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Suffering, vice and justice:
religious imaginaries and welfare agencies in postwar Melbourne

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Why do some Christians do welfare work? The question is not as simple as it might seem. While there are strong traditions of compassion and charity in the different Christian denominations, these contend with ways of thinking that emphasise individual responsibility and a more private relation with one's faith. There are plenty of good and godly people who follow their faith without ever feeling the need to feed the poor, shelter the homeless or console the disturbed. Working with those whose lives have been shattered by fate, or undermined through their own actions can be disquieting. For some, it is both distasteful and far removed from the comfort of their daily lives.¹

But for others, faith is the foundation of their work with the poor, and holds a central place in the role church-based welfare agencies have in the mixed economy of welfare. Their role derives as much from theological debate, as from the institutional histories of churches and specific welfare agencies. The historical course of individual welfare agencies can be influenced by a wide range of factors: the successes or idiosyncrasies of leadership, the inheritance of past practices (in property, commitments and expectations), the ways they develop new services (through serendipity, opportunism or strategy) and the dominant role of the state in shaping the niche for the non-government sector in the mixed economy of welfare.²

This paper concentrates on another dimension: their theological inheritance and the discursive legacies that shape how faith-based welfare agencies imagine what they are doing. These three agencies represent examples of three major Christian denominations rather than the totality, or even the mainstream, of those denominations. One marked characteristic of these three agencies is their difference from each other, and the ways they draw on diverse theological legacies. And differences of theology have practical effects. They not only have consequences

¹ For their help in readings drafts of this paper (without incurring any responsibility for its contents) I am grateful to Michael Challen, Peter Hollingworth, John Honner, Brian Porter and Muriel Porter. The larger project has been supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant (DP0343854)

² See [author], "The Other Welfare State: the faith-based welfare sector in the wage-earners' welfare state", *History Australia* (2006, forthcoming).

for how they imagine the poor, but for how they conceive of their purposes, and what sorts of welfare projects they design. So the initial question might better be framed as how do the varieties of Christian faith imagine and work with the poor.

The consequences of differences in faith can be sketched as follows. Those who believe sin and corruption are everywhere in the world, and that the only form of salvation is to individually accept Christ in one's life, are more likely to think of the poor as fallen due to their own sinfulness. They believe that individual redemption precedes social reform. This tends to be the evangelical Protestant position, producing campaigns against vice and for conversion. Those who emphasise that Christ always sided with the outcast, and who try to see the face of Christ in the poor, tend to do charity work as acts of mercy and the immediate compassionate relief of suffering. This is an old Catholic tradition linked with incarnational theology, but does not necessarily lead to the more radical "option for the poor" of social justice activism. Those who see Christ as present in the world and who believe the world can consequently be reformed, are more likely to engage in action with an emphasis on social justice. This position has been strong in the non-evangelical Anglican tradition and to a lesser extent in Catholicism.³

Bringing salvation to the poor

Evangelicals within Anglicanism and Methodism, while not without generosity in that they saw all humanity as capable of accepting Christ, tended to see corruption and human failing as a principle obstacle to salvation. Hence the suppression of vice campaigns in 19th century Britain, and the focus of the "social gospel" at that time on gambling, alcohol and prostitution. These were seen as ways that the poor and the working class damaged themselves, lived in sin and denied God. In addition, the Protestant churches start with a distinctly individualistic notion of one's approach to religion. The Reformation's radical experiment of translating the Bible into the vernacular expressed the notion that ordinary people, reading scripture, could develop their personal faith without being dependent on the mediation of the church. A sense of the responsibility of the self made Protestantism relatively compatible with liberalism, which has always emphasised the autonomous, self-governing individual.

³ To clarify my terms in an area that can be a terminological minefield, I use "Catholic" to mean what Anglicans call "Roman Catholic" when they distinguish it from the Anglo-Catholic tendency within Anglicanism; and I use "evangelical" to encompass both Methodism and the evangelical revival which it helped inspire in the Anglican church.

The emphasis on the individual's inner experience of faith was paramount for John Wesley, an emphasis that continued with the rise of the Evangelicals that he inspired within the Church of England. For the Anglican and Methodist churches, justification was not by good works nor by outward observance, but by one's faith alone. It was a key inheritance of the Reformation encapsulated in one of the 39 Articles: "We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works and deservings ..."⁴. This was accompanied by a stricture that charitable works without prior justification by faith might even be sinful. An individual knew they were saved by the faith they had, but Wesley added a more intense emotional element to this justification. It had to be experienced as a felt transformation, felt as being "pardoned and received into God's favour, and into such a state that, if we continue therein, we shall finally be saved."⁵

In his study of Methodism, John Andrews suggests that the logical step that followed "remorselessly" from Luther's doctrine of justification by personal faith was Calvin's idea of predestination.⁶ But Wesley resolutely avoided that step, and one of the early splits in Methodism was over his rejection of Calvin. Instead, for Wesley, faith was known to be certain by the intensity of inner, emotional experience, and part of Methodism's generosity and popular appeal lay in never giving up on bringing salvation through revivalism, for all could be saved, if only they were given the opportunity to feel Christ in their hearts.⁷

In his influential analysis of different theological conceptions of the relationship between faith and the world, between Christ and culture, Richard Niebuhr located Wesley as a "conversionist", that is, among those who believed that although the world is full of sin and corruption, it could nevertheless be redeemed. Because Christ was present in the world, culture is perverted good, rather than evil: "the problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation ...". Niebuhr contrasted this with the view that the human world is both irretrievably corrupt and fundamentally separate from the kingdom of God. The two work on different rules: "the gospel as law and as promise was not

⁴ Quoted in S. Andrews, *Methodism and society* (Harlow: Longmans, 1970), 100.

⁵ Quoted in Andrews, 62.

