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Social policy and ethics

This edition of *Good Policy* explores the relationship between ethics and social policy, in particular the significant contribution that Christian intellectuals have played in this debate commencing with the Christian Realism of North American theologian Reinhold Niebhur (1892 – 1971). Brian Howe explores the influence and meaning of Christian Realism in the Australian Government of the 1990s. Bruce Duncan reviews two books, which detail the ethical formation and activism of university students who were members of the Student Christian Movement and the Newman Society (at Melbourne University). David Haywood puts the question of ethics in the context of the recent Global Financial Crisis and asks whether we are going to continue on with the belief that self regulation and limited government intervention will protect us in a world that faces very significant new global questions such as climate change and sustainability. Consumer protection in essential services such as home energy provision is a case in point and Sarah Toohey provides an update on the move towards a National Energy Market.

Good Shepherd activism today has grown from a response to an historical reality of poverty and injustice in 19th Century Europe. St Mary Euphrasia was born in 1796 at a time of social upheaval following the French Revolution. At the age of 21 she began her religious life caring for young women who were orphans or at risk of exploitation. In Belgium in the 1880s a Catholic priest Joseph Cardijn saw the plight of his former school friends who were working in the factories in the new industrial era. Cardijn saw that the social reality, in particular the work reality, was shaping the moral standards of the time. He commenced a youth movement, the Young Christian Workers (YCW) that encouraged young workers to take back their dignity and have a say in the world around them. It was his inspiration and that of many others such as St Vincent de Paul and St Mary Euphrasia that have laid the foundation for a Christian activism that is personal, based on the unique dignity of each person and at the same time questioning of the social reality.

Review of Life and Action both personal and collective, based on the gospel message, was a methodology that assisted many activists to put into practice their religious beliefs. A key principle in this activism is that the poor and those who are disadvantaged have a voice. They are the ones to speak about their own reality.

Christian social formation has a long and significant tradition in Australia. The Student Christian Movement and the Newman Society are the most recent examples of a spirituality that addressed the social reality that we live in. These men and women were serious in their intent to find a way of living out their Christian beliefs in their professions as engineers, nurses, doctors and lawyers as well as numerous other occupations. They were realists and they grappled with the complexities of their own lives and the common good. Many of them are and have been active in current policy debates about economic and employment policies, tax reform, and refugee and indigenous health policies. Historical perspective and lasting values are needed to grapple with questions such as those posed by David Hayward in this edition.

The way forward is not a Christian fundamentalism, but a methodology that continues to explore the fundamental human values of the unique dignity and spirituality of each person and a questioning of the social reality. Radical voices must still be allowed to speak; new ways will not be found without openness to new understandings. In the past Christian intellectuals and visionaries such as Niebhur, Cardijn and St Mary Euphrasia have pointed the way.

by Denis Sheehan

Denis was chaplain to the Young Christian Workers from 1982 to 1994. He is currently working on a pilot project with Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and St Luke's Bendigo, to develop an agency response to unemployment.

A recent ABC television program, *Message Stick* (19/06/2010) documents the success of a Queensland Government public servant who lived in a remote indigenous community (Lockhart River) for six months to listen to ways in which government money could be most effectively used. One method used was a listening circle where everyone was able to sit and listen, and determine a common decision. At the beginning of one such listening circle, one of the women prayed, '*Holy Spirit be with us and guide our discussions, so that we may decide what is good for all and not what is best only for ourselves*'.

IN THIS ISSUE

'WE ARE GOOD SHEPHERD. Our mission is shaped by our inheritance of the vision, courage and audacity of Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier and the Good Shepherd tradition she began. Ours is a vision for promoting a world of justice and peaceful co-existence. Ours is the courage to embrace wholeheartedly innovative and creative ways of enabling people of all cultural, religious and social backgrounds to enjoy the fullness of life, which is the right of every human being. Ours is the inheritance to boldly challenge those structures and beliefs that diminish human dignity. We work to ensure the value of every human being, the communities that enable us all to thrive and the integrity of the environment that guarantees both.'

The Global Financial Crisis: a

by David Hayward
Dean of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University

For the last 18 months, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has dominated Australian policy-making to a degree that is rarely seen.

In one sense this is entirely understandable, for it has been a very long time since we have witnessed a globally synchronised economic contraction that has taken with it the world's biggest banks and car makers, and left a good many countries tottering on the edge of ruin.

On the other hand, the GFC has had relatively little effect on the Australian economy. We have weathered the storm remarkably well, and are one of the few countries to have missed a recession, and whose unemployment rates have risen only marginally.

The significance of the GFC then for Australia is not its economic impact. Rather it is to be found in the political response, which has set the context for a fundamental re-shaping of Australian politics and the ideological landscape in which debates and policy options are shaped for what might turn out to be a generation.

