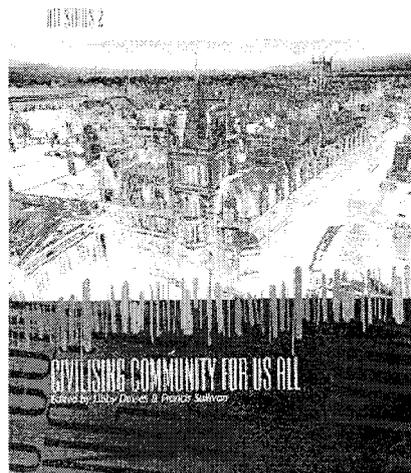


The Australian Theological Book Reviewer



Civilising Community for Us All,
ed Libby Davies and Francis Sullivan,
Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum,
Series 2, pb, 2000, xiii+149 pp.

Review by Bruce Duncan CSsR, Catholic Social Services and
lecturer in social ethics at Yarra Theological Union, Box Hill,
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This series of essays is the result of a conference organised by the Australian Theological Forum in February 1999 to debate the changes to social services, notably health care, aged care, community and welfare services. Especially did the conference seek to evaluate the effect of 'economic rationalist' views on social services from the point of view of the churches and community organisations. As the editors say in the introduction, this requires 'a re-examination of the authentic identity the churches have in these services and a recasting' of their mission (p. viii).

Christopher Newell's 'Whose Community? Whose Values?' encourages the churches to broaden their value base beyond their religious communities to encourage a sharing of spiritualities, including from within contemporary

youth culture, as providing a common ground on which to build inclusion, human rights and community.

How such values are reflected in religious traditions is the focus of Ms Sandie Cornish from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, and Rev Ray Cleary of the Melbourne City Mission.

Cornish argues that the Catholic tradition has decisively refocused on justice and human rights rather than on a charity model alone. She highlights the importance of the social significance of the Jubilee 2000, and how Jesus declared his commitment to the marginalised, suffering and disadvantaged. This 'option for the poor', which also involves social analysis and awareness raising, has been strongly reflected in recent church teaching, especially by Pope John Paul II. In her summary of how Catholic thinking has developed in recent years, Cornish discusses the issues of Aboriginal reconciliation, unemployment, tax reform, East Timor, refugees and public advocacy in the future.

One of the strongest chapters in this book comes from Ray Cleary, attacking the negative effects of recent economic policies, especially on social services. Cleary laments the narrow focus on a particular economic theory, and a 'market driven economic development devoid of values or ethics promoting the common good' (p. 50). He forthrightly denounces 'the constant denial by many of our political leaders of the events of the past', which diminishes Australia as a nation, and the 'slow, agonising death for many rural communities and isolated outback towns' (pp 51–2). Many social services have been defunded, while 'for-profit' services are expanded. Cleary argues that the churches need to emphasise more the civil rights components in their traditions and engage in a moral conversation about community and the wellbeing of all citizens. He is dismayed by trends in Australian religious life, 'the increasing survival or bunker mentality of the churches, a diminishment in the ecumenical commitment to one another and the hard line on issues of pastoral and moral care', and what he considers the self-righteousness and self-interest in many church statements (pp 54–55). He concludes: 'church welfare and health services need to present an alternative set of agenda and services more closely related to the heart of the gospel and less to the dictates of the market' (p. 56).

Lyn Gallagher from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Religious Broadcasting laments that a virulent consumerism has displaced ethics and is now driving health and welfare reform.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon critiques 'mutual obligation' as code for a punitive attack on low-income and disadvantaged groups. The notion of mutual obligation is being used to absolve higher-income groups from their obligations to the common good by placing the blame for inequities on the poor. She particularly attacks the claim that the wealthy are somehow benefactors since they pay taxes, by arguing that many pay only minimal tax. The breakdown in mutual obligation on the side of the better-off risks fracturing society.

A previous Minister in Labor governments, Brian Howe, examines the changes in social policy in recent decades and the historically unique nature of the challenges facing Australia and other Western nations. Drawing on his extensive experience and expertise, Howe summarises well the current predicament of increasing disparity of wealth, incomes and opportunities between rich and poor, noting the government's overemphasis on economic policy at the expense of social policy.

Three current politicians also speak to the issues. The Liberal Senator from South Australia, Amanda Vanstone, offers a brief defence of government

policy. Mark Latham, ALP member for Werriwa in Sydney, argues for a devolution of social and political action down to more local community groups, and for governments to support the development of community and social trust.

For the Australian Democrats, Queensland Senator John Woodley argues that the churches must reinforce their social commitment and resist the 'pietism' which would absolve them from their social responsibilities. Far from judging society in terms of 'winners' and 'losers', Jesus seeks out the disadvantaged and suffering and insists that his disciples show a similar care.

Drawing the book together, two more theological talks address the problem of how Christian faith traditions should respond. Harry Herbert, Director of the NSW Uniting Church's Board of Social Responsibility and Chair of UnitingCare Australia, argues that there is a fundamental contradiction between the social mission of the churches and the economic paradigm used by the government, whereby the disadvantaged must repay the advantaged.

From a Roman Catholic perspective, Elizabeth Hepburn IBVM stresses that communities are complex social structures of nurture, civilisation and care, and not simply accountable in economic formulas. But the church must also be more open to dialogue in exploring moral issues, and be 'ready to be unsettled'.

This book reflects the continuing debate among church and social service organisations about how to respond to market-driven economic policies which are affecting service provision negatively. Clearly there is much agreement on fundamental principles, the social implications of the gospels, and the need to strike a new balance between economic resources and social needs. However, it is significant that there is no substantial contribution from either the government or proponents of its views, and hence no real dialogue partner. Church and community groups have politely clarified their positions with a view to later lobbying with governments, but the conference itself did not provide a forum for such a vigorous debate. And as with many conferences, the papers were very disparate in nature, style and substance.



To order