

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 8

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Book Title: Acting on Conscience

Author: Frank Brennan

Reviewer: Ray Moynihan

It was as if Frank Brennan had scripted it himself. Just as his latest book about the explosive brew of law religion and politics was hitting the book shelves, that very cocktail was served up to readers on the front pages of Australia's papers. A leader of the Catholic Church was issuing a blunt threat to a political head of state: if he voted for a particular piece of legislation he might not receive Holy Communion in a catholic church.

The controversy was stem cell research, and the players in last months drama were Archbishop George Pell and New South Wales premier Morris Iemma, who ultimately rejected the veiled threats, voted for the legislation and continued taking communion. The issue of stem-cell research is just one of the vexing ethical conundrums that Brennan mulls over in *Acting on Conscience*, which also explores debates about the Iraq War, same-sex marriages, abortion, aboriginal land rights, detention centres and the use of condoms to fight HIV/AIDS. A well known voice of reason in Australian life, Brennan's latest book is not about his views on these issues. Rather these rich controversies serve as case studies in his meditation on how church, state, and courts should responsibly interact.

As a politically active lawyer and priest, Brennan sits in the middle of these three different worlds and he is trying to find rules that should guide their relationships. While the book doesn't really come up with a set of strict guidelines, it does stress the importance of respect, and above all respect by political and religious leaders for the conscience of the individual.

Most refreshing is Brennan's authoritative moral questioning of the moral authority of leaders. In *Acting on Conscience*, Popes, Bishops, Prime Ministers and Presidents all come in for strong criticism. Rather than tow the church's absurd line opposing the use of condoms to fight AIDS, Brennan dismisses Rome's policies as "incoherent Vatican announcements". John Howard's policies on asylum seekers and detention centres are said to be "driven by fear" and trample the rights of minorities. After exposing the extreme nature of public

comments on abortion by senior US bishops, Brennan says they had “publicly disgraced themselves”.

The son of a high court judge, the young Brennan studied law and politics at the University of Queensland at a time when Joh-Bjelke Petersen’s police force was bashing students over the head for democratic dissent. The year Gough Whitlam was sacked as Prime Minister, Frank Brennan entered the Jesuit Order of the Catholic Church, going on to play important roles in the evolving debates about aboriginal rights to land and the way our barbed-wire detention centres were run. In recent years he won accolades for work with refugees in East Timor.

One key premise of *Acting on Conscience* is that since September 11, 2001, and the subsequent explosion of debate about radical Islam, it is impossible to deny the role of religion in the public domain, even in very secular societies like Australia. Constant media stories about Islamic Australia, and the political influence of Sheiks and Muftis seems to confirm Brennan’s point. “Religion once again has a place at the table of public discussion on law and policy,” he argues, adding the critical caveat that religion’s role must be circumscribed.

Brennan is most passionate when he argues the wrongness of ill-informed religious leaders dictating their political views to their followers. Instead the book argues the case for the primacy of an “informed conscience”. Summing up his thesis he writes: “It is catastrophic when the individual’s freedom of conscience is violated by a religious authority acting in the public forum beyond its competence.”

If there is a flaw in the book’s approach it is a defensiveness about the role religion has to play. A recurrent message is that for too long religious views have been marginalized in Australia by small ‘l’ liberals, or intolerant atheists, and that now religion once again has the place it deserves in the public debate. Ironically it is Brennan who brilliantly exposes the often unhealthy nature of religion’s role in public debates about issues including abortion, HIV/AIDs and homosexuality.

The book’s biggest flaw is the writing. It is poorly organised and meandering, rather than being a well-structured essay. One gets the feeling that this busy priest has too many things on his “to do” list to spend too much time polishing his written words. And given the social value of many of the things this man does, that’s probably a very good thing.