



# Spirituality and Human Services

## Background Paper

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collaboration · inquiry · social action

### Introduction

This paper provides information and reflections on discussions of the role of spirituality in human services and on the role of Christian faith-based community service organisations (CSOs) in a secular society. While the paper is written from the perspective of the three Catholic CSOs that auspice Esther's Voice and draws on their circumstances, it aims to generate a discussion relevant to members of other Christian denominations. The paper does not attempt to grapple with specific issues for non-Christian faith-based CSOs, although it is hoped the discussion will be of relevance to them and to all CSOs.

The three areas of interest discussed here – secular society, human services and faith-based CSOs – are fundamentally related. The rise of the Secular State also saw the rise of industrial cities and the decline of monasticism and Christendom; this in turn exposed the shortcomings of traditional charities and created the demand for professional social work in human services.

Most surviving Christian charities have today been refounded as large professional community service organisations.<sup>2</sup> They not only provide services to over 20% of Australians each year, but they also play a major role in the shaping of public policy, as well as in holding communities together and making society inclusive and caring.<sup>3</sup> However, given their dependence on

<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.

<sup>2</sup> See John Honner, "Negotiating Change: Refounding MacKillop Family Services", *Children Australia* 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The four major national church welfare bodies – Anglicare Australia, Catholic Social Services, the Salvation Army, and Uniting Care Australia – deal with over four million citizens each year. See Access Economics, *The Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Social Services in Australia*, November 2008, p. 2. Note that these groups do not include

government funding and the pressures of escalating compliance and accountability requirements, faith-based CSOs are caught in a conundrum. The conundrum is that these external requirements of the Secular State may cut across the internal inspiration that originally brought the faith-based organisations to life.<sup>4</sup> There is, after all, potential for a fundamental clash of values between the pragmatic instrumentalism of the ideal Secular State – with its focus on ‘what works’ for the good order of a pluralist society – and the counter-cultural prophetic ideals of followers of Jesus, given their espoused ‘preferential option’ for the poor rather than for market economies, and given their belief in the ultimate value of self-transcending love rather than productivity.

The Secular State and professional human services, on the other hand, are caught in a similar conundrum, but from, as it were, the ‘other side’. Their focus on the immediate and the material may have the unintended consequence of creating dispassionate impersonality in service delivery and thus exposed a yearning for more authentic personal relations and communities.

On a positive note, however, Christian CSOs, Human Services and the Secular State all share a vision of building up the common good. This paper is therefore concerned with addressing the following questions that arise:

1. Is there room in the public spaces of the Secular State for faith-based community service organisations?
2. What concepts of public spaces and what theologies of mission will allow faith-based organisations to experience an alignment of values, mission and purpose in the Secular State?
3. Is the notion of pluralism rather than secularism a better frame for identifying this space?
4. What would an enhanced secular society look like?
5. Can the exploration of spiritual needs be justified in the State’s provision of public services and regulation of professional codes?
6. What training and support are necessary to equip human services staff to engage the whole person, including their spiritual dimensions?
7. What safeguards are required to ensure this engagement has integrity and is not exploitative of less powerful people?

The paper contains three distinct but related parts:

1. The Secular State
2. Spirituality and Human Services
3. The Mission of Faith-Based CSOs

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Mission Australia and the St Vincent de Paul Society, which would expand the numbers further.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Melissa Fyfe, ‘Church and state clash over equality laws’, in *The Age*, 19 July 2009, at <http://www.theage.com.au/national/church-and-state-clash-over-equality-laws-20090718-dozx.html?page=-1>

The paper ends with reflections and recommendations. These include the following findings:

- 1 The Secular State should not be regarded as a society that has “lost” religious faith and that therefore needs an injection of religion to become healthy again. Rather, the Secular State should be seen as an irreversible development in the movement of human society, as another step towards the achieving a balance between attention to day-to-day needs on the one hand and attention to human aspiration on the other. When the state’s espousal of pluralism moves beyond tokenism, then movement to self-transcendence may become a further step in the development of the Secular State. When self-transcendence becomes a core element of social being, then the transcendent may once again becomes a factor in the shaping of society.
- 2 Human services should attend not only to the material needs of people, but also to their spiritual needs; human service workers should be trained and resourced to better assist workers to respond appropriately to such needs; and social services should include the enhancement of people’s spiritual capacities as a goal and a criterion of good practice.
- 3 The mission of Christian faith-based CSOs must be developed as a lay ministry seeking well-being and justice for all peoples, in partnership with other citizens of goodwill. The authenticity of this mission will ultimately be measured against the gospel. In dialogue with human service workers, however, both faith based CSOs and the secular state need to develop language and imagery that can transcend conflict, clarify goals, and enhance mission. This may include the language of ‘love’ and the language of ‘persons’.

This paper is not immediately concerned with issues of taxation or the status of charities, but some of the reflections here may contribute to that discussion. Secondly, the paper is not directly concerned with discussions of mission in faith-based health-care or educational institutions. While there are many overlaps with these discussions, health-care and education have a history and character that precede the Secular State. Arguably, on the other hand, Social Work is a product of the Secular State or, at the very least, has been shaped by the same factors that shaped the Secular State.

Let us now consider each of these – the Secular State, Spirituality and Human Services, and the Mission of Faith-Based CSOs in turn.

## 1. The Secular State

### 1.1 The Secular Age

In 2007 Charles Taylor, Professor of Social and Political Theory in the University of Oxford and Professor of Political Science and Philosophy in Montreal, published what amounts to his life work, a study of the origins and significance of the Secular State, called *A Secular Age*. At the outset, he identifies three broad and related definitions of secularism:

1. *The privatisation of religion*: Public spaces have been emptied of God and of any reference to ultimate reality. In other words, as we function within economic, cultural, political, educational, professional or recreational spheres of activity, the norms and principles we follow do not refer to God or religious beliefs but to the rationality of maximum gain within the economy or the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political arena. This emptying of religion from public spaces may still be compatible with the majority of people believing in God and practising their religion.
2. *The decline of religion*: Secularity entails the decline of religious belief and practice, with people no longer believing in God and no longer going to Church or other places of worship.

