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**Inaugural
Ethos
keynote**

**Identity
Crisis**

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AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY



Chris Uhlmann on Identity Crisis

The launch of Ethos: Public Ethics and the Future of Australia

Canberra, 9 December 2021

Tonight marks the beginning of a series of conversations the Australian Catholic University will hold called Ethos. They will discuss what sort of society we want Australia to be, the values we need to share to sustain it, and what we need to do to make it a reality.

I would like to begin by raising a series of questions.

WHO ARE WE? WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

We are constantly celebrating our differences, but what values unite us? What would we be prepared to fight for? And if there is nothing, how can we stand in the winds that are blowing about us?

I believe that the story of modern Australia, and much of the Western world, is a story of faith, or more importantly, a loss of it.

One of our greatest historians, Professor Manning Clark, identified it over 40 years ago in a speech called “The Quest for an Australian Identity”. In it he said:

With Australia there was no declaration of independence, no statement of what Australia stood for, let alone what it was ...

“All the great mythologies of the world stem from a body of belief about either the nature of God or gods, and the nature of man ... recent quests for identity in Australia coincided with the great decline in faith both in God’s world, and in the capacity of man to achieve perfection here on earth.”

When this speech was given, I was in my first year on my own quest for identity studying to be a priest at the Marist Fathers’ seminary in the western suburbs of Sydney at Toongabbie. It was there that it struck me that a prophet was not someone who could see the future. It was someone who saw the present with perfect clarity.

Someone who could read the signs of the times.

Manning Clark was a prophet. He marked the loss of faith in the West and what that meant in the elusive hunt for an Australian identity.

We are no closer to answering that question today. In fact we are further along the path of what Manning Clark dubbed “the kingdom of nothingness”.

And it is important that we work out what Australia stands for and what we need to defend because the world is rapidly changing.

We live in an age of dictators: Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Donald Trump would like to join their ranks and may yet rise again.

These despots are intent on bending the world to their will, and smaller nations need to have a clear sense of their own purpose if they are to remain free. And if that sense of purpose is to endure, it needs to have broad public support.

The need for Australia to define what it is and what it stands for has never been more pressing. And, I fear, never further from our grasp.

Because the real problem lies not without but within. It lies in the relentless assault on the Western liberal democratic tradition by people who style themselves as progressives. All change is not progress.

We have been on this journey to nothingness for a long time.

One of the markers was laid down 136 years ago by the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, when he declared the death of God in a short parable called “The Madman.”

THE MADMAN

“Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? ... Thus they yelled and laughed.

“The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. We have *killed* him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?’”

Nietzsche was famous for his atheism, but as a young seminarian I admired him for his brutal honesty.

He knew what the death of God meant.



To take God from the West is to erase the ground of our being. All our laws rest on the assumption of a God. Remove God and everything is up for grabs.

The beauty of a divine law is that it lies beyond the reach of humanity. It's a sacred constitution that cannot be debated or changed.

Kill God and there is no reason not to kill others ... to lie ... to steal ... to bear false witness.

The people in the marketplace did not believe in God but had not thought about what that meant. They lived as if there was still an agreed order to the world.

Nietzsche knew that what that meant was that they would have to start from scratch and find a new foundation on which to build society, and that was a terrifying idea.

He also saw that they did not understand him.

"I have come too early," the madman said. "My time is not yet."

That time has come for us. Over more than a century the natural consequence of the loss of faith is upon us. It has eroded all the institutions of the West, the church, parliament, and the law.

Now there are those who proclaim that the Western democratic tradition is an irredeemably racist project that has done untold damage to everyone who is not a straight white male.

As with all these things there is some truth in that. The original sin of colonisation is dispossession. We have yet to atone for the physical and spiritual damage that we did, and are still doing, to the first Australians.

In the summer of 1981, I travelled to Wilcannia which is a dot on a map where the Barrier Highway meets the Darling River. It's about 200 kilometres from Broken Hill, and there I met the remnant of the Barkindji people.

The thing that struck me then as terrifying was that they had forgotten their language, and that's a spiritual dispossession, that is not something that you can heal easily.

They lived in a limbo between the world they used to once describe with their own language, and ours, and were at home nowhere.

