

## Book Review

### *Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World*

*Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World*. By Greg Sheridan. Allen & Unwin Australia, 2021. Pp. 384. ISBN: 1760879096

Review by Katie Murray\*

*Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World* continues Greg Sheridan's examination of Christianity following on from his earlier work, *God is Good for You*.<sup>1</sup> Familiar to many Australian readers as the foreign editor of *The Australian*, Sheridan brings his engaging and relatable writing style to such topics as the historicity of the Gospels, key figures in the Bible, and the impact of Christianity on society — including explorations of popular culture and contemporary expressions of faith. Of particular interest to many readers will be Sheridan's views on the intersection of politics, political leadership, and faith commitments.

The book includes interviews with practising Christians from a range of backgrounds, denominations and political persuasions, including Gemma Sisia (founder of the School of St Jude in Africa), multiple pastors and archbishops, a Hollywood film producer, Chinese Christians whose identities could not be disclosed, and even a former Prime Minister of Australia. The breadth and diversity of their stories, recounted in the second half of the book, add both interest and realism. Indeed, even those who are not interested in the theme of the book itself may nevertheless find themselves enthralled by the window that Sheridan opens into the motivations, challenges and occasional flaws of those he interviewed. The intensely personal memories and insights with which Sheridan has been entrusted are a key feature of the book.

The concept of Christian universalism is referred to a number of times throughout the book. This is the belief that '[e]very human being is created by God and participates in the saved and glorified human dignity of Christ's new creation',<sup>2</sup> best reflected, Sheridan says, in the statement by St Paul in Galatians 3:28 : 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'<sup>3</sup>

Although Christianity was not a political force and did not seek to revolutionise society through 'military policy',<sup>4</sup> 'political overthrow',<sup>5</sup> or 'civic disobedience',<sup>6</sup> Sheridan argues that the concept of universalism led to significant social and later political changes in ancient society, including in the abolition of existing social hierarchies and the treatment of women, and in this way 'Christianity was extraordinarily liberating'.<sup>7</sup> Universalism is also a concept, Sheridan

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Sheridan, *God is Good for You: A Defence of Christianity in Troubled Times* (Allen & Unwin Australia, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Greg Sheridan, *Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World* (Allen & Unwin Australia, 2021) 166.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 162.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* 150.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 164.

suggests, that contributed to Christianity's appeal and consequent spread throughout the world, and which continues to make a significant contribution to society today.

In his examination of the intersection between Christianity and politics, Sheridan proposes that Christian universalism places natural limits on political extremism, asserting, for example, that '[n]o Christian can ever have an excuse in any circumstance for racism',<sup>8</sup> and that movements such as Nazism and Communism would conflict with Christian universalism by disregarding human dignity and equality.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this however, Sheridan contends: 'Moderate politics of centre left or centre right are not adjudicated on by Christianity. It is possible for faithful Christians to vote Conservative or Labour in Britain, Republican or Democrat in the US, and Liberal/National or Labour in Australia.'<sup>10</sup>

Rather, Sheridan says that 'Christianity gives you clear principles but not specific policies'<sup>11</sup> and that there might be a range of conflicting but legitimate views on how to give effect to these. For example, Sheridan argues that, whilst Christianity might advocate assistance for the poor, weak and powerless, there might be diverse approaches to doing so, and:

How they do that is up to individuals and organisations, proceeding from goodwill. It is perfectly legitimate to think you can help the poor by giving trade unions more power to protect the low paid. Alternatively, it is equally legitimate to think you can help the poor best by deregulating the labour market, which might involve reducing union power, so that more jobs are created and fewer people are unemployed and thereby poor.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst, elsewhere, Sheridan suggests that '[h]aving met many remarkable Christians, I've found that there is no one, set way that Christian faith expresses itself'<sup>13</sup>— he is clear that in politics at least, faith may inspire and motivate, but should not seek to dominate or exclude. That is, as Sheridan argues '[i]t's legitimate for a politician to think: these policies are the best way I can give effect to my Christian principles; it's entirely wrong, except in extreme cases, for them to say, only this policy is a Christian policy, or, if you don't follow my policy, you're breaching Christian teachings'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Sheridan reflects, it is 'about right'<sup>15</sup> for politicians to be authentic and honest about their beliefs, but to be mindful that they are the political representatives 'for all Australians, for Australians of all faiths and none',<sup>16</sup> thus giving expression to the key characteristics of Christian universalism.

Looking forward, Sheridan considers Christian belief in the context of contemporary China, examining the history and treatment of religious belief in that country, and suggesting that it is again Christian universalism that may present the greatest challenge to totalitarianism, having, as it does, 'the potential to appeal to tens of millions, indeed hundreds of millions, of mainstream Chinese, ethnic Chinese, all across the nation'.<sup>17</sup> Whilst acknowledging the capacity for conflict, Sheridan also proposes that the purpose of Christianity in China is not to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 166.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 241.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 179.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 241.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 214.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 241.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 242.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 286.

effect political reform but rather individual faith, and that its emphasis on care for the poor and weak may also provide scope for Chinese Christians to ‘help the government with charitable works, care for the aged and the otherwise marginalised ...’<sup>18</sup>

Overall, Sheridan’s views about the intersection between Christianity and contemporary politics may be compared to the juxtaposition between the contemporary worship style he observed in the course of interviews he conducted at London’s Holy Trinity Brompton (an Anglican ‘megachurch’) <sup>19</sup> and the ancient Tridentine Mass celebrated (in Latin) by its Catholic neighbour, the Brompton Oratory. That is, although the two might seem ‘poles apart ... the two churches strike me as not much different at all on the things that really matter’.<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of Christian universalism, it is the principles of human equality and dignity that matter, however diverse their expression.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid 300.

<sup>19</sup> Applying the description adopted by Sarah Dunlop in ‘Anglican Megachurches: Transforming society one person at a time’ (Undated) <<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/theology/research/2-Dunlop-Transforming-Society.pdf>>

<sup>20</sup> Sheridan (n 2) 325.