Taylor, however, is particularly interested in the third definition:

3. *The shift to secularity consists of a move to a society in which belief is seen as one option among others*, though frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this sense, a society would be secular in as much as people live 'buffered' lives in a day-to-day world. Similarly, it would not be secular in as much as people recognise something 'beyond' or enchanted or transcendent to their lives.<sup>5</sup>

The Secular State is a product of the secular age, which is itself a product of the rationalism and empiricism of the European Enlightenment. The secular age is so named because its focus is on the here and now rather than on the intangible and transcendent, on the material and empirical rather than on the spiritual and eternal.

The secular age is thus distinctly different from the European Christendom it displaced, in which religious beliefs and values determined the shape and membership of society. In the Secular State the purpose of society has nothing explicitly to do with God or the salvation of souls, but is simply to enhance an ordered, harmonious productive life among its citizens. Society is no longer tied to religion. Taylor concludes, 'We no longer live in societies in which the widespread sense can be maintained that faith in God is central to the ordered life we (partially) enjoy.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the ideas expressed in this section are derived from or prompted by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap/Harvard: Cambridge MA and London, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 531.

Australia, as Beth Crisp has noted in her paper on 'Social Work and Spirituality in a Secular Society', is a deliberately secular nation. The only mention made of religion in the Australian Constitution defends religion as a personal choice but excludes religion from having any role in the theatre of public activity:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required for any public office or public trust under the Commonwealth.<sup>7</sup>

Following John Locke's declaration that society existed for the mutual benefit of individuals, and Adam Smith's conclusion that social order should rest on visible distinctions rather than on the less striking qualities of virtue and wisdom, the Secular State evolved not to achieve some transcendent goal, but to enshrine mutual respect and mutual service. As Taylor observes, the functions of society are quite limited: 'it cannot itself define the good...' he writes, 'there is more focus on excellence of instruments than on excellence of virtue'.<sup>8</sup> Instead of having the vertical or hierarchical structure of Christendom, for example, secular society aspires to an entirely admirable horizontal and democratic structure.

The starting point of this secular vision, says Taylor, is 'a race of equal individuals designed to enter with each other into a society of mutual benefit'. Proponents of the Secular State thus displayed 'an extraordinary confidence in the capacity to remodel human beings'.<sup>9</sup> Taylor describes the evolution from Christendom to secular society as a shift in ideals from holiness to morality, and then from morality to civilised conduct. A stable civil society was the essential platform for the development of industries and economies. Such a society then became a consumer of human goods, and these would suffice to provide happiness.<sup>10</sup> In this fashion the secular world became 'disenchanted' – shorn of angels and demons, emptied of miracles and providence – and the separate sphere of the spiritual, outside the *saeculum*, ceased to exist in the public domain.

Though Taylor sees many flaws in the ideals of the Secular State, for example that 'this emphasis on objectified expertise over moral insight is the charter for new and more powerful forms of paternalism',<sup>11</sup> it is very important to note that Taylor does not regard the Secular State as a necessarily bad thing. Rather, he argues that the manifold changes to society over the past five hundred years have had a ratchet effect, and that it is impossible to turn the wheel back to a previous time. And, secondly, he argues that this secular age

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<sup>7</sup> Beth Crisp, 'Social Work and Spirituality in a Secular Society', *Journal of Social Work* 8.4 (2008) 363-375, quoting from section 17 of the Australian Constitution and referring to Ian Breward, *Australia: The Most Godless Place Under Heaven* (Melbourne: Beacon Hill, 1988). See p. 363-64.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 165, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 129, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 261.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 501.

has allowed for the liberation of modes of belief from their previous dominant (and not always healthy) forms.

Indeed, while Taylor agrees that modernity and secularity repress and reduce religion, they do not entirely repress the spiritual. The humanism that commonly replaced religion in the secular age displayed a growing confidence in the capacity of human beings to achieve progress on their own. This humanism may not focus on the transcendent, but any attention to the conditions of human existence inevitably leads to the struggle to comprehend one's own finitude and the mystery of the 'other', whether that other be personal, cultural, or environmental.

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. Taylor thus observes first that 'The present scene...is marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks',<sup>12</sup> but he then notes that the multiplicity of faiths has little effect on the dominant culture and the 'maximum homogeneity' of civil order.<sup>13</sup> As long as these many beliefs are kept outside the public sphere, then a homogenous order can be maintained. However, if pluralism is to be realised as an ideal, rather than being used as a political strategy, then public consensus on matters relating to social order and the common good becomes much more complex. If Government regulates too much, it may kill the human spirit. If it does not regulate enough, then plurality may turn into chaos.

Taylor makes a crucial point about the values and priorities of the Secular State: *what really counts* is what attracts the most public attention and what appears to be of common concern and major concern to citizens. Hence the importance of social movements, lobbyists, spin doctors and media campaigns, and hence the tendency for major political parties to move towards the centre rather than follow value driven campaigns, as do smaller parties like the Greens. However, while 'Justice requires that a modern democracy keep an equal distance from faith positions', democracy also requires that 'each citizen or group of citizens speak the language in public debate that is most meaningful to them.'<sup>14</sup> It follows from this that faith-based CSOs, and therefore Catholic CSOs, have a role to play in democracy, and the more they participate in public discourse in their own language, while respectful of the efforts of other citizens, the more they are able to contribute to the development of society.

One significant concern, however, is the apparent decline of religious adherence in our society. To this we now turn: it is not all bad news.

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 437.

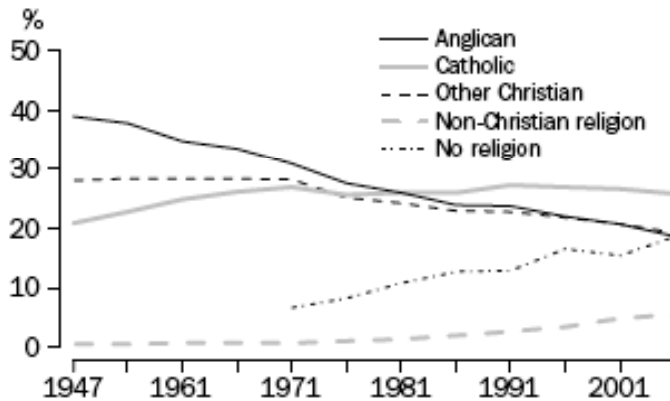
<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 304

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 532.

