

## The role of faith-based criticism of public policy and practice

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Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational theorist famous for his pioneering work in the mass literacy campaigns amongst the poor of his country, summed up our vocation as faith-based organisations well when he called for an engagement in the act of prophetic *denunciation* of the bad news in order to engage in a prophetic *annunciation* of the good news.

The bad news is evident in the unjust social, economic and legislative structures that cause and exacerbate marginalisation and inequality. The good news is that, contrary to the dominant neoliberal discourse, another world is possible!

For faith based organisations the challenge is to withstand the attempts by neoliberal forces, both internal and external, to co-opt their organisations for the project of coercion and control of marginalised people. Instead of this unworthy path, we are called to stand in solidarity with, and fight for, those who have been excluded and marginalised. To fight like the Prophet Isaiah bids us:

*“Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless.”* (Is 10:1-3)

To fight is to bear witness to the stories people entrust to us: their blood, their flesh, their joy, their tears, their sacredness, their dreams, their lives.

There is nothing more human or more sacred than this struggle.

Faith-based organisations are, of course, quite capable of being instrumental in the implementation of social control by the interests of the powerful. This has been demonstrated historically with the role of faith-based organisations in developing and implementing the categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

This instrumentality continues to occur today, especially when programmes and funding are valued more highly than genuine analysis of the structural cases of exclusion.

The contradiction lies within faith-based organisations, however, that they have also been a thorn in the side of those who exercise this social control. Everything is pregnant with its contrary!

Charities have played an important role in supporting the *status quo*, assuaging the consciences of those who are responsible for perpetuating structures which cause or exacerbate poverty and inequality. Charities have also been on the front line of the struggle for social justice, challenging the structural causes of poverty and inequality.

We can either accept the oppressive structures and therefore join the neoliberal consensus that families are to blame for their own poverty due to bad behaviour, or we can take on the perspective of those who have been marginalised. We can dare to critique the structures that make life impossible and degrading for so many families. We can engage in the articulation of a philosophy from below, a philosophy of praxis, a philosophy of liberation.

Before we can share the common dreams of a fair and just Australia we need to share the common nightmares of those who have been left out or pushed out.

But when we do, we should expect to be targeted and roundly criticised.

As Helder Camara put it so well: *“When I give bread to the poor, I am called a saint. But when I ask why they have no bread I am called a communist.”*

Paternalistic programmes and interventions will not solve the root causes of poverty and exclusion in our country. Only when we acknowledge the economic and legislative drivers of inequality will we be able to truly understand the realities that families are facing on the edges of society.

Neither is charity the answer to these problems. Charity has come to be understood as an essential ingredient in a modern market economy in order to catch the people who fall “through the cracks”.

Charity is no substitute for justice.

We must put an end to the creation of gaping holes rather than merely supplying stretchers for the people who fall through them.

The founder of Vinnies, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century French Academic, Frederic Ozanam, wrote: *“Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is justice’s role to prevent the attack.”*

It is justice’s role to build the kind of society where everyone is truly included and no one is pushed to the margins; the kind of society that is built not only by means of the redistribution of goods and services but also by the redistribution of decision-making, the redistribution of the dignity, the redistribution of hope.

There is nothing more alienating than to be consigned to the rubbish heap during a time of plenty. And then to be demonised!

While we are meeting here today the legislation is about to be passed in Canberra to legitimize a racist intervention in the Northern Territory. In yesterday’s *Sydney Morning Herald*, Banduk Marika, a community leader and artist from Yirrkala, Arnhem Land, wrote these brave and beautiful words:

*“I want to say that we do honestly welcome any real help with the problems created by our contact with non-indigenous society, and by past failures to fund and deliver basic services, but we will not be treated as though we have no rights in our own land or lives. Like our elders before us, we will continue to stand up for what is right and fair. And for who we are. I am not just talking here for the sake of it: I am a senior traditional owner of the Yirrkala*

*community land, which the Federal Government is trying to take from my family, without even having the guts or the courtesy to speak to us.*

*“Don't use our children as an excuse for stealing this land away from us.”*

We often find ourselves criticised for taking a stand in solidarity with marginalised people. We find ourselves criticised for not falling into line with Government programmes or the ideological trends that are popular. Let us recall the words of the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador:

*“Even when they call us mad,  
when they call us subversives and communists  
and all the other epithets they put on us,  
we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes,  
which have turned everything upside down.”*

These are some of the nightmares that we are called upon to turn upside down:

The First peoples of Australia are stuck with a health status that is, according to the World Health Organisation, 100 years behind rest of population.

