



The necessity of and priority for the common good in contemporary Australia:

A response to the Federal Leader of the Opposition's 16 November 2006 address to the Centre for Independent Studies

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The current challenge: The death of the common good

On November 16, 2006 in an address to the Centre for Independent Studies, the Leader of the Opposition, then Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Trade and International Security, Kevin Rudd, took the opportunity to challenge the Howard Government's record on "free market fundamentalism". In a strong and coherent piece, Rudd sought first to trace the philosophical core of the Coalition's fundamentalism to one of the most prominent evangelists of the neo-liberal cause, Friedrich von Hayek; second to challenge market fundamentalism by way of the counter-offer of Social Democratic values - defending market disciplines but also championing the priority of social justice; and third to point out the manner in which market fundamentalism has split the right along the fault lines of conservatives versus liberals (as in "small l liberals"), suggesting that this split furnishes federal labor with new opportunities. In his attack upon market fundamentalism, Rudd pointed out that several logical outcomes have included amongst other things, the current industrial relations revolution impacting upon family life; and the Howard Government's failure to identify climate change as a priority.

Whilst Rudd's attempt to attack Howard's free-market fundamentalist credentials through guilt-by-association with von Hayek is perhaps a tad too forensic, it is not without some justification. But what is of greatest interest from both a Christian and 'Centre' perspective¹ is Rudd's philosophical and ethical argument that under the Howard Government's market philosophy, everything and everyone has become objectified and "commodified"; that everything and everyone has its price; that the concept of "public goods" has to all intents and purposes disappeared.

In today's brave new world, areas such as education, health and the environment, to name but a few, are increasingly being and will continue to be swallowed up by the free-market; but more alarmingly *carved in its image*, making the very term social justice a mere anachronism. It is this same intuition that Marion Maddox pursues in her work "God Under Howard – The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics"². Here as if from 'the mouths of babes' a former member of the House of Representatives and high profile Christian conservative, Ross Cameron, confessed to Dr Maddox;

"I'm on the right wing of the Liberal party on most issues. My political view is about the development of the human person. The heart of Christ was freedom – and freedom comes through having the confidence, skills and optimism to take control of your own life. The state is too often a short-circuiting mechanism in the development of the human person against the circumstances of the market...I want the least possible reliance of citizens on the state. I'm against the welfare state on humanitarian and religious grounds. The early church had welfare, but it was also tough – Paul said "Whoever does not work does not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). I'd pretty much repudiate the concept of social justice, it does more harm than good."³

This paper seeks to challenge the current commodification and marginalization of human relationships in Australian life, championing a society where social justice is once again included in the Australian lexicon. It supports Rudd's call for an acknowledgement of public goods, however it goes further than Rudd, in that it argues for the priority of the common good, a concept central to Christian social tradition, but one that has been lost to contemporary political theory and practice of both the right and the left. Further behind this argument for the common good, there stands a second argument, one that shadows so to speak. This of no less importance, contends that Rudd makes the same mistake as do many of his contemporaries; reducing the argument for social justice to economics, or at least permitting the impression that 'economics is where it is at'. This paper will challenge that view; first by promoting the common good over public goods (a thoroughly economic term), and second by suggesting that the major resistance to the common good today stems not so much from current economic orthodoxy, but more fundamentally contemporary culture, of which economic orthodoxy is but a part.

In terms of structure, the paper will begin by explaining the roots of the idea of the common good, how it differs from that of public goods, and how it serves us better in efforts to build a just society. Then it will proceed in a discussion about the struggle that the common good faces in our current social and political climate and will point to its unparalleled value as a conceptual tool in the formation of a new political language and practice in Australia.

In writing this paper I acknowledge my indebtedness to a range of thinkers: the ethicist David Hollenbach SJ⁴; the political philosopher John Rawls⁵; the theologian J. Philip Wogamon who some twenty years ago wrote a seminal piece, entitled *Christians and the Great Economic Debate*⁶; and finally a personal hero and courageous thinker, the Spaniard, Ignacio Ellacuria SJ⁷, scholar, activist and martyr; former rector of the University of Central America, San Salvador.

