

Faith, Values, and Social Policy

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Our topic is a complex one, reflecting themes deep in our history over many hundreds of years. The issues were often contentious, dealing with the role of religious groups in society, particularly the churches, their views about human values and their relationships with civil society, governments and debates over social policy.

The cultural accommodation to these various pressures in our increasingly secular societies has been to pressure religiously inspired voices out of the public forum, and to privatise their views and activities. But many religious traditions resist this pressure, and claim a right to engage in the public forum in debates about values and social policies in general. Social Policy Connections is one such group that seeks to draw from our faith traditions' core values to enhance people's lives and to help address social issues.

SPC seeks to widen the conversation about these issues, recognising that religious or philosophical beliefs do not readily translate into detailed social programs. Much less can we simply lift texts from the Scriptures out of their original context and impose them on contemporary situations. We are not biblical fundamentalists, but seek to identify the enduring values from the Scriptures that can help us find better ways or policies to sustain or promote human wellbeing today.

This process is, of course, difficult, and requires considerable professional expertise about how to shape public policies, as well as attentive listening to the experience of people about what works best in practice. There are no easy shortcuts here.

That is why it is important to enlarge the conversation, offering platforms for people with expertise in particular areas, with a view to developing constituencies of opinion that can interact with the processes of public policy formation.

In Australia, the churches have historically led the way in founding social services, schools, hospitals and health care, and had a major influence on the shaping of other state or community organisations in these sectors. I believe there is still need for religious leaders also to engage in the reasoned public conversation, with its give and take, about social issues. As we can see, not all leaders have the skills to do so effectively. Increasingly, the voices of influence will be those of lay people, speaking out of their fields of expertise.

This is why I believe the work of groups like Social Policy Connections is very important. We can create forums, bring people together in joint effort, share experience, call on the expertise of specialists, take initiatives ourselves with political lobbying, speaking in our own name and not involving church leaders. We can develop and refine positions on key issues, and allow others access to our findings, helping form public opinion. We can encourage others to take part in this broader conversation.

Hopes for the new Millennium

Do you remember the feelings of hope and expectation at the beginning of the new millennium, just a dozen years ago? The end of the Cold War had opened up the possibilities of winding back arms spending and focusing world resources on tackling poverty and hunger. We were then talking about the Millennium Development Goals whereby all countries committed themselves to halving the extent of hunger and the most severe poverty by 2015, and then to continue the process of social uplift to 2025 to completely eradicate hunger everywhere.

The new millennium truly seemed to offer the prospect of a huge and unprecedented improvement in human wellbeing, especially for the millions of people at the bottom of the heap in the poorest countries. Pope John Paul II wrote a marvellous letter, called *At the beginning of the new millennium*, encapsulating these hopes for a renewed humanity. There seemed to be a wide consensus among most religious traditions and civil organisations that a better world was indeed possible.

But the dream was already beginning to dissolve. The Cold War had ended when the Soviet Union collapsed, but there was no instant cure for its economic and social ailments. Much of its antiquated industry collapsed, along with its income supports and social security. For the first time in modern times, an advanced country suffered rapid population decline, of half a million a year, with a sharp fall in the birth rate. Moreover, the moral culture of trust and solidarity had long been deeply corroded. The result was that many of the power brokers under the communist regime morphed into a new super-rich capitalist class, with the worst features of crony capitalism.

Nevertheless, we hoped that with more time, the discipline of the market would help the former communist countries recover in a more prosperous and democratic mode, and that their underlying religious traditions would help restore their sense of moral purpose.

Meanwhile, the Millennium offered us hope for brighter prospects from globalisation, with increased trade, rising productivity and living standards, enhanced international security and better governance. We were rudely shaken from this entrancing vision by the shock of 9/11 and the terrorist attacks on the United States, unleashing the invasion of Afghanistan and the so-called war on terror. A furious United States of America naturally responded strongly, but under the direction of neoconservative political forces that interpreted the world through a highly ideological lens. This distorted and bellicose view of the world resulted in the invasion of Iraq, an unnecessary and extremely expensive war that distracted attention from the resurgent enemy in Afghanistan, and exacerbated relations with the Muslim world in particular.