⁶ Andrews, 61.

⁷ J. Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

directly concerned with the overt action of men but with the springs of conduct.”⁸ The springs of that conduct were inner faith, but held little hope the world could be improved. Niebuhr characterised Luther as an example, but it could equally be said of many evangelicals. While “conversionists” often adopted social reform as a means of transforming the world, those who saw human society as inherently corrupt emphasised individual salvation. Although Methodists and other evangelicals could take up questions of social reform, they could as easily argue that the redemption of individuals preceded the redemption of the world, and in any case they doubted the latter was possible. As the Rev. J.B. Rudduck of Melbourne City Mission had argued during the 1890s depression, “until the people take Christ and His teachings into their hearts and homes, it is little use trying to raise them and give them comfort and happiness.”⁹

The autonomy of the individual self before God had such prominence in evangelical traditions that it would be unusual if it did not help shape how they saw the poor. Liberal self-reliance had it opposite in the failings of the undeserving poor. In the 19th century combination of evangelical Christianity and welfare policing, the poor were only deserving if they had not brought their circumstances on themselves, and if they were receptive to salvation. Pauperism was seen as abject, unnecessary dependence on charity, and the bread of charity consequently must be bitter. Hence the prominent role of 19th century evangelicals in dispensing charity while also winnowing the deserving from the undeserving.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this may be too simple. Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain’s history of the Wesley Central Mission (WCM) demonstrates fluctuations around this evangelical sense of faith. WCM was established in inner Melbourne in 1893 on the British model of inner city missions to take the gospel to the urban poor. Its first few years, in the midst of the 1890s depression, were a time of progressive reformism, with advocacy about unemployment and labour exploitation.¹¹ This was part of Methodism’s late 19th century tradition of social action. The first superintendent, Alexander Edgar, reconciled individual evangelism with social reform by framing the latter as a moral issue.

⁸ R.H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 173, 193-4.

⁹ Quoted in R. Howe and S. Swain, *The Challenge of the City: The Centenary History of the Wesley Central Mission 1893-1993* (South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1994), 12.

¹⁰ B. Dickey, *No Charity There: A Short History of Social Welfare in Australia*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), and R. Kennedy, “Charity and Ideology in Colonial Victoria” in R. Kennedy (ed.) *Australian Welfare History: Critical Essays* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982).

¹¹ Howe and Swain, 5-20.

All our social evils spring from the state of the human heart. What can be expected when sin, selfishness, unlove, envy, hatred, individualism and unbridled competition reign. Sweep those away, and instead of the present distress you will have peace, concord, mutual help, close union of effort and prosperity.¹²

This was social reform understood in terms of the springs of conduct, the inner self.

Howe describes WCM as one of two main centres in Melbourne of social Christianity in the 1890s, along with the Reverend Strong's Australian Church, which had broken away from the Presbyterians. But by the end of the century this progressive Protestantism was a declining force, being replaced a re-emergent evangelical and conservative Protestantism that focused on traditional concerns of temperance and moral reform. In her study of women's organisations in the early decades of the 20th century, Judith Smart found a similar cycle. Drawing their membership from the women's auxiliaries of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union began in the late 19th century with some enthusiasm for social reform and suffrage, but by the 1920s were focused largely on moral reform. The WCTU's triple objectives were "prohibition, purity, peace", and "the emphasis during the 1920s was on the first two".¹³

Wesley Central Mission followed this change, and by the first decade of the 20th century was prominent in campaigns to introduce the Bible in schools, to protect the Sabbath, and to regulate, if not entirely prohibit gambling and alcohol. A celebratory book published during the catastrophe of the 1930s Depression identified the Mission's main contribution to welfare (alongside rescue homes for fallen women, hostels for respectable young women, soup kitchens for the unemployed and a boys' training farm) as being "at the forefront of the fight for the purification of public and social life" in campaigns against "gambling, drink and impurity."¹⁴ These efforts were consistent with an evangelical focus on moral probity and

¹² Quoted in R. Howe, "Protestantism, Social Christianity and the Ecology of Melbourne, 1890-1900", *Historical Studies* 74, (1980): 59-73.

¹³ J. Smart, "A Mission to the Home: the Housewives Association, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920-1940", *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, 28, (1998): 215-234, at 226; see also J. Smart, "Modernity and Mother-heartedness: Spirituality and religious meaning in Australian women's suffrage and citizenship movements, 1890s-1920s" in I. C. Fletcher, L. E. N. Mayhall and P. Levine (eds.) *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, nation and race* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴ H.A. Overend, 'The Church and the Community', in I.C. Benson (ed.), *A Century of Victorian Methodism* (Melbourne: Spectator, 1935), 280-288 at 286.

individual faith. Campaigns for “purification” could discourage sinfulness and save souls, and individual redemption was fundamentally more important than reform of social conditions.

From 1933 till 1967, WCM was dominated by the commanding presence of Irving Benson. Active in Moral Rearmament during the Cold War, Benson advocated spiritual renewal, temperance and individual responsibility. In 1935, he had published the story of Daniel Draper, a story that illustrated both Benson’s rhetorical gifts as a preacher, and the importance to him of the metaphor of salvation. Draper was a builder and preacher in Melbourne, and in 1865 was returning from Britain when his ship foundered in a storm. He promptly launched a 14-hour prayer meeting enjoining the passengers to “come to Christ for salvation”. When the captain announced there was no longer any hope, he declared:

The captain of this ship tells us there is no hope, that we must all perish, but the Captain of our salvation says there is hope for all. Although we must all die, and shall never see land again, we may all make the port of heaven.

Consistent with the tropes of both salvation and Victorian melodrama, as the ship went down, the few survivors heard the singing: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me; Let me hide myself in Thee.”¹⁵ While mass conversion *in extremis* might seem an unstable guide for welfare work, it illustrates the importance for Benson’s evangelism of metaphors of urgency and of redemption.