Indigenous Australians constitute 25% of the prison population and are 13 times more likely to have done time than their non-indigenous fellow citizens.

Over the last ten years there has been a 50% increase in the prison population. At the same time we have seen a 28% decline in Commonwealth funding for public, community and Indigenous Housing.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has released figures that show a widening gap in income levels especially over the last three years. The wealthiest households in Australia have been richly rewarded over the last few years. This comes as no surprise when one considers the disproportionate gains made by high income earners as a result of tax cuts and other concessions.

ABS figures show that the greatest increase in income inequality was between 2003/4 and 2005/6 with the high income households experiencing a \$139 a week increase compared with a mere \$24 a week increase going to low-income households and a \$43 a week increase for middle income households.

One is reminded of the words of the German poet, Bertolt Brecht:

*‘Rich man and his poorer brother  
Stood and looked at one another  
Till the poor man softly swore:  
‘You’d not be rich if I weren’t poor.’”*

Faith-based organisations must also surely hear the echo of that primeval call to do justice:

*“Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood crying out to me from the ground.”* (Genesis 4:10)

As the Canadian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, observed of the people who have borne the burden of growing inequality:

*“They are degraded, for in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable.”*

Some would propose that we ensure that “the degraded” are moved up into “acceptable grades” via workforce participation, for example, even if they are being shamefully exploited and kept in poverty.

But why stop at ensuring that people are included in acceptable grades?

Why not do away with the grades altogether?

We believe that another kind of world is possible. We cannot help but listen to the whispers from the edges of society, the whispers of hope that are predicated on the revolutionary agenda articulated so beautifully in the Magnificat of Mary:

*“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, raised up the lowly, He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty.”* (Luke 1: 52-53)

Faith-based criticism springs forth from this hope against all hope. It is also based on the analytical framework we use for understanding inequality and injustice.

A 15<sup>th</sup> Century anonymous English poet came up with an interesting piece of doggerel at the time of the land enclosures:

*“The law locks up the man or woman  
who steals the goose from off the common,  
but leaves the greater villain loose  
who steals the common from under the goose.”*

What kind of analysis do we choose? Do we focus, as the dominant discourse does, on the theft of the goose, thereby demonising and criminalising the excluded? Or do we have the courage to critique the theft of the commons, the systematic plundering of the common wealth for the benefit of the already powerful? Do we analyse from above or from below?

The Nicaraguans had a saying that: *“Solidarity is the tenderness of the people.”*

This universal tenderness is forged in the kiln of shared suffering and shared hope.

It happens in the face of the structural attempts to alienate and atomize our experiences of exclusion. It happens when we remember the wonderful insight of the Second Wave Feminists that: *“The personal is political.”*

It happens when people begin to arrive at common answers to the common questions:

What is it that marginalises me?

What is it that excludes me?

What is it that makes me feel less than human?

As the Indigenous Brazilian proverb goes: *“When we dream alone it is only a dream. But when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.”*

The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975:viii) prescribed a frighteningly simple antidote to the growth of poverty and inequality in Australia:

*“If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it.”*

Thirty pieces of silver for “programmes for the poor” will never address the historical and structural reality of the theft of the commons or the dominance of the idolatrous value-system that puts profits before people.

Augustine of Hippo once said:

*“Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”*

It is imperative that this analysis end on a note of hope. Let us then give the last word to Bertolt Brecht, who knew the meaning of dark times. He wrote:

*“Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.”*