



# Catholic Identity and Culture in Catholic Community Service Organisations

## Background Paper

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collaboration + enquiry + social action

### Introduction

This paper is a sequel to the presentation on 'Spirituality and Human Services', arranged by Esther's Voice on 8 December 2009, which attempted to answer two major questions:

1. Is there room in the public spaces of the Secular State for faith-based community service organisations?
2. Can the exploration of spiritual needs be justified in the State's provision of public services and regulation of professional codes?

While there was strong evidence for a positive 'yes' in answer to both these questions, further questions emerged:

1. What are the underlying connections between pluralism, Judeo-Christian culture and the secular state?
2. What is the role of the market in the secular state (where the market is opposed to religion whereas the secular state is not)?
3. How can we hold on to Catholic culture and identity in Catholic community service organizations in the secular state?
4. What might the future secular state look like, if faith based organisations play a greater role in public spaces?

This paper explores each of these questions, particularly from the point of view of Community Service Organisations auspiced by Catholic Religious Congregations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jointly auspiced by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services, and MacKillop Family Services, *Esther's Voice* has been created as a site for the collaborative work of reflection, enquiry and action based on a commitment to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

## 1. What are the underlying connections between pluralism, Judeo-Christian culture and the secular state?

This question arose from the valid observation that Australian society remains strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian traditions, even though it may claim to be a secular society. For example, in the 2006 census, around 70% of Australians identified themselves as Christians of one kind or another, and Christian prayers are used at the opening of parliament each day, and a majority of politicians – particularly in leadership roles – come from Judeo-Christian backgrounds.

It could be argued that there is no necessary connection between the secular state and the Judeo-Christian traditions: for example India, Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey are self-proclaimed secular states, even though religions (for example, Islam and Hinduism) are strongly held by the vast majority of their citizens, and religion-based political parties often play a major role in the political processes of these nations.

Against this claim, on the other hand, it could be argued that the secular state is the invention of western thinkers, who are necessarily steeped in Judeo-Christian traditions, whether they hold to them or not. Further, it could be argued that the secular state model has been taken up by non-Christian nations through the commercial and intellectual colonialism practiced by western powers. In other words, the foundations of the secular state will always have some connection with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

There is some truth in both arguments. More significantly, however, it should be noted that western thinking about government and democracy and politics and economics goes back to the classical Greek philosophers, who certainly operated independently of the Judeo-Christian traditions.

Indeed many of the key ideas of the secular state were already present in Plato's account of *The Republic*: the State exists to help its citizens live and work together in peace, and to ensure that the necessities of life are provided. In other words, its primary role is economic (the word 'economics' being derived from the Greek terms for household management). However, and distinct from some current political practices, Plato also insisted that a good government is required to pursue morality and not just expediency.

In conclusion, then, the backdrop to the formation of the secular state is primarily philosophical rather than religious, though it must still be acknowledged that the philosophy involved is typically a western style of rationalism based more on reason than on wisdom. In other words, the western style has a focus on the individual and reason and property, and the latter has more of a focus on the community and customs and belonging.

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, a 'religious congregation' does not mean a parish community, but a community of men or women who have taken vows to live and work together, as in the Sisters of Mercy or Christian Brothers

*In answer to the first part of our question*, then, it is clear that there are underlying connections between western philosophy and the secular state, but not necessarily between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the secular state. However, as in Australia, there are often 'accidental' connections between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the secular state, given that in the West the secular state has replaced 'Christendom' as a model of government.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the secular state replaces the vertical hierarchy of Christendom with the more horizontal equality of liberal democracy. This change also entails a radical change in values: primarily the secular state operates on what will work to achieve order and the best outcomes for the greatest number of people, while at the same time ensuring as best it can justice and equity. For the religious states of Christendom, on the other hand, at least when at their best, the system of values comes from a more transcendent and ultimate base. In other words, while the secular state has grown out of Christendom and carries forth many of its values and traditions, there are some significant disjunctions between the value systems of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the secular state.

For Christian organizations, their heritage is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength, because the vestiges of Christian values in the state allow for respect, easy conversations and mutuality of thought. It is a weakness, though, because the 'secularising' elements of the State will by definition do all they can to purge the system of the vestiges of religion: and they will do this both by direct attack, and also by the support for other sets of values (including other cultures and other religions).