The roots and meaning of the common good

The idea of the common good is shrouded in historical wisdom, taking us far back to Aristotle. For Aristotle, the good life of a single person and the quality of the common life people share with one another in society are intimately linked – in fact the good of the individual and the common good are inseparable. However Aristotle went further than this, arguing contrary to our current climate, that the common good is a higher good than the particular goods of private persons. He wrote:

The attainment of the good for one person alone is to be sure a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine.⁸

For his part St Thomas Aquinas walked in Aristotle's shoes; he too affirming the common good as higher than its private counterpart, as well as its divine character. His reasoning for the common good's superiority over that of the private was twofold: in the first instance the argument of quantification, that no part is greater than the whole, that a person's goodness can only be judged in relation to the extent that the common good stands as his goal – "*cum agitur (quilibet) homo sit pars civitatis, impossibile est quod aliquis homo sit bonus, nisi (sit bene) proportionatus bono communi*".⁹

But second, stood the argument of qualification; namely that the common good is the result of justice, justice understood as that which structures civil society rightly. Accordingly then particular are virtuous only because they serve to defend the common good through their concern with justice. Turning to the question of the common good's status as "more divine"; in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas identified three dimensions of the good as inextricably linked: the good of each person; the good shared with others in community; and at its most sublime, the good when recognized in God's-self - the "*bonum commune par excellence*".¹⁰ For Thomas the three goods are inter-related, they carry a mutuality, but the latter two are especially significant, reflected in the common good and supremely expressed in the double commandment to love God and the neighbour.

That said, the common good does not end with Aristotle and his masterful interpreter Thomas. Indeed the Father of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola, also embraced it with enthusiasm.¹¹ Ignatius lived in the sixteenth century, the dawn of modernity and his thought and practice reflect this. Yes he did look back to his predecessors Aristotle and Thomas, but as if perched on giants' shoulders he also strained forward to a new age.

On the one hand he spoke of the Society of Jesus as marked by the desire to serve the “greater glory of God” but on the other, such glory was interpreted in ‘this worldly’ terms – the common good. But to what did the common good refer? Not surprisingly it was interpreted in terms of the defence and propagation of the faith, but significantly there was a more ‘secular’ strand – the education of youth, the illiterate and the compassionate support of those in prisons and hospitals. In effect what makes Ignatius stand out from his predecessors was the manner in which his understanding transcended the walls of the city-state or the medieval kingdom. Ignatius saw the common good as the good of the whole of humanity extending to the ends of the earth.¹² In fact in the *Constitutions* of the order there repeatedly appears the expression “the more universal good”. It is this more universal good that serves as the criterion for the decisions of the order’s members when discerning what the service of God and the Church might mean in any given situation.¹³

Turning from the roots of the common good to its meaning, the surprise is that through most of early history - antiquity or medieval - the term is seldom if ever defined. Notwithstanding, its meaning can be derived from a comparison and contrast with more modern secular terms. Here the North American ethicist David Hollenbach helps us as he compares and contrasts the term with contemporary ideas of the “general welfare”, the “public interest” and the term to which Rudd himself referred, “public goods. Hollenbach points out that the concept “public goods” is perhaps the closest contemporary parallel to the common good, in as much as it points to a good that is present for all members of a relevant community.

Further he explains that in being present for all members it is a concept that is “*non-rivalrous in consumption*”; that is that its enjoyment by some does not mean it cannot be enjoyed by others. For example “a beautiful sunset does not become unavailable to one person because it is being enjoyed by someone else. Additionally, a public good is “*non-excludible*”; in other words its benefits cannot be easily confined to some people by excluding others. Again for example the clean air of a healthy environment is not like bottled oxygen that may be available to some but not others. As Hollenbach concludes, “If it is there for all, it is there for everyone; if it is present for anyone it is present for all”.¹⁴

So far so good, but Hollenbach continues that the concept of “public goods” lacks an element that is central to the common good, and that is the relational. Public goods are generally seen as external or extrinsic to the relationship that exists amongst those who form a community or society. For example in a family, the home and the income shared are, to apply the term used above, generally non-rivalrous. But there is clearly more to a functional family than the sharing of these extrinsic goods. Crucial to the family are the relationships of mutuality and affection that are prior to the sharing of goods in as much as these mutual relationships are the real foundation for the sharing of such goods in the first place. Now it is precisely these relationships that constitute a key element of a community or society and in turn a central dimension of its common good.

