

A Long History of Faith-based Welfare in Australia: Origins and Impact¹

The final decades of the twentieth century were marked by a retreat by Western governments from the provision of welfare and its replacement by a system of competitive tendering in which religious or faith-based organisations play a major role. While this move has led to lively debate internationally, in Australia the discussion was far more muted.

Although the balance between government and non-government provision has varied over time, 'faith-based welfare', to borrow an American term, has always been central to the way in which the nation provided for the disadvantaged and it was only in the early years of the current century that questions began to be raised. This paper explores the origins of church-state co-operation in the provision of welfare services in Australia before turning to focus on the strains that have developed in the relationship and the challenges these raise for the future.

Colonial Origins

The earliest Australian colonies were convict settlements. Anglican clergy came as part of the convict establishment and exercised any benevolent functions from that position. As both Stuart Piggin and Anne O'Brien have argued, their grounding in Evangelical Christianity made their involvement in philanthropy an intrinsic part of their role, a

¹ This paper was originally a keynote address delivered at the Religious History Association Conference at the University of Sydney in July 2014.

handmaid with government in the project of moral reform.² In this world view the poor were simultaneously 'always with us' yet capable of redemption and it was the role of the religious to both relieve and reform.³ It was this role which Governor Bourke was seeking to preserve when growing denominational diversity made the prospect of an Anglican establishment untenable. As several scholars have noted the Church Act of 1836 was not a first step towards secularisation but, rather, specifically designed to preserve a place for the churches in the emerging polity, collaborating with the state to produce 'social morality' and a Christian citizenship.⁴ This settlement, Greg Melleuish has argued, created 'a public sphere that is both secular, in the sense that it is free of the dominance of a particular religion or version of a religion, and religious, in the sense that it is informed by the religious values of those who participate in it'.⁵

Anne O'Brien has argued that 'while the ethic of service was certainly not derived exclusively from Christian teaching, in the development of the Australian colonies that

² Stuart Piggin, 'Power and Religion in a Modern State: Desecularisation in Australian History,' *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 3 (2014): 326-7. Anne O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 2.

³ O'Brien, 3.

⁴ Piggin, 328-9; David Stoneman, 'Richard Bourke: For the Honour of God and the Good of Man,' *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 3 (2014): 342, 55.

⁵ Gregory Melleuish, 'A Secular Australia? Ideas, Politics and the Search for Moral Order in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Australia,' *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 3 (2014): 401.

teaching was the primary element endorsing and sustaining it'.⁶ In some of the oldest settlements, Anglican and other churches attempted to reproduce some elements of the English Poor Law, setting aside a proportion of their government funding for the relief of the poor, and establishing district visiting societies to administer it.⁷ However, a general distaste amongst upwardly mobile colonials for the taxation which underlay such a system meant that, in most areas, voluntary charity was used to deliver services in areas of identified need. In the absence of a Poor Law, such charities were able to argue that they were delivering an essential service and were often successful in petitioning governments to underwrite their work.

The subscriber charity model, increasingly prevalent in Britain at the time, became the dominant form. Although it was contractual in structure it retained many of the aspects of what American scholars, John Bartkowski and Helen Regan have labelled covenantal charity, appealing to upwardly mobile settlers, enabling them to both honour religious obligations to care for the less fortunate and consolidate their own position in society, while allowing them to choose how much of their wealth they would donate.⁸ Some of the oldest large relief giving organisations had their origins in religious associations. The Benevolent

⁶ Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005). 64.

⁷ Shurlee Swain, 'In Our Midst: The Church, Prostitutes and the Poor, in *Anglo-Catholicism in Melbourne*, ed. Colin Holden (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1997), 100-1.

⁸ John P. Bartkowski and Helen A. Regis, *Charitable Choices : Religion, Race, and Poverty in the Post-Welfare Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). 36.

Society of NSW, established in 1818, initially included 'religious instruction and consolation' alongside relief in its objects, and monitored applicants as to their religious observance.⁹ In other cases the model was less overtly religious but, as prominent citizens came together to form charitable organisations, clergy automatically became *ex officio* members.¹⁰ While men were of vital importance in negotiating the legal and financial elements involved in the establishment of new charities, much of the day-to-day work was done by women and relationships formed between clergy wives on the voyage out, or in their moves around the colony after arrival, provided the basis for many of the ongoing colonial social and philanthropic networks.¹¹ Scholars who use the dominance of subscriber charities to argue that the churches were little involved in relief ignore this important contribution.¹² Colonial Melbourne, for example, would have been very thinly 'charitied' if it were not for the contribution of Bishop Charles Perry and his wife, who between them took the lead in establishing the foundational institutions and organisations which they believed a British

⁹ Brian Dickey, *No Charity There: A Short History of Social Welfare in Australia* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980). 23.

¹⁰ R.A. Cage, *Poverty Abounding Charity Aplenty* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1992). 34.

¹¹ Peter Sherlock, 'Wholesome Examples and the Getting of Wisdom: Colonial Clerical Wives at St Peter's,' in *Anglo-Catholicism in Melbourne*, ed. Colin Holden (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1997), 37.