But worse was to follow, with the collapse of financial markets on Wall Street in 2007, and the resulting economic crisis which has caused millions in the USA to lose their homes and tens of millions worldwide to lose their jobs. And all this has been happening as the impact of climate change has rammed home its message that global warming is posing an increasing and massive threat to people everywhere.

Just in the last few days, the World Bank has released its report, *Turn down the heat*, warning that the world is on track to increase global temperatures by 4 degrees by 2100, or even by 2060.¹ This is an extremely alarming prospect, especially as we already face the task of increasing food production significantly for a population expected to peak at over 9 billion people in 2050. Even keeping global temperatures rising by just 2 degrees will be extremely difficult, with very demanding consequences for agriculture and the environment. But a temperature rise of 4 degrees would be frightful indeed, with intense competition for food and resources, including water. Young people today will unfortunately experience the fuller effects of climate change.

That's the bad news. And what bad news it is. But the good news is that we can still do something to avoid the most alarming outcomes, if we act quickly, and if we concentrate our minds and hearts on figuring out

¹'Degrees of devastation: major report warns of drastically hotter planet', *The Age*, 19 November 2012.

what needs to be done. To succeed, we will need to draw on the ingenuity and good will of everyone, for it will make demands on all of us, in our lifestyle, our use of resources, and in a more equitable sharing between countries, including of population movements.

Resetting our moral compass

First, we need **to expand the conversation** everywhere about what is happening to our precious little planet, and what we need to do to adjust. We need to listen carefully to what the scientists and other specialists are telling us about how our planet is changing and what is likely to happen. We need not only to become better informed, but to engage in the conversation where we can add some value.

Second, we need **to reset our moral compass**, lest we fall back into a Hobbesian world of universal conflict, with nations and groups fighting to obtain desperately needed resources. We are already suffering from the moral collapse that precipitated the financial crisis, as leading economists lament the unparalleled grab for riches in the lead-up to the GFC.

What is especially significant for me is that many of the world's leading economists blame the economic crisis on a collapse in ethical behaviour, and are calling for a renewal of values not just among financiers, but in the discipline of economics itself.

As Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank and a Nobel Prize laureate, wrote in his book *Freefall*, the power of special interests, especially of the financial markets, has shaped the economic rules to their liking, and resulted in a 'moral deficit' in the 'unrelenting pursuit of profits and the elevation of the pursuit of self-interest.'²

In his 2012 book, *The Price of Inequality*, he again highlighted the collapse of moral standards.

Something has happened to our sense of values, when the end of making more money justifies the means... Much of what has gone on can only be described by the words 'moral deprivation'. Something wrong happened to the moral compass of so many of the people working in the financial sector and elsewhere.³

Jeffrey Sachs, the coordinator of the Millennium Development Goals and now at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, wrote in *The Price of Civilization* that 'market institutions [have] run wild over politics and public values', resulting in extreme inequality, and the contagion has spread its 'corruption, corporate power, [and] environmental threats'.⁴ He called for a return to 'civic virtue... to reconnect public values and public policy'.⁵

The key question is global and urgent: how can capitalism in the twenty-first century deliver the three overarching goals sought by societies around the world: economic prosperity, social justice, and environmental sustainability?⁶

The biographer of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky, wrote in the *Australian Financial Review* on 13 February 2009:

At the heart of the moral failure is the worship of growth for its own sake, rather than as a way to achieve the 'good life'... the only moral compass we now have is the thin and degraded notion of economic welfare. This moral lacuna explains uncritical acceptance of globalization and financial innovation.

² Joseph E Stiglitz, *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* (New York: W W Norton, 2010), 278.

³ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: how today's divided Society endangers our Future* (New York: W W Norton, 2012), xvii.

⁴ Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilisation: Ethics and Economics after the Fall* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011), xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

The Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, concurred in 2009.

The economic ills of the last couple of years have brought to light a widespread anxiety about the kind of society we have become, and even more, the kind of human person... In trivializing the meaning of wealth, we have also reduced the range of human reflection and questioning around wellbeing and the good life.⁷

Other church leaders have made similar responses, particularly Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. On 30 April, 2010 Benedict added:

The worldwide financial breakdown... has also shown the error of the assumption that the market is capable of regulating itself, apart from public intervention and the support of internationalized moral standards. This assumption is based on an impoverished notion of economic life as a sort of self-calibrating mechanism driven by self-interest and profit-seeking. As such, it overlooks the essentially ethical nature of economics as an activity *of and for* human beings.⁸

This is home territory for the churches and other religious and ethical traditions, of course. But these have been undermined by our modern cultures that extol materialist values, as well as by the increasing individualism that has hollowed out many of our institutions, including trade unions and political parties, not just the churches. In addition, the sexual abuse crisis, particularly in the Catholic Church, has greatly damaged trust in church teaching, leadership and structures.