Benson was firmly conservative, projecting his voice into social and political debates through regular radio broadcasts and newspaper columns. Frequent guests for his radio broadcasts (the “Pleasant Sunday Afternoons”) were Casey and Menzies, and his impeccable connections in Melbourne business and Liberal Party circles assured funding support, political influence and, eventually, a knighthood. His distinctive reading of Post-war Reconstruction in the late 1940s indicated a strongly evangelical temper.

The word Reconstruction denotes an outward mechanical process; the putting together of the parts of a building or a machine. But life develops from within ... Our Lord never said society must be reconstituted, or the world must be rebuilt. What he said was, Man must be born again – born of the Spirit. ¹⁶

This is a classic statement of the evangelical tradition that sees redeeming the poor of their sins as more significant than reconstructing a social world that is fallen. The early social Christianity of Wesley Central Mission had reconciled the tension between evangelism and

¹⁵ Benson, 120.

¹⁶ Quoted in Howe and Swain, 116.

social reform, by arguing that the social order was not so much unjust as selfish; but Benson's conservatism meant there was nothing that needed to be reconciled.

Although he was dominant, Benson was not the entirety of the WCM in this period. F. Oswald Barnett, a member of the WCM Management Committee, was relatively prominent as an alternative voice, arguing the case for social reform. And Benson's successors were substantially more progressive. Arthur Preston was close to the ALP, campaigning against the Vietnam war and conscription, and initiating new welfare programs. His vision of the earthly Kingdom of God was "a new world community of love and justice in which selfish competition has no place but individuals and groups contribute to the welfare of all in a spirit of co-operation."¹⁷ This was more in the tradition of progressive Methodism, that had been part of the purpose of the central mission idea and that contributed to the influence of Methodism in the British labour movement.¹⁸ In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s, the WCM was absorbing radical ideas of community development, and implemented Wolfensberger's "normalisation" theories in its delivery of services, particularly in institutional care for people with disabilities. Wolfensberger considered the most marginal and vulnerable to be the most precious to God and hence, as Peter Worland, who implemented these changes as Manager of Care Services in the early 1980s put it: "you're doing it because you believe that there's a piece of Christ, a piece of God, in that person ... You should focus on them as human beings."¹⁹ Based on a humanist Christianity of respecting the dignity of those subject to the care of others, this was resonant of the incarnational theology described in the next section.

Seeing the face of Christ

The dominant strand of thought about poverty in the specific Catholic tradition exemplified by the Society of St Vincent de Paul is an old, relatively simple faith that sees poverty in incarnational (some would say sacramental) terms. Christ is present in the suffering of the

¹⁷ Quoted in Howe and Swain, 163.

¹⁸ R.F. Wearmouth, *The Social and Political Influence of Methodism in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Epworth Press, 1957).

¹⁹ Peter Worland, interview, 13 April 2005.

poor, the marginal and the forsaken. This had informed medieval notions of charity, and can be seen in the instructions of the Sisters of St Joseph in Sydney in 1870, who declared that they:

should consider themselves the servants of the poor, and therefore treat the inmates with the most affectionate consideration ... the Sisters are only administrators of the bounty which is God's, who expects that everything should be done for his poor.²⁰

The incarnational conception of poverty is more than the sentiment that Christ sided with the poor and the outcast. It views the incarnation as Christ being made flesh as an expression of God's love, and sees the suffering of the crucifixion replicated in social suffering. In this frame of reference, the lay Catholic men of the Society of St Vincent de Paul visited the poor in their homes, "esteeming ourselves happy" as they put it "in offering something to Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, and in being able to bring some relief to His suffering members."²¹

The *Manual* of the Society linked empathy for the poor with the metaphor of the Eucharist (marking the sacrifice and promise of the crucifixion):

... in loving one's neighbour, and above all those most in need, there is a kind of sacrament, being the presence of the suffering Christ in a needy person. This is the heart of Vincentian spirituality which brings out the meaning of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, as well as his presence in the needy.²²

A more intellectual (and mystical) vision of sacramentalism sees oneself merged with the body of Christ through identification with the poor, but Vincentians had a more earthly conception of personal sanctification through empathy. One former General Secretary of the Society said:

I think we love the poor. I think members tend to enjoy the company of people who are suffering. Not because they are suffering but more from the point of view of empathising with them ... it's a well known axiom of the Society that we look to see Christ in those we assist. I always jokingly say that's not always easy.²³

Another – currently President of the Victorian Society - said:

... in talking to you, I'm talking to Christ. I believe that it's in your neighbour that you see Christ, if that person is a poor person, you are seeing Christ. I can remember the

²⁰ Quoted in L. Hughes, "An Untold Story: Catholic Sisters and Social Welfare", Australasian Welfare History Workshop, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne (17-18 February 2005), 11. See also L. Hughes, "Poor Law Principles, Sectarianism and the State: the work of Catholic Sisters in nineteenth-century New South Wales", *Voluntary Action* 5, 1 (2002): 89-106.

²¹ St Vincent de Paul, Society of, *Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Australia* (Sydney: National Council of Australia, 1976), 25.

²² St Vincent de Paul, 17.

²³ Kevin Curry, (Victorian General Secretary, 1990-6) interview, 28 November 2003.

philosophy in the old [Young Christian Workers] - of Cardinal Cardijn, as he eventually was - that the person that you are talking to at a given moment is Christ. It's your neighbour. On this side of the grave that's the only way you're going to see Christ.²⁴

Charity means responding to the suffering of the poor with Christ's present love in the world, and this practice of unconditional charity is also the nurturing of one's faith: "we of the Society, meeting with Christ in the poor ... grow in our Vincentian spirituality."²⁵

Sacramentalism here means empathy with the presence of suffering, and this frame of reference explains why Vincentians still speak of "charity" long after it is a tainted term for other welfare agencies.

