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RASNET - Religion and Society Teachers' Network

Centre for Ministry and Theology, Parkville

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The role of faith in making a positive difference to our world

Introduction

1. I will speak mainly from the perspective of Christian faith this morning because that is what I know best.
2. It would be presumptuous of me - and casting the net too widely - to speak on behalf of other world religions or faith communities. However you may find some connections or comparisons, points of similarity or contrast.
3. I'm going to adopt a simple approach - first to talk a bit about what's wrong with religion, and then to talk about what's right with it.
4. And following my brief, I will try to focus on how religion functions in society - rather than focusing directly on theology or spirituality, or on its sense-making function.
5. I don't agree with the Christopher Hitchens line that "religion poisons everything".
6. But it's a view we hear quite a lot, not just from the New Atheists but from many people in the middle ground of politics and culture.
7. Certainly religious movements and institutions are connected to a lot of the world's wrongs – from ISIS to clergy abuse scandals - and you can understand why non-religious people, and even some religious people, might form this perception.
8. Considered purely in social terms, religious people, religious ideas, religious movements can do both good and harm. Religion is not inherently toxic, but neither does a religious cloak or label
mean that everything done in its name is right and pure. There is in this sense such a thing as good religion and very good religion, bad religion and very bad religion.

- Let's just quickly identify some of the factors or circumstances that can produce negative outcomes for societies. Four examples of bad religion (there may be others!):
  1. Religion that's too close to political power
  2. Absolutist religion
  3. Quietism, pietism and other forms of disengaged religion
  4. Sectarianism, tribalism and the politics of religious difference

**Bad religion 1: Religion and political power**

- Early Christianity was an underground movement, a social movement that challenged the assumptions and power structures of the time -those of the Roman Empire as the hegemonic political power, and those of contemporary culture.
- When St Paul wrote that in Christ there is neither male nor female, free man nor slave, Jew nor Greek -he was expressing a truly revolutionary sentiment.
- To be a Christian in those times was to think and live counter-culturally, and in the process of course to risk persecution and death.
- At a certain point in time it reached an accommodation with earthly power crystallizing the alliance with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine -and the elevation of Christianity to state religion.
- And from that point on, the church's ostensible role of agent of spiritual transformation, catalyst of revolutionary change, became confused with its objective role as partner to state and imperial power.
- Its institutional form, its hierarchy, its bureaucracy, its elaborate system of control and finance, its system of rewards - all served to make it essentially a parallel state - usually in close alliance with the actual state, occasionally in competition.
- If we look at the main strands of the Protestant Reformation we see these attributes at the core of the church's malaise all being challenged.
- It was the church's presumption to compete with the power of the actual state -or the very idea that church and state should be conflated -that was being challenged in the Anglican reformation, and later by the English Non-Conformists.
It was the alliance of church and empire, and the elaborate overgrown institutional structure of the church, in an advanced stage of corruption, that Martin Luther challenged.

It was the detachment from the spirituality of the individual's relationship from God that the Puritans and Calvin challenged.

More radically, it was the alliance with power and hierarchy in all its forms, and the surrender to materialism, that the Anabaptists challenged.

The problems with the Reformation, however, are the problems of most revolutions. They are never completed, and they run into counter-revolution. Supporters fall out among themselves, or they lose their zeal, or they become fanatics. The revolutionary structures can harden into ones just as oppressive as what they replaced.

The original reformation was followed by many further movements for reform, the formation of countless new sects and denominations.

The moral of all this is that reformation (small ‘r’) is not an event but a process - a process of periodic reflection, reshaping and renewal that all religious movements need to go through.

Rather than fall into the trap of thinking we can rise above our human nature and never be sullied by base motives like chasing power, status or wealth - we need to regularly consult our moral and spiritual compass, be aware of our failings, and collectively get ourselves back on the right track.

Reformation isn't something Protestants did in the 16th century. It's something everyone needs to be doing, all the time.

