BOOK REVIEWS


The Church-Political interface is very topical. Many commentators are referring to the political influence of the ‘religious right’ or Pentecostal church communities. Marion Maddox has written a descriptive book, God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics.

Fr Andrew Murray’s book asks questions about the relationship between politics and religion and how the Church might engage in public discussion on political issues. It is work of philosophy rather than theology. As such, it can speak to a wide audience, including those who approach the questions from a secular perspective.

The issues are complex. When two Catholic Archbishops and their Anglican counterparts entered the federal election campaign about schools funding policies, for whom were they speaking? Themselves? Officially for their Churches? Their school authorities? The parents of children in their schools? Were their views shared by others? Who and to what extent? Were they in a position to ‘do a deal’ about funding with government, opposition or education department? Who does the government/minister/department consult in formulating public policy? Who will authorize the compromise in a world of realpolitik?

These questions and more could be asked about any number of public policy issues where ‘Church’ comment is sought or expected: embryo experimentation, cloning legislation, access to IVF, immigration, industrial relations, health and education funding, and so on.

Fr Murray summarises the essence of his book: ‘By attempting to engage in the public domain, church leaders enter a space that is very different from that of their churches. It is harsher and less predictable, and runs according to different rules. There is, nevertheless, good reason for the church to have a voice in the public domain because it believes that it has a mission to the whole world, and because it has things to say that will improve the lot of men and women, even in a world that it not fully Christian. Church leaders need to learn, therefore, how to act effectively in a world that is different from their churches and that does not understand them in the same way that those in their churches might.’ (75)
If church leaders decide to engage public policy issues, they should be clear as to why they are doing so. This is not a hypothetical question. There can be many reasons for entering a debate, ranging from merely satisfying one’s immediate constituency (why haven’t the bishops said something?) to seeking to effect genuine and substantial change in society (which is more often achieved by saying less publicly and doing more privately).

Fr Murray deals with the political reality of modern pluralist democratic societies, the influence of the media and gives some good advice to preachers who enter the public domain. For those responsible for speaking for the Church, this book provides a sound basis to reflect on what they do, why they do it and most importantly how they can do it most effectively.

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Chris McGillion, religious affairs commentator for the Sydney Morning Herald and senior lecturer in print journalism at Charles Sturt University, has written an engaging and readable account of recent events within the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. For those who live outside that Diocese, and whose experience of the Anglican Church in Australia is significantly different from that described, McGillion’s text is even more fascinating.

The Chosen Ones is divided into two unequal sections. The first traces developments within the Sydney Diocese from the election of Harry Goodhew as Archbishop in 1993 to Peter Jensen’s appointment in June 2001. In the second section McGillion investigates what he describes as the Jensen ascendency. McGillion provides very full footnotes and a useful bibliography.

Developments in Sydney on the vexed questions of lay presidency and the ordination of women are examined in so far as they impact upon the rest of the Anglican Church in Australia and upon the wider Anglican Communion. The text also identifies how Sydney Anglicanism approaches ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue and a range of contentious moral issues. Sydney’s solutions often stand in stark contrast to Anglican approaches found outside its diocesan boundaries. A new and radical set of theological priorities has emerged in Sydney: the supremacy of the local congregation over denominational membership, a disregard for the traditional liturgical and sacramental forms of the Book of Common Prayer and its various Australian revisions, and an ambitious missionary program to attract ten per cent of Sydney’s population to active bible-based Church membership. McGillion asks if these priorities represent a much needed liberation of Anglicanism, as many within the Sydney Diocese would argue, or are they, as their detractors would argue with equal certainty, an unfortunate corruption and misreading of the Anglican Tradition.

McGillion describes his work as a detailed examination of ecclesiastical politics. Some readers may be shocked by the obviously political nature of much synodical activity within the Diocese, however, its defenders see such