We need to refine or redefine our sense of what the 'good life' implies. In common parlance, it means a materially high standard of living. This will no longer do, since it is becoming increasingly unreasonable to think in such narrowly materialistic terms.

How then are we to reclaim essential core values in the new global era?

The effects of climate change have dramatised for us that we are all in this together. Many resources are limited or scarce, and we need to restrain our use so that everyone can have enough for a decent life, within the context of local constraints and cultures. Our western economic growth model is a large part of the problem, and it is not possible for everyone in the world to have the material standard of living we have become accustomed to. But our grandparents were content with much less in the way of material goods. We will be forced to focus on the quality of our relationships and communities rather than simply on the quantity of material resources available to us. The challenge we face is how to develop a more sustainable economy that can still provide sufficiency and wellbeing for everyone.

I would suggest two elements are critical in this reaffirmation of values:

- First, the *notion of human wellbeing, the 'good' in life*
- And secondly, *equity in the distribution of goods and opportunities*.

Globalisation has brought new problems, but also new opportunities. We are moving into a more cosmopolitan world, with an astonishing mixing of religions, races, cultures and systems of communication. Older value systems were premised on the values of the tribe or ethnic group, more or less open to broader perspectives or values. Now we need to renew a social conscience that includes everyone, whatever the differences among us.

⁷ Dr Rowan Williams, 'Foreword', in Rowan Williams and Larry Elliott (eds.), *Crisis and Recovery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) xi.

⁸ Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 30 April, 2010. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100430_scienze-sociali_en.html

Human wellbeing and the world religions

World religions have been brushing up against one another for thousands of years, and have been among the main carriers of identity and social values over generations. Given the history of religious conflict and wars, it would be rash to assume that religious conflict is a thing of the past. However, I would like to suggest that we have an historically unique opportunity to deepen the conversation among religions, and particularly to affirm the values supporting human wellbeing. All have a deep reverence for the great mystery of life and existence, which many of us perhaps too readily term God, as if we had explained the mystery away. The human race over the millennia has found many ways to honour and wonder at that mystery.

Our various religious and philosophical traditions have also shaped our view of the human good in different ways. This is where I think we need a fresh conversation about human wellbeing, values and public policy in relation to faith.

In Melbourne we are particularly well placed to be part of such a conversation. We have already moved a long way down the path of ecumenical co-operation, among Christians that is, and also with the Jewish community, though we are still in the early stages of developing the conversation with other religious traditions. All such conversation must take place also in the context of the secular public forum, including others who believe in forms of humanism, with or without a divine dimension.

Most people presumably would like to advance human wellbeing as a general concept, though there are significant differences about how to view or achieve this. We also need to recognise that various groups and nations can be seduced by demons of the 'master race' or class struggle, by greed or the will to power. We must stand resolutely against such forces.

Nevertheless, we have made significant progress on protecting and enforcing universal human rights. We now have international agreements covering many aspects of human welfare, for instance against the use of torture, human trafficking or the prostitution of children. We will never have a perfect world, but we can always strive for a world which offers a better life for all.

Philosophical debates about the notion of human wellbeing will be with us forever, covering a range of views, from 'thick' (or full and detailed) concepts of the good, to 'thin' notions. Notwithstanding, the United Nations has developed some surprisingly clear and objective criteria for human wellbeing in the Millennium Development Goals. These seek to raise the human capabilities of vulnerable people in developing countries, to improve the education, health and life opportunities for all, but particularly for girls and women, as well as eradicating hunger and alleviating the most severe poverty. I would venture to claim that never before have the nations of the world agreed to such a detailed list of objective criteria for human wellbeing. Not only that, but the richer nations promised to provide the resources to achieve these goals. Since the GFC, Australia is one of the few countries that is still seriously attempting to honour its commitments.