This was precisely Aristotle’s and Thomas’ understanding. For Aristotle in the city-state, the very process of debate concerning how its citizens should live together; the very relationships of reciprocal interaction were understood as the realities that brought the community into being; the antecedent to the general welfare promoted through economic exchange and shared public goods. For Thomas, in like manner, the common good also included dimensions such as the bonds of affection, even love that bound people together in communities. In short then the common good carries us more deeply into human reality than items like general welfare or public goods: in its immediacy to the relational it penetrates more profoundly to the very foundations of what it means to be human together.¹⁵

Another way of understanding this insight concerning the centrality and immediacy of the relational was developed by the twentieth century Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain, who amongst other things did much to integrate the “human common good” and contemporary individual human rights. Maritain accepts that human relationships do possess a functional role; in other words they are essential for the human to survive and flourish. An example may be relationships of the work-place that serve as a means to fulfilling one’s basic material needs. But there is more to it than this; for relationships, reasons Maritain, arise not only from need or deficiency but also from the “very perfections” of human beings.

Another way of putting it is that our relationships are not simply instrumental items that once satisfied take second or third place. Unlike food, the desire for which ceases once it fulfills our deficiency, relationships are entered into and are necessary for their own sake. In short then, friendship and love are not just means to personal fulfillment. If they were considered in this purely instrumental way then they would really cease to be friendship and love in any genuine sense. As Hollenbach notes, true friendship is not something reducible to a mere “*egoisme a deux*” – not a good that simply meets the private needs of friends considered apart from each other. Instead the good of friendship must be a shared good that is valued and embraced *for itself*.

Herein then lies the essence of the common good. It is not just recognition of public goods where the needs and deficiencies of individuals are met – although as Rudd points out quite correctly, under the Coalition we Australians have been less willing to countenance even that. Rather the common good celebrates the flourishing of human beings precisely *in* their eating together, *in* their sharing a home with others, and *in* their involvement in and benefiting *from* education, intellectual exchange and friendship. This in essence is why the current move to the privatization of our lives does not amount to just a simple disaggregation of public goods into private – if that were the only problem we would be singing.

The current situation is in fact much more serious than that, for in the obsession with the private, something greater is being lost - the bonds of friendship that constitute the fundamental part of good lives and good living. The German pastor, theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an oft mentioned favourite of Rudd, understood this well, when he said, “Friendship really completes the circle of happiness and gives us the assurance of our own value”.¹⁶ To properly understand this key aspect of the common good is to understand at its most profound the essential meaning of the *good* of being a community at all¹⁷

The struggle for the re-emergence of the common good in an inhospitable culture

Thus far I have suggested that the common good is a deeper, more adequate concept than the more economically driven “public goods” language when it comes to the question of how to best resist the current trend of the commodification and marginalization of human relationships. It is so quite simply because it more immediately and directly goes to the heart of things by embracing the relational - *what it means to be human together*, the very thing current cultural and economic orthodoxy deny.

That brings us to a significant problem with Rudd’s approach; an approach which is common in current socio-political debate in that it begins with but lamentably never quite gets beyond the economic paradigm. The issue is not that economics is irrelevant – clearly it is not. Rather the issue is that economics is perceived as *the* paradigm which drives all else. This criticism has already been latent in what I have said concerning the more adequate nature of the common good over the more economically defined public goods: but the criticism needs to be prosecuted further and applied to the question that will occupy us for the remainder of this paper: namely what are the forces that are most likely to resist the re-emergence of the common good and how might the common good help us reframe a new political language and practice in Australia.

Revisiting what was advanced in the introduction of this paper, the hypothesis looks like this: that whilst current economic orthodoxy constitutes a significant challenge to the re-emergence of the

common good, what stands as prior and primary is in fact the cultural question: indeed our economic thought and behaviour, if anything tends to stem from and is fueled by our broader cultural values.¹⁸ In discussing this I will be referring to thought that comes largely from North America. Of course the North American cultural environment differs from that of Australia, enjoying a particularity of its own. To those who would be skeptical of drawing lessons from the former, I would make the plea that North American culture does not amount so much to a particularity of type but rather degree. In other words any conclusions drawn from the North American experience, yes, need to be applied with prudence: - but that is not to say that they cannot be applied at all.