How do you fix that? That great crime where we took a sponge and wiped away their horizon, that will take generations to heal, if ever. Now I do not know the answer to that question, but it isn't in erasing our own tradition.

That is a great crime and healing it is the work of generations. But is it a cause to abandon everything that is good about our tradition?

And if we did? Then what?

The false prophets of the death of the Western liberal democratic tradition offer us a wasteland and call it progress.

Because for all the failures, the genius of our tradition is in its foundation of freedom and reason. Liberty allows us the chance of change and of redemption.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal”, the great shadow over what he said was that some in his nation were slaves. Jefferson himself was a slave owner.

And for that his statue has recently been removed from the New York City Council Chamber. Erased from polite society for failing a test set by a distant generation.

But what those who are offended by him fail to grasp is that he is the father of their enlightenment.

The truth of Jefferson’s words – that all men were equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights – demanded that one day the slave would be free.

Less than a century later that reckoning would come with the Civil War. And no one better articulated the stain of slavery or the price that would be exacted to scrub it from the nation than Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address:

“Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”

Both Jefferson and Lincoln appeal to their faith when they define the values of their nation.

Theirs is a God of justice and a God of reason.

As a poor student of Greek in the seminary, I was struck by the title of tonight’s lecture series.

Ethos is one of the modes of persuasion in the Greek rhetorical tradition.

Ethos is an appeal to character or to authority.

Pathos convinces by appealing to our emotions.

And Logos is an appeal to reason.

Like so many words in Greek and in English, Logos has more than one meaning. It also means “word”.

And it echoes loudly from the pages of the New Testament, which of course was written in Greek. It famously begins the Gospel of John which itself is an echo of the first sentence of Genesis.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος

“In the beginning was the word [logos]. And the word was with God. And the word was God.”

In the Christian tradition God is reason itself. Christianity is the marriage of Greek reason with the Jewish faith. It is the marriage of reason and wisdom.

This combined in a radically new way of seeing the world. Not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to the nature of God. And although Christianity is born in the East, it’s informed by the West and takes on its historically decisive character in Europe.

Europe is defined by its faith and its faith is defined by reason.

Reason drives the development of Europe which is the road to developing liberal democracy. Through all its failures and its many crimes reason is the momentum which drives its forward and demands that it learn and progress.



The church itself has sometimes stood in the path of this evolution but it could not stop it. Reason drives the Enlightenment which, inevitably, leads to the rejection by some of the very idea of God.

And our tradition is so free that if we choose, we can take the utterly irrational step of rejecting this entire history.

That would not be wise.

You don't have to believe in God to accept all that is good in the tradition we inherit. Its roots dive deep into the Jewish and Christian faiths, but its evolution is such that it now welcomes all beliefs, and unbelief.

The self-evident truth is that people of all races and faiths are drawn to it. Some are willing to put their lives at risk and make dangerous journeys to make their home in Australia, or the United States or the United Kingdom, because our tradition is a beacon to them.

Because they see the truth that some in our midst would deny. That the society our past has built is so free that here they will be able to pursue their own lives, in their own way, following their own faith, and under the protection of secular law.

Do we seriously want to abandon that heritage?

Despite the incessant attack on the past occupied by our mothers and fathers, they built a country that is one of the richest, freest, and fairest in human history. We owe much to those quaint pre-war currency lads and lasses who are now so often edited out of statements about the modern Australia.

We are so inattentive to our past that people are constantly lying to us about it.

And we are being confounded and confused and hallowed out from within precisely at a time when we are desperately in need of a clear-sighted and united approach to our future.

Because there is a clear and present danger to our way of life in the rise of China.

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

The Chinese Communist Party is seeking to control every aspect of the lives of the people it rules and to extend that control beyond its borders. It is seeking to change the world to make it a safer place for despots.

It wants to recast the rules-based international order set after the Second World War, because the rules don't suit it. And fair enough. Major powers do what they will, the rest of us do what we can.

But those institutions – the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation – have largely served us well, as has our alliance with the United States.

It is unlikely the changes the Chinese Communist Party has in mind will suit us at all.

And those siren voices who say it has no territorial ambitions should check the record.

It took Tibet.

It has occupied and militarised the South China Sea.

It intends to expand its reach in the East China Sea.

It reserves the right to take Taiwan by force, a democratic nation of 24 million that has never been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party.