The speed and extent of the Federal Government's response to the crisis both within Australia and internationally set the tone. Within a remarkably short period from the onset of the crisis in October 2008, the Federal Government had announced first one, then a second stimulus package involving spending commitments exceeding $53b over a five year period; it had overseen the lowering of interest rates to very low levels; it had rolled out a comprehensive package of measures designed to maintain confidence in the financial system, including extensive guarantees for deposits and borrowings; and it had become a global voice in the newly emerging policy regime ideologically committed to a Keynesian pump priming synchronised internationally on a scale never seen before by the likes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In the process of doing this, the then Prime Minister Rudd took the opportunity to carve out a space for a new social democracy in Australia. The politics of tax cuts and low debt were quickly replaced by a politics of short-term government-funded consumption spending and longer-term debt-funded nation-building. A fixation with budget surpluses and deregulation that had dominated Australian politics for twenty years was comprehensively destroyed in a series of brilliant policy and ideological interventions, including of course Rudd's foray into essay writing for left leaning magazines, which has served to whip the ideological right into a frenzy.

The massive increase in Government spending was also used as a vehicle to help redefine the relationships between the Federal Government and the States as part of this new social democracy in the form of a new federalism in which the Federal government has emerged as the ever more powerful player. Much of the Federal stimulus spending was funded via the States, whose budgets benefited enormously from the much-needed cash.

For their part, the conservative Opposition parties were awkwardly 'wedged'. Unsure of what to say, they found themselves supporting an old neo-liberal agenda that has lost both its political constituency and its moral authority courtesy of the financial mess that financial deregulation had left in its wake. Even the banks – once the great champions of liberalisation – have become cautious champions of government intervention and public sector borrowing, in part of course because they have become the recipients of an extraordinary level of government handouts.

This raises in turn the question of the beneficiaries of the policy response to the Global Financial Crisis. While the broader economic benefits are difficult to dispute, not everyone has benefited equally. Those who would otherwise have been unemployed have certainly benefited. But in an economy that is dominated by a few major companies in every major market from banking to retailing to airlines and telephony, the main beneficiaries were destined to be those who probably needed help least.

Who could doubt the massive benefit the first round of stimulus spending delivered to our big retailers, with retail spending boosted to record levels instead of slump? As John Richard Uechtritz, CEO of JB Hi-Fi explained in acknowledging the impact of the government's stimulus package on his firms record half yearly profits in February 2009 and it's like impact on the next quarter's results, "The 18-29 youth demographic without mortgages and families missed out on the last December package, but they'll receive handouts from this one," he said.

So much did retail spending lift in the December quarter of 2008 that the Australian Bureau of Statistics had to put out a special issue explaining how it intended to adjust its data to accommodate the one-off effect of the stimulus package, particularly purchases of household equipment such as plasma TVs and surround sound systems.

And then there's banking – the global industry at the heart of the global financial crisis. The Government rolled out a $700 billion guarantee of all deposits, and then followed this up with a guarantee for bank borrowings. The package helped

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concentrate the banking industry to a degree not seen before, with the Big Four using their new found market power to buy up smaller players, who have lost significant market share. In August 2008 the Big Four accounted for 59 per cent of the residential mortgage market. Today they account for 79 per cent.

Macquarie Bank – the millionaire factory as it is known in financial circles – would have been in very deep trouble without the Federal government's extensive and generous levels of support and at very little cost. It was able to make extensive use of the Government's AAA credit rating to raise funds that otherwise would not have been forthcoming while it went busily about unwinding itself from the complex, but now problematic financial structures it had cleverly constructed over the last 15 years that enabled it to do well from the privatisation of infrastructure both in Australia and overseas.

Yet while the beneficiaries were those who probably needed it least, these very same players were by no means inclined to take a more socially balanced or ethical position in their market dealings. Take Macquarie again. As 'The Australian' reported back in May, the bank "was forced to defend the amount of income tax paid in the past year… which gave the bank an effective tax rate of 1.7 per cent, compared with 15 per cent the year before and an Australian corporate rate of 30 per cent." [1]

The 'Big Four' banks' behaviour has also raised some eyebrows. While the Commonwealth Bank chief, Ralph Norris received some applause for his decision to take a pay cut and the National Australia Bank got some good press for cutting bank fees, overall the banks have been rather tardy in acknowledging their social responsibilities. A number of people have taken note of the discrepancy between the timing of the banks' decision to cut interest rates when rates were falling and the speed with which they were prepared to raise them once the Reserve Bank started to push them back up again. As the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd himself put it in an interview with Fairfax Radio on November 4th 2009:

"I do note a contrast between, shall I say, the speed with which interest rates are brought down on the part of the commercial banks and the speed with which they are put up."

It is here in this confused moral and ethical space that we seem to have learnt least from the Global Financial Crisis. It is clear that the crisis stemmed from excesses within the financial system, especially in the US and Britain. And it is also clear that this was made possible by highly liberalised regulatory regimes underpinned by the tacit knowledge that governments could not afford for the banking system to go belly-up (a moral hazard as economists call it). It is also clear that greed played an important part.

Nevertheless, the missing ingredient was an overarching moral and ethical framework to which banks and bankers should have been tied in order to be able to be such powerful players on the world stage. The existence of the bonus culture on Wall Street and elsewhere occurred in a moral and ethical vacuum that enabled greed to take hold. It is this vacuum more than anything else that needs to be tackled as a priority in the policy response to the financial crisis, and yet so far it has failed to make it onto the policy agenda in Canberra.

If there is one lasting and dangerous legacy of the neo-liberal era, it is the proposition that the only necessary moral framework is one in which we look after our self interest in a market context free of government regulation. It is a dangerous legacy because it justifies leaving the more difficult and complex policy problems alone at great social and environmental cost.