**Bad religion 2: Absolutist religion**

Religion negates its social benefits when it is imposed in an absolutist way - when it seeks to control every aspect of life within a society.

The early church did not form a theocracy, and nothing in the teachings of Jesus suggests that it should.

Neither the Jewish tradition out of which the teaching and ministry of Jesus grew, nor the customs of the early church, sought to control social relations in the spheres of household and family life, property, economic production and so on.

Attempts to construct a totalitarian or absolutist state using religion to underpin its legitimacy are both ‘un-orthodox (contrary to common understanding of religious precept) and unsustainable. (Though interestingly the most sustained and consistent approach to absolutism
in state control of citizens' behaviour and thoughts in today's world is North Korea, officially atheist and materialist.)

Bad religion 3: Quietism, pietism and disengaged religion

- Not referring specifically to the historic movements of Quietism and Pietism, but the general notions they symbolize - all those forms of Christianity that focus exclusively on the inner spiritual life (meditation, contemplation, silence, etc) or on personal piety (in worship or in rigid adherence to personal morality) and neglect engagement with one's community or society.
- No objection (obviously) to any such spiritual practices or adherence to ethical codes - but disengagement is inimical to justice and compassion.
- In the Lord's Prayer Christians pray for the coming of God's kingdom - but this should not be interpreted as referring only to an after-life - the realization of the kingdom means creating a human society where truth, justice and compassion reign. This implies earthly engagement.

Bad religion 4: Sectarianism

- By sectarianism I don't mean different religious traditions or groups engaging in controversy about religious matters.
- The kind of sectarianism I mean is when religious identity, specifically religious difference, becomes a system of badges for tribal disputes - where people strive for economic, political or social advantage for their own group, as opposed to other groups.
- This kind of sectarianism has a long history in Australia, mostly constructed around a Protestant-Catholic divide that only really ceased to be very relevant around the 1960s.
- In other contexts - Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East - we have seen much deadlier examples of sectarian conflict.
- To a greater or lesser degree, these conflicts tend to have little to do with religious belief. Hardly anyone in Northern Ireland during the troubles was worried about transubstantiation, or justification by faith. It's all about the label, the badge, the marker of tribal identity, the code-words that conjure up ancient rivalries and hatreds - religion co-opted to the ancient game of Us Versus Them.
Good religion - great ideas and movements inspired by faith

• In 1843, the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* claimed that, "Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul."

• Feuerbach was not the first to accuse Christianity of promoting introspection and self-obsession, and he was certainly not the last.

• This accusation is a double-edged sword. It attacks faith for promoting selfishness and disengagement from the world. Then it uses that sense of separation to argue that engagement with the world by religious people or movements is itself in some way illegitimate.

• Today we often here the claim that faith or religion has no right to engage in political discourse or decision making in a pluralist, secular world. There is a fear that religion somehow undermines democracy.

• Again, I think it is important to distinguish between religiously inspired thinking and values, and the politics of religious difference.

• In a genuine liberal democracy there can surely be no exclusion of any body of thinking or values except in those extreme cases that set out to destroy the political system of democracy itself.

• Thus, while I would disagree (for example) with some of the political expressions of the most conservative interpretations of Christianity, I would never consider their right to be expressed as illegitimate.

• What is illegitimate - at least, very unhelpful - is those who seek to divide and polarise the community along sectarian lines.

• So there’s a line that we ought not to cross - in demonising other groups or fostering the division of the community into mutually hostile camps.

• But on balance, religious voices contribute substantially and constructively to our democratic debate, and there is no reason they shouldn’t be heard, and no reason why they should have to hide their identity.

• Indeed, there is evidence that religion contributes to thriving community life, both in the public square and beyond it.
• **Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard** and NOT a religious believer has waded into the debate about religion in the public square, with his latest book, *American Grace - how religion unites and divides us*.

• The book emerges out of two comprehensive surveys conducted into religion and public life in America.