It has been involved with border skirmishes with India.

But there is a more insidious battle that is already raging in the Grey Zone, with thousands of cyber attacks on our businesses, our universities, parliament, political parties, even the Bureau of Meteorology.

The Chinese Communist Party has directly interfered in our politics. In the Chinese diaspora its operatives have threatened the lives of people inside our borders and blackmailed the troublesome here by threatening the lives and liberty of their families still living in China.

Beijing also engages in hostage diplomacy and economic coercion when it doesn't get its way, and it intends to go further.

Last year two officials from the embassy handed my colleague Jonathan Kearsley a list of 14 grievances. The complaints began with Australia denying Chinese companies acquisitions on national security grounds and banning of Huawei from the 5G rollout.

The gripes included Australia's statements on the South China Sea, Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

It ended with complaints about statements made here by our MPs in Parliament and antagonistic reports by our media.

Make no mistake this is a letter of demand. Beijing expects that in the world order it is building Australia will comply or be punished.

Now there are those among us, the siren voices, urging us to give ground.

And if we step back, like every bully, China will step forward. What do you imagine will be on the next list?

We face an adversary which has a clear idea of what it is and what it wants at a time when we are internally divided.

I had hoped that a crisis like COVID-19 might unite us, but it turns out we are still a collection of colonies masquerading as a nation.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

The internal and external problems seem so large they can be overwhelming.

The only thing we can do is return to our roots.

We have to be prepared to fight in the public marketplace for the redemption of the liberal democratic tradition. We have to learn from our history, fix what is wrong and treasure what is timeless.

And given tonight this conversation is joined by a Catholic university, I speak especially to those who call themselves Christians, because you already know what to say.

Bear witness to the Truth.

You must live by the faith you proclaim. You have to be known by your deeds and your deeds must match your words.

Nothing has done more damage to the church than hypocrisy, and there has been no hypocrisy greater than the sins of the clergy and the religious on the innocents, and the bishops who covered it up. This is a soul-deep stain on the church and an abject betrayal of the faithful.

If, in the spirit of the words of Lincoln, every crime demands a decade of humiliation and repentance, who would say that the penance was anything but just?

But that was not the crime of the faithful, those millions who live by the creed preached by their priests. People like my mother, Mary.

It is people like her who live lives that are beacons to others. The example of their faith is transformative.



Among my mother's dying words were an entreaty to her children that we love one another.

She drew that from the New Testament, from the words of Christ on the two great commandments; that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And your neighbour as yourself.

Simply, that you do unto others what you would have them do to you.

Mary lived by the example of the life of Christ.

I have lapsed in my relationship with my church but still call myself Catholic in deference to my mother, and because from her I learned the power of faith.

The years I spent in a Catholic seminary gave me insights that I've carried for life.

None more so than a term spent studying the Gospel of Mark.

Mark was the first Gospel written and for a long time scholars neglected it. It did not have the majesty of the Gospel of John. The Greek was coarse, and the Christ in Mark's Gospel was a stark figure.

From the outset Mark's Jesus is on the road to the cross. His disciples don't understand the grim things he says like the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men and they will put him to death.

When Christ is captured, his disciples run away. He is crucified between two thieves. And for a Jew, crucifixion was a shameful death. There was no loin cloth; you were crucified naked and humiliated in public. There was no concept of an afterlife. To die like this was to be abandoned by God.

Christ gives voice to that: *Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani*. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

But when he dies the Gospel says the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. That veil covered the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the place where it was deemed that God dwelt. And at that moment the author has a Roman centurion – not a Jew, not a disciple – say "in truth this man was a son of God".

When he is at his most human, when he reaches the point none of us can evade – death – then Christ bridges the gap between heaven and earth with his body.

Because to be truly human is to share in the divine. Christ offers the chance for everyone to do that, by accepting their humanity.

As it says in Philippians: "He did not cling to his equality with God but humbled himself and became as men are. And being as men are, he became humbler yet, even to accepting death. Death on a cross."

This goes to the heart of the great human frustrations. That we have awareness, that we have reason and that we are not gods. It is the essence of the insight into humanity in Genesis, what was offered that you shall be as gods; something we long for, something we can never have.