In this framework, charity is the cardinal virtue, but it had to be a charity infused with love for the poor. In the immediate post-war years, when full employment was temporarily achieved, the Society confronted the problem of what its role could now be. Was it being made redundant by the welfare state? There were three interwoven themes in its response. The first was that needs might change but were still present. There was still poverty and suffering, some of which was not so much material as spiritual, in the suffering of alcoholism, loneliness, the displacement of migrants, the illness and isolation of old age. The poor had to be sought out: "there are poor to be found everywhere, even in the midst of wealth and plenty you will find the poor".²⁶ Archbishop Mannix rather morosely warned them in late 1951: "the prosperity that we have does not reach all. And such as it is the present prosperity will not continue."²⁷

The second theme in its attitude to the welfare state was the Society's conviction that it brought intimacy to its encounters with the poor.

In a Welfare State the Government Office supplying the aid is soulless and, therefore, necessarily unloving ... in the Welfare State we are losing the true idea of charity. Charity is love ... we must not become mere welfare officers. Ours is a task of love for God's poor, and if we lose our love, we lose the spirit of our Society.²⁸

²⁴ Syd Tutton, (Victorian State President, 2001-) interview, 26 November 2003.

²⁵ St. Vincent de Paul, Society of, *Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul* (Sydney: National Council of Australia, 1991), 12.

²⁶ Rev. Father Brannigan, "The poor you have always with you", *St. Vincent de Paul Record* (2 Jan. 1952): 7.

²⁷ Archbishop Mannix, "Prosperity we have does not reach all", *St. Vincent de Paul Record* (1 March 1952): 34.

²⁸ "The Society in the Welfare State", *St. Vincent de Paul Record* (1 March 1951): 31-2.

Thirdly, this suspicion of the soullessness of the state was informed by the principle of subsidiarity, which insisted that Catholic associations (and the family) must not be subsumed by the state. In one sense, subsidiarity was a defence of civil society against the state, but was also informed by a conservative reaction against centralising state power as one element of modernity. In the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) subsidiarity meant:

... it is an injustice and at the same time a great evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity, functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies.²⁹

Australian Catholic social thought, as Smyth puts it, had supported the notion of a regulated basic wage, yet “rejected the expansion of state provided social welfare which was seen as a threat to the independence of familial and associational life.”³⁰

Consistent with this thinking on subsidiarity, the Society of St Vincent de Paul insisted on maintaining its independence of the state. In the Depression, when the New South Wales government required welfare agencies to provide lists of their clients as a condition of funding, the Society happily ignored the instruction; it would not give out information, and in any case was not reliant on government funding.³¹ In the post-war years, subsidiarity did not mean that Vincentians objected to welfare payments, but they continued to regard the state with suspicion. Their purpose was not to secure government funding, but to sanctify their own faith by practising love for the poor.

This incarnational conception can be found in the leadership of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which drew on the Anglo-Catholic tradition, adding to it a rich strain of more radical thought in English Anglicanism. It can partly be seen in Gerard Tucker who, during the 1930s Depression, Tucker had brought the Brotherhood to inner-city Fitzroy, within the domain of the Anglo-Catholic and socialist tendency at St Peter’s, Eastern Hill.³² Austere, spiritual but with modest intellectual development, Tucker simply responded to the social needs he saw around him on the principle that action was what Jesus would do. He drew his main inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of

²⁹ Quoted in P. Smyth, “Reclaiming community? from welfare society to welfare state in Australian Catholic thought”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 49, 1 (2003): 17-30 at 22.

³⁰ Smyth, 22.

³¹ D. Gleeson, “Catholic charity during the 1930s Great Depression”, *The Australasian Catholic Record* 73, 1 (1996): 68-80.

³² C. Holden, *From Tories at Prayer to Socialists at Mass: St. Peter's Eastern Hill, 1848-1990* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996).

heaven ... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". Tucker described the Sermon as "the best plan known to man for his welfare here on earth", and summarised his view as "You cannot worship God at the Altar unless you worship Him in the slums."³³

The incarnational view of poverty was developed with greater rigour by the later leaders of the Brotherhood, Peter Hollingworth and Michael Challen. For the latter:

the Church is required to care for people not to justify itself; nor even as a consequence of the Gospel, but rather more fundamentally such action lies at the heart of our union with God who is love.

For Challen, the incarnation was a sign of unconditional love. "God's initiative in the birth of Jesus urges us to be committed to one another rather than to ourselves," and he suggested those who took up the caring professions out of "humanism", had unknowingly had "a taste of the Incarnation". Suffering had long been the basis of charitable action:

Historically, much of the Church's charitable work arose from the belief that the Christ of the Cross still suffers as He continues to identify Himself with and is found in the sick, the tragic, the outcast and the powerless ... This suggests to me that in a sinful world, we may not know the primacy of love except by staying amidst the suffering.³⁴

Though they would concede they failed at times, those practising this incarnational conception of welfare wanted to be unconditional.

Compared with the evangelical tradition, they were little concerned with discriminating between the deserving and the undeserving, and were little bothered with judgments of "character". They emphasised charity rather than human failings and compassion rather than salvation. What mattered was the presence of suffering, which must be responded to because Christ was known in the poor. In itself, this strand of thought leads to empathy with the poor, but not necessarily to a wider social analysis. With its roots in this tradition, the Society of St Vincent de Paul came relatively late to arguments about advocacy on behalf of the poor. It seemed outside the currents of the Catholic social justice tradition through the 20th century.

³³ J. Handfield, *Friends and Brothers: A Life of Gerard Kennedy Tucker, Founder of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Community Aid Abroad* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1980), 197. Holden points out this was a paraphrase of the much-quoted formula from 1923 of Bishop Weston of Zanzibar: "You cannot worship Jesus in the tabernacle unless you pity Jesus in the slums." Holden, 213.

