risking their whole livelihoods. So limited liability for corporations was introduced as a trade-off for the social good of providing goods and services for the benefit of the community in which those corporations existed. The argument that the corporation exists for the purposes of making a profit for the benefit of the owners is a hollowing out of the institution’s social and moral principle that limited liability was established to provide.

For anyone working in a large corporation with almost any level of responsibility how you view the purpose for which the corporation exists will make a great deal of difference to the way you exercise your responsibilities. There is a world of difference between saying that a corporation needs to balance its books even to make a profit and saying that that is the purpose for which the corporation exists. You might as well say that the human organism must breathe in order to exist and therefore it exists in order to breathe. A Christian in such a situation who wishes to be able to give an appropriate explanation of their faith will need to have access to a christianly informed understanding of these underlying issues for life in a corporation.

May I mention an example from the 1980s. In this period the Commonwealth Government legislated to make superannuation portable. This meant that for the first time people had a right to take their superannuation savings when they changed their employment. One consequence of this was that the average tenure of middle management in large corporations diminished very significantly. It was the beginning

⁶ Tony Orhniel, *Limited Liability and the Corporation* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

of the end of single career employment. That simple change, justified on many laudable grounds has had a fundamental influence upon the character of the culture in large institutions. It was easy in the previous arrangements for “the way we do things here” to be well known simply by the passing of time since most people spent a lot of time in the same corporation. This no longer applied and corporations had to develop culture transmission programmes and code of ethics. The new challenge arose because of a simple change in an institutional arrangement.

In that context the way in which those values and cultural elements were developed went largely undiscussed by churches because they did not inform themselves as to what was going on or how it might affect a Christian view of humanity or social life.

It is a strange and sad irony that the Christians who did know about these things, that is to say those in the work place, did not have available to them the kinds of theological and research assistance which might have enabled them better to respond as Christian people to the changing circumstances. They had to fend for themselves while the churches, especially the institutional churches, were preoccupied with their own existence and activities.

Where have the churches been in addressing these questions in terms of the underlying values for which such public institutions exist in our society? There are a multitude of public institutions that sustain the life of this nation. The difficulty for the Christian and for the churches is that the reality of the actual circumstances for those who inhabit these institutions (that is to say, all of us) are not the subject of serious analysis nor the subject of serious interpretive research from a Christian perspective. This means that Christians in these situations do not have appropriate help in seeking to witness effectively nor to enable them to contribute to the life and character of the culture within those institutions.

CIVIC INSTITUTIONS

I have in mind here institutions such as the family, marriage and voluntary organisations of one kind or another. In 1993 Hugh MacKay published a book called

*Reinventing Australia*⁷ in which he outlined the immense social changes that had taken place in Australian society. Those changes were undertaken for all sorts of social reasons. Easier divorce because of malfunctioning monogamy, changes to enable women to pursue careers so that their lives might have the opportunity of equal fulfilment in a wide range of areas along with men. These were reasonable and eminently defensible considerations in themselves. The influence of these changes upon the character of family life and the dynamics of marriage were not however as easily foreseen nor are they as easily addressed.

In an article on 21st August in the Sydney Morning Herald Hugh MacKay returned to the question of generational change with an article on ‘What’s right with gen Y’. He drew attention to a number of their characteristics; their powerful tribalism, their assertiveness their flexibility in keeping their options open. ‘If you grow up in a society where the rate of change – social, economic, technological - is faster than ever before and keeps accelerating, how should you respond? Wouldn’t it be a good idea to keep your options open - whether you’re talking about a course of study, a job, sexual partner, a fashion label, a set of religious beliefs or a musical genre?’ Just as the institutional changes take place, so do the options for life decisions change.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

By social institutions I mean those voluntary organisations that enable us to engage in organised sport, leisure and service in our communities. In one sense they are the cultural surplus of society. They are places where our herd instincts are satisfied and where Christians are called upon to witness to their faith in appropriate ways.

The point I want to underline in this discussion is that the greater part of Christian witness in our society takes place necessarily within the framework of the public, civic and social institutions that go to make up the human shape of this nation.

Of course the church is an important community for the nurturing of faith, the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of christian sacraments. However the

⁷ H MacKay, *Re-Inventing Australia* (Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1993).

real witness of christian people is the less visible activity that takes place at work, in social life, leisure and in the family. That is in the institutions of our society.

It is therefore imperative that these frameworks within which we have to witness to our Saviour are well understood and so that we are able to identify what is really important in our activities in these institutions so that they might have some christian resonance.

AGENCY

Understanding this challenge is essential, but not enough. Of course we need to have a firm sense of a Christian worldview, some sense of the character of the Kingdom of God, some sense of the character and purpose of Jesus' mission. But the reality is that there are at least two other factors that influence the way in which people respond, including Christians. We all come to internalise as our values those principles that are implicit in the actions that we habitually undertake. The christian church has understood this point for centuries. It lies behind the practices of the sacraments, hearing the gospel preached, prayer, and of attending to the Scriptures. But at the same time it is also true that the institutions which we inhabit, public, civic and social, also contain values upon which they are based and are tacit in their organisational arrangements. In time those who inhabit these institutions come to internalise these values. Perhaps in part this is what Paul had in mind when he talked about the schema of this age (Romans 12.2). Whether that is so or not it remains the case that if Christians are to be faithful and witness to Christ they will need to do so in the context of competing pressures embedded in the institutional circumstances in which they find themselves.

Of course the church as a community that exists over time also provides the opportunity for socialisation into the Christian virtues, into the practice of effective witness. However if it does that only in the context of its own ecclesiastical assumptions without reference to the world in which Christians are called to witness then it will not necessarily, perhaps not even at all, assist Christians in their fundamental vocation.

No matter what particular ecclesial tradition we belong to we will still need to understand the character of the realities that face us in the lives that we live as inhabitants of our public, civic and social institutions. Christian research which is perceptively interpretive of social arrangements and structures seems to me to be vital if we are to act out our critique of the culture in which we live and to witness to the Christ to whom we belong.

If our various churches focus their activity and research on sustaining or rejuvenating their ecclesial activities, numbers, vitality or growth and go no further, then they are very likely to turn out to have been hollowed out of the reason for their existence and we will be found to be hollow men and women.