## 1.2 The Future of Religion in the Secular State

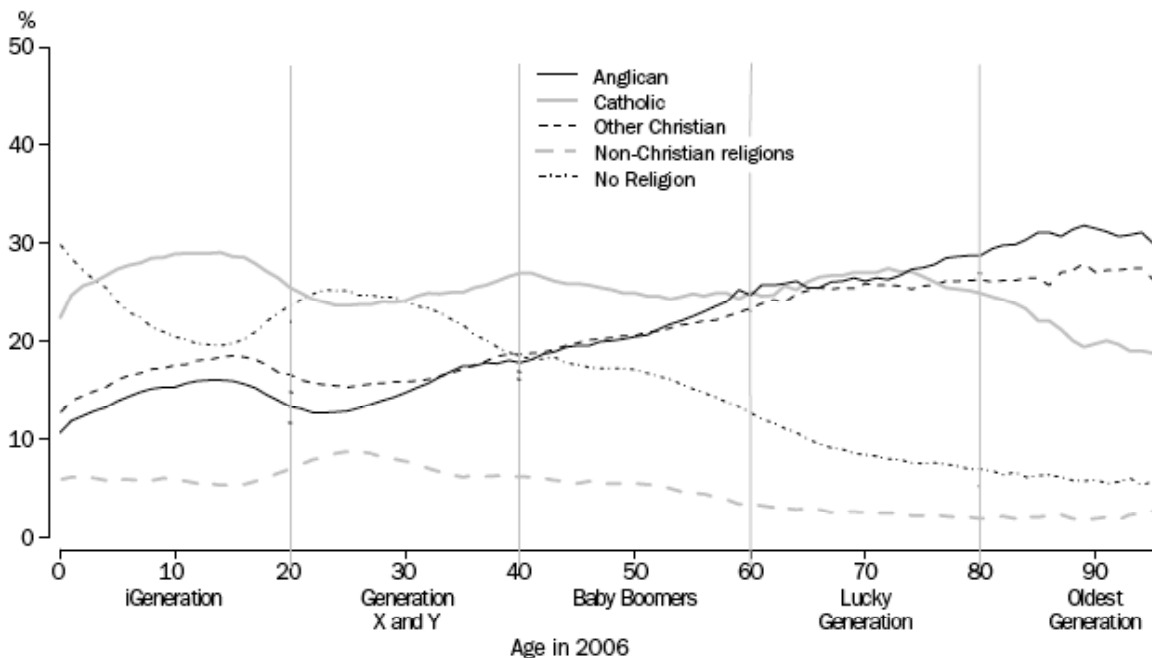
In Australia, the changes in religious adherence are neatly captured in the table below, produced after the 2006 census<sup>15</sup>:

### Broad trends in religion over time, 1947–2006



Across various age groups in Australia, however, among 20-30 year olds the highest demographic has no religion, as shown in the table below:

### Religion of the generation groups, by age



<sup>15</sup> This and the following table are taken from the 2006 ABS Report, *Religion across the Generations* available at [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/LookupAttach/2070.0Publication29.01.0912/\\$File/20700\\_Religion.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/LookupAttach/2070.0Publication29.01.0912/$File/20700_Religion.pdf)

Note that the major increase in religious adherence, in the 'Other Christian' category, is chiefly referring to large Pentecostal and independent churches which reflect an American approach to evangelization. The stability of Catholic adherence is mainly due to immigration. Note also that, despite the relatively high levels of religious adherence, a 2001 survey showed that only about 9% of Australians attended religious services weekly.<sup>16</sup>

The Australian figures roughly match those of Europe and the United States. In Europe, there has been a decline in religious adherence, and particularly in religious practice, though perhaps not as dramatic as popularly imagined. In 1999 'A substantial majority of west Europeans claimed to be Christians', but in places like The Netherlands and France there is obvious evidence of decline: in France baptism of infants fell from 91% of the population in 1958 to 51% of the population in 1990.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, while much publicity has been given to Richard Dawkins' recent attack on theism, *The God Delusion*,<sup>18</sup> based on scientific and philosophical arguments, two recent books written by sociologists and political scientists raise substantial arguments against writing God off just yet.

The first of these books, *God is Back*, written by the Editor in Chief and the Washington Bureau Correspondent of the UK *Economist*. The authors comment:

The basic assumption of secularization theory is that religion and modernity are antagonistic and mutually incompatible.... You've had two sorts of versions of modernity competing with each other, both stepping from the Enlightenment, one stepping from the French Revolution, the other from the American Revolution. The European version is: The more modern a country becomes, the less religious it becomes. The American version is: So long as you separate church and state and create a free market of religion and don't have an official church, the two things can coincide.... It is the slow spread of an American model whereby religion is a choice, not just something that's just inherited, and different religious groups compete for souls.<sup>19</sup>

They argue that the decline of religion in Europe is more a consequence of the lingering effect of European established religions, where church and state were intertwined, than of secularism as such. In America, on the other hand, modernity has not meant forcing religion into the private sphere, but letting it

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<sup>16</sup> J. Bellamy and K Castle, *2001 Church Attendance Estimates* (Sydney: NCLS, 2004), quoted by Beth Crisp.

<sup>17</sup> See Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (eds.), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Adrian Wooldridge in *US News*, 1 May 2009, available at <http://www.usnews.com/articles/opinion/2009/05/01/god-is-back-religions-revival-and-its-global-impact.html>.

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

thrive in all its variations. They make an important point: religions are growing, and they are also growing in their influence in the public sphere. Religion is no longer a private matter.