³⁴ Challen, Michael, "The nature of God and the significance of care" (unpublished paper, Coolibah night, 26 June, 1991: 1, 7, 11 & 14.

This may reflect what Bruce Duncan characterises as the inhibited development of Catholic social thought in Australia. Larger vigorous disputes about the social question, the rights of labour and social justice – reaching back to the mid-19th century - had little impact on the Society. This is ironic since Frederick Ozanam, who founded the Society in France in 1833, had been part of a radical reformist response to industrial capitalism. Ozanam endorsed liberal democracy, but objected that economic liberalism made workers into tools for profit.

He argued that charity was not enough to solve these problems; justice between employers and workers was needed. To regulate the labour market, he called for workers to organise themselves and for State controls.³⁵

But Ozanam, like other social reformers within Catholicism at the time, was soon out of step. Through much of the 19th century, official church positions were intractably reactionary, opposed to modernity in its liberal, socialist and capitalist forms, and nostalgic for an organic, pre-modern order of guilds, families and established authorities.

Though arguments about “the social question” as a response to modernity were out of favour, figures such as von Ketteler, the Archbishop of Mainz, developed strands of Social Catholicism that advocated social reform and justice for workers.³⁶ Michael Novak credits von Ketteler as a key architect of Catholic social thought, including influencing papal condemnations of liberalism, by which was always meant *laissez-faire* capitalism and competitive individualism. In 1891, Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* for the first time showed a Catholic church attempting to accommodate itself with modernity. He committed the church to standing for the rights of workers to organise, to a state that protected the weak, and to a fair wage that allowed workers to live in “reasonable and frugal comfort” – the phrasing later used in the Harvester Judgment.³⁷ Similarly, von Ketteler’s student Heinrich Pesch developed an economics of solidarism as an alternative to both liberalism and socialism, arguing for corporatist institutions mediating between the atomisation of individualism and the despotism of the state. This was a large part of the rationale for the principle of subsidiarity, but also proved unfortunately compatible with Mussolini’s form of corporatism.³⁸

³⁵ B. Duncan, *The Church's Social Teaching: from Rerum Novarum to 1931* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1991), 21.

³⁶ See Duncan, chapter 2.

³⁷ Duncan, 162.

³⁸ M. Novak, *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions: Freedom with Justice* (2nd ed.) (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), chapters 4 & 5.

What followed in the 20th century was a continuing ferment about where Catholics stood on social justice, including conservative reaction against all forms of “Modernism”, and the contradictory sentiments of *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, which condemned more fulsomely than ever both socialism and liberalism, but elevated the concepts of “social justice” and “subsidiarity” to greater prominence. Duncan argues that two trends that were particularly influential in Australia were the British Catholic Social Guild, which supported a moderate guild socialism in the 1920s, and the “Distributism” of Hillaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton, who argued for a distribution of property, were deeply suspicious of the state and were nostalgic for pre-modern guilds and organic communities.³⁹

The point here is not to recount a history of Catholic social thought, but to note that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul remained outside the circuits of these debates, particularly in the post-war years. In this regard, it is revealing that the Society features so little in Patrick O’Farrell’s history of Catholicism in Australia, and not at all in James Murtagh’s.⁴⁰ There are several possible explanations for the Society being on the margins of Catholic thought. For one thing, it was a voluntary group of lay men, and intellectual discussion was hardly their *métier*. What mentions there are in their *Record* of wider debates suggest an affinity with the Distributists. They sometimes endorsed Belloc’s language about the “servile state”; and could claim that because Ozanam supported distribution of property, this made him a “Christian Democrat”.⁴¹ But these were rarely invitations to engage with the controversies within Catholic social thought. Social justice debates first appear in the Society’s publications in the 1970s in relation to Third World development rather than social inequality in Australia. This was consistent with the larger shift within the Catholic church in the 1970s, in which the Catholic bishops argued the need to move from individual acts of mercy and charity, to social action for justice.

The Society continually reasserted its purpose as being devoted to sanctification of their own lives through humble encounters with the poor. Public advocacy was explicitly rejected:

Direct contact with the unfortunates turns aside primarily from all publicity and shows just how far one is but a useless instrument, unless given worth through the grace of God

³⁹ See Duncan, chapters 5 & 6, and also B. Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy: Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia* (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ P. O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian history* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1992) and J.G. Murtagh, *Australia: The Catholic Chapter* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959).

⁴¹ *St. Vincent de Paul Record* (1 March, 1949) 40.

alone ... Large scale welfare and social schemes are not for Vincentians, who never seek them out because they know they are called personally to the modest role of foot-soldier in the battle against misfortune.⁴²

Although priests spoke at their meetings, the reports in the *Record* suggest their contributions were exhortations to return to the original ideas of Ozanam, always posed in terms of seeing Christ in the poor, without a wider interest in social reform. The Vincentian's identity was that of the foot-soldier.

A second explanation for why the Society was less influenced by social justice arguments is that it shied away from controversy in the post-war years. Ozanam had insisted that "the spirit of charity, together with Christian prudence, shall further induce us to banish political discussions for ever from our meetings ... Our Society is all charity; politics are wholly foreign to it."⁴³ Given the intensity of post-war divisions within Australian Catholicism before and after the ALP Split in 1955, this self-denying ordinance may have saved the Society from being drawn into the vortex. During the 1950s, there was no mention in the *Record* of the Split that was convulsing Catholicism. This silence speaks volumes; it was too volatile a topic to broach. Syd Tutton, who had been campaign manager for Stan Keon's DLP campaign in Richmond in 1958, experienced the bitterness of the Split first hand. He suggested that they had got through by not allowing the controversy to spill over into Society meetings, and that the Split caused Catholics in general to turn away from the divisiveness of politics and withdraw from the public realm.

