

Dominic O'Sullivan, *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation. Catholicism and the Politics of Indigeneity*, Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005, xxiv + 296pp, (incl.illus, biblio and index)

This is an attractively produced book and, as to be expected of an ATF publication, has the predictable scholarly apparatus of extensive footnoting, lengthy bibliography, and index, along with several pages of illustrations.

Dominic O'Sullivan's aim is to tell the story of Roman Catholic Church involvement in indigenous policy debate since European settlement of Australia and New Zealand, describing both the Church's failures and successes in applying 'constant' religious truths to questions of public policy, and endeavouring to sort out the inconsistencies and theological confusion found in the pronouncements of Church spokespeople. Quite a challenge. The material is presented in five wide-ranging, loosely connected chapters. But having so much to cover means skipping over parts of the story, and restricting examination of Church involvement in public policy debate solely to indigenous affairs. Particular attention is paid in the Australian chapters to the stolen generation and to Aboriginal land rights, and in New Zealand to discussion of Treaty issues and biculturalism in recent years.

The author does not need to devote too much time to explaining the grievances and hurts which lead to need for reconciliation: today these largely can be taken as read - nor indeed to devote too much time to the contribution of the Church to either the hurts or to opposition to policies which produced those hurts, for apart from the role of Church missions in taking into care the 'stolen generation' the role of the Church probably was relatively modest in its impact, though he does see Church failures to speak up for the equality of peoples as serving the colonising and imperial ends of the British Crown. It is his view that by and large when it came to issues of indigeneity the nineteenth century Church had too narrow an interpretation of the relationship between it and secular society's decision-making processes - though some missionaries in Australia did challenge prevailing social and political thought - and there was a paternalistic belief in the inferiority of aboriginal cultures. In both Australia and New Zealand good intent on governments' behalf was too readily assumed: thus in New Zealand, he asserts, 'the Church did not see that the government's intent was not cultural and linguistic preservation, but destruction' and there was an assumption of racial harmony and lack

of discrimination until late in the twentieth century. There could be no such assumption in Australia.

Constant religious principles are found in the Church's magisterium, - 'a comprehensive body of thought that is supportive of reconciliation, and the advancement of autonomy and self-determination' for indigenous peoples. Reconciliation has become an entrenched part of the political agenda in both countries. A theme of the study is that political developments of the 1960s and 1970s created space on the political agenda into which a more politically active Church - no longer silent - could move the 'constant religious ideology ...from being on the fringe of secular discourse to being accepted by a sizeable policy elite'. The author explores at some length different contributions by the Australian Church to recent debate over reconciliation, notably in the 1990s with the impacts of Mabo and Wik and of the revelations about the stolen generations. Here we see the Church, effectively released from past cultural blinkers and secular fashion, now joining the modern secular community in expressing regrets for past pains, including its own contribution to those pains, and its desire for reconciliation. Indeed, the author claims that in recent times the Australian Church led secular challenges to racial prejudice and discrimination.

O'Sullivan sees in Australia today a Catholic religious activism motivated by a theologically informed understanding of reconciliation, reflecting resources for carrying out its own research. In contrast, in New Zealand both within the Catholic Church and among the Protestant churches he finds a want of that understanding. He does not hesitate to criticise the New Zealand Catholic activists for perceived illegitimate theological comment, leading him to extended discussion of how Church contributions to debate about the meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi, and its insufficiently critical embracing of biculturalism, have caused an unproductive diversion 'by secular political arguments' from the Church's magisterium.

The Treaty is a product of human law, it is secondary to natural law, and the original Treaty guarantees cannot today fully be implemented, although it has provided a framework for reconciliation and for 'limited expressions of self-determination which are unparalleled in Australia'. But the Australian Church should avoid the New Zealand error of promoting this one specific formula for recognising indigenous rights as the one required by Christianity, and it does not need to develop its own

biculturalism. Biculturalism, O'Sullivan argues persuasively, 'can be a problematic political vehicle' which may, or may not, contribute justice to Maori. He recognises the risk that the Church too much becomes a secular lobby group, with 'emotive politic rhetoric' weakening the Catholic contribution to political debate, and risking 'alienating support for the Church's aspirations for Maori people'.

Not surprisingly, if the author is willing to castigate fellow Catholics for their theological inadequacies - and even criticise Australian political scientists for their failure to understand federalism - he sees no need to avoid taking a partisan political position; nor perhaps should he, though nowadays one might leave Bjelke-Petersen and even Pauline Hanson to past history. In both countries, he claims, 'there remain elements of political and ideological hostility towards' indigenous interests.

The 26 page Bibliography shows the strengths and also, perhaps, the weaknesses of the study. Considerable use is made of Catholic archival sources and records and material accessible from the internet, including Vatican documents; there are studies of aspects of indigenous politics and of Catholic theology, even including the works of Aquinas and Augustine whose views, along with those of several popes, are discussed in a scene-setting introduction. The author has ranged widely to search out materials with which to paint a full picture of the Church's engagement with indigenous issues in Australia and New Zealand. But that very focus on indigenous issues leads to over-emphasising change in the Church's approach to political involvement as it 'responded to the Second Vatican Council's strong emphasis on the presentation of religious values in the secular realm'. There is relatively little in the way of studies of the history or politics of the two countries (- hence such elementary mistake as getting wrong the voting system for the Australian senate), or of the broader context of the study - for example of changing attitudes in Great Britain at the time of colonisation, or of approaches to issues of race and indigeneity in the Western world at large post world war two.

Regrettably, too, the author appears to have put this work together in something of a hurry. There is repetition. In his judgements the author's enthusiasm or partisan prejudice can outrun cautious attention to his sources. Footnotes are erratic and sometimes bizarre (2.4% [actually should be 2.2%] of Australians are said to be of Indigenous descent, with reference given to the 2001 census:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitebds/D3310114.NSF->

/4a256353001af3ed4b2562bb00121564/0fe8206bf6b0d763ca2567f4002146fc?OpenDocument). There are careless citations, odd and unnecessary mistakes (misspelling of a name, wrongly dating the arrival of the first fleet in Sydney Cove and of the Mabo case), slip-ups in the index and the oddity that there is a number of indexed 'Maori' references but not 'Aborigine', despite the fact that the Australian chapters of the book take up nearly twice as many pages as the New Zealand. The Bibliography is crudely alphabetised (The Bible is listed under 'T'), and crudely organised (merely divided into two lists, primary sources and secondary).

O'Sullivan is generous in quoting from Roman Catholic sources, usefully putting this material on accessible record. Also valuable in this work is his putting side by side Catholic responses to indigenous issues in the two countries, showing lessons that can be learnt across the Tasman. But it is apparent, too, how little in the past there appears to have been trans-Tasman influence, apart from the rather obvious fact that Australians interested in the issue know that in New Zealand there was a treaty and that Maori have separate political representation. The 'failures' of nineteenth century and later Catholics in both countries are pointed out, while not unsympathetically also described are limitations imposed on them both from contemporary social attitudes and from the situation of the Roman Catholic Church - representing a minority and distrusted by many. In the last and most interesting pages of the work the contrast in modern times between the two Churches, Australian and New Zealand, is well drawn.

The ultimate message of the work for Catholics, and surely all Christians, is that in the relationship between Church and state, 'on the one hand there is a requirement to avoid a partisan political position on issues on which there might properly be a diversity of Catholic opinion, while at the same time there is a need to avoid caution to the extent that the Church becomes impotent in the expression of its ideals'. The work is valuable more for the questions it raises than for answers. And that is how it should be.

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