John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism*¹⁹ speaks for many when he argues that the reality of pluralism within contemporary western society impedes the possibility of even adequately envisioning a social good upon which all can agree, let alone acting upon it. As Hollenbach notes, “this is the intellectual and theoretical challenge to the common good today: diversity of visions of the good life makes it difficult or even impossible to attain a shared vision of the common good”.²⁰ Let us pursue this rationale seeking to understand why western culture is suspicious of any ‘common good’ and what has come to take its place.

In essence there appear to be three fundamental reasons to explain contemporary western skepticism about the possibility of an agreed sense of the common good: first, the nature of our diversity and pluralism and the way we think about it; second the reluctance to believe that any proposal for the common good can be anything other than a self-interested hijack; and third an acceptance by default of a less adventurous good – tolerance.

Today the *practical reality* of the sheer size and cultural heterogeneity of western societies makes it difficult to speak of the common good at all. We are acutely aware that we have many different kinds of neighbours: in the shopping centre and the work-place people rub shoulders who speak different languages, celebrate different rituals and own different religions. This diversity can be seen as an enriching experience, but it can also be interpreted as one of mutual impoverishment and diminishment, where each group reifies the others.

In the US on balance the experience has been a broadly positive one in the sense of acceptance of others. This has been consistent with a historically open immigration policy, but let it be said due in part at least, to a more cynically driven realization on the part of the majority that without immigration – legal and illegal – cheap labour would be minimized and affluent America could not enjoy the levels of prosperity that it has. Australia on the other hand has struggled a little more in the light of its geography, white-Australia history, and labour legislation, where immigrants – legal and illegal – have been seen as competitors for space, work and prosperity.

This perception does not appear to have changed over the years, our best result being a sort of begrudging acceptance of multiculturalism, from which, in any case, we currently seem to be retreating. In short people of different cultures tend to continue to see themselves as strangers one to the other, and serious interaction and mutual vulnerability appear to be more a ‘common bad’ than a good to be shared.²¹

If anything, then, the good life has tended to become associated with the defence of one’s own turf. In turn our *philosophical approach* has reinforced and compounded the practical reality. In Australia as in the US, diversity and pluralism have come to imply personal freedom and equality. Personal freedom involves personal space and choice, and equality is part of this picture to the extent that these personal choices are equally respected, especially when there is little agreement about what a common good life might otherwise look like. In practice then personal freedom and equality have come to require that there be as much *neutrality* as possible about the meaning of the good life, for to do otherwise would lead to a favouring of some people over others. In sum in today’s public life there can be no broadly encompassing view of the common good, for it would necessarily be understood as doing violence to another value - tolerance.

But how is it that we have come to think this way where the promotion of a great liberal value – tolerance – appears to have undermined and eclipsed the common good that has arguably so influenced the West? Hollenbach helps us to understand as he historically explores the nuances of western experience. Aristotle and Thomas, he contends, both lived in pluralist environments, but both believed that the adherents of different religious and cultural traditions could still identify elements of the good life that were common to the lives of all people. Modern suspicion allows no such conclusion; post-Reformation Europe tore open a gap between ancient and modern approaches to public life. For Catholics and Protestants, and even amongst Protestants themselves, there arose sharply conflicting views about what a good society would look like. It was this contention about the meaning of a good society that tragically served still further as the foundation for continued conflict and blood-letting.

Accordingly by the time the Peace of Westphalia was established in 1648, fifteen to twenty per cent of the population of the then Holy Roman Empire had perished from war-related causes. To say the least, such events engraved deeply into our western psyche have not encouraged great confidence in religiously sponsored views about how to live together. However suspicion has not been limited to the religiously sponsored vision alone. The same reluctance has also applied to the quite secular as well. A case in point was civic republicanism, personified in people as disparate as Cicero, Machiavelli and Rousseau, and characterized by the vision of personal well-being and the well-being of the republic as inseparable.

