

Faith, Social Justice and Public Policy

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It's a great honour to be back here in Cambodia. I first met some of you in Site Two camp on the Thai border back in 1987. Bishop Kike was a young Jesuit scholastic starting work in the camp for the handicapped. I first came to Cambodia in 1995 at the invitation of Sr Denise to assist with drawing up a protocol between JRS and UNHCR. I was here most recently two years ago when the reflection centre here was being fully established. The floor had just been put down in the Chapel and the woman at the well had just taken up her place in the garden.

What can I, a Catholic priest from Australia, say about faith, social justice and public policy here in Cambodia which is a largely Buddhist country? Whether we be Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim (and there are happily representatives here of all those faiths this evening), faith is about my having, owning and reflecting on a belief system which allows me to live fully with the paradoxes and conflicts of life and death, good and evil, beauty and suffering. It is only fundamentalists who are able to live as if these paradoxes are not real, as if they do not impinge on our sense of self and on our considered actions every day.

By embracing these paradoxes and confronting these conflicts, the person of faith whether inspired by Jesus, Mohammed, or Buddha is able to live a life of faith. I am able to commit myself to others, in love and in justice. I am able to accord dignity to all others in the human family, no matter what their distinguishing marks, and regardless of their competencies, achievements or potentialities. I am able to surrender myself to that which is beyond what I know through my senses. I am able to commit myself to the stewardship of all creation. The atheist, the person with no faith except in man himself, may do all these things with varying degrees of success. Suffice to say, I cannot imagine being committed to these life tasks so comprehensively and so universally except with faith. Some atheists are amongst the finest, most generous humanitarians I know. But I know that my faith enhances my humanitarian instincts and achievements. I would be a lesser person without my religious faith. For example I would find it difficult to accord full human dignity to persons at either end of the life cycle but for the abiding conviction that every person is uniquely created in the image and likeness of God.

All of us, whether religious or not, whether people of faith or not, have a comprehensive world view which informs how we think about human life in community, in society, and within the nation state. Those comprehensive world views differ. That's why we are political beings. Politics is about effecting compromise on those issues which do not yield one true answer to persons of diverse comprehensive world views. The person whose comprehensive world view is informed by and underpinned by faith is just as entitled to be represented at the table of public deliberation as the person whose comprehensive world view is informed by atheistic humanism.

When we live in diverse, pluralist societies, it makes good sense for us to be able to translate our comprehensive world view in terms accessible to others if they do not subscribe to our way of thinking. The challenge to a Christian living in a largely Buddhist society has some similarities to the challenge to a Christian living in a society where the public square is largely the preserve of those who argue and agitate with a secularist mindset. We have ideas not just about what is good for us as individuals but what is good for the society of which we are a part. While it might be patronizing and not appropriate for us to tell others how to live their lives, there is nothing wrong with participating in the discussion about how we might shape our society for the good of everyone.

No human being can live like an island. We are creatures made for life in community, for life in relationship. Only with others can we achieve our full human flourishing. We all need to live in society – with the exception of the occasional hermit. No large society can survive in our contemporary world except with the backing of the State and the system of international relations amongst states. Our first need is peace and security. So we band together in order to guarantee the peace and security of all persons against attack by unjust aggressors. As we all know since 2001, there may be a need to interfere with individual liberties in order to maintain the peace and security of a society. This may require quite oppressive use of state power.

Once peace and security are assured, we then need to look to the requirements of the common good or the public interest. The other day I was riding the splendid air-conditioned BTS skytrain in Bangkok. One of the signs in the carriages familiar to everyone was the “No Smoking” sign with the red circle and cross running through a cigarette. A smoker might say, “This is an interference with my right or my liberty to smoke.” Yes, it is. But it is a justifiable interference with the individual right or liberty for the well being of everyone wanting to ride that train in comfort and in good health. Forty years ago, we would not have interfered with the liberty of people to smoke, even on long plane flights. Now everyone accepts that it is for the common good and in the public interest that people’s right to smoke be limited. Similarly, the State might insist on the vaccination of babies or that everyone in a car wear a seatbelt. There is always room for discussion. The important thing to note is that it is appropriate for the State, without arbitrary discrimination, to impose restrictions on individual liberties for the good of everyone in society. We need to debate those conditions so that all in society might have the best opportunity of achieving their full human flourishing.

