

Over the Rainbow

John Rickard

Tess Livingstone
GEORGE PELL

Duffy & Snellgrove, \$22pb, 495pp, 1 876631 52 X

Chris McGillion (ed.)

A LONG WAY FROM ROME: WHY THE AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC CHURCH IS IN CRISIS

Allen & Unwin, \$29.95pb, 206pp, 1 86508 917 6

Caroline Miley

THE SUICIDAL CHURCH:
CAN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH BE SAVED?

Pluto Press, \$27.95pb, 182pp, 1 86403 182 4

JUST AS IT USED to be said that the middle class was always rising, in recent times it seems as if the churches are in perpetual crisis. And it is now almost a cliché to remark the apparent paradox that, while religion is in decline, the hunger for spirituality is increasing. These three books all present different perspectives on the crisis facing the two largest denominations in Australia: Roman Catholic and Anglican. Each in its own way makes for depressing reading.

Caroline Miley's *Suicidal Church* is a passionate diatribe directed at an Anglican Church that is 'timid, damaged and fearful'. She sees the church as weighed down and inhibited by its inheritance of genteel English middle-class culture. Of course, Anglicanism has always had a sort of amorphous quality, characterised as it is by a membership the great majority of whom hardly ever attend church, while at the same time boasting such a diversity in churchmanship and theology that its claim to any sense of unified identity seems tenuous. It has always been an easy target for criticism and satire. (Who remembers Alan Bennett's splendidly vacuous Anglican sermon all those years ago in *Beyond the Fringe*?) Many of Miley's complaints, therefore, will be shared by other Anglicans both practising and lapsed, but her overriding critique of the nature of the church as an institution is more problematic. It is easy enough to say that 'this is an anti-institutional age' and that the church should 'de-institutionalise', but Miley's programme for reform is naïve to say the least. What does it mean to say 'abolish hierarchy'? Throw out the bishops?

Astonishingly, Miley's solution is to centralise authority in 'one major centre' that would, essentially, run 'the national church'. Many would consider that as a new and more dangerous form of hierarchy. Likewise, Miley is contemptuous of the role of committees in the governance of the church. Committees can be tedious and frustrating, but at least they represent a consultative process involving people: beware any organisation in which decisions are made behind closed doors,

in 'one major centre' perhaps, in the interest of 'getting things done'.

One could go on: this is a profoundly irritating book, which, in a sense, it is meant to be. But one of its curious — and revealing — features is that it comes without any acknowledgments. Not even an editor is thanked. Had anyone, apart from Miley, read the text before it went into print? And this is a text that calls out for editing and revision.

Tess Livingstone's *George Pell* could also do with some pruning. It is a sprawling book laden with large verbatim extracts from the gospel according to Archbishop Pell. It often seems as if it is the archbishop and not the author who is directing the narrative. Livingstone's tone is moderate and restrained, and she at least gestures towards balance by incorporating some of the criticisms made of Pell from within the Catholic Church; but this is ultimately a heroic portrait of an archbishop whose career is seen as having already surpassed 'giants' of the church such as Mannix and Duhig.

The tone is set in George Weigel's foreword, in which he praises Pell for his 'lack of clericalism', 'rugged good humour', intellect and piety. Weigel and Livingstone depict Pell as a leader who has gained notoriety only because he has had the courage to challenge 'the dominant consensus among Australia's intellectual and cultural tastemakers'. There is even a sense of his being chosen for the role. According to Livingstone, Bishop O'Collins, described as Pell's mentor, hoped that the young priest's experience of Oxford would equip him to take on 'the then-prominent liberal Catholic commentator Max Charlesworth'. As a climax to the story, there is his brief dalliance with martyrdom, before he was exonerated from the charge of child abuse.

One virtue of Livingstone's book is that the information it provides does allow for a rather different interpretation of George Pell. While many concede his pastoral qualities, he also comes through at times as a bully. One critic describes him as 'great fun in a social situation' but, ultimately, when serious issues arise, an autocrat. It is interesting to learn that he suffered ill-health as a child and, later, as he grew physically strong, compensated by throwing himself into sport, particularly Australian Rules. He played it hard, gaining a reputation for being free with his arms in a contest; his team in the seminary, according to one of his admirers, 'mischievously' made it their motto to play the man and not the ball. Pell himself has drawn attention to this penchant for rough house in a paper he gave at La Trobe University in 1988 on Catholicism in Australia. In an extended football analogy, he likened the church's situation to being a few goals behind in the first quarter, kicking against the wind. 'The Catholic team has to slow the game down and close up play. We should start a few fights. The tight defensive play will give us time to see which of our young forwards adapt best to the new conditions.' The cynical aggression encapsulated in 'start a few fights' is an understandable cause for concern, particularly for those on the receiving end.