This moral and ethical framework must include questions about the core responsibilities of government. Are there things that should never be outsourced? I would count amongst these services the ability to impose force or violence or which severely restrict another's liberties – prisons, detention centres, the military, police and the judiciary all fall into this category. I would also include here regulatory frameworks governing our health and well-being. I do not think it wise or ethically sensible to allow food producers or advertisers to set up and enforce their own codes of conduct.

Similarly, there are questions about the ethical suitability of a firm to be eligible to win a government contract. To bid for government funds, one must pay their taxes. They must be socially aware and committed employers. And they must demonstrate a commitment to the environment.

The Global Financial Crisis has taught us a lot about economies and economics. But the bigger learning is fundamentally social, and at its heart is morality and ethics. Let's hope our policy-makers realise this in the wake of this federal election.

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National energy laws may leave Victoria cold

by Sarah Toohey *Policy Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service*

For those concerned with social justice and equity in the provision of essential services, regulatory consumer protections provide the mechanism to ensure that private electricity and gas providers are required to supply these services in a way that recognises the right to access for all in the community.

This issue, of consumer protections in essential service provision, is now being debated at a national level and changes to the Victorian consumer protection framework are afoot.

VICTORIAN CONTEXT

Historically, each state and territory in Australia has provided electricity and gas through government-owned businesses. In the 1990s, Victoria was the first state to privatise the provision of electricity and gas. This set the ball rolling for deregulation across the nation.

On the first of January 2009, prices for electricity and gas ceased to be regulated by the Victorian Government, leaving competition and the market to determine the price for these essential services.

However although prices have been deregulated, Victorian consumers have a range of consumer protections in place to assist households to manage their energy bills and ensure that no household is disconnected from energy supply due to an incapacity to pay. These protections have evolved over a number of years following pressure by community and consumer organisations, including Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and Victorian Council of Social Service, to address specific issues faced by consumers in the competitive energy market.

THE NATIONAL ENERGY MARKET

In 2004, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to establish a National Energy Market, which would provide for uniform regulation of the electricity and gas industry across Australia. The transition to a National Energy Market has progressed in stages, with the regulation of generation (power stations), transmission (high voltage power lines) and distribution (street poles) all moving to the national domain.

The last remaining area of reform, and the one that is critical to consumers, is retail regulation. This means regulation that sets out people's basic rights to access essential services and in dealing with their energy company.

Energy markets across Australia are in differing stages of development. Some state governments still own and run energy companies, others have only just begun to have a competitive energy market and all states other than Victoria regulate energy prices.

Once a national framework is in place it will be much harder to respond to specific state based issues as they arise. Changes to the national law will need a directive from the Ministerial Council on Energy, a group of all state and territory energy ministers.

NATIONAL ENERGY RETAIL LAWS

The process of developing a common framework for retail services in a national energy market has taken a number of years and ongoing consultations. In 2009 the results of these consultations were released in the first exposure draft of the National Energy Retail Laws. A second exposure draft was released in November 2009.

While attempting to pull together a range of consumer protection mechanisms from various states, the draft laws did not acknowledge how these protections work in concert to create a consumer protection framework. For instance, while they mandate times when houses cannot be disconnected, it does not set out timeframes for reconnection. This basic discrepancy means that even where a household has remedied the reason for disconnection, there's no guarantee that they can get back on supply as soon as possible.

Many consumer protections that have evolved in Victoria over time work in concert to reinforce each other and these small details, like disconnection and reconnection times, can make a big difference to people's lives.

Provision for hardship programs, flexible payment arrangements, guidelines for the provision of information, the wrongful disconnection payment and the ban on late payment fees and pre-payment meters are all critical aspects of Victoria's current protections for vulnerable and disadvantaged households in their access to essential services.

HARDSHIP

Victoria's energy laws require companies to develop programs to assist households experiencing financial hardship. This requirement came about as a result of two extensive investigations into utilities hardship: the Utility Debt Spiral Project by the Committee for Melbourne and the Victorian Government's hardship inquiry.

These processes helped to frame what can be a difficult concept to quantify. Utilities hardship is not experienced in the same way, for the same reasons by all households and for this reason a one size fits all approach to hardship is not effective.

Unfortunately a desire for a uniform approach seems to have informed the response to hardship in the National Energy Retail Laws. The draft law defines consumers in financial hardship as a 'hardship customer'. This approach suggests that there is a fixed class of customers that experience hardship, rather than acknowledging financial hardship as an event that can be episodic, short or long term.

In practice, this is likely to mean that hardship assistance would be limited to a range of consumers that fit certain customer characteristics, rather than by their specific circumstances at a point in time.

FLEXIBLE PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Flexible payment arrangements and payment options such as Centrepay can assist households to manage their energy bills and actually help to prevent consumers from falling in to financial hardship.

Allowing these mechanisms to be used only when a household is experiencing financial hardship unnecessarily limits the options available to consumers to meet their payment obligations.

Despite these criticisms, it is encouraging to see that preventing consumer hardship in the provision of essential services has been recognised in the law. What is needed now is a more comprehensive and flexible approach to this issue.