In conclusion, then, Western experience has been marked by a real sensitivity to the dangers that lurk behind any attempt to base public life on ideas of the common good, be they religiously or non-religiously nourished. It is as if we have been inoculated against entertaining *any* strongly held competing ideas about the good life, sensing in all of them a licence for tyranny.

What then remains; what may we hope for? If the social imagination must surrender the search for and construction of a good life in common; if such searches are destined to be hijacked by self-interested agendas – religious or otherwise; the less adventurous, the safer, the default option appears to have become one of mere tolerance. Let us conclude this section by doing two things: first, let us refer to the current conflict within Western societies that has led to the promotion of tolerance as the supreme value; and second, let us consider the manner in which the primacy of tolerance has fueled the extraordinary reach of the private, the “non-public”.

The theologian and commentator Martin Marty points to contemporary society as a torn reality; torn between two forces; on the one hand those groups that perceive themselves as being the victims of pluralism and diversity and who seek to impose a single national identity upon all; whilst other groups seek to defend their respective identities, resisting the pressure of being swallowed up in the ‘greater whole’. From the perspective of the former, these latter groups undermine the nation insisting upon their respective identities at the expense of the *commonweal*. The result of this, says Marty, is a “shock to the civil body, a trauma in the cultural system, and a paralysis in the neural web of social interactions”.²²

While Marty refers in large part to his own context of the US, these same issues remain alive and well in other places. Perhaps the most notable case has been that of France, where impacted by a resurgent Islam, the very culture that furnished the West with the principles of *liberte, fraternite and egalite*, has been unsure as to how to respond to the issue of whether or not Islamic girls should be permitted to wear religiously prescribed head-coverings in French schools.

More recently a similar issue has been raised in Britain with the former Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, now Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw; publicly suggesting that Muslim women discard veils altogether. In Australia the Federal government’s broader complaint has been that our Islamic leadership is not doing enough to ensure a greater integration of its community into the Australian “way of life”. On the face of it then we appear to be locked into a downward spiral, where awareness of difference generates fear and conflict; where we are further than

ever from being able to acknowledge a good shared in common by people, let alone give political expression to it.

Now it is in the light of this seemingly unrealizable common good that we Westerners increasingly have appealed to another value; that of tolerance as the highest of aspirations – apparently this is as good as it gets. Hollenbach justifiably avers;

“Once upon a time there was a common life where what was good for one was good for all. In those days we could hold town meetings and elect representatives to decide how to achieve the shared good that benefits us all. But today the best we can hope for is tolerance toward all that makes us different from one another, and at worst we have to be ready to fight”.²³

The story does not end here however; more important is the way in which tolerance, the fruit of the demise of any confidence in commonality, also feeds further breakdown in any shared or common understanding, by its tendency to define all visions of the good life as simply *private options, non-public choices*. This view has been substantiated by a broad range of surveys within the US, but particularly informed by the detailed work of the American social scientist Alan Wolfe, entitled *One Nation After All*. As Hollenbach reports, Wolfe’s work set out to discover in considerable detail just what Americans think about matters of public morality.

In any event the results were in part reassuring but also disturbing: reassuring because they suggested that the country was not about to enter into a period of conflict between traditionalist religious believers and progressive secularists, since opined Wolfe, the “American religious style is strongly averse to religious conflict”²⁴; the eleventh commandment being “Thou shalt not judge”. Notwithstanding, there was also considerable room for concern, in as much as Wolfe asked the justified question whether tolerant individualism is enough to deal with the complex problems that American society faces. Americans according to Wolfe, may value personal responsibility highly, but they have a distinct lack of enthusiasm for meeting the responsibilities of national citizenship. He suggests that this narrowness of vision is a by-product of the prosperity of the middle class.

“In the comfortable world of the middle class, morality writ small translates into couch-potato politics’: an unwillingness or inability to articulate common purposes and act to secure them.”²⁵

Now the extent to which the North American story reflects the Australian situation remains of course an open question; suffice it to say that none of what has been said appears foreign to our Australian experience. The idea that we are in a similar position regarding an ethic of tolerance, that has come to replace any concerted effort at working toward a serious understanding of the common good, does ring true.

