

# CARDINAL GEORGE PELL: MAN OF THE WEST

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Sometime in the early 2000s, I was sitting in the office of Cardinal George Pell in Sydney. I don't recall precisely the topic that we were discussing. With Cardinal Pell, it could range from some obscure point of economic history to the internal factional machinations of the Australian Labor Party or the state of the European Union. I do remember, however, looking at the wall towards the end of the conversation and seeing a small portrait of an 18th century man that I vaguely recognized.

“Is that Edmund Burke?” I asked the Cardinal. “Indeed, it is,” came the characteristically booming reply from the other side of the room.

For Edmund Burke, widely regarded as the founder of modern Anglo-American conservatism, to be on the wall of a Catholic cardinal's office, I'd suggest, is unusual. In one [article](#), however, Pell describes Burke “as the great Irish statesman of the eighteenth century.” Pell's understanding of the content of that statesmanship, I'd suggest, tells us a great deal about how the recently deceased cardinal thought about questions of politics and culture.

It's certainly true that Pell happily identified as a conservative. But his conservatism was of a particular type. In the first place, it wasn't party-political at all. Pell was always clear,

for example, that there was a wide scope for political disagreement among Catholics on most issues. Indeed, he said many times that it was important for practicing Catholics to be present in the main center-right and center-left parties in Australia.

Pell also held eclectic views on many policy issues. On several occasions, for instance, he stated that the market-liberalization reforms that Australia underwent in the 1980s and 1990s had been necessary and generally beneficial for the country.

That put Pell at odds with those clerics who imagined that the only economic position worthy of a Christian was some version of social democracy. But it was also a point of difference between Pell and his friend, B.A. “Bob” Santamaria, the most influential 20th century Australian Catholic conservative. The latter retained much of the hostility towards capitalism that characterized many Catholic intellectuals who experienced the Great Depression. At the same time, Pell thought it was important to have strong trade unions in modern capitalist economies. That was a topic that we occasionally argued about, including in one of our last conversations.

On social issues, Pell’s positions fell squarely into the socially conservative category. But this had less to do with Pell being a conservative *per se* than the fact that he was a Catholic bishop fulfilling his responsibility to uphold and preach orthodox Catholic teaching on such matters.

A better insight into Pell’s conservatism, I’d argue, emerges from recognizing that he was interested in some of the questions that came to preoccupy Burke.

Like Burke, Pell’s political opinions were not of the reactionary kind. Burke was after all a Whig and didn’t regard everything associated with the various Enlightenments as the spawn of Satan. On many political and economic issues, Burke’s views were those of Adam Smith and David Hume, even if Burke, a devout Christian, lamented the latter’s religious skepticism.

In a similar vein, Pell was conscious of the complexities associated with the Enlightenment period. In one essay, he pointed out that the Scottish Enlightenment could not be so easily segmented out from the theological disputes that characterized the Church of Scotland at the time. More generally, Pell saw modernity as something here to stay. He wasn't in the habit of expressing nostalgia for pre-modern political, social, and economic arrangements, and found it difficult to take Catholic integralism seriously.

More broadly, Pell's conservatism was focused on issues of philosophical, historical, and cultural import to Western civilization and the threats to it. This comes out in Pell's reflections on the significance of 1968.

In the first volume of his *Prison Journal*, Pell observed that the 1960s' cultural upheavals had reconfigured the Western Left insofar as it led to the triumph of those fixated upon lifestyle questions over old-style social democrats who tended to focus on economic issues. The effects of this shift, Pell argued, seeped over into wider society after 1968 and helped facilitate attitudinal changes which undermined long-standing assumptions that Western culture had drawn from Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian sources.

Though Sir Roger Scruton's religious views were less definitive than Pell's, there were clear parallels in their understanding of these trends. For both men, 1968 was one of those defining moments in Western culture in a manner analogous to Burke's understanding of the French Revolution's significance. At some point, everyone had to choose where he stood vis-à-vis the ideas and movements associated with 1968, and both Scruton and Pell knew precisely where they stood.

Another major focus of Pell's civilizational conservatism concerned a debate that has divided Western thinkers going back to antiquity, but which made its way into the Catholic Church in the lead-up to and in the aftermath of Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

This dispute concerned whether there are in fact acts which are intrinsically evil and therefore ought never be done. In other words: are there moral absolutes which forbid

people from ever making certain choices? Or: is morality largely about intention, circumstances, and “lived experiences,” and therefore essentially subjective and relative?

In 1993, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth). The very title threw down a gauntlet to Western societies in which moral relativism seemed to be gaining traction. Major newspapers covered *Veritatis Splendor*’s release and opened their pages to the encyclical’s supporters and critics, with Catholics and non-Catholics found on both sides.