LATE PAYMENT FEES

Late payment fees penalise households having trouble paying their bills and force these households to prioritise electricity and gas over other essential needs, such as food and housing costs. For this reason, late payment fees for electricity and gas have been banned in Victoria.

When introducing legislation to ban late payment fees in the lower house, the then Treasurer John Brumby stated, *"the government does not believe that people who are unable to pay their bills on time should be penalised further by late payment fees"*[1].

This is a view that VCOSS continues to share. Unfortunately late payment fees have been allowed in the national draft legislation.

WRONGFUL DISCONNECTION

The Victorian Wrongful Disconnection Payment compensates households who have been disconnected without proper disconnection procedures being followed. It provides for the living expenses associated with disconnection and as an incentive to retailers to adhere to correct procedures.

This payment was designed to curb the increasing rate of disconnection seen in 2003–2004 and to ensure that energy retailers were complying with the requirements of the Energy Retail Code. After the introduction of the payment, disconnection numbers in Victoria fell and have remained relatively steady, at around 0.29 disconnections per 100 households. In contrast, other states have disconnection rates that are much higher – around 1.13 per 100 households in Queensland and 0.85 per 100 in South Australia for 2007–2008[2].

This critical compliance tool has been left out of the national draft laws.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The Ministerial Council on Energy will have to agree on final changes to the National Energy Retail Law before it is introduced into the South Australian Parliament in late 2010. The nature of national reform means that compromise is made to secure agreement. However, when the price of essential services is set by the market, as it is in Victoria, consumer protections are even more vital and the Government simply cannot afford to compromise.

The Victorian Government has committed to a consumer protection framework that does not leave Victorian households worse off. This must include continuation of critical protections such as the ban on late payment fees and the wrongful disconnection payment.

Widespread support for Victoria's consumer protection framework from the community sector will continue to be essential in assuring that the final national energy retail laws do not leave vulnerable Victorians out in the cold.

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The churches and social

by Professor Brian Howe AM

(Based on the paper given at the official opening of the Yarra Institute of Religion and Public Policy, April 2009)

My own interest in public theology was first sparked by reading Reinhold Niebhur's Gifford lectures, published under the title 'The Nature and Destiny of Man'.

As a theological student in Melbourne and later in Chicago, I read many of Niebuhr's books and articles. The influence of Niebhur is lasting. In an interview with Barak Obama prior to his assuming the presidency of the United States, David Brookes reports that Obama seemed tired and disinterested, until Brookes mentioned the name of Niebuhr, at which point Obama reeled off the books that he had read by that author and explained what he had taken from them.

At a Georgetown University forum 'The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Future of Christian Realism' columnist E J Dionne reflected on why Niebuhr seemed to be relevant again to public policy in the United States. Dionne recalled that by the end of the 1920s when Niebuhr became active, the economic depression had quickly swept away all trivia as public policy was focused on depression and then war. In the current economic crisis Niebuhr's doctrine of 'Christian realism' or something similar might emerge as very relevant.[1]

The vision for the Yarra Institute of Religion and Public Policy set out by its Director Bruce Duncan is that "social issues can be approached from a template of values…that help bring us to our full stature as human beings. They are values that we share not just with other Christians or Jews, but with people of other religions and even people who may hold no religions beliefs at all".[2]

It would be wrong to underestimate what is involved in translating a "template of values" into public policy. I recall as a Minister in the Hawke government with responsibility for social policy rather overusing the word 'ought' as in "the Government ought to do this or that". I soon learned that in arguments with other Ministers and public officials it was important, without disregarding the moral imperative, to find complementary reasons why something should be done.

In 1969 I was responsible for initiating an ecumenical centre in Fitzroy, which later became known as the Centre for Urban Research and Action (CURA). This centre hoped to influence various government policies through a bottom-up process involving research, reflection and action or community organisation. At that time there were a number of modest church-based agencies in Melbourne that did research such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Ecumenical Migration Centre. There was very little professional social research undertaken in Australia. Sociology was only just being established at Latrobe University and Swinburne College of Technology. Psychology and social work were focused on individual development. Economics was then dominated by Keynesian ideas soon to be replaced by supply-side economics with its emphasis on mathematical modelling and markets. The social sciences in Australia then were in their infancy. Few theological students trained in Australia in this period would have had a background in the social sciences.

Professor Graeme Davison in his Barnett lecture 'The Compassionate Eye: Research and Reform'[3] summarised the role churches played in pioneering social research over the previous century. He saw the 1970s as a period of transition from 'the amateurs' to 'the professionals'. Over the following decades there has been a rapid expansion of universities and research institutes employing large numbers of professional researchers trained in the theory and methods of the social sciences. Many of these institutions seek to influence public policy either directly or indirectly. It is a much more crowded field. This opens up considerable opportunities for collaboration including with organisations, which are not specifically Christian, but which for example, share the Yarra Institute's commitment to the UN Millennium Goals.

The social sciences were far more advanced in the United States than they were in Australia before and after the Second World War. Niebhur was important as a theologian there because he recognised that he needed to take the social sciences seriously, although never in an uncritical way. He recognised that both theology and the social sciences had an interest in human nature, but also that the social sciences are not neutral forces, having been captured by 'the soft utopianism of the liberal world' which failed to take seriously the contradictions in human nature inherent in Christian theology. Niebuhr above all stressed the infinite capacity of people for self deception when it suited them. On the other hand Niebuhr emphasised the redemptive power of love, anticipating the later development of an ecumenical theology in the 1960s.