Is there a future for the common good? A new political language and practice revisited

So far the prognosis for a possible re-emergence of the common good seems unpromising. Contemporary western culture, especially in its North American and quite probably Australian forms, appears to dismiss anything that might claim a broader public or common dimension. Well meaning privatized tolerance seems set to reign, especially with its characteristic toleration of its not too distant cousin, economic orthodoxy.

That said, some years ago while working with the Sociologist of Religion Peter Berger, one of the lessons ingrained within us graduate students was the “principle of unintended consequences”; meaning that history has a way of undercutting, emasculating our confidence in the way the future will unfold: in short the student of history should expect only one thing: the unexpected. This is not then the place to confidently predict one thing or another; nevertheless there are reasons for judiciously believing that the future may not amount to simply a continuation of the present. Certainly the common good provides us with a more sound foundation for a prosperous and fair future together than our current experience has delivered: but still further it appears that we are reaching a political

watershed in Australia where the case for a fairer society might just be beginning to be listened to in a way that it has not been for some years. Australians appear to be tiring of the ‘gospel of the market-place’, aware that the price tag may be altogether too high for them; both in terms of personal debt and unacceptable levels of inequality and injustice.

Let us then in the final stages of this paper underscore three propositions that may help us give expression to this sense of hope; by understanding just how the common good may serve us. First, the common good reflects a deeper and altogether more realistic appreciation of human nature; what it is that makes us tick – something that can only help in the building of a viable society. Second, the common good can perform a significant role in helping us measure the state of health of our society, in a way that contemporary culture with its trivialization of equality, cannot. Third, the common good has a real potential for serving as an aid in the shaping of socio-economic policy and practice through both the promotion of solidarity in the interest of justice, and the provision of a particular understanding of how justice should be understood and applied.

The common good reflects a deeper and more realistic appreciation of human nature.

All social systems possess an understanding, implicit or explicit, adequate or inadequate, of the human person. One of the favourite claims of free market gurus is that the free market works so well because it is realistic about what fundamentally drives people – self-interest. In the same breath it also claims that communitarian or socialistically oriented models are doomed to fail precisely because they harbour too high a view of the human being, expecting too much in the way of altruism.

Still, this same argument can be turned on its head: namely that while self-interest is a component within our make-up, to reduce the human person to this dimension only serves to diminish him and the social environment which he shapes. Kevin Rudd quite correctly signaled this diminishment in his discussion of market fundamentalism, pointing to its straddling the twin horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, stands the proclamation of the “new individual”, ‘liberated’ *from* the old communal altruistic norms of his ancestors, and ‘liberated’ *for* an altogether sleeker model committed to “rational self-centred participation in the market”. On the other hand this same market fundamentalism curiously and intriguingly maintains a quite inconsistent ‘commitment’ to the family; the quintessential expression of community itself.

Needless to say, as Rudd articulates, and as one would expect, only one side of the equation really *does* count; it is the market that maintains the real ascendancy at all times, or at least at those times that matter: as current federal industrial relations legislation has recently shown. But there is a further dimension of human diminishment within the current cultural and economic model, a deeper problem: the caricature of the human person as a mere consumer, never a citizen. The two terms are quite different; the former reduces the person to a minimalist almost passive role, reacting to market realities alone - as someone said “consumers are relatively thick”. The latter understands that citizenship is a more complex and active arrangement, where the citizen, as part of the *demos* (the people), is called upon to immerse himself in the civil life of the community, debating and shaping society in all its dimensions. To consume is one thing, to participate in governing is quite another.²⁶

Now it is against this current damaging and minimalist understanding of the human person as an isolated self-centred consumer, that Christianity offers a much deeper and more realistic counter-view: one that serves as the anthropological foundation for the common good itself in the building of a viable society. In understanding the human being, the cornerstone of Catholicism’s social teaching embraces two fundamental complementary streams. The first defends the dignity and inalienable rights of *the individual* while the other embraces his *social nature, the call to form society*, and find fulfillment through the common good.²⁷ To this effect Paul VI writes in *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, 1967); “In the design of God every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation (15).....But each man is a member of society. He is part of the whole of mankind” (17). For its part modern Protestantism does the same, although through a diverse range of schools of thought including the Dialectical, the Social Gospel and Christian Realism.