Note that 'secularist' here means a person who is actively opposed to beliefs that suggest there is an 'other' or transcendent dimension to reality. The secular state, on the other hand, simply denotes a state that operates independently of religious or other transcendent sets of beliefs and values.

While the church should not attempt to rule the state, believers have a right to participate in the life of the state. While secularists may have a right to purge religion out of the workings of the state, they do not have a right to attack religion, nor to use the purging of religion as a justification for the purging of more generic reasoned values.<sup>3</sup>

*In answer to the second part of our question*, about pluralism and the Judeo-Christian tradition in the secular state, the following could be said.

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<sup>3</sup> It is wrong to say that the Catholic Church is critical of the secular state. Rather, it is critical of secularising tendencies that come with the secular state. Benedict XVI warns against 'secularism' in his encyclical *Love in Truth -- Caritas in Veritate* (\*56), and says that love adds something to a merely secular political stand (\*7). These are his only two mentions of the term in that encyclical. He also warns against 'secularism' in *God is Love -- Deus Caritas Est* (\*37), again, his sole reference. But he also defends the importance of the separation of religion and state: in *God is love*, he does this four times in one paragraph (\*28).

First of all the secular state is usually pluralist more in ideals than in practice. As we have noted above, in Australia, the Judeo-Christian tradition runs deep in our culture, and more than two-thirds of the population identify themselves as Christians. Further, the Preamble to our Constitution assumes belief in God:

**Whereas** the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, *humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God*, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and under the Constitution hereby established.

Secondly, as noted in the original forum paper on the secular state, the secular state does of its nature encourage pluralism: 'The absence of a transcendent focus and the separation of public spaces from private beliefs inevitably lead to a pluralism of beliefs and attitudes within society',

Thirdly, in practice the secular state is somewhat tokenist about pluralism. It 'is controlled by a mainstream elite and mainstream media, and the "pluralist" elements remain token until they become part of the main debate.'

While a secular society operates in the here and now in a pragmatic and instrumentalist way, there is no reason why an enhanced secular society couldn't be developed, one which seeks to address questions of human meaning and human community by attending to spirituality (but remaining independent of religion or beliefs).'

Given that the Judeo-Christian traditions are part of the mainstream of our society, and given that they particularly influence more conservative media commentators, then Christian faith-based organizations are in something of a bind. On the one hand they have a duty to speak their voice in the public spaces of society; but on the other hand they have a duty, as members of the secular state, to ensure that other voices are heard, respected, understood, and engaged. This latter step could be a contribution to the enhancement of the secular state, perhaps even to the creation of a new kind of society where there is recognition both of the transcendent 'One' and the actual 'Many'.

## **2. What is the role of the market in the secular state (where the market is opposed to religion whereas the secular state is not)?**

*A True Story: Late in 2009 representatives of a local church group approached a large regional shopping centre to arrange a simple Christian celebration there: some carols and the story of the birth of Jesus. The shops, of course, were full of Santas and the sounds of "White Christmas". The management huffed and puffed and said, totally unaware of the irony, "You Christians are always trying to take over Christmas."*

There is clearly a necessary connection between the state and market economics, given that both are concerned with the management of the needs of the people and the production of wealth and security. Charles Taylor points out that the new imagination of the role of the economy goes hand in hand with the new imagination of the secular state: according to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'humans are engaged in an exchange of services'.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, there is a clear connection between the secular state and the market. Both ideas are key elements of liberal thinking in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In extreme liberal models, promoting *laissez faire* economics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state did not interfere in the market. Likewise, neo-liberals of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century argued that government should be small, should not interfere in the market, and that their business should follow market models of out-sourcing and purchasing. Above all else, the market should be deregulated, labour should be casualised, and red-tape minimalised.

The upshot, of course, was the breakdown of community and the coming of the Global Financial Crisis. While ideally the market will thrive on trust and mutual benefit, in reality, if unchecked, it operates on greed and profit.

It is a commonplace to identify three separate but interrelated elements in the make up of society: government, market, and community. Each operates differently, but each should be allowed to provide checks and balances to the other for the development of a healthy society. Where there is too much government, you end up with neither market nor community, but totalitarian dictatorships like North Korea. Where the market has too much influence, you end up with weak governments, consumerism, the exploitation of labour, the destruction of resources and the Global Financial Crisis. Where there is too much community, you end up with the primacy of extended family, but little development and a degree of anarchy, as with the Mafia.

