



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR  
**CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE**

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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **Home: between here and there**

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*Eremos Magazine*

Autumn 2016

## ***Home: Between here and there***

For two weeks during the season of Lent this year the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra (ACC&C) had the privilege of hosting a remarkable exhibition of art by eight artists seeking asylum in Australia. The exhibition, *Home: between here and there*, captured the sense of disruption in a transitional space experienced by people seeking asylum in Australia. Some of the art work at first sight looked like a normal scene but as you looked more closely you noticed disruptive elements – a rug not properly laid; an abstract with texts inserted from a far away land. Some works depicted solitary figures in prison, behind bars looking out to a world beyond full of promise. One work depicted the stitched mouths of refugees with bandaged heads. The art spoke of the alienation, despair and yearning that asylum seekers experienced after years of community detention not knowing from day to day what their fate might be.

Their art gave voice to those without voice – those asylum seekers arriving on our shores seeking a new home. But because of our present draconian policies they are not even accorded the basic rights of refuge under the United Nations Charter for Refugees.

The exhibition was organised by Settlement Services International (SSI) as part of its Arts and Culture program. Six young artists from Iran and Iraq attended the opening of the exhibition and shared their stories with the 100 or so present. The contemporary Chapel of the Centre proved a brilliant art space. The popularity with the general public at the official opening and over the two weeks the art was on display showed that it struck a chord. Such art embodies wisdom for our troubled times; it is challenging; it is a wisdom that has a density and power about it; it confronts, disturbs and calls us to imagine a new and better world where the common good rather than self-interest is the supreme value. We trust that it is the first of many such exhibitions to be hosted by the Centre.

## ***Wisdom for the common good***

The twenty-first century is a period of profound transition. Our times are variously described as turbulent, uncertain, changing, exciting, dangerous and comfortable. Of course responses depend on who we are, where we live in the globe and what resources we have. Today, more than ever, we need fresh wisdom. There are so many ethical and moral dilemmas that confront, challenge and confuse us: euthanasia, same-sex marriage, asylum seekers, corporate tax avoidance; corruptions of many kinds; indigenous reconciliation; child abuse; drugs; state sponsored terrorism and domestic violence. We have information overload; we have made so many advances in knowledge and technology to take us to other planets. But what about wisdom for life on this planet; what about

moral vision and courage born of wisdom; where is that to be found?

'Wisdom for the Common Good' might embody the vision of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, which came into being through a unique partnership between the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn and Charles Sturt University, and which is located at the heart of the nation's capital on the edge of the Parliamentary Triangle. But how is that wisdom to be defined?

The Centre aspires to be the *go-to-place* for the interface between Christianity, Australian society/culture and Indigenous people. It recognises that the search for wisdom requires a new dialogue between people, cultures, disciplines of thought, contemplatives and activists, of all shades of political persuasion. So the Centre hosts new conversations that arise out of the imperatives of the gospel of Jesus (a gospel of hope, justice, peace and community). In a time of considerable uncertainty and with many challenges facing Australia and its neighbours, the Centre is working to reconnect people and institutions, restore broken lines of communication, and offer hospitality and encouragement for a renewed vision for the common good. In a time of great challenges for our country, when people's spiritual hunger remains unabated the Christian faith offers a way of life and meaning that builds hope and community.

At heart, the vision for the Centre is ecumenical and distinctively Australian; 'a single house that embraces the great diversity which is and always has been, the Christian faith'. From this place we seek a fresh engagement of faith with culture so imaginatively stated many years before by a former Anglican Bishop of the Diocese, Ernest Burgmann: 'I want the great things of abiding value ... thoroughly baptized into the Australian scene, blown through by Australian winds, and even coated now and then with Australian dust'.

### ***Four pillars of wisdom***

The Centre engages with society through events, programs and public intellectual discussion through four pillars of wisdom. Briefly these pillars are as follows:

#### 1. *Peace through new religious engagements*

These days it is said that to be religious is to be inter-religious. Many of us are concerned with the rise of violent extremism and the way this is often bolted onto a religious ideology, and we recognise the need to counteract fear and negativity in society. This pillar, therefore, focuses on religious engagement, dialogue and reconciliation that are vital tasks at this time in Australia. From deep roots in Christian faith and an ecumenical vision the Centre focuses on inter-religious dialogue and joint action, particularly the relationship between the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Over the last few years, the Centre has embarked upon a major dialogue between Christianity and Islam. In 2015 a national dialogue between a leading Indonesian Muslim public intellectual and the recent former Executive Director of the Centre, the Rev'd Professor James Haire AC, took place in five capital cities and a large regional city over two weeks. Over a 1000 people attended the dialogues.