I have referred to Niebuhr at some length partly because he was so successful in communicating on issues which today we would describe as public theology. He was both very well informed on many issues of public concern and also recognised the importance of identifying the fundamental assumptions which lay behind the social sciences. He took seriously the hermeneutical task of public theology.

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Ann Wansborough[4], referring to National Council of Churches statements, explains, *"the churches need to articulate and examine their underlying assumptions, explain their hermeneutic, or way of interpreting the world…They also need to listen, learn, reconsider their arguments, and sometimes change their own life or their approach to policy matters"*.

Wansborough describes the 'hermeneutical circle' methodology, which might help churches to bring more rigour to their public statements. Perhaps the most important point she makes is that "theology is necessary, but insufficient". The churches need to also use the insights of secular theories and tools developed in secular analysis.

For the Yarra Institute, identifying policies based on the "values that help bring us to our full stature as human beings" is therefore a hermeneutical task that requires inspecting the assumptions which lie behind our espoused policies or strategies. For example, pursuing the Millennium Development Goals or, more modestly, the challenge of the lack of development in parts of Northern Australia, requires reflection on sustainable development and how to build an integrated policy that seeks to balance economic, social and environmental factors. From one point of view Indigenous people suffer from many disabilities which help to maintain their low socio-economic status. However from another point of view the survival of Indigenous people as a relatively intact culture represents triumph over adversity due largely to the adaptive strength of Indigenous culture. In this discussion the role of the churches has been important and remains important, but determining a position requires a capacity for self criticism as well as theological depth.

Churches may often do little more than run a commentary on political developments while pursuing incremental remedial strategies that do not go to the core of needed changes.

Mahbub ul Haq[5], the architect of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) development strategy, set out the following principles:

- development must put people at the centre of its concerns
- the purpose of development is to enlarge all human choice not just income
- the human development paradigm is concerned with both building human capabilities (through investment in people) and with using those capabilities (through an enabling framework for growth and development)
- human development has four essential pillars: equity, sustainability, productivity and empowerment; and
- the human development paradigm defines the ends of development and analyses sensible options for achieving them.[6]

It should not be imagined that Australian Christians have not played an important role in pursuing these principles. For example Australian Volunteers Abroad was largely developed by members of the Student Christian Movement, and Community Aid Abroad, these days part of Oxfam, grew out of the Food for Peace program initiative by Father Kennedy Tucker[7 8].The campaign based on Jubilee principles, strongly supported by the Roman Catholic Church, substantially reduced the debt of developing countries and emphasised investment in development. Each of these programs sought to achieve a paradigm shift, not incremental change.

It is important to underline the shift in ethics represented by the focus on human development as outlined above. Amartya Sen has played a very important role, as an economist with a feel for ethics, in rejecting the negative view of human nature, which he feels is implicit in the utilitarianism that underlies neo classical economics. Sen is not a socialist who rejects the utility of markets, but is committed to reducing inequalities not only in income, but in various dimensions of human life. Sen is opposed to simplistic notions of poverty and inequality based on single indicators. He emphasises the multiple indicators which UNDP use to measure comparative wellbeing such as health status, years of education, and opportunities for political participation.[9] People in Sen's terms are denied the capability to do and to be if they are not treated with respect, if they are not able to participate in the way that their community is governed, if they do not have good health or are unable to complete their education. Any one of these factors can reduce peoples' capability to function normally in their community.

I have recently been involved in the discussions about how effective philanthropy can be in bringing about change. I recall that in 1975 CURA received a very large grant in International Women's Year to undertake research on the working conditions of migrant women working in manufacturing industry in inner Melbourne. The study was important in uncovering the scandal of working conditions then applying in many factories in inner Melbourne and was subsequently the subject of a Four Corners programme on ABC television. However the most important thing that we did was to set aside a third of the grant for implementation through a migrant working women's centre to follow up with people and to continue placing pressure on employers and authorities to improve

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working conditions. Philanthropy should put as much resource into implementation as it does into research: both are essential.

Establishing a research and action centre in 2009 is very different to establishing something forty years ago. It does require a critical or sceptical hermeneutic. Niebuhr might have said something like this…

"Decisions about what ought to be done require us to relate biblical demand for justice to investigation into social facts, theories about economy and society, and an informed assessment about the probable results of alternative causes of action. No single element determines the conclusion and our thinking about all of the elements is apt to be subtly changed in the process of relating one to the other".

Niebuhr was not a communitarian, but brought to us a kind of wisdom ethics, which requires a settled disposition and a set of attitudes, which is both critical and responsible. There is no easy shift from literal text to responsible action.

How should we ascertain the issues that should most engage this Institute? The issue of climate change is perhaps the issue of our time. Rufus Black, a very creative and far sighted theologian here in Melbourne, thinks that we have not yet got fixed in our imagination the extraordinary issues that will face us through this century as we factor in the limits of growth, shortages of water and arable land, nuclear proliferation and exponential growth of new technologies.