When I first joined the society, there was no advocacy because we probably thought there might have been a political connotation to it ... arising out of the Labor Party Split and the bitterness and the sectarian disturbances of those mid 1950s ... many generations of Catholics that were socially involved pulled right back ... Not only [the] St Vincent de Paul Society, I believe the whole Catholic community generally withdrew from politics ... everyone said, 'no let's keep right out of politics' and I'm sure that was a mitigating situation why the Society kept out of advocacy.⁴⁴

This suggests fear of political controversy was added to the modesty of the foot-soldier. But it also meant that larger debates about welfare and social justice were left to one side. In the post-war years, they would be for others to champion.

⁴² St Vincent de Paul, *Manual*, 1976, 15.

⁴³ St Vincent de Paul, *Manual*, 1976, 28.

⁴⁴ Tutton, interview, 26 November 2003.

Social justice for the poor

By contrast with these Catholic debates, the non-evangelical Anglican tradition on “the social question” is less suspicious of modernity, more amenable to state action but less obviously aligned with organised labour. The Brotherhood of St Laurence’s emphasis on social justice, community action and policy advocacy comes out of an articulate, though minority, tradition within Anglican political and theological thought. This also drew on an incarnational view of the world, and parallels what Niebuhr called the “conversionist” attitude: Christ is always present in the world, which can consequently be redeemed through social action.

In a paper outlining his “vision” as the new director of the Brotherhood in 1991, Challen sketched this approach: “the creation is surrounded by and is penetrated by the reigning of God, who is Love.” With a gesture towards liberation theology, he went beyond the incarnational view of the poor as the face of Christ, to arguments for social justice activism, as “God’s preferential option for the poor”.

A Christian welfare organisation is to indicate to the wider society that what matters most in our world are human beings and that includes those who are likely to be overlooked or brushed aside. A Christian welfare organisation is forever challenging society ... so that the ‘status quo’ is not accepted as being inevitable ...

This positioned social justice as more important than charity, within the Brotherhood’s by-then well-established view that charity lacked an analysis of the structural causes of disadvantage:

The response of charity is where most of us start when we are encountered by someone in need. We are prompted by the need to act out of love. Then we grow in our awareness of the causes of that person being in need ... To approach the issue of poverty from the point of justice is to include all people in the consideration and responsibility; to approach [it] from the point of charity is to focus upon the victim alone.⁴⁵

Challen’s view reflected the radicalisation of the Brotherhood occurring in the 1970s when it had become a powerhouse of community development and, in the 1980s, of social policy research and analysis.

⁴⁵ M. Challen, “Executive Director’s Vision for the BSL”, (unpublished paper presented to the Board, 2 June, 1991): 2 & 3.

This, however, was a minority view within the Anglican Church in Australia. A number of historians of Anglicanism have pointed to the marked differences between evangelical and Anglo-Catholic tendencies, show most clearly in differences of ritual and observance, but also with consequences for politics. Low church evangelicals favoured a more austere, Protestant form of worship, while high church Anglo-Catholics were drawn to the use of ritual, vestments and incense (though not statues). The latter were not necessarily hankering to return to Roman Catholicism, and Hilliard notes their view was often that they represented the true pre-Reformation Church of the English, which had thrown off the Roman yoke. Nor were there stable dividing lines between what was low or high; what was considered outrageously “Papist” in one generation could become uncontroversial “tradition” in the next.⁴⁶

Divisions in politics do not quite match with these high and low church arguments, though there were some links. Political views ranged from the mainstream “Anglican ascendancy” that was so attached to the ruling order and empire, through social reformers who hoped for consensus and reduction of class division, to Christian Socialists who argued an explicitly Marxist language.⁴⁷ Joan Mansfield, in her study of Christian Socialists in New South Wales from the 1930s to the early 1950s, notes how marginal they were to the dominant trend of evangelism. The division was nicely captured in the rivalry between two committees of the Diocese of Sydney with responsibility for the “Social Question” in the 1930s:

... the Social Problems Committee ... understood its area of interest to be ‘the Social Problem, rather than specific evils such as gambling, drink and vice, except in so far as these are bound up with the structure of society’. It was not to be confused with the Sunday Observance and Social Reform Committee which focused on just these ‘specific evils’. The existence of these two committees illustrated neatly the split in social attitudes within the Diocese.⁴⁸

From 1943 to 1951, this socialist activism found expression in the Christian Social Order Movement in New South Wales, which was explicitly anti-capitalist and asserted the necessary compatibility of Christianity and socialism. This meant the Kingdom of God required radical

⁴⁶ D. Hilliard, “The Anglo-Catholic Tradition in Australian Anglicanism” in M. Hutchinson and E. Campion (eds.) *Re-Visioning Australian Colonial Christianity: New Essays in the Australian Christian Experience, 1788-1900* (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1994).