¹² Cage, 18.

colony would need: hospitals, orphan asylums and institutions for those unable to work because of age or disability.¹³

The public charities which the Perrys and other elite figures helped to establish were always prey to sectarianism.¹⁴ Ostensibly non-denominational they encoded a Protestant Evangelical Christianity which could and did get embroiled in controversy. Charities needed Catholic involvement if they were to be able to claim to represent the whole community, but there were few Catholics affluent enough to qualify for membership, and a celibate clergy deprived the denomination of the clergy wives who had proved to be so valuable a resource in the construction of the charitable network.¹⁵ While hospitals and other major institutions could enlist Catholic clergy to their committees of management, lower level charities often became by default Protestant enclaves. In the early years the division between religious and secular was not clear. 'Many large voluntary organisations ... used Christian symbolism and language, comfortable with a loosely Protestant interdenominational outlook.'¹⁶ However, the result was often a dry or dessicated form of

¹³ Charles Perry was involved in the foundation of the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum, the Society for Promoting Morality, the Melbourne Hospital, the Blind Asylum, the Immigrants' Home and the Deaf and Dumb Institution, while delegating to his wife a similar role in relation to the Governesses Home, the Carlton Refuge, the Orphan Asylum, the Lying-in Hospital and the Melbourne Ladies Benevolent Society.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, 68-9.

¹⁵ Shurlee Swain, 'Women and Philanthropy in Colonial and Post-colonial Australia,' *Voluntas* 7, no. 4 (1996): 433.

¹⁶ O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*: 65.

religion, visible in the compulsory prayers and nominal visiting designed primarily not to offend denominational beliefs. Finding such Protestant domination threatening, the Catholic Church responded by developing its own range of charitable institutions, staffed by imported religious brothers and sisters, for which they also received government support.

The Protestant dominance also provided a religious underpinning to the harsh distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving which underlay colonial charity and the punitive services that they served to produce. Christians in such situations were replicating a model of charity that assumed a static society in which the more fortunate had a responsibility to assist 'their brethren, whom it pleases the same God to afflict with poverty and want'.¹⁷ Those used to the English model of relief struggled with the embryonic egalitarianism they found in Australia. As Anglican deaconess Emma Silcock remarked: 'here you see Jack is the master, not the man, and that is very difficult for us ... The people seem to consider it is our duty to do everything we can for them and they are not at all grateful!'¹⁸ By positioning themselves in opposition to the increasingly democratic spirit of the age, the elite Christian women who dominated the distribution of charitable relief, Hilary Carey argues, played a significant role in the rise of anti-religion in Australian popular culture.¹⁹

Denominationalism

¹⁷ Report, Rules and Receipts and Expenditure of St Peter's District Visiting Society, 1850-1, Archival collection of St Peter's Anglican Church, Melbourne.

¹⁸ Cited in Shurlee Swain, 'Philanthropy and Welfare in the Diocese of Melbourne,' in *Melbourne Anglicans*, ed. Brian Porter (Melbourne: Mitre Books, 1997), 121.

¹⁹ Hilary Carey, *Believing in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 105.

The assumption that a non-denominational Christianity could speak for all was not to last. The latter years of the nineteenth century saw an increasingly specialisation. As the Catholic Church expanded its institutions in order to preserve users within the Catholic way of life, Evangelicals from a range of Protestant denominations established missions in the inner cities which had conversion as their central concern. This proliferation of services was indicative of a fierce competition for souls. The centrality of conversion diminished the emphasis on establishing deservingness or desert, although the principle of less eligibility, the notion that the level of relief should never exceed that which the poorest worker could obtain through his own efforts, remained.

Separation by denomination began in relation to children, considered to be the most vulnerable to proselytism and hence in need of the greatest protection.²⁰ In most colonies the establishment of government-supported supposedly non-denominational orphanages in major cities from the 1850s was quickly followed by the opening of Catholic institutions which were eligible for similar levels of assistance. When Victoria, in 1887, decided to license individuals as child rescuers, empowered to take guardianship of children they considered to be at risk, all the major denominations were quick to put forward their own candidates so that children could be preserved within their own tradition. The Protestant domination of ladies benevolent societies, the main source of outdoor relief in many areas, provided a strong impetus for the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia. Although membership was restricted to Catholic laymen, the introduction of ladies auxiliaries provided an outlet for Catholic women with the time to become involved in charity work.

²⁰ Dickey, 17.