The churches have made an enormous investment in caring, but caring in an ever more acquisitive and materialistic society will increasingly become more problematic. Theology is ultimately about imagining an alternative future, as in the vision of Isaiah. It is this exciting challenge, which is being embraced by the Yarra Institute.

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The Good Policy newsletter

'Good Policy' is the newsletter of the Social Policy Research Unit of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service.
We aim to bring the latest news of research and policy developments in areas of importance to our supporters, colleagues, service partners, interested donors and funders, responding to the ongoing interest in the policy voice and research outcomes of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service. Thankyou to all contributors and supporters.

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How religious inspiration has helped shape Australian social reform:

the Student Christian Movement and the Newman Society

Book Review
by Bruce Duncan CSsR
Director, The Yarra Institute

A Century of Influence: the Australian Student Christian Movement 1896–1996

Renate Howe
(Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009) pp.446.
RRP: $69.95 ISBN 978 1 92141 095 6

Golden Years: Grounds for Hope. Father Golden and the Newman Society 1950–1966

(ed. Val Noone, with Terry Blake, Mary Doyle and Helen Praetz. Melbourne: Golden Project, 2008), pp.270, RRP: $49.95
ISBN 978 0 646 50478 0.

These very different books explore the endeavours of Christian university students and staff to draw out the social implications of their faith commitments. They offer valuable lessons in how Christians today might effectively and appropriately bring their social values into the public forum in secular democracies like ours.

Renate Howe in her wonderfully illuminating account, *A Century of Influence*, traces the activities of the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) over a century from 1896. The ASCM involved mainly people from the Anglican and Protestant churches, though it gradually moved into more openly ecumenical contact with Catholic groups from the 1930s.

Val Noone's *Golden Years: Grounds for Hope. Father Golden and the Newman Society 1950–1966* revolves around the person of Father Jerry Golden SJ and the University Apostolate, as it was called, during the post-war economic boom and the excitement of the Second Vatican Council, opening Catholics to a closer involvement in social reform movements, and also to ecumenical collaboration. What makes this book unique are the accounts by numerous participants of how the Newman Society and Father Golden affected their lives. It combines telling anecdote with insightful reflection.

Some readers may be quite surprised at how so many of Australia's academic and political luminaries have been associated with either the ASCM or the Newman Society. These books unveil some of the significant channels for religiously inspired aspirations to promote human wellbeing in Australia's increasingly secular environment, and explore their practical effects. Our authors indicate that beneath our secular civil culture run deeper currents for social betterment, inspired by the Gospel in different ways.

Our authors do not intend to evaluate wider church efforts at social reform. Not only do leading clergy receive little attention, but readers need to keep in mind the wider networks of parish, educational and social welfare organisations.

However, the university youth groups were quite significant, though similar problems arose over time for the ASCM and the Newman Society: in relating to their wider church organisations, managing generational change in the student movements, absorbing developments in scripture and theology, and responding to pressing social issues of poverty, depression and war. In later periods, there is considerable overlap in thinking between the ASCM and the Newman Society, and cross fertilisation of ideas and influences. But in earlier periods, the churches tended to operate in separate silos, though in the universities the Anglican and the major Protestant groups through the ASCM developed strong links.

The sectarianism of the period, however, kept Catholics in particular confined to a parallel universe of thought and activity. Howe understandably does not explore this, but it may be helpful for readers to be aware of how this isolation was reinforced by the heavy-handed Vatican response to the Modernist crisis from 1907, in reaction to the new historical-critical methods in Scriptural studies, history and theology. Practically all the leading Catholic scholars were silenced and the anti-Modernist campaigns wreaked havoc on the social engagement of Catholics. This retreat into devotionalism meant that the Catholic Church was not engaged as constructively as it could have been with contemporary social ideas and movements. It was largely left to the Anglican and Protestant thinkers to play the lead roles in relating Christian values to public policy matters in the early twentieth century.

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How religious inspiration has helped shape Australian social reform:

As mainly working class, Catholics were naturally under-represented at the universities, and tended to concentrate on medicine and law. However, they formed active groups through the Campion Societies from the 1930s, struggling to appropriate Catholic history and identity, often in a polemical or apologetic context.

The Student Christian Movement

Renate Howe draws on her extensive knowledge of social and political movements as she highlights the important role the ASCM played in helping shape the intellectual and moral climate in Australia and the development of social policy that followed. One of her central themes traces the continual efforts to translate their understanding of the moral imperatives of Christianity into contemporary responses to changing social issues, alleviation of poverty, war and international conflict, and race relations.

The movement described itself as 'a university within a university'. The SCM study groups, meeting and conferences, driven by 'faith in search of understanding'… promoted 'a lay Christian intellectualism – relating theology to the political, social and cultural environment of a developing Australia.' (p.17).

As Howe chronicles, many of Australia's leading thinkers and academics, politicians and community activists, passed through the ranks of the Movement. With its international contacts, it opened up channels for the intellectual movements in Europe and elsewhere and Australian students were able to study in Europe, broadening their intellectual horizons. Howe traces the sharpening social focus from the World Student Christian Federation conference in Oxford in 1909. 'Central to the focus on Christianity and social change was a liberal interpretation of the Bible, an increasingly divisive issue' (p.113). A young William Temple strongly influenced the conference not just about relieving poverty, but about bringing Christian social principles into developing social and economic reforms.