• Perhaps the most controversial finding in this book is the point delivered most emphatically—that **religious people make better citizens and neighbours**.

• He writes, "...for the most part, the evidence we review suggests that religiously observant Americans are more civic, and in some respects simply 'nicer'"

• Putnam reports that on every measurable scale, religious Americans are better volunteers, more generous financial givers, more altruistic and more involved in civic life, than their secular counterparts.

• Religious people, says Putnam, are better neighbours, more community minded, more likely to volunteer (and not just for faith-based activities).

• They are more likely to give blood, to give money to a homeless person, to provide financial aid to family or friends, to offer a seat to a stranger and to spend time with someone who is "a bit down". They are more often taking part in local civic and political life and pushing for reform.

• We all know that the religious landscape is very different in Australia, but what information we do have suggests similar results would be found here.

• **A 2004 report by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Research and Philanthropy in Australia**, for example, found that people who said they were religious were more likely to volunteer, and to volunteer for more hours, than those who said they were not. The report found the effect was more pronounced for those who attended church or other religious services frequently.

• In 2011, the Australian National Church Life Survey asked a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders the following question: "Do you agree or disagree: 'Christians should work to change the structures of society in order to create a more just society'?

• A large majority of attenders (80%) were in agreement with the idea that Christians should work to create a more just society, including 37% who were in strong agreement. A small number (17%) were neutral or unsure, with only 3% in disagreement.

• The views of these attenders suggest that there is underlying support within the Christian community for active attempts to work for change that establishes a more just society.

• While the goal of social change is debated among churches and their members with different groups at times holding opposing views in relation to a justice issue it is clear that the current
tenor of attenders' views is one of activism rather than withdrawal from social and political engagement.

- In Australia too, Stephen Judd and Anne Robinson in *Driven by purpose: Charities that make a difference* highlighted that 23 out of the top 25 charities in Australia are faith-based -schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, aid and development organisations.

- This is a far greater predominance than found in societies that outwardly seem more religious, such as the United States.

- I think this suggests that it is too simplistic to say Australia is just a secular society. I've argued elsewhere that Australians have a very distinctive attitude to religion millions of them would never darken the door of a church except for weddings and funerals, but they thank God for the Salvos.

- Religion conforms to some extent to the cultural space it is given. Australians are open to spirituality, but they have a "low threshold of bull**t" (a term coined by the Uniting Church theologian David Millikan).

- So the Australian church, and I think this may be true of other religious traditions as well, has become service-shaped.

- Historically, we have seen that Christian engagement in the world has both alleviated the symptoms of poverty and suffering and also engaged in social reform to address the longer-term causes of suffering -not just the symptoms.

- It has made significant changes to the lives of the most vulnerable, and give expression to the Lord's Prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- Wilberforce and the movement to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade is a much - celebrated historical example of this, but in the last fifty years Christian churches and organisations have also made vital contributions to the American civil rights movement, the overthrow of communist regimes in eastern Europe and the fall of apartheid and the work of reconciliation in South Africa.

- The Evangelical scholar N.T. Wright has expressed it this way

  "It isn't that the cross has won the victory, so there's nothing more to be done. Rather, the cross has won the victory as a result of which there are now redeemed human beings getting ready to act as God's wise agents, his stewards, constantly worshipping their creator and constantly, as a result, being equipped to reflect his image into his creation, to bring his wise and healing order to the world, putting the world to rights under his just and gentle rule." [Evil and the Justice of God, SPCK, London' 2006' p' 90']
• Sadly, the message that Jesus of Nazareth preached is sometimes misunderstood, even by his followers.

• If you had asked me to summarise that message after years of evangelical Sunday school and church attendance, I would have said something along these lines: Jesus came to first-century Palestine and went around telling people to become Christians and to go to church.

• Now I understand that he did nothing of the sort. He came announcing that God’s Kingdom was breaking in, and we needed to change the way we live and embrace it.