Focused on home visitation the Society worked to keep people within the faith, resisting the temptations offered by the growing number of Protestant missions in the areas where the Catholic poor lived. By the turn of the century this competition was intense with several denominations adopting the mission model in order to establish a link with what they saw as the unchurched poor.²¹ The inner cities had long provided a place for the individual, religiously inspired, entrepreneur, much to the annoyance of those who sought to regulate charity. While men like Dr John Singleton in Melbourne, and George Ardill in Sydney, were able to build personal 'empires' they did not develop the succession plans that could transform their personal initiatives into something more lasting.²² The inner city missions filled this gap. Many copied the methods of the Salvation Army which had demonstrated, since its arrival in Australia in the 1880s, the efficacy of a combination of lively worship and charitable services in bringing the poor to God. For Anglicans, Methodist, and some of the smaller Protestant denominations, missions offered a solution to declining church attendances as the upwardly mobile left for the suburbs. Most Australian cities saw the opening of Central Missions by the various denominations within Methodism. Based on

²¹ Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain, *All God's Children: A Centenary History of the Methodist Homes for Children and the Orana Peace Memorial Homes* (Canberra: Acorn Press, 1989). 9-10.

²² Sylvia Morrissey, 'Singleton, John (1808–1891),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/singleton-john-4584/text7531>, (viewed 4 September 2015); Heather Radi, 'Ardill, George Edward (1857–1945),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ardill-george-edward-5048/text8413>, (viewed 4 September 2015).

a British model they combined new and more populist methods of worship, often in halls and theatres rather than the traditional churches, with material aid, clubs and activities and visiting and sometimes nursing services.²³

Many of the missions also developed dedicated sisterhoods that offered an outlet for women seeking to move outside their accepted sphere. Careful to distance themselves from the 'Papist' elements of Catholic religious orders, they were one of the under-acknowledged precursors to the development of professional social work, although the centrality of conversion to their motivation rendered them fundamentally conservative in their approach.²⁴ Australian cities did not provide a nurturing environment for the settlement movement which was the source of much that was transformative in Britain and the United States. Although there were many attempts to persuade young Christians to live

²³ The histories of the various central missions are detailed in: Ivor Bailey, *Mission Story: The Story of the Adelaide Mission*, (Adelaide: The Mission, 1988); Brian Dickey and Elaine Martin, *Building Community: A History of the Port Adelaide Central Mission* (Adelaide: Port Adelaide Wesley Centre Inc., 1999); Harry Freeman, *Collingwood Coke* (Melbourne: Spectrum, 1984); Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain, *The Challenge of the City: The Centenary History of Wesley Central Mission 1893-1993* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1993); Don Wright, *Mantle of Christ: A History of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984).

²⁴ O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*: 104.

alongside the poor, none developed ‘the residential base fundamental to the “bridge-building” ideals of the international settlement movement’.²⁵

Over time, most missions augmented their direct relief services with a range, or what many called a ‘chain’, of institutions designed to address the longer-term needs that their mission work had exposed. These included babies homes, child rescue societies, female rescue homes, maternity homes, night shelters for the homeless, and institutions for the aged and people with disabilities. There is an argument that inner city missions provided a way in which Christians could resolve the conflict between biblical injunction that reified the poor, and a very real reluctance to have them sitting alongside the respectable in church – that is in our midst versus fields of mission.²⁶ Richard Broome has argued that missions encoded:

a middle-class ... view of the slum problem. Those who were morally upright and religious were classed as ‘worthy and respectable’ whereas the sinful and the poor were apart from religion and therefore immoral ... [They were] as much concerned with cleaning up the drunks and the prostitutes for the national good, as with preaching the gospel for the sake of their God.²⁷

Richard Kennedy was even harsher: ‘Capitalist individualism,’ he wrote, ‘permeated the religious charities. Generally speaking they embodied the dominant class values of that day

²⁵ Renate Howe, *A Century of Influence: The Australian Student Christian Movement 1896-1996* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009). 120.

²⁶ Swain, 'In our Midst,' 99.

²⁷ Richard Broome, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1988). 38.

... Christians of the bourgeois persuasion *practised* ungenerous assistance in order to preserve "character". Protestantism always had insinuated that the unfortunate were probably being punished for wickedness.²⁸

Much of this criticism relates to the later mission years. While some of the early missions did engage with debates around the systemic rather than individual causes of poverty, the retreat into a service provision or institutional model was indicative of a blunting of whatever radical edge such missions had possessed. Although Evangelicals routinely called their institutions 'homes', and argued that they were more loving and caring than the older and larger institutions of the past, small, and often poorly regulated homes created a space for harsh, and at times bizarre practices. This tendency was accentuated by the practice of staffing such organisations on the basis of mission or call, rather than looking for professional qualifications or skills, a practice that lies at the root of some later instances of abuse. As missions became more conservative the emphasis returned to the place of alcohol and gambling in the causation of poverty and an identification with the 'Wowser' cause did little to increase their attraction to many of those they set out to serve. Mission institutions were also severely under-resourced as the sectarianism which they encoded rendered them ineligible for the government assistance which underwrote the economies of the older established charities.²⁹

Theological underpinnings

²⁸ Richard Kennedy, 'Charity and Ideology in Colonial Victoria,' in *Australian Welfare History: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kennedy (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982), 71.

²⁹ O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, 123.