⁴⁷ On the “ascendancy”, see B. Fletcher, “The Anglican Ascendancy, 1788-1835” and R. Frappell, “Imperial Fervour and Anglican Loyalty, 1901-1929” in B. Kaye (ed.), *Anglicanism in Australia: a history* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ J. Mansfield, “The Social Gospel and the Church of England in New South Wales in the 1930s”, *Journal of Religious History* 13 (1986): 411-433 at 415.

changes to social structures, and was connected with the enthusiasms of Post-War Reconstruction. Mansfield describes the CSOM drawing on a tradition of the social gospel based on “an incarnational theology which focused on the unity of the sacred and secular ...” But by the late 1940s, as Post-War Reconstruction waned and anti-Communism increased, the CSOM’s support was undermined by an increasingly evangelical shift: “the stronger tendency was to see the social gospel as a rival to, rather than a necessary component of evangelism”.⁴⁹

Melbourne Anglicanism has tended to be less evangelical and more pluralist. David Hilliard sketches its character between the 1920s and 1950s as follows:

... the tone of the Melbourne Diocese tended to be ‘low’ rather than ‘high’. It embodied a restrained and moderate Anglicanism, broadly Protestant in sympathy, conservative politically, though with a sense of social responsibility, cautiously open to change, and proudly imperialist.⁵⁰

Within this demure restraint were some who were both Anglo-Catholic and politically progressive, including Farnham Maynard, vicar from 1926 to 1964 at St Peter’s, Eastern Hill, “a liberal Catholic in theology” and “an outspoken socialist”.⁵¹ It was Maynard who helped bring Tucker’s fledgling Brotherhood to Melbourne, and the BSL emerged as a welfare agency in Fitzroy to some extent under his protection. In his history of St Peter’s, Colin Holden describes the “fruitful interaction” between Anglo-Catholicism and Christian socialism, which linked theology with politics.

Since the beginning of the Oxford Movement, the stress placed on the Incarnation by its theologians had been a stimulus for social work. Since the Incarnation proclaimed the essential dignity of the created order, an appropriate response was the desire to remove all that obscured that dignity. Living standards and working conditions became a proper concern for parish clergy, members of religious communities and lay people.⁵²

This confluence gave parts of Melbourne Anglicanism a reputation for political radicalism by the 1960s, nurturing the progressive politics of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

⁴⁹ Quoted in J. Mansfield, “The Christian Social Order Movement, 1943-1951”, *Journal of Religious History* 15 (1988): 109-127 at 113 & 120.

⁵⁰ D. Hilliard, “Intellectual life in the Diocese of Melbourne” in B. Porter (ed.) *Melbourne Anglicans: the Diocese of Melbourne, 1847-1997* (Melbourne: Mitre Books, 1997), 36.

⁵¹ Hilliard, “Intellectual life in the Diocese of Melbourne”, 38.

⁵² Holden, 200.

Peter Hollingworth, who had joined the BSL as chaplain in the 1960s and was its Executive Director from 1980 to 1991, saw this tradition as a legacy of English social justice thinking, characterised as an “Anglican Liberal Catholic tradition”. This “affirm[ed] the importance of Christ’s incarnation and kingship, proclaiming as a corollary the centrality of Christian social witness and action in the corporate life of the world.”⁵³ He charted this “tradition” beginning with Frederick Dennison Maurice, who from the 1840s started what later became the Workers’ Educational Association, and was a guiding light of Christian socialism. The lineage ran through Bishop Westcott’s Christian Social Union (founded in 1889) which argued for co-operation to replace *laissez-faire* economics and included Charles Gore and Henry Scott Holland, to the Church Socialist League (from 1906 to 1923) which was unequivocally socialist, and included the historian R.H. Tawney, the future Labour Party leader George Lansbury and the “Red Dean” Hewlett Johnson. In the 1930s and 1940s, William Temple was then a key figure, developing radical Anglican responses to unemployment and labour conditions and contributing to the emergence of the post-war welfare state with his *Christianity and Social Order*, published in 1942, the year he became Archbishop of Canterbury.

This is a diverse and rich legacy, based on the idea that the social order should be remade to accord with Christian values of justice and fellowship. Its engagement with modernity included a critique of industrial capitalism as based on selfishness and competitiveness, to which it opposed a social order informed by service and co-operation. Niebuhr describes Maurice as the clearest expression of a “conversionist” orientation. “The conversion of mankind from self-centredness to Christ-centredness was for Maurice the universal and present divine possibility.” The incarnation was the basis of this possibility, because Christ was imminent as love in humanity. As Niebuhr puts it, this meant:

... there is no phase of human culture over which Christ does not rule, and no human work which is not the subject of his transforming power over self-will – as there is none, however holy, which is not subject to deformation.⁵⁴

For similar reasons, Maurice opposed evangelicals and Calvinists who made sin and damnation the main ground of theology: “it seems to me that the living and the holy God is the ground of it, and sin the departure from the state of union with him ...”⁵⁵

⁵³ P. Hollingworth, *Christianity and Social Order: From Maurice to Temple and Beyond* (Melbourne: Occasional Paper, Companions of St Laurence, 1981), 1 & 12.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, 225 & 227.

⁵⁵ Maurice quoted in Niebuhr, 224.

In his biography of Temple, John Kent locates him in the mood of social anxiety about industrial modernity pervading the Victorian upper class from which he came. At Oxford in 1900 - shortly after the death of the influential T.H. Green - Temple encountered the Hegelian philosophy that was inspiring new liberalism, along with “the conviction that the economic and imperial successes of Victorian individualism had made too many comfortably-off people indifferent to the effects of industrialisation on society.”⁵⁶ Temple joined the Christian Social Union, the WEA and (briefly) the Labour Party, and was deeply influenced by his close friend Tawney. They were at school at Rugby and then Oxford together. Temple combined Hegel with Maurice. With the latter, he argued that competition, which “pervades our whole life ... is simply organised selfishness”, and wrote with strong Hegelian overtones that the “real purpose” of the world was “the active presence of a real Will which lay ‘behind’ the world”.⁵⁷

It may have been this Hegelian influence of new liberalism that gave him a confidence in the ethical role of the state markedly missing in Catholicism. In 1917, Temple wrote that “before there can be again such a thing as Christendom existing in the world as a living fact ... we must first realise the spiritual character of the State even in its most material functions”. As Kent puts it:

... the troubles of a sick society could only be cured by remedies applied to the society as a whole. One might call this the ‘liberal’ side of Temple’s Anglicanism, because he always assumed that the community would use its power to increase the freedom of the individual; he was not satisfied with the orthodox view that all that religion could do was save individuals from an incurably sick society.⁵⁸

This is rather abstract, but Temple’s activism included organising conferences in the 1920s and 1930s that argued for worker consultation, a living wage and social welfare programs:

... his theological version of ‘organic unity’ became a justification of what we have come to call the ‘Welfare State’. In his view to set up a society organised to look after the whole population as far as provision of health, work, education, housing and old age was concerned would be to express the will of God in terms of social justice.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ J. Kent, *William Temple: Church, State and Society in Britain, 1880-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

⁵⁷ Kent, 14 & 20.