• The signature of this kingdom, Jesus said, is good news for the poor.

• Our work at World Vision is an expression of our understanding of what Jesus declared and lived out in his life. Our development programs, then, are not a ministry that is an optional addition to the gospel, but insofar as it calls us to change and become good news for the poor, it is at the heart of the gospel.

• From the very beginning of the Christian faith in the first century there is evidence that Christians were motivated in their social justice and poverty programs by at least four revolutionary ideas - ideas very different from the prevailing Greco-Roman worldview:

• One was a different vision of the human being. Christians inherited the Jewish idea that human beings are made in the image of God. Consequently, all human beings are deserving of dignity and respect because they are special to God and reflect something of his character. Like other world religions, it is universal in its scope and is concerned with all human well-being and flourishing - not limited to a particular culture.

• The second idea is a different view of God. That is, God actually is loving and compassionate - not capricious; not transcendentally distant; not uncaring or indifferent to suffering and injustice. In Jesus, they believed they had seen God incarnate - in the flesh - and he was merciful and forgiving. He cared for the sick, the sinners and the outcasts - for women, for Jews, Greeks, slaves and free.

• The third idea is a different view of the material world. God’s concern for and endorsement of the goodness and integrity of creation - the created environment. This is a vision of shalom, that is to say, of harmony, of the world run right of human community as it is meant to be, in which humans enjoy right relationship with God, each other and the world. It is not a gnostic or Platonic view that elevates the ‘spiritual’ and disregards the physical, material world. It is a holistic view that integrates the spiritual and the material.

• The fourth idea that you can detect in the early Christian texts has to do with the Christians belief that the Kingdom of God was coming ... They believed that a kingdom was coming into the world that would bring justice. That would bring the relief of the poor and the end of
suffering. And the Christians said, 'OK, that kingdom's coming, let's live like it's here already. Let's anticipate the kingdom by living lives of justice and care and relieving the poor'."

- Christian churches and NGOs are well known for acts of humanitarian relief that alleviate immediate suffering.
- Christian care and concern for the poor is commonly expressed in practical humanitarian relief and welfare - the provision of food for the hungry shelter for the homeless and care for the sick - the sort of care provided to those affected by the 2004 tsunami.
- Yet our **advocacy and engagement in social reform** is sometimes seen as 'too political' or controversial, or too complex. Indeed, it can be all those things - and more.
- In fact, I regard it as another important expression of God's heart for the vulnerable and love for our neighbour.
- In a truly democratic and pluralist society, Christians and other people of faith have just as much right - and obligation - as our secularist fellow citizens to contribute in the public square informed and animated by our worldview and religious tradition.
- In fact, our engagement is often seen to be a challenge to the powerful. Two of the best-known statements about this (familiar to you all, I'm sure):
  - "When I give to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." (Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, Brazil)
  - "Christians shouldn't just be pulling people out of the river - We should be going upstream to find out who's pushing them in. To be neutral in a situation of injustice is to have chosen sides already. It is to support the status quo" (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa)
- We need to influence the powerful on behalf of the poor. That can include challenging the powerful - raising uncomfortable questions, and frequently more than just questions. When the poor are oppressed or children are raped or abused, we take a stand with the poor and challenge the powerful.
- However, we also need to remember that the powerful have a place at the Cross. They cannot become our enemies. I remind myself that I have the same failings and weaknesses that they have. We who seek to be agents of transformation are in need of transformation as much as the poor and the powerful.
- The truth is that both the powerful and the agents of transformation need to transform their understanding of power.
- We need to earnestly believe that our basis of power is not our professionalism or connections or resources, as these are purely tools. The basis for our power is our dependence on God.
• If we do not remember these fundamentals, it is so easy for us in World Vision to play God in the lives of the Poor.

• It is true that we can’t do everything, but at the same time, we cannot do nothing and we can all do something.