The fact that this division didn’t break down along “Catholics-versus-everyone-else” lines was revealing. First, it underscored that some Catholic theologians had effectively rejected something which the Catholic Church has taught unambiguously from its beginning: that certain acts are intrinsically evil (*intrinsece malum*) and never to be chosen. Second, it became apparent that many non-Catholics understood how denying such moral absolutes struck at the roots of any society which aspires to be civilized.

No-one was surprised that Pell, then an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne, was among the encyclical’s most vocal defenders. But Pell’s concern wasn’t just for the integrity of Catholic doctrine. It was also about combatting an on-going drift towards utilitarianism as the default ethical position in Western societies—especially in the Anglo-American world, as personified by Pell’s fellow Australian, the philosopher Peter Singer. For Pell, the moment a society moved away from some degree of commitment to moral absolutes of the type affirmed in the Second Tablet of the Decalogue, but also knowable through natural reason, nothing was unthinkable.

*Veritatis Splendor* stressed that this debate had significance for issues that went beyond sexual morality and bioethical questions. It had implications, the encyclical maintained, for the workings of democracy. Moral absolutes, for instance, put limits on the will of majorities and thus inhibit democracies from collapsing into majoritarianism.

Even more fundamentally, moral absolutes are indispensable for the maintenance of the

rule of law. The very idea of rule of law depends upon a non-negotiable commitment to due process and non-arbitrary behavior. But if everything is basically relative, the administration of justice quickly collapses into whatever the powerful and influential want it to be.

Pell himself experienced the sharp end of a legal system in which the demands of rule of law were seriously fudged in order to realize a particular goal: that goal being, “Get Pell.” Some politicians, people in the legal system, and police officers in the state of Victoria in Australia decided that the end (in this case, an unjust objective) justified the deployment of unjust means. But such things happen when moral absolutes against violating principles of natural justice are cast aside.

The same concern, I suspect, shaped the argument—expressed in the now famed [Demos memorandum](#) which, at a minimum, reflects Pell’s distinct language and some of his known concerns about the trajectory of Pope Francis’s pontificate—that “The lack of respect for the law in the Vatican risks becoming an international scandal.”

The Demos memorandum lists specific and hard-to-deny violations of basic principles of natural justice within the Holy See since 2013. “Everyone,” the memorandum states, “has a right to due process.” That, it added, had been denied in several cases—including to senior Vatican officials who Pell plainly regarded as corrupt, but who he also believed were owed due process of law as a matter of justice. To that extent, Pell believed that lawlessness had come to characterize what I increasingly regard as “Buenos Aires-on-the-Tiber,” and lawlessness is the natural result of violating moral absolutes.

These were the type of questions around which Pell’s brand of conservatism revolved. Though he followed everyday politics closely, this was not where Pell thought the main action lay. Like Burke—and John Paul II and Benedict XVI, for that matter—Pell’s political interests gravitated towards discerning which currents of ideas would exercise the most influence on the culture of the West. Some ideas, he believed, would magnify the achievements of that civilization—freedom from unjust coercion, rule of law, constitutionalism, the architecture of Renaissance Florence, the plays of Shakespeare, the

writings of Aristotle and Aquinas, and so forth. However, other ideas—Marxism, fascism, and now ‘wokeism’ (a particular target of Pell’s in more recent years)— would undermine that civilization and thus merited strong resistance.

By no means did Pell think that Western culture was static. His civilizational conservatism was not of the frozen variety. Pell did, however, think that it was possible to distinguish developments consistent with the primary threads of that culture, from those changes that were not. It is not hard to see the analogy with another cardinal from the English-speaking world, John Henry Newman, with his understanding of how we distinguish authentic developments of doctrine from doctrinal corruption.

In what turned out to be his last public homily, delivered three days before he died on January 10, 2023, Cardinal Pell referred to the “heritage of Wojtyla and Ratzinger.” In addition to being courageous teachers of the Catholic faith, they were, Pell said, also “Europeans, examples of men with profound knowledge of the high culture of the Western world.”

Preserving and promoting that culture and the goods which it embodies was the essence of Pell’s conservatism: one that, like Edmund Burke’s ideas, transcended the particularities of the moment. Such a conservatism is not focused on winning elections or developing policies, as important as such things are. It is, however, a conservatism that seeks to sustain and deepen our understanding of those goods which make human life truer to what it is meant to be.

In that sense, Pell’s conservatism was one that extended far beyond Catholicism’s boundaries. It was in fact open to anyone—believer and non-believer alike—who understood that respect for the truth is the surest guarantee of our liberty. Civilizational conservatism of the type championed by George Pell thus turns out to be decidedly ecumenical and non-sectarian in nature. If only more conservatives understood that today.