Further, the market tries to create a materialist consumerism, to defend private property, and to urge de-regulation. All of these actions will undermine community and the deeper values of truth and love. In this sense, the market will be opposed to spirituality and religion, and hence the secular state can be seen to condone opposition to spirituality and religion.

Thus market forces are likely to have a secularizing influence, since their focus is on the things of this world: they claim to sell happiness, but it is happiness in terms of material goods and manipulated desires rather than deeper human needs.

What governments have found, however, is that sections of the economy collapse because sections of the local community collapse into disorder and poverty. Governments have recently rediscovered the importance of community. In the last couple of decades, then, governments take greater

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<sup>4</sup> See Chalres Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 177.

interest in community building, neighborhood renewal, social inclusion, capacity building, and social capital.

Unfortunately, the investment in community by governments rarely matches the devastation of communities by market exploitation of values and labour resources.

*In answer to our question*, then, the market can bring wealth, and it will almost always assist in the preservation of order, but it will also create poverty and inequity. Above all else, the market will 'secularise' society, because of its focus on material possessions, individuality, and happiness based on the purchase of products with inbuilt obsolescence. It may also weaken the capacity of governments to create inclusion and community.

What place then for the eternal, for love and for truth? There is certainly a call for faith-based organizations in the community to challenge the darker side of market forces, and to support government and community views that can save the market from the ultimately destructive forces of greed.

The unthinkable alternative, of course, is to do what many American churches have done, which is to turn faith into a consumer item and the church into a market player. But would this be an abandonment of the culture of faith for the culture of possessions? This leads us to our third question.

### **3. How can we hold on to Catholic culture and identity in Catholic community service organizations in the secular state?**

This is the big question. From the outset, we should accept that even in our own personal stories we have difficulty in grasping our own identity and culture. Developmental psychology, further, makes it clear that, for individuals,

- identity is a work in progress, and it typically goes through several stages
- identity is often best achieved through stable relationships with others: parents, siblings, partners.....
- identity is thus shaped by the development of ego and by a sense of competence/worth
- identity development, when it goes wrong, leads to a loss of confidence, erratic behaviour, attachment disorder, self-harm...
- an identity crisis can paralyse us, but it can also liberate us.

Erikson's stages of social development<sup>5</sup> identifies the following stages and tensions:

1. Trust – mistrust
2. Autonomy – shame and doubt

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<sup>5</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

3. Industry – inferiority
4. Identity -- confusion
5. Intimacy – Isolation
6. Generativity – stagnation
7. Integrity -- Despair

If the identity of individuals is so complex, and has to go through so many changes, so also must the identity-development of organizations be complex and perhaps require many stages. New organizations in new contexts will therefore have a series of stages of growth to go through as they find their identity.

Understandably, then, questions of identity and culture have become critical for Catholic health, education and community service organization in the past few years. These works had their beginnings in the relatively autonomous schools and hospitals and charities that were established by dioceses and religious congregations, and operated by clergy and religious to respond to the various needs of the colonies in the nineteenth century, though even at that time they occasionally enjoyed a measure of government support. In the twenty-first century, however, where most of these institutions are substantially funded by governments, should display professional standards, and are required to comply with multiple external measures, their Catholic identity and culture appear to be seriously threatened.

Even though government funding sustains the operations of these Catholic institutions today, they bring with them a great deal of social capital, which they continue to contribute to society: the strength and success of these institutions rests on the meaning Catholic culture and identity that brought them into being, shaped them, sustained and supported them, and allowed them to grow. A deep part of that culture is a personal commitment to follow the way of Jesus Christ through love of God and love of neighbour.

If identity is partly shaped by stable relationships with 'others', however, then contemporary Catholic organizations are in a somewhat precarious state, for their key relationships are with the secular state on the one hand (which is unsure about them) and the Catholic church on the other (which in some cases are equally unsure about them).

At the outset, it is important to make three fundamental observations.