This theme is further explored in the recently published *Religious America, Secular Europe?*, which uses a sociological approach to compare European secularity with the religiousness of the United States. It concludes that 'despite differences between religious America and secular Europe, in the global future it will be entirely "normal" to be more fully modern and fully religious'.<sup>20</sup> In the European secular model people are being asked to keep their religion to themselves in the name of freedom of belief, pluralism and tolerance. The future reality, however, is that people will not do this: religious voices are returning to the public sphere and perhaps shaping a post-secular society.

This paper does not propose that the American model should be followed, nor that religious factions should have undue power in public spaces. What this excursus indicates, though, is that the future of the secular state will be different from its past, and that religious voices will have a role in the shaping of that future. The same can be said of professional human services, whose origins are tied to the rise of the secular state, but which are now coming to terms with the spiritual and religious dimensions of people's lives.

## 2. Spirituality and Human Services

Taylor notes 'the ugliness and egoism of commercial-industrial society, the atomism and lack of concern that this society breeds'.<sup>21</sup> Unlike earlier societies which had a vertical structure and a transcendent source of meaning, he observes that 'our age suffers from a threatened loss of meaning.... What tells against forms of unbelief is the series of nagging dissatisfactions with the modern world order... the rapid wearing out of its Utopian vision, the continuing sense that there is something more...'<sup>22</sup> And so this new placement, he says, is now 'the occasion for the recomposition of spiritual life in new forms'.<sup>23</sup> In 'Spirituality is the New Black... and it has social impact', Gianni Zappalà of the Centre for Social Impact argues that 'Spirituality is an increasingly significant factor shaping social trends and institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.<sup>24</sup>

In this section we explore how developments in social work theory, as a core exemplar of human services, address the conundrum of spirituality in the Secular State.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas (eds.), *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (London: Ashgate, 2009). See Review at [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/BOOK\\_20090618\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/BOOK_20090618_1.htm)

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 379.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 303, 533.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 437.

<sup>24</sup> Gianni Zappalà, 'Spirituality is the New Black... and it has social impact', CSI Background Papers (Sydney: 2009) 1, p. 4.

Both 'spirituality' and 'social work' are broad terms. In this paper the *definition of Social Work* is taken from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) combined statements:

## 2. Definition of Social Work

The Social Work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, Social Work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to Social Work.<sup>25</sup>

The *definition of spirituality*, on the other hand (like spirituality itself), is more elusive. It is important to note that 'spirituality' does not necessarily include organised religion. David Hay puts it succinctly when he describes spirituality as a capacity to have a relationship with what is 'other' to us, removing boundaries between ourself that the reality outside the self.<sup>26</sup>

Some definitions of spirituality specify a focus on the divine. Others are less specific, but emphasise an engagement with the transcendent. Some use the term spirituality in a very general way to include art and relationships.

David Tacey, in his *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* and other papers, is clear and uncompromising: spirituality has to do with the divine. He writes:

Spirituality is the cultivation of a personal relationship with the sacred. It is the intuition that there is a deeper level of reality, a level we are not always conscious of but which we can apprehend in moments of insight or vision. Spirituality is the gradual awakening of this depth dimension, and a longing to know it more fully and intimately.<sup>27</sup>

Catholic theologian Sandra Schneiders, in the *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, is surprisingly less specific:

Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html>

<sup>26</sup> David Hay, *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> See David Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Harper Collins, Sydney, 2000) and 'The Rising Interest in Spirituality Today' (2002) available at [www.austheos.org.au/topics/tacey-website.html.htm](http://www.austheos.org.au/topics/tacey-website.html.htm)

<sup>28</sup> Philip Sheldrake (ed), *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM, 2005), p. 1.

Spirituality need not be 'other worldly', nor necessarily irrelevant to the here and now, but it may unlayer spaces and energies which transcend our day-to-day living. Spirituality thus includes all dimensions of human living and nurtures the fullness of humanity. Spirituality is not a tool or a device. Spirituality may be surrounded by practices and rituals, but in the end these practices and rituals are props which reflect our time and circumstances. The practices and rituals are not the 'object' of spirituality. Indeed the 'object' of spirituality is ultimately ineffable. Hence the Zen insight: 'If you meet the Buddha, kill him.'

On the other hand, as Tacey argues, if spirituality lacks a focus or other-centredness, it becomes self-centred and/or vacuous like New Ageism. Spirituality has to be more than a random meandering; it is a pilgrimage built on our awareness of our limitation, our awareness of the 'other', and our desire for completion.

Social Work and Spirituality thus operate on distinctive levels. Social Work operates at the secular social level using theories of human behaviour and social systems, addressing needs and changing systems. Spirituality entails the whole person and focuses on engagement at a cosmic or sacred level, seeking to build a relationship with the transcendent 'other'. The two overlap, however, in as much as they are both concerned with enhancing personal well-being and interpersonal relationships, and with bringing social systems, with all their plurality, to a harmonious unity.

The current interest in the place of spirituality in Social Work arose in the USA and Canada and is well documented.<sup>29</sup> The recent focus is not on religion

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<sup>29</sup> See in particular the work of Edward Canda: e.g. 'The Future of Spirituality in Social Work; The Farther Reaches of Human Nature' in *Advances in Social Work* 6;1 (Spring 2005), pp. 97-108; available at [http://books.google.com/books?id=qvposxf4Zj8C&pg=PA100&lpg=PA100&dq=canda+%2B+nakashima+%2B+Burgess&source=bl&ots=gzCsMLprNP&sig=AnP6\\_YWFxV8csqI-ffwxyKeUH58&hl=en&ei=D0XlSeG6MpiTkAXapcnbCw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=8#PPA97,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=qvposxf4Zj8C&pg=PA100&lpg=PA100&dq=canda+%2B+nakashima+%2B+Burgess&source=bl&ots=gzCsMLprNP&sig=AnP6_YWFxV8csqI-ffwxyKeUH58&hl=en&ei=D0XlSeG6MpiTkAXapcnbCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8#PPA97,M1)

and E. Canda (ed.), *Spirituality in Social Work: New Directions* (New York: Harworth, 1998) accessible at [http://books.google.com/books?id=YiPeW8XLnhUC&dq=Journal+of+Religion+%26+Spirituality+in+Social+Work&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=uTnlScjOGdGikAWugo3OCw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=11#PPP1,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=YiPeW8XLnhUC&dq=Journal+of+Religion+%26+Spirituality+in+Social+Work&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=uTnlScjOGdGikAWugo3OCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=11#PPP1,M1) and at [http://www.amazon.com/Spirituality-Social-Work-New-Directions/dp/0789005158/ref=sr\\_11\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1239759534&sr=11-1](http://www.amazon.com/Spirituality-Social-Work-New-Directions/dp/0789005158/ref=sr_11_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1239759534&sr=11-1)