In all these, human beings have been understood to possess both individuality and sociality: in fact for Protestant ethics, without these two dimensions, the human person cannot be fully comprehended at all.²⁸ In short then, from a Christian perspective, both Catholic and Protestant thought serve as a necessary corrective upon the dangerously inadequate understanding of the human person offered by current cultural and economic orthodoxies, as they clearly fail to understand what makes the human person *really* human.

The common good helps us measure the health of our society through a deeper understanding of the meaning of equality.

As explained earlier, in promoting tolerance to the pinnacle of its ethical hierarchy, our current cultural and economic model has weakened serious ethical discussion, through its trivialization of the term equality to mean no more than an “equal respect for the personal choices made by others”. This may all be well and good in a world made up of relatively isolated individuals whose highest calling is to do no more than put up with each other; however the common good invites us to do much more. In fact central to this invitation of living together “commonly” is a deeper understanding of the meaning of equality itself; one that debunks the current trivialized understanding and returns us quite properly to the fold of social justice. In this connection Christian thought usually and not unsurprisingly begins with the idea of human equality before God. H. Richard Niebuhr, the North American Reformed theologian put it like this:

The idea of equality which stems from faith in the creator and judge of all men...affirms that all men have immediate worth to God...whatever be their worth or lack of worth to each other and to society.²⁹

It is this absolute equality before God that serves as the foundation of and context for all other equalities, including the moral and the relational. For its part moral equality refers to two things; firstly the inherent value of the human person that should never be undone by unjust structural arrangements wrongly promoted by social and economic policy; but secondly our equal propensity toward evil; that is our shared limitations, which in turn implies the need to work against concentrations of power that tempt people to act unjustly, simply because they can.

Finally relational equality refers to our responsibility each for the other, our responsibility for fellow citizens. In a nutshell then Niebuhr’s thought summed up via our absolute, moral and relational equalities, helps us to re-found our understanding of equality, altogether freeing it from contemporary trivialization, enabling it to become once again a substantive value for serious cultural and socio-economic application. To use Niebuhr’s own terminology; our equality before God must serve as a “forethought” and “co-thought”, not just an after-thought in the construction and development of the socio-economic order.

The common good serves as an aid in the shaping of socio-economic policy and practice through firstly the promotion of solidarity in the interest of justice, and secondly the provision of a particular understanding of how justice should be understood and applied.

While equality is a central consideration in any discussion of the common good, so is solidarity. For Christians solidarity is closely related to the old word charity, which in Scripture is one of the distinguishing marks of the disciples; indeed John Paul II explicitly relates the two in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern, 1987). That said perhaps John Rawls has a point when he argues that a public philosophy cannot be built upon the expectation that such high levels of virtue will be uniformly found among a nation’s citizens. Indeed Aristotle said as much when he coined the phrase “birds of a feather flock together”. Through this dictum he suggested that close friendship can only be found with a limited number of people – those who are like us – citizen with citizen, slave with slave. Accepting this reality to a degree, albeit reluctantly, does not mean that the virtue of solidarity must be written off altogether.³⁰ Indeed despite Aristotle’s caution about the limitation of friendship, he also observed somewhat intrigued that “friendship seems to hold states together”. In

short then for a community to hold together at all there must be a basic level of concord required, a form of friendship needed, even though it may be different in kind and intensity to that which exists between intimates.³¹ To this extent we can speak of a range of forms of solidarity that are appropriate to different sorts of relationship.

Solidarity however is not autonomous: it is important because it is the glue that promotes the common good and it is required because justice demands it. Put another way, the requirements of justice establish a floor below which social solidarity dare not fall without doing serious harm to some of society's members, and so to society as a whole. But justice itself is a complex affair; let us remember that Plato began his work, *The Republic* debating its meaning: a debate that has never really ended. Precisely because of such confusion it is necessary to distinguish the different forms of justice that not only require but advance solidarity in the search for the common good.