1. Culture and identity are shaped on the run: as with personal identity, organisational identity grows out of a past into a new future. The culture that we grow from acts as both a guide and a springboard (as both an integrator and an operator).<sup>6</sup> That is, on the one hand our past is necessarily part of who we are and will guide

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Ormerod takes up the notions of 'integrator' and 'operator' from the writings of Bernard Lonergan, and uses them very fruitfully in his forthcoming essay, 'Identity and Mission in Catholic Organisations' to appear in the forthcoming *Australasian Catholic Record* (July 2010)

the way we think and act; but on the other hand our past will also bring within it an impetus to move forward into new territory, and to be in some ways, and perhaps many ways, different from the past.

2. The culture and identity of the Church, and the culture and identity of religious congregations within the church are not going to be fully represented in any one church agency. Rather, each agency carries out and carries forth some particular elements of that culture, but not the totality. Rather, it helps shape the totality. As Neil Ormerod puts it, 'It is not the task of any particular agency to cover all bases at all times.'
3. 'Culture' is not a concept that anthropologists can precisely describe, but it generally rests on a sharing of interiorised 'myths' and 'symbols' and 'rituals/traditions' rather more than on rules and constitutions, and it is held together by the memory of visionaries and leaders rather more than by pseudo-fundamental truths. Cultures, as a result, tend to be conservative rather than flexible.

Having made these preliminary observations, the tricky questions remain: what is Catholic identity and culture? And how are Catholic Community Services organizations meant to 'hold on to it'?

Significant recent publications explore these questions: for example, Neil Ormerod (ed.), *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*; Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Crafting Catholic Identity in Postmodern Australia*; and the Bishops of NSW, *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads*.<sup>7</sup> These studies provide useful guidelines and suggest targets indicators, but they leave the core question of 'Catholic culture and identity' somewhat up in the air, and with a somewhat mixed message.

From the point of view of the Church's teaching, for example, Bishop Michael Putney implies that Catholic Community Service Organisations are 'The church doing its work' rather than 'the church itself', and depend very much on 'the church itself' clarifying its identity and mission.<sup>8</sup> Putney concludes that in order to find a way forward, Catholic institutions must not only look at themselves, but also look at their context and those they are working with – those who are 'other' to them – before they can fully claim their identity. In other words, rather than seek essential truths to shape its culture, a Catholic CSO should shape its culture through conversation with other elements of the church, with its people, and with the society in which it works.

This theme of conversation with other parties is common in many studies, and it echoes Erikson's findings that identity develops in relation to others. In the meantime, however, what is it that we want to hold on to in Catholic Culture?

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<sup>7</sup> Neil Ormerod (ed.), *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies* (Strathfield: St. Pauls, 2008); Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Crafting Catholic Identity in Postmodern Australia* (Deakin ACT: Catholic Health Australia, 2007); and the Bishops of NSW, *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Putney, 'Catholic Identity and Mission' in Ormerod (ed.), *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*, pp.36-37.

And how can we hold on to it? Are their fundamental truths, or core myths and rituals, which we should hold on to?

David Ranson takes the line that we must learn as we go: "As mission is engaged, identity will manifest itself naturally". Mission and identity are thus not expressed in religious signage and religious practice, but "in a sacramental intending of the kingdom of God". Our "originating memory" is important, but it is more important that "the story must go on". In other words, a sense of mission and identity is partly developed through a dialogue between the past traditions on the one hand and the imaginations of those who join these faith-based institutions today, "with their own sense of professional vocation, passion, and spirituality".<sup>9</sup> While he acknowledges the importance of the core elements of Christian faith (we could think of creator, saviour, Trinity and sacrament), Ranson suggests that we may need to learn to be "bi-lingual" in how we talk about them, because in the end the actions are more important than the words. Ranson's conclusion, then, in many ways echoes Putney: "the future of Catholic identity is thus not resolved through packaged formulas. It will be experienced only to the extent that we dare to play the game".