See also Canda's Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resources Centre at <http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/>

Robert Gause & Diana Coholic, 'Spiritually-Influenced Social Work Practice: A Descriptive Overview of Recent Literature', a 37 page document which only looks at literature since 2004, available at

<http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/spirituality/gauselitreviewspiritualityandpractice.pdf>

Other key web sites offering a range of papers and studies are the International Study of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice at

<http://spiritualityreligionsurvey.com/default.aspx>

and the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work at

(though spirituality may include religion), but on the nature and needs of the human person, and the consequent implications for Social Work training, particularly in the context of marginalised peoples, health care, aged care, mental illness and substance abuse. Similar interests have appeared in the UK, for example through Bernard Moss and Peter Gilbert at Staffordshire University and through Sheila Furness and Philip Gilligan at the University of Bradford.<sup>30</sup>

Typically, these social work studies do not start from overt religious premises, but from within the ethos and experience of Social Work practice.

With respect to the *ethos* of Social Work, reference is commonly made to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*, particularly to section 4.1:

#### 4.1. Human Rights and Human Dignity

Social Work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this. Social Workers should uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and ***spiritual integrity*** and well-being.<sup>31</sup>

Reference is also commonly made to the origins and history of Social Work: how professional social work grew out of religious charities as volunteer workers sought better ways to improve the lives of the poor and change social structures. The inclusion of spirituality in social work is also seen as a more personal and relational corrective to the pseudo-scientific objectivist character that professional Social Work often seems to espouse.

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<http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/spirituality/index.html>

The online journal *Critical Social Work* has published at least two special editions on spirituality: <http://www.criticalsocialwork.com>. There is also a *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* produced by the Society for Spirituality and Social Work at <http://ssw.asu.edu/portal/research/spirituality>

<sup>30</sup> See [http://www.bernardmoss.org.uk/centre\\_for\\_health\\_&\\_spirituality.htm](http://www.bernardmoss.org.uk/centre_for_health_&_spirituality.htm) and <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2009/02/27/110846/peter-gilbert-talks-about-spirituality-in-his-new-role-at-worcester-university.htm>

See also P. Gilligan and S. Furness, 'The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Practice: Views and Experiences of Social Workers and Students', *Br. J. Soc. Work* 36:4 (2006) 617-637. See <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/36/4/617>  
<http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/bcp008v1>

M. Gray, 'Viewing Spirituality in Social Work through the Lens of Contemporary Social Theory', *Br. J. Soc. Work* 38:1 (1 January 2008) available at <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/bcn032v1>

M. Holloway, 'Spiritual Need and the Core Business of Social Work', *Br. J. Soc. Work* 37:2 (1 February 2007) available at <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/37/2/265>

M. A. Zahl, L. Furman, P. Benson, P. & E. Canda, 'Religion and spirituality in Social Work practice and education in a cross-cultural context: Findings from a Norwegian and UK study', *European Journal of Social Work*, 10(3) (2007), pp. 295-317.

<sup>31</sup> Available at <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html> (my emphasis).

With respect to the *experience* of Social Work practice, studies have explored the ways in which spirituality sustains a client's resilience and hope, particularly in situations where hope is hard to find. Studies have also explored the capacity (or lack of capacity) displayed by social workers in addressing and supporting the spiritual dimensions of a client's life, and the consequent challenges for future social work education. Several studies note the 'invisibility' of religion in Social Work text-books and discourse. They report on the development of spiritual assessments and interventions that enhance practice, including attention to culturally different traditions of helping and healing. They explore the development of personal spirituality as a form of self-care for workers. And, finally, studies reflect on the potential for conflict between more objectivist approaches to social work and more personalist approaches, which might include greater sensitivity to spirituality.

There are occasional studies, which approach the nature of social work from within the ethos of a particular faith. For example, Ebear, Csirnik and Bécharde have presented several papers like 'Examining the Role and Practice of Social Work Within the Catholic Church',<sup>32</sup> which explore the views of a range of workers within Catholic Parish structures.

There is general agreement, however, that much more needs to be done to understand and develop the role of spirituality in Social Work. Canda's conclusions in his contribution to *Advances in Social Work* include the following remarks:

Even within the spiritual perspectives considered so far in social work literature, greater depth and breadth of knowledge is needed.... More information and guidance are needed with regard to spiritually sensitive practice with specific cultural groups.... Work on specific fields of social work practice needs much more expansion.... For example...there is very little regarding school social work...about issues of gender and disability... there is very little published on addressing spirituality with children in Social Work.<sup>33</sup>

In Australia, though good practice is meant to include attention to the culture and religion of children and young people in particular, there is little evidence for any formal interest in spirituality in social work. In the 1990s collection of Australian Essays, *Transforming Social Work Practice*, for example, there is no mention of spirituality. Ten years later, Fran Gale and others have produced *Spirited Practices: Spirituality and the Helping Professions*.<sup>34</sup> Beth Crisp's recent work has noted several papers exploring connections between

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<sup>32</sup> Available at [http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/spirituality/EbearCsirnikBecharde\\_Proceedings-revised.pdf](http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/spirituality/EbearCsirnikBecharde_Proceedings-revised.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Canda: 'The Future of Spirituality in Social Work; The Farther Reaches of Human Nature', pp. 103-104

<sup>34</sup> See Bob Pease and Jan Fook (eds.), *Transforming Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999). . Fran Gale, Natalie Bolzmann and Dorothy McRae-McMahon (eds.), *Spirited Practices: Spirituality and the Helping Professions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008).

spirituality and social work practice in Australia, but they are hardly mainstream yet.<sup>35</sup>

In concluding this section, therefore, there are three arguments about spirituality and social work that need to be considered.

