



social policy connections

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NEWSLETTER

October 2009

Editorial by Rowan Ireland

Public Policy and Practical Mysticism

The agenda for the September meeting of the Yarra Institute Board included a preface drafted by Stephen Ames. It was designed to focus our discussions and read:

The Yarra Institute is an independent ecumenical organisation established for:

- 1. Conducting research into the implications of Christian social thinking for the formulation of public policy in Australia.*
- 2. Teaching Christian social thinking and its implications for public policy in Australia.*

Had the agenda been for an extraordinary joint meeting of Social Policy Connections and the Yarra Institute, a third point might have been added to include SPC's aims, along the lines:

Developing and advocating social policies consonant with the Gospel imperatives of social justice, equity, compassion and solidarity with the oppressed and distressed (based on a 2007 draft).

Given the different but related orientations to research and advocacy, our two organisations are ecumenically Christian in vision and inspiration, and dedicated to working in secular Australian society for public goods. From time to time it is worth reminding ourselves that we are claiming something quite extraordinary about ourselves, collectively and as individuals, in this definition. We are proclaiming ourselves practical mystics.



PUBLIC FORUM

Reflections on Pope Benedict's encyclical on Human Development, Caritas in Veritate

with

Archbishop Philip Freier,
Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne

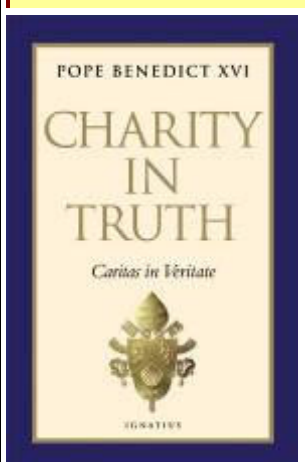
Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services

Rufus Black
Master of Ormond College

Thursday
19 November 7.30pm
Wyselaskie Auditorium
Centre for Theology and Ministry,
1 Morrison Close,
Parkville VIC

Contact: Rev Canon Dr. Stephen Ames,
stephen@jahames.com.au

Sponsored by Social Policy Connections and the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy



In the midst of our practical engagements we won't easily see ourselves as mystics, but reading Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* has persuaded me that is exactly what we are. We pursue our social policy concerns as mystics. Taylor contrasts the prevailing modern secular sense of self with the mystical. Where the secular self is 'buffered' (the self ends with my skin, so there's a tight boundary between the inside 'I' and the outside), the mystic senses the self as 'porous' (in our traditions as open to, and dependent on, the flow of God's grace).

The secular self conceives of space and time as empty, but able to be given meaning and turned to the ends of human flourishing exclusively by the exercise of scientific reasoning. The mystic self negotiates a cosmos suffused with divine purpose, which can be discovered through contemplation of revelation and experience.

Taylor draws further distinctions between the two selves, but that may be sufficient to help us locate ourselves among the mystics, even as we affirm our practical concerns and our commitments to best-practice science in pursuit of them. Accepting our identity as practical mystics, we will want to explore again its foundations in our shared Christian faith and spiritualities.

I hazard the guess that our practical mysticism is founded in a 'both-and' type of Christian spirituality. First, ours is a spirituality that is both *theocentric* and *humanist*. It involves de-centring of our individual selves in relation to God (in the manner of Galatians 2:20), an aiming beyond life as presented to us and immediately experienced. And it involves engagement in the creative quest for human flourishing in the here-and-now for ourselves and others, on the understanding that God ordains and graces human flourishing.



Photo: Istock.

Second, our spirituality both *endorses secular modernity and criticises an exclusive secularity*. On the one hand, we are committed to the freedoms gained in secular modernity, and to the application of best-practice science and technology to the flourishing of life on this planet in justice and peace. On the other hand, we are critical of that form of modernity that exalts scientific and technical reason over excluded considerations of the intrinsic value of human life, and indeed all life-forms. (The point is expanded in Stephen Ames, 'Instruments of Idolatry', *Arena Magazine* 92, December-January 2007-08: 26-29).

Third, our spirituality aims us towards *contemplative location of the present in the Reign of God already and to come, and full engagement in present social, political and economic reality*. We feel, and our spirituality cultivates, a calling to discern both the signs of God's grace at work in the world, and the injustice and violence that subverts God's Reign. The calling out is to contemplation, reflection and action, in constant interplay, such that we attempt to realise

the promise and the commission of John 14. We know that we will only discern through a glass darkly, and we are given no certain recipes for setting the world right. But we do know that, to be true to our calling, Biblically informed contemplation and action for justice and peace must go hand in hand.

Have I got all this right? Do we share the sort of both-and spirituality that I've started spelling out here? Can we all identify as practical mystics, as a reading of Charles Taylor has suggested to me that we might? I've hazarded my guesses, but finish with questions to provoke responses. Discussion of our foundational beliefs and spiritualities, including the airing of differences, will strengthen our organisations by sharpening our senses of identity and mission. And perhaps we will discover, in such discussion, more about our special contributions to national debates about social policy.

SPC's Annual General Meeting and Future Directions

25 November, 7.30pm
at the YTU Study Centre,
34 Bedford St., Box Hill

**A light supper and drinks will also be
provided.**

The AGM for Social Policy Connections is not just an opportunity for the Board to report on the events and progress made during 2009, and outline plans for the coming year. It is also a chance for members and supporters to contribute ideas and energies to develop SPC as a key vehicle for information, debate and advocacy on important social issues. Financial members of SPC will also be sent information about nominations for the Board for 2010.

Much of our work has gone into launching the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy with its excellent Board, and initiating research projects. Its new website is nearing completion and will be going live shortly.

So we now have two vehicles for engaging in public debate and development in areas of public policy. We welcome your ideas about how to make best use of them as well as your active participation where possible.

A light meal will be provided to allow people to meet and mingle, sparking further conversation about setting priorities and making the most of opportunities.