

CES Annual Report 2018

Springs of Hope

It is perhaps a condition of aging, but as year succeeds to year it is difficult to see where 'springs of hope' are to be found in a world where dictatorships are becoming more numerous and virulent; democracy appears to be on the decline; major issues such as human migration and climate change only receive attention from the perspective of 'national self-interest'; making money is divorced from value to society; and economic policy is divorced from desired outcomes of social wellbeing and sustainability.

Particularly troubling has been the apparent growth of a binary culture in national and international politics, media, and populist opinion. President Trump has bequeathed to the world the expression 'fake news'. This has given permission for everyone to dispute that with which they do not agree, or find inconvenient, and not just dispute, but to malign those who present what might otherwise be described as verifiable fact. Added to this has been the spectacle of our own domestic politics in which sound policy is sacrificed on the altar of political partisanship. Politicians no longer seek to present that which is best for the country, but that which is the opposite of their political opponents. If one side of politics presents an argument, the other side automatically opposes, regardless of the argument's merits. The Australian electorate at large has seen through this dreadful display of partisanship and has lost confidence in the main stream political endeavor.

These trends are the antithesis of Christianity. In its earliest days Christianity found it could no longer fit within the Judean culture of exclusivity. The incarnation heralded the death of dualism in any form. In Jesus it became clear that the individual was to find his or her identity in relationship with God, others and the world, while the world was to be understood through the wellbeing of the individual. In Jesus it is not possible for good to be good unless it is common, and truth cannot be truth in isolation. Finding commonality with the opposite, Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, became the mantra. We are who we are through engagement with others.

Christians for an Ethical Society does of course long for a world in which ethics are taken seriously. But further than this, we make no apology for the base from which our ethical structure is formed. We understand our primary citizenship is as members of the whole human race. We understand that God has made a covenant with all living, not just humans. We know that we are who we are as inheritors of past legacy and we know that opportunities available to future generations will depend upon choices we make; therefore, our ethical base is also intergenerational. We know that this broad citizenship must always have priority over individual or national self-interest. "He has told you O mortal what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God".

We do not claim that those who own no religious base cannot develop an ethical base to their lives, as has been the argument of some. But we do assert that Western Culture has been formed out of a Christian tradition and the current widespread loss of Christian identity appears to have led to a lack of understanding of the ethical framework that has heretofore undergirded our life.

It appears that those who seek to reform what has been a social Christian contract would like to do so on the basis that the right of the individual must always be supreme. Strangely this emphasis upon the individual, out of context of the society to which they belong, appears as much to be presented by

political leaders who claim a Christian faith, as by those who espouse none. In CES we would say to those who claim conservatism and want to take us down this route, please turn around, go back, the direction you espouse has no scriptural warrant and no basis in the Christian tradition. Self-interest, be it individual or national, is the route to chaos and violence, if it becomes the primary basis for choice and action.

The CES goal is not to engage in dogma or any form of distinctively Christian practice, but with St Paul to hold before the world that there is a “still more excellent way” and to encourage all to walk down this path.

This last year our theme has been “Springs of hope”. Our forums have been:

Our annual Dinner Forum was held on Thursday 17 August 2017, when Kristina Keneally spoke on ‘Wisdom in an uncertain world’, chaired by Bishop George Browning.

On Wednesday 18 October 2017 we had a Joint Forum with the Catholic Social Justice Commission, on their Social Justice Statement, on the ‘Sustainable Economy’ with Fr Frank Brennan SJ as keynote speaker.

On Tuesday 14 November 2017, in association with Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), we held a Muslim-Christian Conversation titled ‘Diversity and Harmony: Peace & Justice in the 21st Century’ featuring Omar Hashmi (Vice President of MPV), Saba Awan and Shan Gunawardena with Richard Browning, Katherine Rainger and Dylan Mordike and chaired by Rt Rev’d Professor Stephen Pickard.

Our first forum in 2018 was held on Thursday 8 February when Professor John Warhurst introduced our theme for 2018, ‘Wellsprings of Hope’, chaired by Bishop George Browning.

The forum on the eve of Anzac Day 2018, was addressed by Associate Professor David Neville who spoke on ‘Hope and Peace’ and chaired by Professor Thorwald Lorenzen.

At our forum on Tuesday 29 May 2018, Elizabeth Farrelly spoke on “Springs of Hope: rethinking the vertical’, chaired by Bishop George Browning.

Our last forum was held on Wednesday 15 August 2018 and addressed by Gerard Horton and Salwa Duaibis, entitled ‘Rule of Law or ruled by law?’ and will be chaired by Bishop George Browning.

For several years we have been privileged to enjoy the wisdom and leadership of The Revd. Dr Thorwald Lorenzen as our president. We have been blessed indeed to have someone of his wise and considered presence in our midst. I am delighted that Professor John Warhurst has agreed to become our new president. John hardly needs any introduction to the people of Canberra, being a regular columnist in the Canberra Times. He is emeritus professor of political science at the ANU, the chair of Catholic Social Services Australia and a member of Concerned Catholics.

After many years Robyn Coghlan has stood down as secretary. She has made a strong and selfless contribution for which we all owe her a great debt of thanks. We are fortunate that Ann Skamp has

stepped into the breach. Ann is no stranger to Christian leadership having been a longtime member of the Anglican General Synod of Australia and one of its representatives to the UN.

Our deep appreciation also goes to Heather McLaren who has been responsible for our e-publicity which is vital to the success of the forums. We are grateful that Peter Walker has now undertaken this role.

The current CES committee is:

John Warhurst (President), George Browning (Chair), Ann Skamp (Secretary), Jeremy Dawson (Treasurer), Bill Bush, David Hunter, Ingrid Moses, Werner Padarin, Stephen Pickard, Clive Rodger and Peter Walker.

Behind the scenes one of our biggest goals this year has been the revamping of our website and its capacity to allow far greater engagement in the topics addressed. The new website is on the verge of being launched due to the continued efforts of the Committee members and the professional expertise of Justin Huehn Design.

I would also like to acknowledge the generous hospitality of Stephen Pickard and the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture to the Society.

It has been my privilege to be chair of CES for the last 12 months.

Bishop George Browning

September 2018