⁵⁸ Kent, 22 & 52.

⁵⁹ Kent, 53.

With *Christianity and Social Order* in 1942, a bestseller that expressed some of the hopes of post-war Britain, Temple brought together these arguments about reforms inspired by Christian influence over social policy. He sent drafts of the book to both Tawney and John Maynard Keynes. Temple had felt defensive about his entitlement to propose a policy program on housing, education, wages and worker consultation, but Keynes reassured him. Marshall had taught him that political economy was part of ethics and hence “the right of the Church to interfere in what is essentially a branch of ethics becomes even more obvious”.⁶⁰

Temple is important because, for a short few years, he had the authority of being the Archbishop of Canterbury, and because he re-articulated a tradition of Christian socialism in the conditions of an emerging welfare state. This was to flow directly into the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Hollingworth doubted Tucker had ever read any of that tradition but, because Tucker’s grandfather was a cousin of Bishop Westcott of the Christian Social Union, “he didn’t have to read about it, I mean it was in the family blood.” Hollingworth described Tucker’s successor, Geoffrey Sambell (director from 1954 to 1969), as “a liberal, evangelical, social gospel Anglican, an interesting mix”, who was more interested in ideas.

Sambell would certainly have read William Temple ... Temple is the great kind of constructive intellect who pulls all this together and for Sambell, that’s where he got his social gospel ideas ... an incarnational style of Christianity which was based upon demonstrating what justice and caring meant in practical daily life ...⁶¹

Challen too related the influence Temple had had on him:

He’s an amazing man, one of the biggest intellects, came from very privileged circumstances, but really in his public ministry was virtually devoted to workers and unemployed ... Extraordinary ... we still look to him because he’s certainly got the Anglican emphasis on the incarnation, [and] I think an emphasis within a certain stream of Anglicanism to take reason seriously and give a proper place to philosophy ...⁶²

But incarnation was not enough in itself.

The formulation behind Catholic ideas of meeting Christ in the other can lead to quietism, without changing the circumstances of the other.

⁶⁰ Quoted in F.A. Iremonger, *William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: his life and letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 439.

⁶¹ Peter Hollingworth, interview, 24 November 2003.

⁶² Michael Challen, interview, 4 December 2003.

Related to the doctrine of incarnation is Jesus' mysterious but persistent refrain of the Kingdom of God ... the Kingdom does not refer to a place or a regime. The Kingdom refers to a dynamic which comes from the relationship that God has with us. The God who is love relating to us through love. Now if you really believe in that sort of thing, then love and all its expressions has primacy and it is that by which you judge not just personal behaviour but arrangements in society ... the Kingdom is not only future but it is present right now, and I think social justice, the pursuit of social justice, the quest for social justice is a wonderful way of knowing the reign of God who is love.⁶³

In part as a result of this radical though minority tradition within Anglicanism, the Brotherhood of St Laurence was not only an agency developing its own institutional history and strengths. In the 1970s it drew on radical, largely secular politics to initiate community development and social action; in the 1980s and 1990s, it developed major research and policy interventions. But as a faith-based organisation, it was also nurtured by a legacy of radical theology.

During the post-war years, Wesley Central Mission, St Vincent de Paul and the Brotherhood of St Laurence gave the appearance of converging towards the same point. They all developed forms of institutional and residential care, such as shelters for homeless men and accommodation for the aged. The state encouraged and enticed them with funding incentives, and they occupied a similar niche in the mixed economy of welfare, delivering care on behalf of the state. By the 1980s, they came to share much the same language of social justice and advocacy, even though they understood these things differently.

But despite this convergence, from the point of view of their theological traditions, in the deeper discursive structures of their faith, three differences are marked. First, they have regarded the state differently. At the risk of simplifying, we could say that Vincentians have been suspicious and at best ambivalent about state involvement in their work; they wanted to keep the state at arms length to avoid being subsumed into its soulless embrace. Evangelicals, by contrast, frequently wanted the state involved in legislating to redeem public morality, by prohibiting vice, but they were not much focused on the state's broader role in social policy. The Brotherhood had the most positive theoretical view of the state, drawing on a new liberal

⁶³ Michael Challen, interview, 4 December 2003.

tradition that saw the state as capable of representing the collective interest, and agitating for action in areas such as poverty, unemployment and slum clearance.

Second, these three traditions have distinctive views of liberalism. Vincentians had learnt from regular papal denunciations to disapprove of liberalism as competitive individualism; evangelicals had a vision of the autonomous individual before God that was more compatible with political liberalism, while the Brotherhood drew on the new liberal confidence that the state represented an “organic unity” and could play an ethical role as the expression of social interests.

Finally, the theological lineage of each of these agencies has an imagining of Christ in the world, as the consequence of the incarnation, but with different implications. For evangelicals, the incarnation represents the persistently renewed possibility of salvation, as grace offered to all, who are consequently expected to take it up. For Vincentians, it represents the persistence and perhaps inevitability of suffering, with Christ’s suffering repeated in that of the poor. For the Brotherhood, the incarnation represents the possibility of remaking the social order in the image of Christ’s love. And so they came to imagine the poor differently, or more precisely to imagine a different poor – as the fallen being offered salvation, as those whose suffering might well go on forever, or as the oppressed who can and should be released.