Discerning the Australian Social Conscience (Jesuit Lenten Series)
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Over the past decade the Australian province of the Jesuits has made a significant contribution to credible public reflection on Australian society from the perspective of the Christian vision. In my view, two outstanding aspects of that contribution have been the magazine Eureka Street and the Jesuit Social Justice Centre, Uniya. In its brief Eureka Street includes society, the church, theology and the arts. Uniya leads the Australian church on Aboriginal issues, among many others, and, through the mass media, gives the church a voice in the wider society. Discerning the Australian Social Conscience is another of these contributions. It is a collection of mainly shorter papers delivered to large audiences in Melbourne and Sydney during Lent 1998 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Jesuits’ presence in Australia. In introducing the series Sir William Deane acknowledges both the Jesuits’ formidable influence on the nation through outreach to the disadvantaged and their critical influence on the ‘intellectual life, the spiritual quality and the essential morality of the church itself’ (2).

The structure of the book reflects the dialogical nature of the original seminars. In each seminar two speakers (a man and a woman), experts in their field, present papers which are responded to by several interlocutors. Following questions from the floor, the seminars conclude with a response by a Jesuit priest. In line with the seminar format, the papers do not attempt to be comprehensive; rather, the presenters focus on key issues of their topic, with the aim of stimulating reflection and discussion among the audience. Six areas are explored in relationship to social conscience: Australian values, personal wellbeing, science and technology, religion and the state, education, and, finally, the arts. Because of the breadth of issues covered and the depth of the contributors’ knowledge, any response to this collection can only be partial and idiosyncratic. My interests were most engaged by seminars one and four.

In the first seminar, on Australian values, a former chief justice of the High Court, Sir Gerard Brennan, and the editor of Eureka Street, Morag Fraser, seek to identify those goods which most strongly shape the Australian sense of self. Brennan names egalitarianism, freedom and tolerance as our central values. For Fraser, self-possession and a commitment to community and responsibility make us who we are. In brief but rich discussions of their views, the speakers touch on the way in which these values shape our life together. Dorothy Lee responds by inquiring about the relationship between a secularist and a Christian understanding of tolerance and egalitarianism. She asks, ‘What place is there for transcendence?’ (28). Her question suggests that both secularist and Christian readings of these values have their own presuppositions and shape society differently. She points out that tolerance can be understood in a radically relativist manner—an understanding that differs greatly from the Christian view, which strongly upholds the dignity of every human person. Lee’s question opens up the possibility of dialogue between Christians and secularists about how we can best account for the values that make us who we are. Several respondents to Fraser wondered how we can best protect the value of community in our society, which seems increasingly individualistic. It
is impossible to respond adequately to such a complex question in a few sentences, but Fraser’s response indicated that, although our communal life is threatened, she is optimistic about the future. What is required, Fraser says, is not a total reshaping of our country but rather a constant effort to keep before citizens the values that deeply shape our common sense of self.

The fourth seminar, entitled ‘Religion, the State and Social Conscience’, also deals with the nature of our common life, this time with a stronger focus on the church’s role in the affairs of the state. In her paper Justice Susan Kenny, a judge of the Federal Court, reflects about the citizen’s right to religious freedom and the state’s duty to protect that right. In this context Kenny speaks of social conscience as an expression of the believer’s right to participate fully in society. She stresses the need for citizens to exercise their own conscience, saying, ‘Social conscience cannot, it seems, be delegated’ (203). This view rests on a particular understanding of the source of the right to religious freedom. She opts for what could be called a more communitarian view of the right to religious freedom, which finds its source in the dignity of our shared humanity. In a polished, good-spirited paper, retired federal politician Fred Chaney discusses the church’s role in political debate. To begin, Chaney lists six positive aspects of the churches’ contributions to debate on social policy. In the major part of his paper he argues that the churches often ignore the complexity of issues of social policy and hence make an inadequate response. He says, ‘Much of the churches’ contribution to debates on these matters seems to ignore issues the State cannot ignore and there are many examples where the quality of the church contribution in such cases is simply inadequate’ (213). Frank Brennan SJ provides the Jesuit response in this seminar, discussing issues from both Kenny’s and Chaney’s papers. In the context of Chaney’s paper, he offers some insightful reflections about who speaks for the churches and when they should speak. He argues that church leaders need to do more and resource others to do more than simply enunciate principles in public debate. As well as stating principles, it is also necessary for the churches to evaluate how government and opposition policies measure up in the light of these principles. In a packed sentence about the role of social conscience in the affairs of the state, Brennan says, ‘Church people active in the political process of the State have to be principled pragmatists who are always prepared to articulate the moral principles on which their preferred outcome is premised, professionally disinterested in which party is in power, consistent in their articulation of the parameters on power to be exercised by the various cogs in the machinery of State, calculating in their assessment of what is achievable, and unstinting and impartial in their efforts to achieve the outcome’ (261).

Besides the papers on Australian values and religion and the state, there are many other fine contributions in this volume. Other highlights for me are Kevin Hart’s theological reflection on Levinas’s ethics; Andrew Hamilton’s story about Sopheap, a Cambodian woman in whom he sees ‘a sanctity beyond goodness’; and Bill Uren’s reflection about the complementarity of science and theology.

Bruce Dawe’s contribution to the final seminar—The Arts, Entertainment and Social Conscience—is the shortest of all the papers, yet his poems have a profound impact. The poem on youth unemployment, ‘Doctor to Patient’, depicts the ‘chillingly abstract’ way in which we deal with the issue of unemployment. His poem on abortion, ‘In the Vestibule’, is equally powerful. Here he envisages the line ‘Blind hope and desperation here conspire . . .’ inscribed above the clinic.
entrance—a line which powerfully encapsulates the confluence of desperate circumstances with an all too simple solution. Another of Dawe’s poems, ‘Exiles’, conveys the irony of Aboriginal people being treated as exiles in their own land. The poem concludes:

Who that observes them slowly moving now
along the fringes of our restlessness
could see them as they were before we came,

Or see them, on the banks of the broad rivers,
watching the convicts row in chiming rhythm,
still innocent of the song the sweet links sang?

*Discerning the Australian Social Conscience* is a very fine collection of papers and responses that hope to generate further discussion about issues central to the shape of our common life.