This is a profound piece of wisdom because the one thing we all struggle with is our mortality, our limits. The fact that death cannot be evaded and that we wonder if this fierce now is all there is and what the purpose of it is. The Incarnation, the Logos, the Word made flesh is the great blessing of humanity, because if it was good enough for God to choose to be human, it should be

good enough for us. This is a beacon of hope and the enduring genius of humanity is our capacity to hope.

And from the example of Christ is born a revolutionary idea, that everyone, slave or free, can have a personal relationship with God. And that every individual has worth, and none is more worthy than anyone else.

The idea of the individual is born alongside the notion that the individual only thrives in a community of the faithful. And so the balance of democracy is written. A society that gives to each what they need and demands only what they can give, the individual and the common good.

These are the foundations of the tradition we inherit. Your job is to bear witness to that, to defend it. To learn from our mistakes but to redeem the best of our tradition.

It is not easy.

When I was studying Mark, I learned there was a long and short ending to that Gospel. Some scholars argue that, finding the original ending unsatisfactory, an earlier scribe wrote a longer version that stuck early in the history of the church.

The short ending fits with the stark nature of the Gospel. It says that on going to Christ's tomb the women were told that he had risen. And it says:

“And the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid ...”

Do not be afraid.

It takes courage to give voice to a truth that is so unconventional and so unfashionable and so unbelievable.

Just like it was two thousand years ago.

And maybe we are in an age when once again the faithful must gather in secret in catacombs, like this perhaps, and carve fish on a rock to send coded messages to one another. But these are powerful ideas, or they would not have survived two thousand years.

You need to give voice to your beliefs and reclaim your place at the rock on which liberal democracy was built.

And we need to continue to adapt it to confront the twenty-first century, as we did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to this constant continent.

The secret ballot was once also known world-wide as the Australian ballot.

The vote for women took root here long before it did in the United Kingdom.

We adopted preferential voting and compulsory voting.

And we have an independent electoral commission that makes elections here more trusted than almost anywhere else on earth. The recent American presidential election shows what happens when politics corrupts the electoral process.

The missing piece in our democratic journey – our settlement – is, I believe, some form of constitutional recognition for the First Nations people. This is an historic wrong which must be righted.

Whatever the future holds, it must be built on the strong bones of the past.

We might not be able to get a settlement on an Australian identity, but we need to agree on what our foundations are if we are to stand upright in a contested world.

My list would include:

- Parliamentary democracy
- The rule of secular law
- Equality of opportunity
- Free speech, because a robust democracy is what we need
- And freedom of association

Through that we should all be allowed to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in all the manners in which a free society can imagine it.

Then we can fight over everything else, as democracies do.

THE AUTHOR

Chris Uhlmann is political editor for Nine News. He began his career as a journalist with *The Canberra Times* and spent 19 years with the ABC. With the national broadcaster he co-hosted Canberra's top rating breakfast show and hosted flagship national programs like 7.30, Insiders and AM before being appointed political editor for TV, radio and online. He won a Walkley Award for broadcast interviewing in 2008 and was part of the 4 Corners team that won a Golden Quill in 2017 for its investigation into China's power and influence in Australia.

On 9 December 2021 he delivered this talk at the launch of Ethos, in conversation with Rachael Falk, CEO of the Cyber Security Cooperative Research Centre, and Professor Zlatko Skrbis, Vice-Chancellor and President of Australian Catholic University.



About Ethos

Ethos is a new series of major events focused on the big public ethics issues of the day and what they mean for the future of Australia.

Its events bring together leading thinkers and figures shaping public discussion to tackle current and emerging challenges for our life in common.

Speakers and participants are drawn from Australia and around the world, ranging across academia, politics, government, business, the media, culture, and the arts. Each event connects thought-leaders and practitioners from a wide range of fields with ACU scholars and experts to discuss the issues shaping the national conversation and some of the questions they raise for public ethics.

Ethos is an initiative of the PM Glynn Institute at Australian Catholic University. For more information, visit acu.edu.au/ethos

The PM Glynn Institute was established by Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 2016 as a public policy think tank to analyse issues of concern to the Catholic Church and the wider Australian community. Its focus is public policy for the common good.

pmg@acu.edu.au

pmglynn.acu.edu.au

Cover image: Aerial view of arid desert dry landscape and blue lake in outback Australia

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