

Kevin Donnelly (ed), *Christianity Matters: In these Troubles Times* (Melbourne: Wilkinson Press, 2022). 256 pp. RRP: \$23.39 Paperback.

That this book was launched on the eve of the recent federal election, with Tony Abbott the main speaker and sponsored by the Nationals think tank the Page Research Centre gives you some idea of the tension between it and our current political mood.

After a foreword by Page Centre Chairman John Anderson and introduction by the Page Centre CEO Kristian Jenkins there a series of commissioned chapters by distinguished Australian academics and public figures. They are:

1. First Australians and Australia First: The Story of Maria Yellomundee by Stuart Piggin.
2. God: Home Alone in Australia by Cardinal George Pell.
3. 'Under God and the Law' Limited Government and Civil Disobedience in the Christian Legal Tradition by Augusto Zimmermann.
4. Literature, Music and the Arts by Peter Craven.
5. Universities by Stephen Chavura.
6. The Challenge of Preserving Catholic Education in a Post-Christian Society by Stephen Elder.
7. Health and Social Welfare by Tim Costello.
8. The Christian Citizen by Martyn Iles.
9. Christianity Under Attack by Wanda Skowronska.
10. Christianity's Sins by Peter Rosengren.
11. The Way Forward by Tess Livingstone.

A standout chapter for me was Stuart Piggin's story of the indigenous woman Maria Yellomundee who defied stereotypes of her own age, and even more of our age, as did some of the Christian humanitarians who made her story possible. It draws on the decades of archival research that led to his magisterial volumes on the history of evangelical Christianity in Australia. Having recently suffered through several sessions of predictable romanticisation of indigenous culture and denigration of Christian missionaries at this year's Australian Historical Association conference, Stuart's richly documented and gentle undermining of the current orthodoxy was refreshing. His work is a treasure for future Australian historians.

As someone involved in higher education I naturally turned to Steve Chavura's chapter on universities. After a brief historical introduction, he paints a picture of a nihilist leftist ideology destroying our humanities faculties, allied with a corrupt corporatism that is perhaps even more dangerous to high quality scholarship. Dismal reading and connects with the observations of so many recent writers on our universities, at least those writers who don't have a vested interest in painting a happy picture of our universities and perpetrating the ideological corporate alliance. I would have loved by the way some exploration of the links between these two threats to scholarship. The final section of Steve's chapter considers solutions. He does not advocate abandoning our universities, but his emphasis is change through new institutions such as the Ramsey Centres now established in several universities, the Catholic liberal arts college Campion in Sydney, and Alphacrucis which aspires to be a comprehensive university in the Pentecostal Christian tradition. All of these need substantial

philanthropic support if they are to succeed. This diagnosis seems pretty right to me. I'd hate to see conservatives and Christians staff and students giving up the fight in our universities - often through quiet presence and work with their students and colleagues. But I know from my economics training that innovation and transformation of industries tends to come through new entrants more than reforming the incumbent firms. If incumbent firms change it is usually through competitive pressure from new entrants. So there is a need for both philanthropic funding for new entrants and government regulatory arrangements that facilitate entry into the teaching and research spaces monopolised at the moment by the incumbent universities.

Stephen Elder's chapter about schooling rehearsed many of the recent criticisms of our system, especially its hostility to orthodox Christianity. A crucial point he doesn't take up is the connection between the problems of our school and university systems - unless teacher training in our universities education faculties is fixed or alternatives found it is hard to see the problems of our school system being overcome. I'd love to see the apprenticeship model of teacher training that Alphacrucis is pioneering in conjunction with a network of Christian schools spread to other institutions, and other new models of teacher training arise around the country to shake up the monopoly that public university education faculties have at the moment.

Tim Costello writes eloquently about the Christian background of so many of our social service and international development organisations, and argues that we need to maintain, or even better reinvent their Christian identity and mission in the current complex environment they face. Others such as Roy Williams have observed that Christian schools and Christian NFPs will have contact with so many more Australians in the years to come than Christian congregations, and are hence absolutely crucial to the future of Christianity in Australia. Tim Costello's arguments seem to me exactly right but I would like to have read a bit more about how exactly Christian identity mission of these organisations will be reinvigorated. Is it leadership training? Is it rebuilding the connections between these organisations and Christian congregations? Or something else?

Martin Iles scores points in my book for discussing some of the economic studies of the positive impact that Christian faith has on society. And he is right that economic arguments are powerful in contemporary Australian public policy debates. Perhaps it is too much to expect in a short chapter by someone whose background is law rather than economics, but as we all know it is possible to find research to support almost any argument heard in contemporary public policy. Even if we discount some of the shameful research produced by ethically challenged consultants for hire. The point is whether the studies he mentions (but unfortunately does not formally cite) are theoretically and empirically robust, and how their results are reconciled to other studies out there which seem to tell a different story about the effects of Christianity. Martyn's chapter makes some good points, but underlines the lack of rigorous Australian research on the economic impact of Christian faith, even when Australia has the best data in the world on Christianity through the work of the National Church Life Survey team over the last 30 years combined with Australia having a religion question on our

census. The Australian Research Council would never fund such research so perhaps this is another area where our philanthropists need to step up.

The tone of the book changes markedly in the last two chapters by Peter Rosengren and Tess Livingstone which discuss some of the darker aspects of Christian history. Peter Rosengren squarely faces the horrific failures of the Catholic Church in relation to sexual abuse, though he argues these do not count against the truth of Christianity. Dark for Tess Livingstone are the Vatican deal with the Chinese government, and the present Pope's attempt to suppress the Latin mass. Both in her view undermine the Catholic faith which is our best hope for renewal of society.

Congratulations to Kevin Donnelly for assembling such a distinguished group of writers to address some of the key challenges facing Australia. Christianity does indeed matter for the future of Australia. Much of the discussion is of Roman Catholic Christianity, now the largest religious group in Australia, and also the one with the strongest record of public engagement. Wouldn't it be good to have a similar volume assembling writers from Australia second largest religious group, Pentecostal Christians, to address the big issues facing Australia.

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