

ELECTIONS, FAITH AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Bruce Duncan

The recent elections in Australia and the USA have raised urgent questions about the relationship between religious faith, politics and social concern. Some commentators in Australia have expressed fears that a new religious Right might emerge like that in the USA, relying on a fundamentalist or literalist interpretation of the Bible, and imposing social policies in the name of religion.

Others consider this unlikely, as Australians have long proved resistant to the showmanship of US evangelism, and to the slick sell of the Gospel as a guarantee to wealth and individual success. Australians seem not so readily convinced that one can serve both God and Mammon.

The US elections certainly reflect a concern about so-called family values, but the religious Right has no monopoly on values. As the mainstream Christian denominations well know, there are other moral values:

- truth-telling by governments;
- refusing to go to war on spurious pretexts;
- not killing the innocent;
- preventing torture, and educating one's soldiers in the rules of war;
- providing jobs and a decent livelihood to all citizens;
- defending the principles of social justice and equality of opportunity;
- not pandering to the rich by excessive tax cuts to the wealthy;
- providing adequate health care and social security for everyone;
- supporting an international system of governance based on respect for law;
- protecting the environment, especially by reducing green-house gas emissions, etc.

The churches also know from bitter experience that religious faith cannot automatically determine public policies. The same religious faith can inspire many different interpretations of how people should live, their moral values, and public policies.

Jesus and social values

The Gospel writers did not see the relationship between religion and politics as we do today, but nevertheless repeatedly emphasised the social implications of faith. It is a message that Pope John Paul II has constantly tried to highlight, especially by making Jesus' statement in Luke 4: 22-30 the centrepiece for the Year of the Great Jubilee in 2000.

Luke makes the passage the heart and soul of his Gospel, highlighting it as the central mission statement of Jesus. You recall the incident of Jesus in the synagogue reading from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour [the Jubilee].*

The passage does not deny the personal and other dimensions of faith, but emphasises Christ's acute concern for the 'poor', those suffering and oppressed, powerfully implying that social concern and responsibility for one another is not just a metaphor but is essential to faith.

We can see this passage as a Gospel imperative to help nurture and activate the social conscience of our people and of the nation, by engaging in a deeper conversation with our contemporaries, and by drawing on the rich resources available to us, from our own social traditions as well as from our history and culture, the social sciences and disciplines available.

It was no accident that Pope John Paul II wrote so movingly about the implications of the Jubilee in his 2001 encyclical, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*. He was particularly insistent about 'our commitment to history' as Christians, about the duty to help fashion a more caring and humane world.

He also highlighted the Last Judgment scene from Matthew's Gospel, a most astonishing parable, when God will judge us not on our piety, but on our practical solidarity with the homeless, the sick, the hungry - in a word, 'the poor', to use the code word of the Bible. According to the Pope, the whole credibility of the Christian message hinges on our taking to heart the message of this parable.

A split between faith and social responsibility?

Why does the Pope so strongly insist on this social dimension? Because in the past many Christians have given an excessively spiritual interpretation to the Gospels, without realising the social implications embedded in them. The Pope is particularly keen to overcome the split that developed in the consciousness of many Catholics between the realm of faith and the secular world of work and society.

The Vatican Council in its great document, *The Church in the Modern World*, declared that this split between faith and social responsibility was one of the most serious errors in the Church. Its opening words trumpeted *a call to engagement*, not disengagement, with the problems of the contemporary world.

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (par. 1).

The Pope recognises of course that the world of religious devotion is highly complex, searching for ways to express communion with God. But he does not wish piety to become an escape from real life responsibilities, or still more, to construct an indulgent fantasy world that ignores the need to work for peace and justice in society and the world as a whole. He is insistent that concern for social justice and solidarity with struggling people is an 'essential' part of the mission of the Church.

Indeed John Paul on 29 October 2004 called for a new social activism among Catholics as he commended the new *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that he had directed be prepared. He saw it helping 'Christians in their daily commitment to make the world more just', and based on 'an authentic, solidaristic humanism.' He especially stressed the role of lay Christians in shining the light of the Gospel on 'the realities of work, economy, politics', peace-making, 'justice and friendship among peoples.'

In other words, concern for social justice is not an optional extra, or an 'add-on', but springs from the heart of the Gospel. It is a direct response to Jesus' call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, not just by individual charity, but by how we organise society and institutions to carry out these tasks in a more effective and universal way.

Hence it is puzzling to hear some talk that concern for social justice can become a rival to the Gospel, as if they were opposed. It is true, of course, that some people might fail to make the link between the Gospel message and concern for social justice. But part of our task is to make those links transparently clear, and indeed to stress that any sense of God or the Gospel that ignores or downplays concern for the poor and social justice is a distortion and perhaps even a betrayal of the Christian message.

Instead of fearing some rivalry between concern for social justice and evangelisation, in our conversation about public issues we could be helping draw people to the heart of the Gospel. Far from social justice being an obstacle to faith, it can become a privileged lens of insight into God's passionate concern for human wellbeing.

In my view, it would be a great mistake to trivialise or downplay concern for social justice, especially among younger people. It is not a mistake either John Paul II or the Vatican Council has made.

As the Pope said in his World Day of Peace message for 2005, peace depends on securing the human good for all people. But genuine peace must be founded on social equity and solidarity, a commitment by everyone to support the wellbeing of others, especially those most in need. The search for the common good must take into account the social and economic problems: inequalities, privations of all sorts, injustices and insecurity.

Concern for justice, peace and equity in society is one of the most powerful means for many people to discover what true belief is all about.

God's startling solidarity with us

Those of us in the churches, in close dialogue and collaboration with other religious traditions, have an urgent contribution to make to informing the social conscience of our communities. Our fundamental conviction is this: that the great mysterious presence sustaining the universe, that we call God as if it were clear what that word means, is mightily concerned about our human wellbeing.

So insistent is God to convince us of this, we Christians believe, that in Jesus this mysterious presence takes on human flesh, and lays down his life in an astonishing act of solidarity with all the 'poor' of the earth, all those suffering and searching for life and justice, truth and meaning. Jesus asks us to share a similar concern for one another.

This is a vision of God that I suspect is astonishingly attractive not just to Christians, but is one that people from other religions could largely endorse, and even non-believers would find it immensely heartening. It demolishes the dualism in western history that has been the source of so much confusion. God takes delight in the full flourishing of our beings, and all that is genuinely human is precious to him. Is this not what the Incarnation and the birth of Jesus are all about?

Hence we Christians can engage in the social transformation of the world, inspired by values in Scripture certainly, but not in an imperial or manipulative way, and certainly not by trying to impose religious beliefs on others. We are part of the wider public conversation in society, a conversation which encourages all to join the earnest search for the human good and the truth about human wellbeing, and which prizes dutiful conscience above all. In this free and earnest pursuit of moral truth, we honour primacy of conscience as the most sacred core of our beings before God.

Though the major world religions have different perceptions of God and their belief systems have developed almost in parallel universes as it were, we can reverence the religious traditions and search of all without prejudice to our own beliefs. We need to expand the conversation among the religious traditions so we can further the human good together. Religious faith does not substitute for human wisdom. It is not some sort of magical process providing easy solutions to difficult problems. It invites us to use our intelligence as well as commitment.

How marvellous is that word 'conversation'. It implies mutual respect among people, a willingness to listen and learn, to be open to different and even opposed points of view. Can we not imagine ourselves as a family gathered around God's kitchen table, discussing our various views robustly enough, but earnestly seeking the truth about human wellbeing, and knowing that we are all precious in God's sight?