THE COLLECTION *A Long Way from Rome* brings together essays by seven dissident Catholics who have, to a greater or lesser extent, been on the receiving end of the Pell assault, even though they are members of the same team. The issues raised range from 'the lost art of Catholic ritual' (John Carmody) to the church's failures of communication, particularly with the young (Juliette Hughes and Michael Mullins). Morag Fraser looks at the plight of 'the silenced majority' (women), while Paul Collins, who was effectively drummed out of the priesthood when his book *Papal Power* was censured by Rome and Pell, laments the church's 'loss of its distinctive imagination' and urges the recovery of a poetic sense of the sacred. But basic to the crisis being addressed in this book are the nature of authority in a hierarchical church ('Why people don't listen to the Pope', by Damien Grace) and the church's inability to come to terms with sexuality, both in society and its own priesthood. Of course, the two issues are dangerously intertwined.

Damien Grace argues that the Catholic Church is like a club that will expel you if you do not accept the rules. But clubs, in fact, are responsible to their members, who can change the rules: it would be more appropriate, in the present climate, to see the Roman church as a military organisation where obedience to the line of command is a condition of membership. (And consider the Salvation Army as a Protestant mirror image!) Rome's most brazen exercise of its authority in recent times has been the *Statement of Conclusions* issued in 1998, which the Australian bishops were required to sign. This schoolmasterly document saw 'the tolerance characteristic of Australian society' as a mixed blessing, and admonished the Australian church for its deviations from the orthodoxy now being insisted on by Rome. According to Chris McGillion, the *Statement* effectively put a damper on 'innovative and imaginative responses' to the problems facing the church and the wider society; and it steadfastly ignored the vulnerability of the church, both here and elsewhere, on issues of sexuality and child abuse. A 1999 report to the Australian bishops, *Towards Understanding*, had found that clerical sexual abuse was a direct consequence of the church's failure to treat men and women equally. Pell has shown no interest in this report; indeed, he told a journalist that he had 'no clear recall of the contents'.

The male culture of the priesthood, reinforced by celibacy, distances the church from the community it serves. Rome's response, however, is not to reconsider celibacy, let alone the ordination of women, but to refuse ordination to any homosexuals. Pell's extraordinary reaction was to say that he 'broadly' agreed with this position, but, quoting Livingstone, 'that one or two exceptions could make very worthwhile priests'. How interesting: which one or two? At the same time, anyone wearing a rainbow sash, homosexual or not, will be refused Communion in Australia, which is, surely, a perverse tribute to the power of that symbol in confronting the authority of the church. Even Michael Mullins seems to assume that Pell had no alternative but to refuse Communion in these circumstances, only criticising his manner of doing so.

With a marvellously straight face, Livingstone tells us how the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office (aka the Inquisition) got it 'totally wrong' about Galileo, but it was not until 1992 that it acknowledged its error. Will it be the same with homosexuality? In light of the widespread medical consensus that homosexuality is not a disorder, Pell and his Melbourne successor, Denis Hart, have recently sponsored a visit by one Father John Harvey and a Dr Peter Rudegear, both of whom still speak in terms of 'an objective disorder' and 'cure'. Is it any wonder that some reach for the rainbow sash?

A Long Way from Rome is a courageous book, an exercise in what Morag Fraser calls 'integrity-in-dissent'. Its authors have not given up hope — well, not entirely — even while the church bureaucracy marginalises them. Well might Archbishop Pell claim 'the majority support me' when he has effectively driven many of his critics either out of the church or to its edge. For Caroline Miley, on the other hand, the Anglican Church may be a frustrating entity, but it is far less intransigent than Rome. Women are ordained in most Australian dioceses, the issue of homosexuality is at least being addressed and the new Archbishop of Canterbury offers the prospect of imaginative challenge emanating from the hierarchy itself. What both she and the contributors to *A Long Way from Rome* might agree upon is the problem facing hierarchical churches in an age when the popular quest for spirituality has become so personalised and yet so decentred that tradition, liturgy and cultural heritage are treated as optional extras rather than as integral to the religious experience.