



Greg Sheridan's faith moves mountains, but perhaps confession should be his next stop

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At the end of the week when the Taliban rode into Kabul, shattering the neocon dream of a revived self-confident West, there is surely something grimly funny about the publication of a book by Greg Sheridan on the need for the world to be more Christian.

This is a man who spent years in the early 2000s spruiking for one war after the next, fizzing on being in “the new Rome” of Washington DC, telling Christian war opponents to “keep taking the tablets!”

After two decades of delusion and failure, do we need to hear from him at all?

Well, yes, partly because it is an able enough account of what a certain type of Christianity feels like from the inside, and makes an argument about what the faith is. But principally, surely, as symptom. What sort of conception of Western culture and supremacy of message powered the now defunct project? And by what mechanism does it manage to keep the central message of its beliefs separate from its actions and desires? It is, as they say, a surpassing mystery.

Sheridan promises to “introduce us to Jesus and his first friends”, but he doesn't spend too long on that, and it's revealing how he does it. An account of the gospels' crucifixion scenes ably enough bodies forth the terror and beauty of the alleged moment — though not as well as the gospels themselves, as Sheridan himself notes. Wouldn't more excerpting have been the go, or couldn't he secure the rights? Jesus' cry on the cross is usually these days taken as an expression of the fully human, bereft of God; this in turn is taken as an image of faith, its necessary leap over despair. For Sheridan: “Almost, almost, almost Jesus feels despair ... but to be tempted is not the same as succumbing ...” It's an odd sort of swerve, a sort of foreclosure of any troubling the scene might cause.

That's the strategy of the book over and over. The next chapter is devoted to the historicity of the gospels, Sheridan plumping for the earliest possible dates for all, which allows him to present them as eyewitness accounts. The textual scholarship of two centuries which show the composite nature of such texts, he dismisses, except when it suits his purpose as establishing authorship.

There are some bizarre analogies — Bob Carr being celebrated as “king of sport” in the year 2425? Whut? — intended I think as modern parables, which certainly emphasises the skill of Jesus. Sheridan accepts, grumpily, that history can’t tell us Jesus was God, but his version of historical scholarship is that they count as four eyewitness-based accounts (not, as most now believe, drawing from common sources, interweaving older scriptures).

The crucifixion account has a heartfelt feel, from the inside of a certain sort of faith, but we don’t get much more of the gospels, curiously. Instead we go to Christians today — some nice people, doing good works, some of whom believe that God has not only steered their way but, for example, helped them win a showjumping competition. That’s very Sheridan too, the notion of God as life coach, giving your existence purpose in enacting His will.

There’s a good chapter on Paul, though too attracted to his politicking, and the chapter on Mary is genuinely moving as a picture of a certain type of piety — if you can suspend disbelief in the quasi-polytheism of Roman Catholicism.

Then decline sets in. An interview with Prime Minister Scott Morrison reads like a Pete and Dud script, with Morrison saying, on being berated for anti-Christian acts by his government: “I said, you can’t judge my relationship with God. There’s a lot of prejudice and ignorance. It’s like going surfing or going to the football. The fact that I go for the Sharks doesn’t affect how I put the budget together.”

I don’t hold a hose, mate. Sheridan, not for the first time, simply denies the bleeding obvious:

Morrison is assuredly not equating Christianity with supporting a particular football team.

He knows not what he does. As we have discovered.

But why such a turnaway from the gospels? Well, once the spectacular bits are gone, the rest of it is more reproving. Consider the question of rich and poor, well:

[Jesus] disliked hypocrisy from the privileged ... but if the rich, the powerful and the respectable came to Jesus with good hearts and honest intentions they were welcome like everyone else.

This is Sheridaning at his best, utter self-delusion captured live. The rich were accepted as long as they stopped being rich. “Sell all thou hast and give it to the poor.” Mark 10.21; Matthew 19.21; Luke 18.22. Unequivocal. And inconvenient.

Sermon on the Mount? No mention. You don’t meet a lot of the meek at cocktail do’s with the Cato Institute. And the single most beautiful sentiment of the gospels is missed entirely:

For I was an hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in ... And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:35-40, abridged.)

Why? Well the interview with ScoMo is key. Matthew 25:35-40 is the essence of Christianity as practice because it makes clear that God only moves in you, when you respond to the absolute demand. Feed not your tribe, but everyone. Visit not your kin, but everyone. Welcome.... and so on. This is the radical force in the faith. And of course it shames and exposes ScoMo — and all right-wing Christianising politics — utterly, shows the self-satisfied complacency up for what it is.

Can an atheism of seriousness have a dialogue with theism? Most assuredly, even with those who believe in the active presence of something called God in human affairs. But with a believer in the literal and unique divinity of Jesus? No, these are just-so stories (one has a don't ask-don't tell policy on this with Catholic friends). Who would disturb such faith in the poor and backward? Who would not, of the powerful, who use it as an alibi to enact a will-to-power that is satanic in its energies?

I've tried to be as generous as possible here, but if Sheridan's faith was of a real depth and ground, he wouldn't have needed the black mass he helped plunge the Middle East into by his relentless cheerleading.

He has used the spectacular metaphysics of Roman Catholicism to shield him from the demands of its moral lessons. If he wants to write something that will draw people to Christianity, a long and searching confession about the evil he was some part of would be an excellent start.