

TRANSFORMING FAITH: MAKING PROGRESSIVE RELIGION WORK

Introduction

One of the challenges of redefining faith in the 21st century is to be able to move beyond a more credible intellectual construct to a demonstrable faith that realises its potential for changing the world positively. This workshop will explore the practical and theological dimensions of faith-based service in the margins of society.

Topics for discussion will focus on four main themes:

- The nature of faith - can't I just believe?
- Faith and service in the Bible - God calls us into partnership
- Characteristics of faith-based service - what should we expect?
- Reflective praxis - how our actions can shape our beliefs

The Nature of Faith – Can't I Just Believe?

I think that Christianity has to be active and I don't just mean going to church. I've recently become a vegetarian and have noticed how much greater the impact of this change in my lifestyle is than much that passes for Christianity today.

Bernard Brandon Scott talks in the LTQ material about the change in Christianity since Constantine. The first Christians were known for their way of living together, but since Constantine Christianity has become about belief - "you don't have to do a thing and it's a disaster!" I think Scott is right - we need to be known again by what we do or what we believe will be irrelevant. In fact we are already known by what we do – abuse and sex scandals within the Church are headline news. It's far more difficult to hit (and sustain) the headlines with a change in theology.

Hugh Mackay said last night that "how we live is more important than which piece of religious dogma we choose to believe". It reminded me that for a number of years I was part of a local interfaith group where people from a range of backgrounds came together easily over social justice issues or when social action needed to be taken. The group never tried to convert each other or even spent much energy trying to teach each other about our own faith traditions - we respected where the others come from and were prepared to take public action together when the community was divided over racial or religious issues, or needed to tackle housing or refugee situations. I don't think this is accidental, our doctrines were different, our religious rituals distinctive but our social practice had much in common. Progressive religion recognises that all religious expressions now very clearly exist in a multi-faith context. My experience recently at the Parliament of the World's Religions confirmed the idea that social action is a natural common ground on which people of many varied belief systems are able to meet.

So why believe anything? Is it not simply enough to live a good life? Well, in my opinion that would be a pretty good start! I don't think you have to believe certain things in order to lead a good life. In fact I know and deeply admire the lives of lots of people who believe quite different things to what I believe. However, I do also find myself both nourished and inspired by the Christian tradition and by the challenge of being part of a faith community that seeks to change the world to be a better place.

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I'm particularly intrigued by the interface between the sacred and the secular. Much that passes for religion today continues to be stuck in a dualistic worldview that divides the spiritual and the material. I want to suggest today that not only should progressives dismiss such dualistic approaches but through a rediscovery of the integral relationship between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material, we are compelled to invest ourselves in the renewing of creation, the healing of brokenness and pain, the redemption of the world. To put it simply, where the danger of dualism is the we become "so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good", the movement beyond dualism can once more inspire us towards creating heaven on earth.

I wrote a piece a few years ago suggesting that the key understanding of sacrament in The Salvation Army was through engagement with the poor and the marginalised, something William Booth called 'The Sacrament of the Good Samaritan'. The basic idea was to explore sacramental language as a way of explaining how we can find a connection to the sacred through helping people in need. Instead of relying on an elsewhere God to intervene, we experience the divine and fulfil our human purpose through an orientation on others, as exemplified through Jesus' image of the Good Samaritan.

The essence of my Master's thesis was a call to recognise that salvation occurred on a daily basis through the social work of The Salvation Army as people were saved from poverty, homelessness, addictions, social isolation, domestic violence, etc. This isn't just a play on words but a vital recognition of the overlap between sacred and secular.

Faith and service in the Bible - God calls us into partnership

I'm unable to entirely shake off my Evangelical heritage and thus am compelled to say something about the Bible.

My understanding of the historical Jesus, informed by people like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, suggests that he was less concerned about preaching against individual sinners than initiating an alternative social structure that deliberately avoided socio-economic, class, race and gender dividers. It's this image of Jesus and the Kingdom that inspires my own vision of social justice and radical social involvement today. In Crossan's words "the Kingdom has begun and we are called to participate in it". Jurgen Moltmann talks about our need to create 'anticipations' of the Kingdom which has not yet been fully realised. In Pauline literature this is described as being co-workers with God (1Cor 3:9, 2Cor 6:1). The significant point is that we are not meant to sit around simply waiting for God to fix the world. We have a calling as prophets, to speak truth to power. We have a calling as healers to a wounded creation. We have a calling to an all-inclusive Kingdom as a radically different vision of community and life together. It's a massive challenge and one can understand why some might choose to try it just within an enclosed community of Christians – challenging enough! Yet I don't think we can do that. Our task is not to recreate the barriers that the Gospel challenges, perhaps it is our task to identify and break down the new barriers that we have created?

Characteristics of faith-based service - what should we expect?

A few years ago now I conducted some research, thanks to a Churchill Fellowship, that looked at the distinctive characteristics of faith-based organisations that were involved in social service. I looked

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at nearly 50 services in LA, New York, Washington DC, Nairobi and a rural village in Kenya, as well as a variety of locations around the UK.

Of course, one of the concerns that is often raised about the involvement of religious organisations in the delivery of social services is whether there are implicit or explicit evangelical motives. I agree with Jack Spong that the church needs to get out of the conversion business. And it's because of this that I think that progressive religion can advocate for social justice with a kind of integrity that is otherwise compromised by conservative evangelicals whose motives always contain a proselytising agenda.