In order to understand the diversity which emerged in the development of faith-based charity it is useful to examine the theology that Christians invoked in explaining their involvement with the poor. Anne O'Brien and Brian Dickey have both argued for a clear distinction between Evangelical and Incarnational understandings of Christian duty and service. For Evangelicals, represented across denominations ranging from Anglicans through to Salvationists, charity was primarily a way of bringing people to God. Consequently, they measured their success in terms of conversions gained rather than poverty relieved.³⁰ Their good works served as a demonstration of individual conversion, fulfilling their duty as Christians to show love for others. Evangelicals claimed to offer forgiveness rather than condemnation within homes that often mimicked the structure of the family. However, their compassion was tempered by a sense of moral superiority which justified their interference in the lives of those who came to them for help.³¹ Catholics and Anglo-Catholics took a more Incarnational view valuing the poor because their suffering was seen as bringing them closer to God.³² Charity was not primarily about evangelization but about bearing witness and adhering to the values of the Gospel, seeing the Christ rather than the sinner in the individuals who came to them for help. In their churches and institutions they looked for outward conformity rather than individual conversion, believing that ritual and practice would bring the poor to salvation. However, such a distinction does not help to explain the tendency of most Christian charitable outreach to retreat into conservatism.

³⁰ Anne O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison: The Poor in New South Wales 1880-1918* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988). 197; Dickey, 81.

³¹ O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison*, 190.

³² O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison*, 192-3.

Although Christians from both traditions could cite instances in which their intervention had brought about meaningful changes in people's lives, overwhelmingly they were socially regressive, and as such functioned to alienate large sections of the working class. At the same time, their followers, anxious to preserve the purity of their faith, shunned the secular forces that were working towards change.

In some of the more radical of the missions a third approach emerged. Adopting a social gospel analysis its followers focused on structural rather than individual causes of poverty, and argued that both individual and society had to be transformed if Christ's teachings were to be fulfilled. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that advocates of this approach were simply liberals moving away from an older narrower religion, but not yet ready to embrace a secular world. Rather their actions were grounded in a particular reading of the Gospel – a reading which focused on texts that emphasised a common humanity rather than those which reinforced the existing social hierarchy. Believing God to be still active in the world, advocates of the social gospel argued that existing inequalities could be overcome, and that it was their responsibility as Christians to work towards such change.³³ However, this new reading was also fragile, co-existing with institutions and breadlines which conformed more closely to older Evangelical views of poverty, and laying the basis for the campaigns around temperance and morality which would be labelled as Wovserism in the early decades of the 20th century.

³³ Howe and Swain, *The Challenge of the City*. 12-13. For a discussion of a similarly short-lived Tasmanian initiative see Robert S. M. Withycombe, 'The Politics of Caring for the Poor: Anglican Responses in 1890s Tasmania,' *Journal of Religious History* 31, no. 3 (2007).

Church and State in the Federated Nation

The position of religion in the constitution adopted at Federation in 1901 needs to be understood in terms of the sectarian tensions which had threatened community harmony throughout the nineteenth century. As a result, Stuart Piggin has argued, the Constitution guaranteed a 'freedom of religion, not freedom from it'.³⁴ Although the Constitution empowered the Federal Government to make provision for a national social security scheme, poverty relief and service delivery remained predominantly a state responsibility, leaving existing relationships between church and state unchanged. Welfare history in the twentieth century has tended to be written as a triumphal story of the rise of a welfare state that was seen as inherently secular. However, throughout this period the core contribution of faith-based charities, and their easy partnership with government, continued largely unchanged. Most state children's departments were increasingly dependent on denominational orphanages, children's homes and reformatories to accommodate their wards. Church-based agencies were also key players in what has come to be known as the 'heyday' of adoption, providing the 'homes' in which parents could secrete daughters who threatened to bring shame upon the family, and the screening services through which their babies were transferred into 'good Christian families'.³⁵ Despite initial concern on the part of the churches that the expansion of social security in the post-war era might diminish the need for their welfare services, faith-based agencies were able to reconstitute themselves in order to benefit from Federal subsidies available in areas such as marriage guidance and

³⁴ Piggin, 332.

³⁵ Shurlee Swain and Renate Howe, *Single Mothers and their Children: Disposal, Punishment and Survival in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73-80.

aged care, and to fill the gaps in government provision, offering new and experimental services in areas of as yet unrecognised need.³⁶ Such arrangements did not arise out of extensive policy debate, for no such debate was considered necessary. Church-state partnership was the Australia way.

This unofficial partnering continued largely undisturbed until the church-state alliance began to fracture during the 1960s. Falling rates of church attendance broke the link between religion and good citizenship. It was not that Christians did not continue to be good citizens, but they were now in a much more crowded marketplace and their views were losing influence with key policy makers. In the 1950s Christians had been automatically consulted by politicians contemplating policy change and their views were taken into account. By the late 1960s they no longer had such confidence.³⁷ With the rise of a new range of mostly progressive social movements, too many church leaders seemed to be defending principles that again could be equated with wowsersism, while those who sought to move with the times were accused of moving away from fundamental Christian beliefs. At the same time, professionalization and a growing dependence on government rather than congregational fundraising, forced many faith-based agencies and their sponsoring

³⁶ Elaine Martin, *Changing Relationships: Marriage Guidance Council to Relationships Australia* (Adelaide: Relationships Australia (SA), 1998), 5-8. O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, 155.