After the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, Temple visited Australian cities, urging Christian students to apply 'Christ's ideal to the actual facts of contemporary life. We have practically no Christian social doctrine: and we must gradually find one. This is the work of the students.' (p.117). Temple's influence 'transformed social and theological understanding in the ASCM', Howe writes.

The ASCM soon moved in a more ecumenical direction with the move of the national office from Sydney to Melbourne, where it found strong support in the high standards of the newly founded Melbourne College of Divinity (1910), involving the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist colleges.

The ASCM in the early twenties dropped its missionary emphasis and instead concentrated on international and social issues, much to the dismay of the churches, which the Movement's leadership considered had retreated from 'pre-war social reform agendas' and failed to pursue negotiations for church union (p.163). Tensions with the churches were exacerbated by debates about the authority of the Bible and its interpretation.

After the 1930 visit to Australia of Dr Howard Guinness, a medical graduate of Cambridge University, Evangelical Unions (EU) were formed in Sydney and Melbourne in opposition to the 'Liberal' ASCM. The EU also moved into some Protestant schools and partially undermined the recruitment of students into the ASCM. Howe writes that in Melbourne 'in the mid-1930s the ASCM… found it easier to cooperate with the [Catholic] Newman Society than the EU' (p.193).

Yet the ASCM engaged strenuously in its social criticism in the light of the scriptures and faith, and produced many serious publications, including Burgmann's *The people of God: a study of the church*, its origin and destiny (p.1936).

Howe's diligent research extends into later debates and issues. The Second World War occasioned more urgent questions about pacifism and conscientious objection. Pacifism was strong in the ASCM, though Reinhold Neibuhr's writings had shifted some like Boyce Gibson to a 'just war' position (cf. p.216).

Howe also gives special attention to the role of women in the ASCM, and the awakening to the dominance of patriarchy in the churches and the movement itself.

By war's end, many of the people who had passed through the ASCM, with its ideals of full employment and social betterment, were moving into positions of influence in government departments and other organisations, including the Brotherhood of St Laurence. From 1950, a growing interaction and collaboration developed between the ASCM and the Catholic groups, particularly the Newman Society and the Young Christian Workers' Movement (YCW). Howe identifies as major achievements of the ASCM in the post-war period the fostering of ecumenism and awareness of Australia's role in the Asian and Pacific regions (p.308). The Movement was also involved with refugee resettlement work, which was eventually to evolve into the Ecumenical Migration Centre in Melbourne.

Our author continues her analysis of the ASCM into its response to the more radical critique from liberation theology, closer relations with Catholics during and after the Second Vatican Council, and the disintegrating cultural malaise from 1968. Many members opposed the Vietnam war in this turbulent period, and took part in demonstrations. The organisation supported conscientious objectors, and some members sheltered draft dodgers.

However, the increased politicisation of the ASCM, and at times support for some communist regimes, alienated earlier members and wider church communities. Howe writes that 'Frank Engel despaired at the younger generation's failure to see that "Christian

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social action needs to be based on firm biblical and theological foundations…"'; while Davis McCaughey thought that holding social justice and theology "together became too difficult. So people just held on to the social justice…" (p.377). McCaughey put his finger precisely on the issue: how to locate support for appropriate social action in one's religious commitment.

Renate Howe has produced a very professional history, based on extensive research and many interviews. The book is a splendid publication by UNSW Press, with fascinating photos, excellent footnoting and a scholarly index.

The 'University Apostolate'

Golden Years: Grounds for Hope offers a spectrum of views of how Catholics at Melbourne University attempted to bring their faith to bear on contemporary social problems. The book is the result of nine seminars run over 18 months in 2007–2008, and contains 100 contributions from 74 authors. Greg Dening, Emeritus Professor of History at Melbourne University, undertook the editing, but died suddenly in March 2008 before the book was completed. Val Noone stepped into the breach as chief editor, assisted by Terry Blake, Mary Doyle and Helen Praetz. Dening wrote that the 'University Apostolate' created a "realistic hope" within them of changing "our world for the better" (p.132).

Despite the recollections of many members and friends, Fr Jerry Golden SJ remains a curiously elusive presence in these pages. Dave McKenna thinks that "Fr Golden never gave a sustained talk" to the Newman Society during his 16 years as chaplain (p.99). Golden wrote little, though the *Golden Years* features his 1955 preface to the important Newman publication, 'The Incarnation in the University', arguing how Catholic faith should support the lay vocation to reshape the world in accord with the Gospel.

As many contributions attest, Golden's 'silences' were famously non-directive, for he wanted people to "discover for themselves the thrilling realisation of what being a Catholic means" (p.261). He was strongly influenced by the YCW Gospel discussion methods, which encouraged reflection, debate and personal appropriation of the message along with its practical implications for daily living.

Michael Costigan's reflection sketches the cultural and political divisions among Catholics at this time, including the opposition of the liberal Newman groups to the conservative anti-communist movements around BA Santamaria.

Rowan Ireland reviews the Newman Society publications, admiring "the depth of thought and passionate engagement in specific items" (p.100), while being aware that the Catholic Church was trying to catch up with what was happening elsewhere. "There is a tone of excitement about being part of a new church in the making", with some "anxiety about our failures of responsibility, about passing on the baton across student generations", and their own limited capabilities (p.104).