Australia's relationship to its near neighbour, Indonesia seems particularly important, not only for obvious economic and trade reasons, but because Indonesia – the fourth largest population in the world after China, India and the USA – is the largest Muslim population in the globe. Indonesia has more Christians than Australia has people.

## 2. *Wisdom* for Civil Society

This pillar concerns issues to do with social ethics in Australia. It focuses on the liberal democratic tradition and its undergirding values. Given the increasing pluralistic nature of our society, the emerging tension between secular and post secular accounts of Australia, and the significant issues before us, what we need more than anything is a fresh wisdom for the cultivation of civil society. The Centre's work is to foster a wisdom that is intellectually robust, relevant to civil society and practical in application. In short a wisdom that 'stands at the crossroads' of life (Proverbs 8).

What issues confront us at the crossroads of our public life? One matter that requires a new national dialogue is Indigenous reconciliation. There are members of our current Board who have had a long involvement with indigenous Australians. I think of our previous Bishop, George Browning and the Deputy Chair of our Board, Lt Col John Sanderson (former Governor of WA). How we as Australians enter into this dialogue is a litmus test of our values and aspirations as a country. The reason is simple: how we regard and treat the least of those in terms of power and wealth; those without; those whose history has been one of diminishment and impoverishment and oppression; how we enter into relation with such people is a litmus test of our character as a people.

This dialogue overflows into other related issues. And there are many hot button issues that fall under the pillar of civil society: asylum seekers and refugees; climate change and environmental matters; welfare and inequality; the place and status of children; freedom of religion; aid and development; ageing and pastoral care; leadership and ethics; security and peace. The Centre is well placed to host, initiate, promote and contribute to discussion on such matters in Australian public life. A bi-annual *Religious Book Prize* is soon to be launched.

## 3. *Creativity* through the Arts, Sciences and Culture

This pillar recognizes the importance of creativity and imagination in human life and society. Over

the years the Centre has promoted these themes through music, religious poetry and drama and liturgical experimentation. The exhibition of asylum seekers' art discussed at the beginning of this article is a recent example. In November a new exhibition will be displayed, and next year a contemporary Stations of the Cross will be installed in Lent. We also hope to exhibit the *Touring Blake Prize*, Australia's premier religious art prize. The well-known Australian artist, Euan Macleod has donated one of his works to the Centre. The Centre launched a national *Religious Short Film Prize* last year.

Recognising the importance of the arts in the search for wisdom, the Centre has recently engaged an *Associate Director Liturgy, the Arts and Spiritual Care* (Rev'd Susanna Pain) to assist in developing these programs. The sciences are also a rich source of human creativity and operate at the cutting edge of new knowledge. Scholars associated with the Centre have for many years been part of international dialogues exploring the relationship between the sciences and theology.

#### 4. *Resilience* in institutional life and ethical leadership

This pillar draws attention to the need for ethical leadership in the Churches and society. But the focus is broader and concerns the wellbeing of institutions in which leadership takes place. Building resilience in personal life, in institutions and leadership is vital in times of transition and stress. This pillar will be the avenue for the development of leadership programs from a Christian perspective. These programs will target church, political and industry leaders and emerging leaders among the young.

#### **Conclusion**

The Four Pillars provide a strong basis for the development of the programs of the Centre for the future. The pillars give purpose to the work of the Centre and importantly offer a way through which an intentional public theology can take shape and help to make a difference to the quality of the Church's engagement and witness in contemporary Australia. We are, therefore, actively developing a cohort of Centre Scholars who can contribute to the public intellectual life of the nation on matters pertaining to the Four Pillars. Our hope is that Australia will one day be a home of hospitality and friendship with God and one another whatever our creed, colour, race or language. Perhaps, in the meantime, our role is to provide a sort of 'Home between here and there' where those seeking such a space can meet.