My point here is that while we may never arrive at universal consensus about a 'thick' notion of the good, we can develop fuller notions of what the human good entails, and establish institutional arrangements to promote and sustain those rights. We are conscious also that our understanding about the 'good' for human beings has developed significantly over time, but can also regress suddenly into barbarism, as under Nazism or communism.

Social equity

It is significant that Stiglitz, Sachs, and other writers highlight the problems stemming from the sidelining of social equity as a fundamental social norm in economics and finance. You will recall that it was Stiglitz's

2011 essay in *Vanity Fair*, 'Of the 1%, for the 1%, by the 1%', that illustrated how the most wealthy people were harvesting most of the wealth in the United States and elsewhere, at the expense of most of the rest of society.

Furthermore, Stiglitz and our other economists argue that the rich have rewritten the rules of the market to ensure they continue to maximise their own wealth. Given the extent of the outright corruption and ethical collapse in financial markets and in the dealings of some transnational enterprises, they warn that the future of democracy is at stake, not least in the United States itself because of the influence of vested interests in and over the media. Sachs warns against the new 'corporatocracy', rule by giant corporations with vast global power and influence.

I remember the late Professor Henry Mayer at Sydney University in the early 1980s lamenting the declining influence of the churches as a source of value formation in community life, and the shift to the media, in particular advertising, as a prime source of highly commercialised values. Henry was not an apologist for the churches. He was an agnostic Jew who had fled Europe and come to Australia on the famous ship, the *Dunera*. But he recognised how important the churches had been in Australia in setting the framework for social values. If he were alive today, I think he would be even more of that view, and particularly agree with Sachs about the power of global corporations as value formators.

Some writers have compared our current economic situation to that following the Great Depression. So bad was the economic collapse then, that it prompted significant reforms in banking and economic thinking, particularly the development of Keynesian policies, which bore lasting benefits later. Today we need another reworking of economics and finance away from the neoliberal free-market fundamentalism of the recent past, to policies that give a decisive role to considerations of social equity and participation by all involved, and not just focus on short-term profit maximisation. This does not mean absolute equality of incomes, but recognises a legitimate role for incentives to increase effort.

Religion and social equity

J. R. Donahue in his article, 'Biblical Perspectives on Justice', has an enlightening passage, which I quote:

There are 'two women of justice', one with a scale and her eyes blinded, and the other, who proclaims: 'He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich he has sent away empty.' (Lk: 4).⁹

You are familiar from our law courts with the figure of a blind-folded woman with the scales of justice in her hands, symbolising the lack of partiality. The other woman is of course Mary, the mother of Jesus, responding to the angel who was asking if she would consent to become the mother of the Saviour. We know this prayer as the *Magnificat*, from the first words in Latin: 'My soul glorifies the Lord...'

No one had a tape recorder at the time to record her exact words, and the prayer is in fact a composite drawn from great women figures in the Old Testament, longing for the Messiah. What it highlights is that God is not impartial, but extremely partial to the victims of injustice or those who suffer. It is a very different concept from the impartial justice we value in our law courts. God's justice is to restore equity and wellbeing to those badly done by. This is precisely what the word Redemption itself implies, rescuing people from slavery or bondage, a situation only too real for people at that time.

⁹ J R Donahue, 'Biblical Perspectives on Justice', in J C Haughey (ed.), *The Faith that does Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977, 68-112), quoted in Ellen Van Stichel, 'Global Justice as Participation: the Missing Link in the dominant secular moral philosophical Debate?', Keith Chappell and Francis Davis (eds.), *Catholic Social Conscience: Reflection and Action on Catholic Social Teaching* (Leominster UK: Gracewing, 2011), 21.

What faith adds: Meaning and Motivation

For Christians, faith offers a **wider sense of meaning**, a framework in which we can locate ourselves in a longer narrative in human history, addressing two of our most fundamental questions: Why am I here? Where am I going? Faith offers a particular narrative about the struggle between good and evil, even as it affects our own lives, and a developing sense of encounter with the Divine.

Many people who do not have a sense of the transcendent in their life of course may still have an acute awareness of human dignity, perhaps grasped intuitively or from experience. But faith offers a further level of meaning to our sense of the dignity of human beings.