One of the other things that I discovered (accidentally, as it wasn't a part of my original research intentions) was that there did seem to be a correlation between the theological perspectives of local service managers and the practical policies that shaped the nature of service delivery. In short, those who maintained a view of God as the patriarchal judge tended to run more judgemental and rules-based services. Those with a more progressive theology often demonstrated more grace in their application of rules and had more flexible, client-oriented processes.

Let me say a couple more things about why I think faith-based perspectives are important in the helping encounter.

In Australia, the vast majority of social services are delivered by faith-based organisations (FBOs). Churches and church-based agencies have been serving people in need here and around the world for centuries. FBO's exist because they believe that this world can, and should be, better and fairer for everyone. Our spiritual and religious motivations are central to this conviction, they have sustained us in this work for many years and will continue to do so because they speak to the core of our existence.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

FBO's know from years of firsthand experience that social isolation frequently accompanies social disadvantage. A chronic lack of viable social supports and real friendships consolidates disadvantage, exacerbates mental illness and frequently increases problematic drug and alcohol usage. Despite a growing recognition of the significance of community connection in providing socialisation opportunities and building supportive networks, few community groups are inherently resilient enough to genuinely embrace those whom the rest of society has discarded.

However, where most groups value homogeneity, churches are built around a values base that prioritises those who may have been excluded elsewhere. Faith communities of all kinds have the potential to offer a safe place for the marginalised and the vulnerable. They provide an environment where hope can be restored and resilience encouraged in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. Moreover, because they inherently gather around ultimate questions of meaning, faith communities don't balk at those challenges which are frequently thrown at, and sometimes by, society's forgotten people.

Faith communities also provide opportunities for genuine participation and contribution that demonstrate the essential value and equality of all human beings. For instance, churches consistently demonstrate high levels of volunteerism encouraging active participation in meaningful

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activities and valuing these contributions. These interactions are reported to be incredibly important by those whose primary exchanges are with professionals (doctors, social workers, case managers, psychiatrists) because care and concern delivered outside the professional sphere is evaluated differently.

Thus church agencies, because of their inherent and often explicit links to local communities of faith, offer unique opportunities for genuine social inclusion that reach beyond the scope of most others. However, let me go further and say why I think progressive religious communities are vital to this space. Unfortunately, my experience in working with people who have been pushed to the margins society suggests that some churches are not only failing to help those who come to them, but because of a restrictive, judgemental, punitive belief system they are actively doing further harm to those who are already wounded. I've run into too many people who, because of a mental health problem or because of their sexual orientation (just to pick a couple of obvious examples), have been deeply hurt by their experience with a church or in some cases a number of churches in succession. A few feel compelled to keep returning because they have a legitimate spiritual need that they are seeking to fulfil. We cannot afford to relegate these people to their abusers.

RESPECT OF PERSONHOOD, VALUING HUMAN DIGNITY

An essential value which characterises the work of FBOs is the recognition of all human beings as divine creations. This sense of equality inherently deconstructs paternalistic models of welfare in favour of capacity-oriented approaches. People are evaluated according to their essential humanity and therefore are not immediately excluded based on the complexity of their issues, the challenges of their presenting behaviours, the potential to meet predetermined outcomes or the costs associated with deep and long-term assistance.

In contrast, Government and for-profit agencies often fail to engage people with high and complex needs because they invariably have criteria, rules and requirements which this group are unable to meet for consistent periods. FBOs, on the other hand, frequently demonstrate impressive resilience, despite a range of challenging behaviours, treading the balance between firmness and flexibility in favour of their clients. Those that manage to reach people who have been pushed to the margins of society often have minimal (though clear) rules, low requirements or criteria for access to programs (including the ability to remain anonymous) and avoid banning as a method of refusing service to the more difficult clients.

Of course, this brings me back to the earlier suggestion that the character of our theology invariably shapes the kind of service we provide. People in crisis are unlikely to gain much from the application of a framework built around law, judgement and conditional forgiveness.

Reflective praxis - how our actions can shape our beliefs

I want to conclude today by questioning a common understanding that exists in many of our churches. One of the ways that this understanding is expressed is what seems to be a straightforward analysis of how people become integrated into the life of a local congregation: Believe, Behave, Belong. These aren't just three unrelated ingredients but they reveal an implicit ordering that suggest that if we believe the right things, then our behaviour will reflect those beliefs

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and we will be able to find our place within the community of like-minded believers. I suspect that these links are rather more tenuous. Not only do our beliefs frequently conflict with the way we act (the apostle Paul testifies to this famously in Romans 7), but good behaviour isn't any real guarantee that one will find belonging – though it may sometimes stop you getting kicked out.

The reality is more complex. Sometimes the process may in fact work in the opposite direction – that is on finding that one belongs somewhere, our behaviour adapts to fit in with those who have accepted us and we may even learn to fit our beliefs to accommodate this lifestyle.

When I reflect on my own Christian journey, I can see more clearly the interplay between certain stages of my life and the theological emphases that accompanied them. If we understand that the relationship between belief and action is not simply one way and that our beliefs are, more often than we would like to admit, being shaped to accommodate our life circumstances then perhaps the particular challenge of Christianity is to put ourselves in the kinds of places that Jesus found himself?

Active participation in service with those who are marginalised and vulnerable in our society is a critical part of our response to what Tillich calls 'being grasped by Ultimate Concern'. It also transcends religious and cultural barriers. I think that progressive religion, despite having created a more credible, intellectual belief structure, risks a different kind of irrelevance if it loses a prophetic voice on behalf of the poor and cannot demonstrate love for neighbour that transcends all boundaries. We need to go beyond 'what we believe' to show 'what we are going to do about it'.