Another of the signs on the BTS was one instructing passengers to give up their seats to those in need. The picture showed a disabled person, a pregnant woman, and a little child. Usually we might say, “First in, best dressed.” Everyone has the right to a seat if they can get one. But then we acknowledge that we should have a preferential option for the poor. We are committed not only to justice giving each their due. We have a commitment to social justice providing what is needed especially by the neediest in society so that they might achieve their human flourishing. We have a universal commitment to the human rights of all persons but we have a special eye to those who are most disadvantaged and most likely to be cheated the exercise of their rights unless we have a care for them. It is easy to assume that we are committed to universal human rights respecting the dignity of all. But we have heard from Tess that when some people are evicted from their lands here in Cambodia, there are some who receive no land compensation, namely the ethnic Vietnamese. The common good or public interest may require the compulsory acquisition by the State of people’s property rights eg. when there is a need to widen the river and prevent future flooding, people with homes on the riverbank need to be moved. Due process should be accorded to everyone including

the ethnic Vietnamese. We have heard from Nicola about the issue of statelessness. There are some people living in Cambodia whose families have lived here for generations and yet they are denied nationality in an arbitrary fashion. Some of them are stateless. This is an instance of not according dignity to all. We have heard from Maddie about people who are exploited and trafficked for work and sex in Malaysia and Thailand. Ultimately their dignity will not be assured, they will not be able to enjoy their human rights, until there is a legal and economic order in place guaranteeing employment and just working conditions for those prepared and qualified to work.

Another sign I saw on the BTS was new to me. It showed a monk on a seat and instructed passengers to give up their seats for monks. I don't think we will ever see signs on Australian buses telling people to give up their seats for priests or sisters. Respect for culture, religion and conscience is another matter we need to consider. Even when the State wants to make laws applying equally to everyone, there may be a need to provide an exemption or to make a special qualification for the benefit of those whose freedom of conscience or religion would be offended.

These are the issues we always need to consider in public policy when wanting to achieve social justice: peace and security for everyone, the social conditions needed so that everyone might have the opportunity to achieve their human potential in relationship with others, human rights, the preferential option for the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized, and respect for conscience and religious freedom.

In different societies, people cast the balance differently between the state, the market, and civil society. This can often be just a matter of history and culture. For example, I come from a country where the State guarantees universal health cover. In the US, there is controversy at the moment about the new ObamaCare as Americans debate the limits of state intervention, the responsibility of employers, the role of the market and the scope for civil society (including the churches) to dictate their own terms for health cover.

We need to ensure that the state structures are right providing a balance of power between the lawmakers (the legislature), the law implementers (the Executive) and those who decide if the law is being applied appropriately (the judiciary). But we need more than structures. You could have the best structures in the world. But that won't help if your public officials are corrupt or untrained or if your citizens are not educated enough or aware enough of their rights and entitlements. People need to be trained in good technique. They also need to be trained how to be wise and how to make good decisions which shape good character. Ultimately, you need persons of good character who are truly wise who play a role in the state machinery. Often people with a religious faith are well suited to developing this wisdom and character, in part because their religious faith keeps them true to themselves and their values even when no one else is watching and when it would be so easy to seek personal gain.

As state officials or as citizens, our religious faith can help us and our neighbours. Everyone has a comprehensive world view. The religious person who espouses universal truths and the universal dignity of humanity might be more likely to stand up for the people on the margins – the land evictees, the stateless, and the trafficked. The religious person is free, and perhaps duty bound, to speak up in the public square and to vote accordingly. When appointed as state officials, we are vested with a public trust and we must discharge that trust faithfully. It would be wrong for a religious person to abuse their public trust imposing their religious views on others. A few years ago,

I chaired a committee for the Australian government looking into human rights in Australia. One of my committee members would often introduce us saying, "I am an atheist and my chairman is a Catholic priest. We come from all different backgrounds. We are not here to impose our views on you, but to faithfully report your views to the government." We are able to educate each other and to empower each other. Thirty years ago, I worked as a legal adviser for Aboriginal groups in Australia and would often be seen to be speaking for them. Nowadays their leaders are educated, well connected and highly motivated to engage in the public square. They speak for themselves, as they should.

With religious faith, we are able to engage in public life committing ourselves to the common good and to the rights of the poor and marginalized, acknowledging that people without religious faith often do so even better than we do. But we know we could not be so committed except for having religious faith.

It is important to distinguish the citizen or public official with religious faith from the religious official or representative of the faith community. There are other prudential issues to consider when we come to define the role of religious leaders in the public square. Buddhists in countries like Cambodia and Myanmar know that the monks can be very effective in making public protests. But the monks must not do it too often; otherwise they lose their symbolic role. And if they never do it, they risk becoming completely irrelevant and withdrawn from their people. Think just of the time when the monks marched in the streets of Rangoon and gathered outside the house of Aung Sang Su Ki when she was under house arrest.

As people of faith we come into the public square not saying that we will impose our religious views on others. Rather we say: True to our religious tradition, we will discharge the public trust we are given and we will speak and act as citizens working to recognize the dignity and human rights of all persons, at all life stages, no matter what their competencies, potentialities, achievements or distinguishing marks. We work to establish the conditions for the common good. We will work to respect and enhance the culture and space for freedom of religion and conscience for all our fellow citizens.

We will find hope in the midst of despair. We will love in the midst of hatred. We will persevere to educate and form our citizens and to design structures appropriate to our history and culture promoting the rule of law and due process for all.