

Launch of *Social Justice & the Churches*

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I am honoured to be asked to launch this book tonight in my capacity as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Divinity. This book's vision and mission parallel those of the University. First, it brings theologians and social activists into critical conversations with a view to changing the church and the world. Second, the authors come from the Roman Catholic Church, the Uniting Church, the Churches of Christ, the Salvation Army, the Anglican Church, the Baptist Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The book is a major undertaking, and the results provide much food for thought - along with some recipes for action - on the topic of social justice in contemporary Australia.

It seems somehow appropriate to be launching this book this afternoon, the day of the memorial service for the late Gough Whitlam, whose initiatives transformed our society and were based on a clearly articulated series of ideals around justice. It is less appropriate that today is Guy Fawkes Day, commemorating the failed attempt to blow up the English Parliament as the first step in the overthrow of an early modern Protestant state and its replacement with a Catholic one. These events remind us, however, of the place of religion in the Australian psyche - either irrelevant, or divisive. In the Whitlam narrative, radical change flowed from what was a secular vision that many in the churches resisted; in the Guy Fawkes narrative, religion is at the base of attempts to divide or destroy social order.

Earlier today I posed a question to the University of Divinity's Learning and Teaching Day. What is the public benefit of theology? I believe this book constitutes substantial evidence of at least one answer to that question: the pursuit of social justice. This justice is based on our beliefs about the nature of the kingdom of God. It is therefore based upon our understanding of what it is to be human, made in the image of God, endowed with freedom and responsibility, and redeemed by the sacrificial love of God.

Frank Brennan reminds us that 'the language of Christian social teaching must always be prophetic, pedagogical, and practical', expressed in 'words, actions and structures'. The collection is therefore well-served by the willingness of all contributors to question the institutional and spiritual failures of the churches and religious orders in putting their own houses in order. While God's justice lies at the heart of Christian theology, the Church must call itself to account if it is to be authentic to its teaching and in its public protestation against injustice beyond its walls.

This collection is published at a strategic moment for the churches. It reveals substantial differences between the way each church engages with the world around us on issues of raising awareness and taking action on matters of common concern. This hinges on our ecclesiology and public theology: what IS the church? What is its relationship to the world? How do we deal with differences, within the church, and between church and its context?

Understanding the differences of approach by each church or religious order is strategic because, as we are marginalised from what little remains of evidence-based public discourse, we need to be able to speak coherently and collectively if we are to make an impact. The first step to collective action is understanding how we approach the topic of social justice, so that we can work together.

Most contributors point out that this is not an ecumenical problem, but an interdenominational

one, for all the churches struggle to reach sufficient internal consensus to move to prophetic action on any particular topic. Yet as several chapters illustrate, full agreement is not always necessary before action is taken. Indeed, the capacity to live with difference and to learn to understand difference as a reason to change, rethink, reclaim, challenge is sorely needed in Australia, and it may prove that the churches are the last institutions still able to teach this to our politicians and voters.

The theological action is not all one way, from the church to society. Importantly, Margaret Coffey does remind us that Christian social teaching can flow from the provocation of our changing context. Margaret reminds us that the churches had to develop new teaching and responses to the vast social changes wrought by industrialisation and unionisation. I am reminded of Dr Tim Jones's work on Anglican attitudes towards contraception in Britain, where the bishops of the Church of England surprised themselves and the Church in 1930 by agreeing that the use of artificial contraception was acceptable. Their attitudes were changed, unlike those of many of their international and ecumenical colleagues, because they were members of the House of Lords, and through Parliamentary committees they were brought into direct contact with women representing the labour movement who convinced them that it was more dangerous to give birth than it was to go down a coal mine. This perspective challenged them to re-examine their theological position, and the consequence was an extraordinary rapid change of teaching within a generation.

If there is a flaw in this collection it is that there is no chapter on social justice from outside the churches - what would non-government, non-faith-based organisations make of the book? How distinctive is Christian social teaching from, say, the environmental or labour movements? This is important for understanding precisely what the churches contribution actually is.

Mark Zirnsak's chapter reminds us how small the church's voice is in our society, and helpfully interrogates some of the reasons and consequences of this. Yet I think most of us in the churches still fail to realise just how insignificant our voice is at present. We are at last beginning to recognise how much harm we have caused to others through sexual abuse and systematic bullying, though it has taken a Royal Commission to drive that message home and to make us confess our hypocrisy. But I don't think we fully appreciate how much we are silenced or misheard, either because words are put in our mouths by others on matters to do with gender or sexuality, or because there is little apparent interest in our protests against, for example, the treatment of asylum seekers.

Recently at the Claiming Sovereignties conference held at Whitley College and organised by Mark Brett and Monica Melanchthon, a wise speaker pointed out that the churches needed to find ways to take targeted action on social justice issues. A scatter-gun approach that lobbed together asylum seekers, same-sex marriage, economic inequality, and sharia law will not work as the message is incoherent. In addition to the hard, long-term work the churches do in the background, we might be pragmatic in finding ways to work together to target issues in the short term.

The success of the LoveMakesAWay campaign in drawing on people of faith from around Australia to raise public and political awareness of the presence and plight of children in detention is one such example. Its success comes from a potent mix of social media savvy, ecumenical and interfaith collaboration, and of course a focus on a single issue (for example, it seems obvious to me that no one should be in detention who has committed no crime, but the focus on children alone is a pragmatic starting place).

Its success, however, is also because it is firmly grounded in theological principle, in Christian social teaching, which can be seen through the public expositions of theological motives for the

series of non-violent protests that have now led to the arrests of over 100 faith leaders. In many ways this approach benefits from its clear grounding in the question 'What would Jesus do?', and the gospel answer - stand with those on the outermost margins of human society no matter what the cost.

So to return to my opening question: What is the public benefit of theology? I wish to close with the words of the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, published by Francis in 2013 and quoted in this book:

Faith is truly a good for everyone; it is a common good. Its light does not simply brighten the interior of the Church, nor does it serve solely to build an eternal city in the hereafter; it helps us build our societies in such a way that they can journey towards hope.

What is the public benefit of theology? It is hope, hope based in prophetic vision that is much bigger than the individual person, household, or neighbourhood; it is the hope passed on through Christian social teaching; it is the hope made real by material action. Our task now is to spread the message of this book in our churches and in our communities, that the light of faith may be seen and the message of hope made tangible.