

# Church social thinking making a difference: a rhetorical question?

John D'Arcy May

Several contributors to the symposium of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy on 'Christian Social Thinking for Australia: Making a Difference?' commented that the title was surely a rhetorical question: of course the churches make a difference in the social sphere. But as the very different contributions by speakers from seven Christian traditions were presented, an undertone of frustration also became evident: that one's church was *not allowed* to make a difference because of the current legislative and political constellation, or that one was *not able* to make a difference because of the way one's church was constituted. Far from being a rather boring repetition of the well-known and well-worn principles that are supposedly common to all traditions, the papers were startlingly distinctive in their approaches, demonstrating that there is a wealth of social justice resources for Christians to draw on if only they were better informed about one another's starting points. It was this, perhaps, that was the main benefit of the conference: that representatives of each of these seven traditions, possibly for the first time, were able to hear well-informed accounts of the social justice perspectives of all the others.

There was a certain Catholic bias in the design of the conference, in that Professor Frank Brennan, the well-known Jesuit legal scholar and human rights advocate, initiated the proceedings with a very substantial and wide-ranging examination of some of the most controversial social justice issues at present being discussed in Australia. He exploited to the full what has rapidly become known as the 'Francis effect' since the new pope began not only speaking frankly about the priorities Catholic social justice discourse but bearing witness to it in his own lifestyle. Acknowledging that his expertise is in law rather than economics, Brennan went on to offer genuinely new and controversial insights in areas such as the abortion debate, the question of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or religious affiliation, the legal position on vilification because of race or religion, the possibility of incorporating elements of Sharia law into Western jurisprudence, the status of same-sex marriage and civil unions, and the controversies over asylum seekers and border protection, each time with reasoned legal argument (some of which had to be omitted here for reasons of space). This left the participants with a lot to digest, though some took up Brennan's points and begged to differ. Fr Max Vodola expanded on Brennan's concluding salute to the sources of Catholic social teaching by treating in more detail the long tradition of social encyclicals. He did not dodge the issue of a certain discrepancy between style and substance in this tradition, made manifest in the fresh approach of Pope Francis and reaching crisis proportions in the sexual abuse scandals which have been revealed in recent years.

As Margaret Coffey remarks in her concluding reflections, a number of contributions are in marked contrast to this Catholic tradition of authoritative teaching and doctrinal continuity. Gerald Rose explains how the Churches of Christ owe allegiance to the 'radical left wing of Protestantism', jealously preserving a congregational structure with no central authority. Thomas and Alexander Campbell saw themselves as initiating a 'restoration movement' to retrieve the 'primitive faith of the New Testament'. Problems arise when political involvement is called for: the social ethic that emerges is orientated to the personal experience of the individual rather than the rational authority of a tradition, so that maintaining moral standards in the wider society becomes a problem rather than a programme. Geoff Pound portrays the Baptist heritage in similar vein: stemming from the Free Church tradition, in a sense separatist and hence more comfortable *outside* social structures and state allegiances. Yet he also envisages a 'public theology' which is not averse to participating in the pluralism of the public square.

The Anglican Church, too, as Raymond Cleary points out, has no central *magisterium* which could presuppose or bring about a consensus on social or doctrinal matters. As a former chief executive of Anglicare he is aware that such agencies arose from outreach initiatives at parish level, not from the prioritising of social justice issues by the Church; indeed, he suspects

that such issues are regarded as secondary in ecclesiastical circles. For him this relationship needs to be rethought, for here lies the Church's real mission. Anglicans must learn to deploy the language of faith in such a way that it has an impact in pluralist societies. The Uniting Church, a much more recent foundation (1977), has made social concern central to its constitution and has appropriated the Catholic notion of subsidiarity. Mark Zirnsak, more than any other contributor, offers detailed analysis of economic incongruities such as tax evasion in a taxation system skewed in favour of the rich – including the media moguls who can influence political opinion in this sense. He takes issue with Frank Brennan on a number of questions and explicitly mentions the potential of ecumenical cooperation in resolving disagreements among Christians.

Jenny Begent of the Salvation Army offers yet another perspective on combating social inequality, speaking frankly about the conflicts this entails for an organisation that fought free of established churches in order better to serve the poor, but has inexorably succumbed to the pressures of institutionalisation. It was founded on the premise that 'there is no improving the future without disturbing the present' (Catherine Booth), but it does not always succeed in being a prophetic presence, holding together evangelism and social service. An entirely different but equally valuable perspective is provided by Fr Boutros Shenouda of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Although it enjoys a long tradition of social activism, which it continues in Australia with a range of services, this Church is continually aware of the persecution its members have suffered for many centuries in Egypt, perhaps never more than in recent years, when the attempt was made to apply Sharia law to the whole society. He too takes issue with Frank Brennan on matters such as same-sex marriage, noting that Christian opinion, once fairly uniform, has now diverged markedly.

At least two questions of fundamental importance emerge from this very fruitful discussion. One is the classical sociological tenet formulated by Max Weber as the institutionalisation of charism: if a movement brought into being by an inspired founder is to survive, certain compromises must be struck with the structures and norms of a society it may have set out to oppose. In this inevitable process there is both profit and loss, as the early history of Christianity itself instantiates. Another question is that of the relationship between ecclesiology and social ethics. Although the Catholic Church's coherent body of social teaching may give this impression, the principles of social justice do not exist in a vacuum; they are not given *a priori* as abstractions which may be 'applied' as circumstances require. Each church has its own founding narrative, its own context of origin, and these determine the extent to which society with its economic and political structures is accepted or rejected in any given situation. Margaret Coffey's reference to Frederick Ozanam and his Society of St Vincent de Paul in the context of nineteenth century French Catholicism illustrates this nicely. If the conference did anything, it brought such questions to the fore and made Christians committed to social justice more aware of their different responses to them. This diversity need not mean dissipation of resources; it could equally encourage mutual enrichment and support.

The conference, held in the Oratory of Newman College in the University of Melbourne, was organised by the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy, whose director, Fr Bruce Duncan CSsR, played a major part in recruiting the speakers and initiating this publication.