First, there is the argument that social workers (and de facto human service workers) should, as well as attending to the material and social needs of people, attend to the spiritual needs of people. Given the definition of social work and the statement of principles and ethics in social work, this argument has considerable weight. If the argument is accepted, then social work practice needs to include ways of assessing and enhancing the spirituality of people in the community, so as to enhance their resilience, well-being, and connectedness, as well as to overcome isolation, loss of identity, and powerlessness.

Secondly, if the first argument is accepted, then there are obvious consequences for the training of human service workers and for the practice of social work. Those of us who have grown up in spiritual traditions know that just as a music teacher has a better sense of pitch and rhythm than a beginner, so also a person trained in the practice of spirituality is more likely to have a better sensitivity to the spirituality of another person than a beginner. Hence, courses for the training of human service workers should offer an introduction to spirituality, an experience of a range of spiritualities, and opportunities for the development of their own personal spirituality.

Thirdly, if human service workers are to be trained in spirituality, their ongoing formation and well-being will be enhanced by opportunities for further spiritual development, both in and outside of the workplace. The measure of a good human service worker is not just a measure of their capacity for dealing with day-to-day needs, but also a matter of their capacity for sustaining appropriate relationships. This is sometimes called emotional intelligence, but it could also come under the heading of spiritual sensitivity.

If these three arguments are all accepted, one consequence should be a more personal and sensitive practice of social work, in which people will not be identified as clients so much as members of communities. For example, even where the material outcomes for people engaged in community services do not greatly improve, their sense of well-being and resilience can change. Dealing with both day-to-day needs and the life of the spirit can work together to enhance a person's well-being and capacity to participate in the human community.

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<sup>35</sup> See Beth Crisp, 'Social Work and Spirituality in a Secular Society', *Journal of Social Work* 8 (2008) 363-375. See also Peter B. Edwards, 'Spiritual Themes in Social Work Counselling', *Australian Social Work* 55 (2002) 78-87; R. Lindsay, *Recognizing Spirituality: The Interface between Faith and Social Work* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2002); and S. Rice (2002) 'Magic happens: Revisiting the Spirituality and Social Work Debate', *Australian Social Work* 55 (2002) 303-312.

Lest this sound far-fetched, note that there is significant precedent in medical research. In 1992 there were only three medical schools in the United States that had programs examining the relationship between spirituality and health; by 2006, the number had increased to 141.<sup>36</sup> Similar changes are occurring in spiritual ministries in public hospitals.<sup>37</sup>

In the light of these considerations, it is now time to turn to the implications for faith-based CSOs.

### 3. The Mission of Faith-Based CSOs

#### 3.1 The Rise of Urban Missions

Charles Taylor observes that one of the consequences of the decline of monastic Christendom was that monks moved into the world, lay people gained a sense of vocation, and the world became a place of religion.<sup>38</sup> This came to a high point in the Catholic tradition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when laywomen and laymen like Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice, Catherine McAuley and Mary Aikenhead founded the Presentation Sisters, the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity to work in the streets and lanes to care for and educate and nurse the poor of the new industrial cities. Compared with their predecessors, they lived in the midst of the struggles of the world, rather than attempting a heavenly life in an isolated convent or monastery on earth. Similarly, in Anglican, Protestant and Non-Conformist churches, the nineteenth century saw the founding of the Salvation Army and City Missions and the like all across the industrial world.

In the mind of the Enlightenment, however, religion is seen as unreasonable, authoritarian, offering false hopes in the face of human suffering, threatening legitimate social authorities, and undermining the importance of dealing with the here and now. Nonetheless, these new religious congregations and missions, working in essentially lay ministries rather than priestly ministries, flourished remarkably. In the Catholic Church they spread across the globe, reaching a zenith in the 1960s and then beginning a slow but inevitable decline. In the last two decades we have seen the governance of the hospitals and schools and charities founded by these religious orders passed over to lay administrators and incorporated boards. In other communions and churches we have seen similar realignments and transformations of missions and charities, particularly in the development of professional human service organisations and in the partnerships they have entered into with the secular state.

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<sup>36</sup> See recent article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (2007): David R. Williams and Michelle J. Sternthal, 'Spirituality, Religion and Health: Evidence and Research', at [http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/186\\_10\\_210507/wil11060\\_fm.html](http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/186_10_210507/wil11060_fm.html) Williams is the Professor in the Harvard University Department of Society, Human Development, and Health.

<sup>37</sup> See Roy O'Neill, 'The ministry of the skilled stranger: Religion and Spirituality in Public Hospital Ministry' at <http://compassreview.org/winter06/5.html>

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 144.

The relationship between governments and faith-based CSOs remain a matter for scrutiny. Some leaders have cautioned faith-based CSOs against allowing themselves to be pigeonholed as 'providers of services' purchased by governments and being forced into competitive tendering processes, rather than identifying themselves first as key contributors to social capital and robust participants in public policy debates.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the outcome of the recent federal tendering process for employment services, in which many contracts were awarded to new players from the for-profit sector, has left some faith-based CSOs in a parlous position. Others faith-based CSOs, however, have developed partnerships with secular governments and grown in influence and stature.

### 3.2 Catholic Charity and the Church in the Modern World

The Catholic community is still seeking a way forward out of its current crisis of declining church attendance and low numbers of vocations to priesthood and religious life. Some voices seek a restoration of the Church of the 1950s, others seek to follow the dialogue with the modern world initiated at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. The two ways may be broadly distinguished as vertical (where the focus is on the worship of a transcendent God beyond the vale of tears of this world) and horizontal (where the focus is on finding God in the energies of creation). These two ways are sometimes characterised as Christology from above and Christology from below.