Various contributors (Marie Joyce, Jan Watson) comment on the spirituality that promoted their own development and careers. Tony Coady thought that while the Apostolate broke down clericalism, "we still had a touch of that triumphalism that has marred so much of the Catholic tradition" (p.126), and were not open enough to the thinking of Protestants and Anglicans.

Some contributors see the Apostolate methods contributing to their current interests. Geoff Lacey critiques current directions in technological change, and calls for a more organic way of living (p.137). He laments the way science has been diverted to serve the interests of capital and the military complex, when it could have concentrated on promoting social justice and human wellbeing. He looks for ways to disentangle science from a materialist world view (pp.168–169).

Len Puglisi pursues the implications of climate change for urban planning and models of economic growth. Dennis Green writes how key theologians "taught me how one might reconcile a critical approach to the hierarchical church with a love of the institution itself" (p.149). Paul Grundy adds, "Here is the mystery for Christians: to love... the world is to engage in its redemption", including through work as an engineer (p.155).

Other contributors point to negative aspects of the Apostolate. Margaret Coady indicates the clericalism among some; and with other women, Marie Joyce expresses the pain felt by continuing patriarchal assumptions in the Church, and the slow awakening to the insights of the women's movements among Apostolate members. Joanne Lee Dow writes of the disappointments after the Vatican Council, and the "prejudicial sex and gender inequities of the university and Australian society", along with more recent attacks on freedom of conscience in difficult moral matters (p.187–88). John Funder recounts the disappointment and dismay among many about Humanae Vitae, and the consequent disillusionment with Church leadership and allegiance.

On a more positive note, Rowan Ireland writes of "Our both-and spirituality" embodied in their key words: 'incarnation, community, search for truth, Trinity, living church, redemption of the world, vocation.' The news sheets give evidence of "practising in the groups, however, haltingly, even painfully, a new mode of being church... the theology was in the making in our reflections." (p.205–207).

Borrowing from Andrew Greely's 'both-and' tendency in Catholicism, Ireland writes that their spirituality "involved the creative quest for human flourishing in this world for ourselves and for others, on the understanding that God ordained and graced human flourishing". The "spirituality both endorsed secular modernity and criticised exclusive secularity that framed the discourse of faith as irrational…"

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How religious inspiration has helped shape Australian social reform: the Student Christian Movement and the Newman Society » continued

And they embraced individual freedom and conscience, but within the community of discourse and relationships. Rowan is disappointed with the new clericalism in the Catholic Church, and attacks on 'reflexive' theology, especially liberation theology. But he sees hope in another generation emerging, as indicated in *The Spirit of Generation Y* by Michael Mason, Ruth Webber and Andrew Singleton (pp.205–11).

Rosemary Crowley provides a fitting comment on which to summarise this collection. She writes that people are hungering for values, but "it is more likely to be brought into the public domain through the words and issues raised by men and women of commitment to equity and social justice." (p.229). Quite so.

Each generation must wrestle with how to bring its best values and beliefs into efforts to improve and expand social wellbeing. The context today is much more international, and presents very serious challenges. Readers of these books by Howe and Noone can take some comfort from the fact that Australia has a long tradition of social reform efforts inspired by the Gospel. And examples from the past can help inform renewed efforts at creating a more peaceful and equitable world.

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NEWS

Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service has made the following policy submissions:

Federal

- Human Rights Consultation, June 2009
- 'Income Management' legislation, January 2010
- School Funding Review Terms of Reference, May 2010
- National Consumer Credit Reform, August 2010

State

- Homelessness 2020 Strategy, December 2009
- Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing, January 2010
- Improving Public Housing Responses Segmented Waiting List, January 2010
- Flexible Learning Options, May 2010
- Skills for Victoria Implementation, May 2010 (joint submission with Melbourne City Mission and Brotherhood of St Laurence)

New Social Policy Research Unit publication

Researching the Gaps: the needs of women who have experienced long term domestic violence by Lucy Healey, Borderlands Cooperative. Available on Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service website.

Who's Who in the Social Policy Research Unit:

Marilyn Webster	Manager
Barry Pullen	Policy Consultant
Kathy Landvogt	Social Policy Researcher
Tanya Corrie	Senior Project Worker

We welcome new team members:

Tanya Corrie comes to us from banking and held various roles in branches, compliance and project management, and has studied policy, politics and economics. A commitment to social justice and an interest in policy brought about a change of career and sees her with us in the not for profit sector.

Will Farrier has joined us as a volunteer, assisting with editing and research support to the unit.

Students on placement:

Clare Gillett and Matt Tang (Monash University, Medicine) are doing a community placement scoping food insecurity at the Lynall Hall breakfast club.

Roisin Wade (Latrobe University, Health Sciences) is scoping the health status of trafficked women.

Gemma Carey (PhD, University of Melbourne, Population Health) is researching the Social Inclusion Agenda.

We have three students from RMIT University:

Patrick O'Keeffe (Social Work) is undertaking an internal service summary.

Irene Morgan (Social Science) is investigating education rebates.

Jacinta Cleary (Social Work/Psychology) is planning an evaluation for the St Kilda 'Outlandish' program.

Contact us:

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