

JAMES FRANKLIN

CARDINAL DIRECTIONS



THE COLLOCATION OF title and subtitle in Cardinal Pell's latest book is an insult to the spirit of the age—if not a direct insult then at least “offensive to pious ears”, to use a Catholic phrase once applied to the lowest grade of heresy. If you “test everything”, according to modern intellectual sensibilities, surely you thereby find everything wanting, so how can there be anything to “hold fast” to?

The thought, however, is not itself from Pell. The title and subtitle together are a quotation from St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The world's oldest institution must sometimes wonder if there has been much progress in two thousand years.

The book is a collection of Pell's occasional writings, sermons and addresses, mostly recent but a few going back twenty-five years. Though inevitably not as unified as a book on a particular topic would be, the result is more coherent than usual for such a collection. The cause of its unity is that the mind behind it is a seriously intellectual and broad-ranging one. For the first time in a hundred years—since at least Cardinal Moran—Sydney has as its archbishop someone truly interested in and capable of playing at the highest level of public intellectual debate. Pell holds a doctorate from Oxford (in church history) and was there much impressed by the very capable, though Wittgensteinian, Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. He takes his philosophy seriously and knows how to explain the traditional philosophical and theological positions of the church in terms that make sense to modern scientifically-trained minds.

The more general essays in Pell's book are a good place to start for the conservative who is puzzled

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by the phenomenon of the Catholic Church and of Christianity generally. The non-religious conservative, with philosophical roots in the Enlightenment, appreciates that the church has long been a custodian of Western cultural values and that its present education system delivers a large proportion of the foot-soldiers of the “forces of reaction”. But he finds it impossible to

think himself into finding at all plausible the heavy load of dogma of the church, from a bodily resurrection at a fixed time in history to modern Vatican pronounce-

ments. Lytton Strachey criticised the comparatively liberal Catholic Lord Acton, who “while straining at the gnat of Infallibility, had swallowed the camel of the Roman Catholic Faith”, and one certainly sees the problem. How can anyone literally believe that, or even assign it a probability of say more than a quarter?

Pell is not one to shrink the camel by a hump or two to render it more palatable to modern gourmet tastes. In his title essay, addressed to young people, he insists, “Our basic teachings come from God ... the Church cannot compromise her basic beliefs, especially Christ's hard teachings.” In any case, he says, the alternatives have been found wanting: “Experience also shows that some of the alternative life styles foisted on young people hurt rather than help, lead to despair rather than hope.”

But he does not simply call for faith to open the throat to camel-width. “We have to be able to back up our claims, present reasons for our hope.” That comes in two parts: looking at the “big questions” including arguments for the existence of God, and explaining the total Christian theory (Catholic version) as the leading total story of the universe, all things considered. The first part is tackled in one of the longest pieces in the collection, “Without God We Are Nothing”, a speech delivered to the 2009 Festival of Dangerous Ideas at the Opera House. Pell defends versions of the traditional cosmological argument (“Why is there something rather than nothing?”) and the design argument

Test Everything: Hold Fast to What is Good,
by George Pell;
Connor Court, 2010, 386 pages, \$34.95.

for the existence of God. Those have stood the test of time, at least in the sense of making people rationally wonder about the big picture of the universe, and, as Pell says, the design argument has been given a new lease of life by the discovery of the “fine tuning” of the universe—the exactitude with which several apparently independent cosmological constants must take the values they do in order to produce a universe in which life is possible. He even suggests that the principles of mathematics call for a divine explanation. That may be a step too far. The digits of pi are what they are in all possible worlds and are not subject to the divine will, so God is not needed to explain them and it is therefore hard to see how they could redound to God’s credit. Perhaps applied mathematics is meant.

Occasional addresses do not permit developing such arguments at sufficient length, and no doubt the press of administrative business in running an archdiocese will prevent anything much longer from being written. A recommendable long version of such arguments, more or less along the lines sketched by Pell, is the 2008 book *God, Actually*, by the Sydney lawyer Roy Williams.

If Enlightenment rationalists find belief incomprehensible, there is conversely something Catholics cannot understand about the non-religious conservative mind. How can anyone confidently pronounce on what policies are best for humans, without an objective view of ethics, of what is ethically good for humans? The Enlightenment philosopher David Hume rightly maintained that one cannot derive “ought” from “is”. So where to get “ought” from? Pell says, in a sermon for the “Red Mass” for lawyers and judges:

An important divide today is between those who work to discern the moral truths in created reality—often theists—and those who believe that our higher form of animal life is to be shaped and improved in any ways the majority or the more powerful forces in society see fit. This explains why there is no consensus on the foundations of human rights, why human rights arguments are used both to destroy and defend human life ...