Catholic CSOs, while inspired by the love of God, tend to belong in the horizontal category, or the category of Christology from below. In this they have much in common with the other Christian CSOs. If they lose their spirituality, however, they may run the risk of becoming entirely secular. In his significant first Encyclical Letter of 2005, on the theme of charity, the current Pope included reflections on '*Those responsible for the Church's charitable activity*'. He writes,

32. Finally, we must turn our attention once again to those who are responsible for carrying out the Church's charitable activity.... today as in the past, the Church as God's family must be a place where help is given and received, and at the same time, a place where people are also prepared to serve those outside her confines who are in need of help.

This is well and good, but the Pope then proposes that for Catholic organisations this pathway entails their staff not only being inspired by love but also desiring to work with the formal Church through its Bishops.

33. With regard to the personnel who carry out the Church's charitable activity on the practical level...: they must not be inspired by ideologies

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Ray Cleary, "To Tango or to Tender", John Roffey Memorial Lecture, 2008, available at [www.anglicare.asn.au/documents/2008JohnRoffeyMemorialLecture\\_CanonDrRayClearyAM\\_ToTangoortoTender\\_001.pdf](http://www.anglicare.asn.au/documents/2008JohnRoffeyMemorialLecture_CanonDrRayClearyAM_ToTangoortoTender_001.pdf)

aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love (cf. *Gal* 5:6). Consequently, more than anything, they must be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour.... The personnel of every Catholic charitable organisation want to work with the Church and therefore with the Bishop, so that the love of God can spread throughout the world....

This does not preclude working with other organisations, however, and ultimately rests on love:

34. Interior openness to the Catholic dimension of the Church cannot fail to dispose charity workers to work in harmony with other organisations in serving various forms of need, but in a way that respects what is distinctive about the service which Christ requested of his disciples.... Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ.... I must be personally present in my gift.

And so:

37. It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and the growing secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable work.

While the Pope's interest in the work of Catholic charitable organisations is admirable, this is clearly a theology done from 'above', from an ideal order, rather than a theology done from 'below'. It is a position 'over against' secularism, rather than a position of dialogue with secularism.

The Second Vatican Council offered more latitude for lay reflection and leadership, stating that 'The Laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation', and that in taking on this work they should attend first to the demands of justice and cooperate with other citizens. 'Enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role'.<sup>40</sup> This is a theology from 'below', in which the role of the faithful is worked out in the real context of the world's energies and activities. Of course such a theology runs the risk of 'secularising' a charity. This need not necessarily be the case, however, and if this path were to be followed, then further effort is required to unlayer and sustain an authentic spirituality 'from below'.

Charles Taylor comes to a similar conclusion:

We have undergone a change in our condition, involving both an alteration of the structures we live within, and our way of imagining these structures. This is something we all share, regardless of our

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<sup>40</sup> See Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, §7-8. and *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, §43.

differences in outlook. But this cannot be captured in terms of a decline and marginalisation of religion. What we share is what I have been calling 'the immanent frame'...or 'this worldly' order which can be understood on its own terms, without reference to the 'supernatural' or 'transcendent'. But this order of itself leaves the issue open.

The developments of Western modernity have destabilized and rendered virtually unsustainable earlier forms of religious life, but...new forms have sprung up.... This process...is continuing...<sup>41</sup>

If we follow a theology from above, then it is very difficult to imagine how a Catholic CSO in Australia could survive in the current structures of secular civil society and instrumentalist funding and compliance demands: the gap between religious loyalties and compliance requirements becomes too large.

However, if the teaching of Vatican II is followed, where it is proclaimed that 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ',<sup>42</sup> and where the laity are given autonomy to work with other citizens of goodwill, then a realistic pathway forward can be forged, particularly if the spiritual heritage of the Church is allowed to grow and be carried forward.

Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2009 social encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, acknowledges the essential connection between spirituality and interpersonal relationships, and that the development of individuals and peoples 'depends partly on problems of a spiritual nature'.<sup>43</sup> He thus invites Catholic CSOs to take up the challenge of furthering human development and becoming involved in the *res publica*.<sup>44</sup>

The best marker for the future mission of Catholic CSOs, therefore, is to be found in Catholic Social Teaching to. Given that human services largely grew out of Christian traditions of charity, it should come as no surprise that many of their foundational principles are identical. The table below compares the Fundamental Principles of Social Work and Catholic Social teaching. In these definitions there are several parallel statements:

- 'the points where people interact with their environments' // 'human life in society'
- 'principles of human rights' // 'the dignity and rights of the person'
- 'social justice' // 'quality of social life...justice'
- 'empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being' // 'promotion of the human person...and peace in the relationships between persons and between communities of persons'.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 593.

<sup>42</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, §1.

<sup>43</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §54 and §§75-77, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html)

<sup>44</sup> See *Caritas in Veritate*, §24.

There are, however, some important differences of emphasis in the two definitions:

- 'theories of human behaviour and social systems' \ 'love'
- 'people' \ 'persons'.

Social Work <sup>45</sup>	Catholic Social Teaching <sup>46</sup>
The Social Work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, Social Work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to Social Work. (§2)	By means of her social doctrine, the Church shows her concern for human life in society, aware that the quality of social life – that is, of the relationship of justice and love that form the fabric of society – depends in a decisive manner on the protection and promotion of the human person, for whom every community comes into existence. In fact, at play in society are the dignity and rights of the person, and peace in the relationships between persons and between communities of persons. (§81).

It is through taking up this focus on love and the personal in their work, I believe, that Catholic CSOs can find both their mission and their contribution to secular society.