³⁷ Howe and Swain, *The Challenge of the City*, 153-4. For a detailed examination of the challenges faced by churches in the 1960s see David Hilliard, 'The Religious Crisis of the 1950s: The Experience of the Australian Churches', *Journal of Religious History* 21, no.2 (1997).

churches to reconsider the nature of their relationship. To what extent was an agency Christian when the bulk of its staff were no longer church members, the bulk of its funding came from Government and few of its clients had any association at all with organised religion?³⁸

In his analysis of faith-based agencies in the post war environment, John Murphy again distinguishes between the evangelical, incarnational and social gospel approach.³⁹ This paper argues for a modification of his classification. In the face of the challenges that churches and their welfare arms faced in the 1960s and beyond there were two clear pathways: a retreat into fundamentalism and an embracing of old/wowser values, or cutting loose and adopting a radical oppositional response. Both of these approaches could find a clear gospel justification, the first drawing on the 'thou shalt nots' in the Bible, the second on the liberationist verses, texts which were also being invoked by radical movements across the first and third worlds.⁴⁰ There was, however, a third alternative which, at least initially, became the majority response. The third pathway involved a distancing and disguising of religious affiliations in order to shed the baggage of the past without coming into open conflict with either church or government sponsors. Melbourne's Wesley Mission, for example, adopted as its guiding principle Wolfensberger's normalisation (later social role

³⁸ For a discussion of this dilemma in the US context see: Bartkowski and Regis, 168.

³⁹ John Murphy, 'Suffering, Vice, And Justice: Religious Imaginaries and Welfare Agencies in Post-War Melbourne,' *Journal of Religious History* 31, no. 3 (2007).

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, 179.

valorisation) theory.⁴¹ Normalisation, it argued, was grounded in Christian theology, but its introduction saw all of Wesley's services stripped of any overtly Christian signage or practices, at the cost of confusion to supporters and some residents as well.⁴² While the path of secularisation may have seemed simplest to agencies negotiating their role in an apparently post-Christian world, it did strain their relationship with their sponsoring churches, unsure of just why they should be continuing to offer support.

Faith-based charity in a post-welfare state Australia

At the dawn of the twenty-first century it was becoming clear that each of these pathways brought its own challenges. Faith-based charity has been a centre of contestation internationally generated by the move from conservative governments to wind back the welfare state, a move that always assumed, implicitly or explicitly, both that charity would take up the space that the government had vacated and that it was inherently better equipped to do so. The contestation has been comparatively muted in Australia, except as an echo from US debates. The nature of the retreat from the welfare state is culturally specific and definitions of a faith-based charity, or at least the faith-based charity that causes alarm, differ between nations.⁴³ In the United States, where the division between Church and State is an ideological flashpoint, the controversy focused on those charities

⁴¹ Wolf Wolfensberger, *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services* (Toronto: Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded, 1972).

⁴² Howe and Swain, *The Challenge of the City*, 195-6.

⁴³ Grace Davie, 'A European Perspective on Religion and Welfare: Contrasts and Commonalities,' *Social Policy and Society* 11(2012): 594.

which sought to use their position to evangelise as well as relieve. Yet, it was the 'moral values' and 'holistic goals' which typified such agencies that made them so attractive to the conservative reformers behind the US Charitable Choices program.⁴⁴ In the UK, where church and state have a long historical relationship, alarm about government support for faith-based charity related almost exclusively to Islamic organisations.⁴⁵ In Australia, where the increasing focus on faith-based charities was evolutionary rather than revolutionary, the alarm was raised by Marion Maddox whose primary focus was on the Howard government's links with the Christian Right.⁴⁶

The old comfortable partnership with government had been disrupted by the introduction of competitive tendering, compelling church-based agencies to compete against each other for the government funding on which they were all now dependent. Government had the upper hand and while the use contractual rhetoric could effectively defuse opposition to religious involvement it can also threaten the basic principles that underlie Christian relief.⁴⁷ Faith-based agencies can be both socially progressive and socially regressive, but they share a commitment to transformation. Where that transformation is

⁴⁴ Bartkowski and Regis, 5.

⁴⁵ Mark Hill, Russell Sandberg and Norman Doe, *Religion and Law in the United Kingdom*, (The Netherlands: Kluwer Law International, 2011), 102.

⁴⁶ Marion Maddox, *God under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005).