For a person of mature faith, the dignity of the human person arises fundamentally from our sense of being creatures made in the image of God. Indeed, the Bible insists that men and women are the only images of God that God tolerates. Any other images of God are rejected as idols. This awareness can heighten our sense of the dignity and worth of all human beings. God expects us to recognise this dignity in everyone else, but especially those most in distress. From this arises our obligation to treat others as we would wish them to treat us.

Many of us have experienced what the Second Vatican Council so well said: 'Faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for the total vocation of humanity, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human' (*Church in the Modern World*, #11). Faith invests life with new meaning. It also augments us with fresh motivation for social action.

As I have tried to show in my little book, *Social Justice: fuller Life in a fairer World*,¹⁰ the Bible insists that God rejects and despises piety or sacrifices if the Jewish people ignore the orphans and widows, the hungry and impoverished. The Bible repeatedly refers to God as a God of justice, one who loves justice, and who expects believers to act justly as well.

It is very interesting to see how Jesus distilled his message through this reading of the Scriptures, especially the prophets. He constantly talked about healing, forgiveness, care for the sick and vulnerable, justice and new life.

It is also very interesting to see what he declined to pick up from the Scriptures. Jesus does not come as a warrior like David, or like a white knight, slaying his enemies. Christ appears in the Gospels as a total anti-type of Caesar, the imperial conqueror, and is depicted deliberately so in the Gospels. Nor did Jesus appear like Mohammed, fighting as a warrior in the cause of God. Christ overturns these narratives of force and power totally. He enters Jerusalem not on a war horse parading his army before him, but on a donkey.

As far as values and social policy are concerned, one of the most important things we can say about God is that God identifies intensely with those who are suffering or in distress. This is clearly part of the message in Christ's crucifixion. It is a message about God's solidarity with the distressed, even to the extent of laying down his life in Jesus.

It is no wonder that the Jews thought it blasphemous that Christ should claim to be the Incarnation of their God, especially one who endured such a shameful and horrific death. It was only the power of the Resurrection that convinced the apostles that Jesus had power over death, and then they spent the rest of their lives trying to understand and communicate this to others.

The effect of this Christian belief in the hope of resurrection, of a life beyond death, is also that it can change our calculations today about risk-taking and social action. The horizon for our hopes is pushed beyond this life and its boundaries. It further changes our understanding of the measure of success or failure.

¹⁰ Bruce Duncan, *Social Justice: fuller Life in a fairer World* (Melbourne: Garratt Publishing, 2012).

Hope as a magnet for social change

The metaphor of the Kingdom or Reign of God is an extremely powerful one, which recurs repeatedly in social movements throughout history, not least in the founding of the United States, and more recently, in a secularised form, in communist ideology, with its attempt to build the perfect society on earth. The Kingdom of God serves as a metaphor for the full flourishing of human wellbeing – which is a way of translating *Shalom*.

Yet the Kingdom is a tricky concept; it is here, but also not yet. The final realisation of the Kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ is only at the end of time. It will not be the result of anything we do, but a total gift from God. Yet Jesus insisted that the Kingdom was already present in the world, mysteriously spreading and growing through God's Holy Spirit. We understand the Spirit is moving not just in the churches of course, but in all people of good will everywhere, and sustaining the universe itself in being.

I like to think of the Kingdom of God as acting like a giant magnet throughout history, calling us to aim higher in our social action, trying to bring on earth better conditions for the fuller flourishing of human beings, drawing inspiration from what we think God intends for humanity. We will never achieve such a perfect world of course, but we can, step by step, try to approximate it more nearly.

Quite contrary to Marx's depiction of religion as the opium of the people to help them endure their sufferings, the Kingdom of God can act like a magnet on our hopes, aspirations, and motivations for a more fulfilling life on earth.

In trying to imagine how SPC might develop in the next few years, I am encouraged by the work of men and women like Frederick Ozanam, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Barbara Ward, and Jacques Maritain, people at crucial moments who formed ginger groups of thinkers and activists who initiated major changes in the church and their societies. Part of the church's mission is social transformation for a more just and peaceful world, and this is mainly the work of lay men and women.

We have many new and different issues in our time. As Rowan Williams put it so well: 'The question of how we think about shared wellbeing is the central one before us.'¹¹

¹¹ Rowan Williams, 'Knowing our Limits', in Williams and Elliott, *op. cit.*, 24.