*In answer to the first part of our question then, Catholic culture and identity is something to be created rather than to be held on to. Its creation comes through four stages:*

1. keeping alive the memories and of our founders
2. continuing a dialogue with other elements in the church about the Christian mission and our part in it
3. getting on with our work and our way of working: professional and compassionate, but also prophetic and loving, promoting hope and seeking justice
4. learning a new language and new rituals with those who work with us and those we work with

*In answer to the second part of our question, Catholic culture, and any culture that recognizes the importance of the spiritual, will be in tension with a secular state that deals only with the material and the pragmatic. The secular state, by definition, creates a two-tier system whereby it looks after material needs and it leaves individuals to pursue their own spiritual journeys. This is sometimes called a dualism of spirit and matter, as if the two are separate realms that have no bearing on each other.*

The Catholic Church has struggled throughout its history to live with similar dualistic tendencies. One typical struggle is to work through the dualism of grace and sin: in this outlook the world is generally a place of sin, but the church is able to offer grace and salvation and save people from the sinfulness of the world. This point of view is not going to help any dialogue between church and state. At its extreme, it is in fact regarded as a heresy, but elements of it linger in the Church, particularly in its conflicts with the secular state.

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<sup>9</sup> See David Ranson, 'A Service Shaped by Catholic Identity', in Ormerod (ed.), *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*, pp. 84-86.

A second and healthier view talks about the unity, rather than the dualism, of grace and nature. In this view, the world of creation is also the world of grace: there is no dualism of matter and spirit or of grace and nature: where people live and work, there also grace abounds. In this view all parts of the world and all cultures are potentially and actually places of grace, or places of God's activity: as St Paul famously wrote, with this mystical view of a cosmic presence of the risen Lord, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus'.

Perhaps the key role of Catholic community service organisations is to carry this message of the unity of grace and nature both outwardly to the secular state, and inwardly to the hierarchical church.

#### **4. What might the future secular state look like, if faith-based organisations play a greater role in public spaces?**

Polishing up the crystal ball, and dreaming and hoping, perhaps the secular state of the future will grow out of its exclusive concern with measurable productivity.

Perhaps it will take greater cognizance of, and give greater attention to, the less pragmatic elements of social life. Perhaps it will understand that it is caught in a duality of providing for the material needs of the state and its citizens, but in doing so it is cutting across their spiritual needs. For example, two major sources of revenue for the secular state are taxes on gambling and taxes on liquor, both of which are substitutes in the human quest for self-transcendence and a spiritual meaning (interestingly, the best cure for alcoholism remains the seven steps of AA, which include finding a relationship with God). This will include attending to the spiritual needs of the marginalised and broken. This will require vision, regulation of the market, and the cooperation of community service organisations.

Perhaps it will achieve a genuine recognition of and inclusion of variant cultures. This too will require the cooperation of churches and ethnic groups: where there is a genuine commitment to recognising plurality, and a genuine respect for cultural difference, this may be possible. There will remain, however, many clashes of values – for example the place of women in society -- and it will take considerable effort to work through these difficulties.

## Conclusion: Joining the Sacred and the Profane

As Bishop and Jesuit Greg O'Kelly put it in his recent Lenten address:

It's a cardinal point - at times in the spirituality of the Church there has been a certain gap between the sacred and the profane. People have written about it as two theatres, two existences - meaning the secular. But against that the basic tradition of the Church has been that of integration, as in Augustine - the times will be better because we are the times. Ignatius, in the *Exercises*, asks us to see how God dwells in creatures, in the elements giving being, in the plants giving growth, in the animals giving us sensation, and in the humankind granting the gift of understanding, and how he dwells also in me, giving me being, light and sensation, and causing me to understand. To see too how he makes a temple of me, as I have been created in the likeness and image of his divine majesty....

And all this reflects the profound teachings of Scripture, from Genesis, where God saw that it was good, he made us and saw it was very good, and the teaching of St John that God so loved the world that he sent his only son. The world. He didn't like just some people, but God so loved the world. The totality. And hence this incarnational view that we have, that the world is a theatre of God's presence, and the secular is the place of the incarnation. Paul tells us that all creation has been renewed. Jesus walked in this world in which we also continue to walk. Jesus moved amongst sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and failed fishermen. The enrichment the Church offers is to invite the non-religious in our world to look beneath the surface of the secular, to see its deeper meanings.

And how often are we invited, in fact, by the Church to do this? I think there are questions of reform for ourselves as community. Some of us were brought up in a spirituality that said we should pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on us. But in fact to be true to Ignatius it would be the other way around. We pray as if everything depends on us, and that gives an urgency to our prayer, and we work as if everything depends on God, and that gives a sense of hope and confidence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See address at <http://www.express.org.au/article.aspx?aeid=19976>