He has in mind not conservatives but progressives keen on gay marriages and similar experiments with human nature. But with the small addition of a “not” before “improved”, the quotation equally applies to

most non-theist conservatives: without some realist story about the metaphysics of morals, about the inherent as opposed to conventional worth of persons, there are left only pragmatic arguments about what effects and side-effects reforms might or might not have on our comforts, and political struggle. That leaves out something important, such as a solid sense of the reality of evil.

FOR THOSE READERS inclined to take an “all above my pay grade” attitude to the big questions, there is a lot of readable and colourful material in Pell’s book on individual heroes from the past. From the Old Testament, Amos, a

prophet obscure except when the books of the Bible are listed alphabetically, is seen being drummed out of the college of prophets at Bethel for not being a team player. Several sermons on St Paul emphasise his fanatical and violent position before his encounter on the road to Damascus, and so make plain the difficult reorientation needed to make him a follower of a religion of love. (Of course, there is plenty on Jesus himself, but Jesus is more elusive as a personality than his more flawed followers.) St Thomas More, a team player in his youth but reluctantly a troublemaker when he stayed where he was while the team moved elsewhere, is explained in the rounded terms appropriate to the “man for all seasons”. Pell does however criticise his actions as Chancellor in executing Protestants (“regarded as small ‘I’ liberals now regard racists”). Mary MacKillop’s career is described briefly, and Pell recalls without further

comment that he went to pray at her tomb immediately before his installation as Archbishop of Sydney. Her recurring difficulties with bishops are not glossed over, but “She remained totally loyal to the Church leaders even when they treated her disgracefully” (which must make an archbishop think fondly of the past).

It is perhaps through these short human stories that an outsider can most quickly and painlessly gain some understanding of what the Catholic Church is for, what its total worldview is as compared to alternatives. The reason why it is so enthusiastic about maintaining its own complete education system is that its theory is reasonably plausible if understood from the inside and then compared with simpler alternatives like scientific atheism or evangelical Christianity, but is hard to think one’s way into from the outside. The bite-sized but well-ordered pieces in Pell’s collection are a good

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place to start.

One absence in the book is any mention of the sexual abuse scandal. That may disappoint those who have heard little else about the Catholic Church in recent times. It is a pity, since a proper account of the crisis from the official spokespersons of the church is still awaited. There have been apologies and plans put in place to prevent any recurrence, which are of course the first steps needed, but there has not exactly been an official account reflecting on how it happened and what to make of it.

A retired auxiliary bishop of the Sydney Archdiocese, Geoffrey Robinson, published in 2007 a book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, arguing that the institutional church had gone very wrong on those two matters. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference expressed their disagreement with some of the more theological aspects of his views, but have not exactly put forward an alternative analysis.

What does the official church think was the cause of perhaps one in twenty priests and brothers in the 1960s and 1970s committing abuse? Was there something in seminary training and the circumstances in which priests lived that left them somehow vulnerable to the temptation to abuse? What was the thinking behind the policy of dealing with the cases internally to "avoid

scandal"? Was there some point to the policy in the historical circumstances? Does the policy call in question the Catholic Church's claimed divine guidance, or at least the wisdom of taking all Vatican pronouncements with total seriousness? Those are questions to which there could be different answers. A serious official historical and theological investigation would give both Catholics and others an insight into an issue that will be with us for some time.

The book marks a new stage in the rise to prominence of the publisher Connor Court. The press had its most notable success with Ian Plimer's *Heaven and Earth*, on global warming, but it has had a broad range of successful titles on Catholic and other themes. Tess Livingstone (author of a Connor Court book on Enid Blyton) writes in her editor's foreword to *Test Everything*, "Congratulations to Anthony and Brigid Cappello, whose dynamic Connor Court publishing company is brave enough to 'test everything' from political correctness to 'climate change' and still prosper."

Pell's book is one they can be proud of.

James Franklin's Catholic Values and Australian Realities (Connor Court) was reviewed in Quadrant in the July-August 2006 issue.

ON EMPTY

On a hot day the North-West Plain is so flat it isn't.
The horizon curves and stirs like a wisp of moustache.
Animals burrow that aren't meant to burrow.
Prey walk past their predators under a white flag.
The eyes of roadkill are left to boil in their sockets.
The can of beer is dry when you open it.
A cigarette is rolling another swagman.
The motor smokes nervously before you start it.
The mobile phone sweats, whimpers and croaks.
The devil is on holiday in Tasmania.
The paddock on the left is Texas.
The seat of government is the only tree.
We'll take a rest-stop at the next mirage.
Is it far? It has been. Are we there yet? No.

John Carey