⁴⁷ Bartkowski and Regis, 171.

structural rather than individual it sits uneasily with government priorities.⁴⁸ Following the election of the conservative Howard Government, Australian agencies came to share the concerns of similar organisations in the UK that in becoming over-reliant on government funding they faced the threat of being constrained in their role as advocates for the 'oppressed and dispossessed'.⁴⁹

Forced to justify their existence in an environment in which both secular agencies and commercial businesses compete for attention and support, many have sought both to re-articulate the role of faith in a Christian service and re-connect with local Christian communities. Agencies in the 'passing' group were challenged by the return of religion, and the rise of faith-based discourse, leading them to rethink their language and presentation. For most, church-based welfare work is seen as modelling rather than preaching Christianity, with workers within those agencies who are practising Christians framing their involvement as part of their commitment to their faith. 'Although the work of Christian welfare agencies must necessarily have much in common with agencies without a distinctive base,' argued Melbourne's former Anglican Archbishop Keith Rayner, 'their primary motivation will be to express the love of God towards his creation.'⁵⁰ The distinctive message of the

⁴⁸ Christopher Baker, 'Spiritual Capital and Economies of Grace: Redefining the Relationship between Religion and the Welfare State,' *Social Policy and Society* 11(2012): 571.

⁴⁹ Sheila Furness and Philip Gilligan, 'Faith-based Organisations and UK Welfare Services: Exploring Some Ongoing Dilemmas,' *Social Policy and Society* 11(2012): 608. For similar concerns expressed in the US see: Bartkowski and Regis, 7-8.

⁵⁰ Cited in Shurlee Swain, 'Do You Want Religion with That? Welfare History in a Secular Age,' *History Australia* 2, no. 3 (2005): 79.6.

Gospel, Catholic organizations have argued, is that Christian welfare organizations should stand alongside those who they serve and work for a more just and equitable society.⁵¹ However, if to abide by such principles an agency needs to challenge some of the conditions set by Government there will almost certainly be another faith-based organization with a different, and less radical, vision of faith and mission prepared to tender for the contract in their stead.

Radical oppositionals faced a major challenge under the Howard Government's contracting out programs which demanded silence, and acquiescence in relation to the key tenets of welfare policy as a condition of funding. Where Christian leaders spoke out against an increasingly punitive welfare policy, the Government and its supporters in the media were able to point out that the policies were being implemented by other Christian agencies. Opponents were easily cast as Marxists or men of yesterday, misreading the Gospels in support of a now discarded ideology. In the face of such a sustained attack, and having voluntarily cut themselves off from government funding, few such radical organisations emerged with their budgets and reputations unscathed.⁵² The return to fundamental principles group was also divided. Organisations like the Salvation Army, with a long and distinguished record of Christian service, came under increasing questioning because of their close association with the Howard Government. Having built its reputation on non-discriminatory relief, the Salvation Army found itself relieving in one service the very

⁵¹ See for example the Mission Statement of the St Vincent de Paul Society, available at: https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/About/Mission__Vision/ (viewed 4 September 2015).

⁵² For a fuller investigation of these issues see Amy Webster, 'Political Wolves in Charity Sheep's Clothing?: The Outsourcing of Welfare to the Faith-based Sector under the Howard Government,' PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010.

same people it was compelled to 'breach' through its employment agencies, raising questions within the organisation as to the morality of its actions.⁵³ In more recent times, its acceptance of contracts to provide services for offshore immigration detention centres has brought it into further conflict both with government and with key supporters.⁵⁴

Confronting the abuses of the past

Maddox's concern was not with such issues however but rather with the opportunities which contracting offered for the newer Pentecostal mega churches to become prominent players in the welfare field. The American material on which she and other critics drew, focused almost exclusively on the morality of using government money to fund the promotion of religious belief, an argument that has gained little traction in the Australian context. Less attention has been paid to a second potential risk, the reliance on mission in the selection of staff which opens such new organisations to some of the now well-identified dangers from the past. A series of inquiries contemporaneous with the contracting out of welfare services, gave people who had been the subject of church-based

⁵³ Dennis Garland and Michael Darcy, "'Working Together?': the Salvation Army and the Job Network', *Organization* 16, 5 (2009): pp. 764-7.

⁵⁴ Bruce Haigh, 'Waiting for Salvation in a Nauru Detention Centre,' *Crikey*, 14 December 2012. Available at: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/12/14/waiting-for-salvation-in-a-nauru-detention-centre/> (accessed 30 June 2015); Sarah Whyte, 'Manus Island Work by Salvation Army a Failure, Says Former Worker,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/manus-island-work-by-salvation-army-a-failure-says-former-worker-20140329-35qek.html> (accessed 30 June 2015).

charity in the past the opportunity to speak publicly about their experiences, disrupting, Anne O'Brien notes, any claims the churches had to occupying the high moral ground.⁵⁵ The various state and federal inquiries into the treatment of children in care, for example, make sobering reading for anyone seeking to maintain a belief in the essential goodness of such Christian homes.⁵⁶ 'Suffer the little children for they shall see God – so the church taught us', wrote careleaver Ian Morwood in his submission to the Forgotten Australians Inquiry. 'And by God, they made sure we suffered and still suffer,' he concluded.⁵⁷

'The primary use of religion in Children's Homes,' the Care Leavers of Australasia Network co-founder Joanna Penglase argues, 'was as a tool to inculcate in children a belief

⁵⁵ O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, 205.

⁵⁶ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: HREOC, 1997); Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record Report on Child Migration* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2001); Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-home Care as Children* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, 2004); Australia Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* (Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, 2012).