## Conclusion

We are now in a position to suggest some answers to the questions that prompted this paper:

**1. Is there room in the public spaces of the Secular State for faith-based community service organisations?**

*Yes: as members and elements of civil society, and particularly as organisations that work for human well-being and the development of community and society, it is essential that faith-based CSOs have a presence in the public space of the secular society. In so doing, their religious inspirations will be part of their contribution to the overall shaping of society. (This should not be interpreted, however, as endorsing religious factionalism or supporting an established religion with particular privileges in the State.)*

**2. What concepts of public spaces and what theologies of mission will allow faith-based organisations to experience an alignment of**

<sup>45</sup> The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) combined definition of Social Work at <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html>

<sup>46</sup> Quotations are taken from the Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004). Regrettably, official translations do not always use inclusive language. See [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

**values, mission and purpose in the Secular State?**

*Public spaces usually refer to the educational, health care, welfare, cultural, infrastructure and recreational elements of a society that are open to all citizens. The values, mission, purpose of the Secular State centre around the creation of good order in civil society to allow for the mutual benefit of all, especially in terms of liberty and economic prosperity. The ethic therefore tends to be pragmatic and instrumentalist.*

*If the dominant values of a faith-based organisation are of the prophetic kind that protests against the quest for material satisfaction and proclaims God's preferential love for the poor, the orphan and the stranger, and if their ethics are based on absolute foundations, then there will always be tension between the secular state and the faith-based organisation. There may be some overlap of mission and purpose, however, for example in the provision of education, health and welfare services for those who could otherwise not afford them.*

*Where Catholic CSOs accept that 'the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the people of this age...are the joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ', then there is a call to engage with the Secular State in its public spaces, whether or not there is alignment of values, to pursue joys and hopes and to address griefs and anxieties.*

*If the Secular State evolves to the extent that its public spaces include the recognition of something beyond or transcendent to people's lives, then this space will be large enough to include faith-based organisations.*

**3. Is the notion of pluralism rather than secularism a better frame for identifying this space?**

*Yes and no. A secular society is pluralist in its ideals, but in practice 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).*

**4. What would an enhanced secular society look like?**

*Good question. We have already seen in some administrations greater moves to partnerships and community consultations, and greater respect for the contribution that various players in society can make. At the moment, the potential for faith-based organisations to model community and to contribute to well-being through their spiritual resources is almost entirely untapped. If the number of neighbourhood renewal, community building and social inclusion programs are any*

*indicator, the current secular state has a challenge in this area. In the enhanced secular state, the energies that go into productivity and competition have the unfortunate by-products of isolation and alienation. Just as governments have been forced to attend to the crisis of global climate change, the enhanced state may in part be shaped by pressure to address the core producers of social isolation: social inclusion policies will inevitably be giving greater attention to supporting spiritual well-being. The enhanced secular state will not, however, be a place where religious elements become one faction over against others. Rather, faith-based CSOs will work with and among other citizens, just as other citizens will work with and among faith-based CSOs.*

**5. Can the exploration of, or giving attention to, spiritual needs be justified in the State's provision of public services and monitoring of professional codes?**

*Definitely: this space is already being opened up from within Social Work professions, and it would be timely for faith-based CSOs to join in this discussion both as a contribution to Social Work and as a contribution to public discourse.*

**6. What training and support are necessary to equip human services staff to engage the whole person, including their spiritual dimensions?**

*There are many centres of spirituality (Christian and otherwise) available.<sup>47</sup> However, it is unlikely that most of these centres could currently enhance the integration of spirituality and human services, and therefore attention would need to be given to developing appropriate resources. Involvement should be voluntary but guided. Like any other training, refreshers will be needed. It could be done in exactly the same way that fire safety training is done, or training in dealing with potentially violent clients, or training in first aid.<sup>48</sup>*

**7. What safeguards are required to ensure this engagement has integrity and is not abusive or exploitative of vulnerable or less powerful people?**

*This is complex, because by definition the spiritual realm transcends prescriptive laws. There are, however, rules for 'spiritual discernment' and the like in various spiritual traditions. Therefore, people with spiritual gifts and spiritual training will play an important role if the pitfalls of enthusiasm and zealotry are to be avoided. Inevitably, of course, guidelines will be written, but these may require considerable work.*

*Where the focus on spirituality is essentially relational rather than on*

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<sup>47</sup> There are over one hundred Catholic Centres of spirituality, for example, listed at [www.terraspiritus.com.au/member/sample\\_view\\_frame.cgi?aid=12&m=1](http://www.terraspiritus.com.au/member/sample_view_frame.cgi?aid=12&m=1)

<sup>48</sup> There are some very good resources, however, such as David Ransom's *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (Homebush: St Pauls, 2002).

*particular practices or rites, and as long as the power imbalance and professional boundaries are heeded, there will be less risk of abuse or exploitation.*

## **EPILOGUE**

I once worked as a chaplain in a major hospital. As well as working in a cancer ward and a general surgical ward, I worked in the heart transplant unit. One patient there was very sick and waiting for a transplant. He generally ignored my 'Good Mornings' as I went around the wards. One day, way down the corridor, I heard him crying for help: 'Nurse, nurse', he cried repeatedly. I came to his door and when he saw me he was obviously disappointed.

'Can I help you Peter?' I said.

'I need some ice, can you get me a pack of ice from the ice box there...'  
Because of the condition his blood was in, he was prone to great pain from bruising. I probably broke all the hospital rules, but I went and got him an ice pack. For the next two days he replied to my Good Mornings, but had nothing else to say: what could have been good about it for him!

On the third day, a Friday, I finished my shift at 6.00pm and retired exhausted to the chaplain's flat. I had barely got in the door when my beeper went off. I rang in. 'A heart has come in for Peter, and he is in prep at the moment, and he wants to speak to you.'

I hurried back to the heart transplant unit, wondering what on earth he wanted to talk to me for. There he was, splayed out in something like a space capsule, surrounded by technicians placing monitors all over, and in various parts of, his body. He ignored them and focussed his eyes on me.

'I just wanted to tell you that I'm not afraid to die', he said. He then went on to explain how he had had an 'out of body' experience after one of his heart attacks, in which he technically had died. He was not a believer, he said, but he was not afraid to die. It was a long conversation, and he told me some things about his troubled life and his family that I didn't quite understand at the time. He was soon ready to be taken into theatre. I wished him well.

He died on the operating table, the only person to die in the program that year. The one thing that all the technology and all the medical science could not measure was the state of his spirit: he was ready to die.

In retrospect, I realised that he had asked me to explain all this, and some of the other things he had talked about, to his family, which I duly did when I assisted them at his funeral. I believe he ended his troubled life in peace.

I also believe that sensitivity to spirituality in human services will help in similar ways.

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