⁵⁷ Forgotten Australians Submissions 2004-7. Submission 100. Ian Morwood.

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/submissions/sublist (viewed 7 January 2014).

in their own inferiority, and to rationalize punishment.⁵⁸ Church homes, the Forgotten Australians report argues, were very closed institutions, employing staff on the basis of mission rather than professionalism and largely spared from outsider supervision because of the trust inherent in their status as religious organisations.⁵⁹ By creating a space in which survivors could be heard, the inquiries have exposed a counter-narrative which depicts the homes as anything but Christian. The witnesses described a very un-Christ-like world in which emotional, physical and sexual abuse was all but normative. While many church leaders have stepped forward to apologise for past wrongs and to commit resources to compensation the suggestion that the problems were systemic and not simply the actions of individuals fallen into sin has deeply damaged any claim that could be made for the superiority of faith-based care. Recent instances of substandard and at times abusive care in church-auspiced aged care facilities would suggest that such problems cannot be safely confined to the past.⁶⁰

All churches have been hurt by allegations that they have harboured sexual abusers within their communities although the focus has fallen most heavily on the Roman Catholic Church. Any such allegations suggest a fundamental contradiction of the notion of the

⁵⁸ Joanna Penglase, *Orphans of the Living: Growing up in 'Care' in Twentieth-century Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005), 97.

⁵⁹ *Forgotten Australians*, 130.

⁶⁰ For the latest such instance see: 'Aged Care Facility Issues Statement after Abuse Allegations,' *News Mail* (Bundaberg), 16 February 2015. Available at: <http://www.news-mail.com.au/news/aged-care-facility-issues-statement-after-abuse-al/2545181/> (viewed 2 July 2015).

church as a place of safe refuge and a breach of Christ's teachings, contributing to continuing declines both in the church's engagement with young people and its reputation in the community at large.⁶¹ Too often the response has been to retreat into a legalistic defence, reinforcing the notion that the church is more concerned with protecting its assets than in reaching out to those who have been harmed by past practices.⁶²

While, throughout the recent inquiries, representatives of the Catholic Church have been quick to apologise, there is a shift over time as to the way in which they have framed both their apologies, and their responses to their accusers. When the earliest allegations surfaced there was some attempt to place the blame onto the victims, suggesting that child migrants, for example, were sexually perverted before they arrived in Australia. By the time the inquiries began the evidence was too strong to be combated in this way.⁶³ Catholic apologies before the Bringing them home inquiry positioned their sorrow as the product of hindsight, expressing regret for policies and practices considered beneficial at the time.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Nicky Stanley, Jill Manthorpe, and Bridget Penhale, eds., *Institutional Abuse: Perspectives across the Life Course* (London: Routledge, 1999), 223. Garth Blake, 'Child Protection and the Anglican Church of Australia,' *Journal of Anglican Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 91-2.

⁶² Patrick Parkinson, 'What does the Lord Require of Us? Child Sexual Abuse in the Churches,' *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 4, no. 2 (2002): 26.

⁶³ Lost Innocents Submissions: Submission 57,
http://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/1999_02/child_migrat/submissions/sub57_pdf.ashx (viewed 3 September 2015)

⁶⁴ Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines) submission 433 page 1 quoted in *Bringing Them Home Report*, ch 14. Available at

They also sought to share the blame, arguing that it was Government, not the Church that was responsible for the removal of Indigenous children from their families, and that it was never critical, at the time, of the institutions in which they were placed.⁶⁵ As the scandal around sexual abuse grew, the church became increasingly suspicious of the media coverage, arguing that it was intent on celebrating the fall from grace of a respected institution which had claimed to be the moral guardian of society.⁶⁶

Throughout the various inquiries the Church has been cautious about admitting liability and positioned itself as the guardian of the reputations of the hard-working religious who had not been abusive, and the children who did not see themselves as victims.⁶⁷

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-chapter-14> (viewed 2 September 2015)

⁶⁵ Chairman, Bishops' Committee for Social Welfare, Chairperson, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Catholic Council and National Director, Australian Catholic Social Welfare

Commission, page 1 quoted in *Bringing Them Home Report*, ch 14. Available at

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-chapter-14> (viewed 2 September 2015)

⁶⁶ Lost Innocents Inquiry submissions: Barry Coldrey, Submission 15,

http://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/1999_02/child_migrat/submissions/sub15_pdf.ashx (viewed 3 September 2015).

⁶⁷ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Child Migration, Official Committee Hansard, 22 March 2001, CA 483, Brother Anthony Shanahan, :

However, the sympathy that such testimony elicited has diminished over time. At the Victorian Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Non-government Organisations in 2013, the cautious respect that had marked earlier investigations was replaced by an open hostility to church authorities, with bishops, archbishops and provincial leaders all called to explain their past failures. The Church and its agencies came to the inquiry well aware of the issues likely to be raised, but perhaps less prepared for the way in which their explanations would be received.⁶⁸ They actively confronted allegations, denying that the Church had deliberately constructed itself in such a way as to avoid liability and make it difficult for victims to seek compensation through the courts, or that bishops had failed in not removing all support from perpetrators.⁶⁹ Church leaders used their submissions to combat charges of guilt by association, spelling out more clearly what abuse they had been aware of and when, and detailing, if not always justifying, the ways in which

http://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/1999_02/child_migrat/hansard/22mar01_pdf.ashx (viewed 3 September 2015).

⁶⁸ Parliament of Victoria, Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-government Organisations, 2012, Submission *Facing the Truth: Learning from the Past How the Catholic Church in Victoria has Responded to Child Abuse*, available at:

http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/57th/Child_Abuse_Inquiry/Submissions/Catholic_Church_in_Victoria.pdf (viewed 3 September 2015).

⁶⁹ *Facing the Truth*; Parliament of Victoria, Submission Cardinal George Pell, available at:

http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/57th/Child_Abuse_Inquiry/Submissions/Cardinal_George_Pell.pdf (viewed 3 September 2015).

they had dealt with the offenders when they became known.⁷⁰ In response to accusations that the reparations schemes which were by then in place actively deterred victims from reporting abuse to the police, they argued that most victims did not want to pursue this course and positioned the Church as their defender.⁷¹

Confronted with a series of cases in which the church had been slow to respond, Melbourne Archbishop, Denis Hart, responded somewhat flippantly 'better late than never'. 'People will make their own minds', he added after a further attack on the church's defence of its reputation, to which committee member Andrea Coote responded:

The victims have made up their minds. They do not believe what you are saying. They believe that you are spending money on lawyers and spin doctors, but you do not actually understand and admit that not only were there some individual priests, but your church covered it up. It spent money to protect the reputation of the church from scandal, that that is your prime motivator.⁷²

The shift from people to victims is crucial to understanding this and subsequent exchanges, for while the church continued to appeal to an understanding still widely believed within the

⁷⁰ Pell submission.

⁷¹ *Facing the Truth*.

⁷² Family and Community Development Committee Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-government Organisations, Transcript 20 May 2013, 23,

available at:

http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/57th/Child_Abuse_Inquiry/Transcripts/Catholic_Archdiocese_of_Melbourne_20-May-13.pdf (viewed 3 September 2015).

male clerical hierarchy and their almost exclusively male advisors, its representatives misunderstood the degree to which that had changed, with the victim voice now becoming the dominant discourse. While the bishops and religious leaders argued that perpetrators too were victims who needed to be supported, such arguments only served to further condemn them in the eyes of the committee and its supporters.⁷³

The current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continues this line of approach. Twenty-three of the 33 case studies conducted by mid 2015 related to religious organisations, eleven of which concerned the Catholic Church. In addition to hearing victim and offender testimony, the Commission has called to account senior church figures, asking them to assess their actions against the policies of their denomination, the laws of the states in which the offences took place, and the principles of their religion. While most are all too ready to admit some culpability and to express general regret, they continue to struggle with lines of questioning that seek to identify institutional rather than individual failings, and with the troubling issue of how to deal with former offenders within an ethic of repentance and forgiveness while protecting children from further harm. The responses of senior figures to cross examination and the negative publicity which inevitably follows has led to calls for a review of the tax exempt status of churches and a general denigration of the role of religion in society.⁷⁴

⁷³ See for example: Victorian Inquiry transcripts 3 May 2013, 25-6, available at:

http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/fcdc/inquiries/57th/Child_Abuse_Inquiry/Transcripts/Christian_Brothers_03-May-13.pdf (viewed 3 September 2015).

⁷⁴ See for example: Terry Hamilton, Submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 30 June 2014, available at:

Conclusion

When nineteenth-century philanthropists sought to persuade churchgoers to contribute to their cause the most commonly invoked text was always Matthew 25:40 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me', a verse so familiar that, in some contexts, it could be referred to simply as the 'Inasmuch'. Very neatly it reminded the potential giver that the poor stand in the place of Christ, and that, therefore, in helping them they can provide direct service to the Saviour. Charity in the Christian sense of the word has not always been apparent in services delivered in the church's name in the past. Yet, despite its mixed and contested record, Christian benevolence, or organisations with a Christian base still dominate the delivery of welfare services throughout Australia and, beyond the mega agencies, the poor and the dispossessed continue to present at church doors looking for relief.

The long history set out in this paper has demonstrated how faith-based welfare became integral to the relief of poverty in Australia, positioning church agencies well in the competition for government resources which followed the late twentieth-century retreat from the welfare state. However, it has also explored some of the dangers that too great an involvement with government have brought, and argued that churches have been damaged in instances where it has been shown that their practice did not always align with their principles. If Australian churches are to maintain their dominant position in the delivery of welfare services, the challenge of the 21st century is to find a way to address emerging

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/0760a114-ed27-424c-bd92-44a0a405e7ea/22-Terry-Hamilton> (viewed 3 September 2015).

needs that stays true to the message of the gospel in an increasingly unequal nation and an increasingly unequal world. If they are to continue to argue that faith-based charity does it better, they need to be able to articulate how and why this is the case.