The first standard of justice to which policy and practice should attend is *commutative justice*; that which requires reciprocity in terms of exchange between citizens. The point of commutative justice is that there may be equivalence in what is gained and lost on both sides of the exchange. Perhaps the classic example of such justice lies in industrial relations. Here commutative justice demands that employers pay their employees a wage that is equivalent to the value of the work that the employees have done. If there is a failure on the part of the employer to do so, the worker suffers abuse and the employer is responsible for a grave injustice. Indeed without reciprocity the question may be justifiably put as to whether the exchange has been free at all.³² This in large part is the issue that lies behind the new Australian federal industrial relations legislation, where in the name of labour market flexibility a considerable number of employee rights are considered, not without reason, to have been unilaterally axed; and where perhaps more importantly, the new industrial relations mechanism appears to place the employee at a constant disadvantage.

Commutative justice is fundamental but so are two other forms: *contributive* and *distributive* justice. Contributive justice refers to the virtue governing the duties of citizens to promote the common good of their larger society.³³ It requires that citizens be active members of the community, using their capacity and skills not just for their own good, but for the general good of the community as well. This contribution to the general good includes as a bare minimum taxation, but also embraces the provision of the basic material needs of fellow citizens: , employment for those without work, adequate housing, accessible and quality health care as well as education and child care. It may also include overcoming established patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

Distributive justice on the other hand refers to the way in which members of society share in the goods and services that their life together actually produces. In other words it deals with the challenge of the allocation of the common good in a way that maximizes the well being of the community's members. Clearly the problem here is just how to work out the criteria for deciding how the common good should be allocated. Aristotle and Thomas rejected the need for a strict communism in the sense of an arithmetically equal share for all: for example that all incomes be strictly the same. For his part Hollenbach, following Michael Walzer³⁴, argues for a *proportionality* that will be different for different sorts of goods. For instance Nobel prizes should be given only to those who have actually made important contributions to literature, science or peace. In like manner Olympic medals need only be allocated to those who have genuinely excelled in one sport or another.

Turning to the market economy, it is reasonable, contends Hollenbach, that people's remuneration be related to their productivity. Nevertheless a qualification should be underscored at this point; namely that productivity is not easily measurable in all areas of market activity, much less in those areas related to organizations of the third sector – those that are neither governmental nor strictly market oriented – such as church or secular administered agencies working in areas of welfare and social justice itself.

Finally when it comes to health care, Hollenbach quite rightly argues that the distribution of goods should be decided on the basis of need alone; those who are sick should receive more than those who

are well, and issues of wealth and income should have nothing to do with it. On the face of it then, proportionality appears to be a useful criterion for allocation of the common good in a market economy, but - and this is a crucial pre-condition - only providing that the framework is grounded in the broad principle that minimum and reasonable levels of participation in the life of the community remain for all persons. In this sense the US Catholic bishops put it well:

The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race.³⁵

Conclusion

In responding to Kevin Rudd's Address to the Centre for Independent Studies, I have sought to do two things: affirm the broad directions of Rudd's argument *against* market fundamentalism and *for* public goods, but equally challenge the adequacy of Rudd's economic paradigm. In essence I have tried to move the debate from the primarily economic to the primarily cultural; pointing out that the challenge stems above all from contemporary culture, of which economic orthodoxy is but a part.

In re-framing the parameters of debate in this way, the gravity of the challenge to the common good is better appreciated. What perhaps is surprising in the argument is that the enemy is not so much "dry economics" alone but the solid liberal value of tolerance, which in a potent mix with "dry individualism" has conspired to diminish the social enterprise from living our common reality "commonly" or together, to that of simply putting up with each other amidst our difference. Further the vision of a shared common good where equality stands as a substantive value has been excised from the collective imagination leaving a mere remainder, a debased equality; a bare acknowledgement of the equality of each others' private view of things, but little more.

Of course the challenge is great; but it is precisely in this sort of environment that the common good becomes extraordinarily attractive and compelling, holding out the promise of a new equilibrium founded in a well thought through Australian humanism. It is the tradition *of* and the historical memory *behind* the common good, as well as its imaginative power *for* the present and future, that furnishes us with the framework to help reground Australia's social philosophy in the fundamental values of equality, solidarity and justice; values that have been absent from our public life for so long.

In a word, the common good possesses the capacity to re-awaken within us the vision of our genuine togetherness as human beings.

4 January 2007

¹ The Centre refers to "Centre for an Ethical Society".

² Marion Maddox: *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* (Crowns Nest, NSW, Australia, Allen & Unwin, 2005).

³ *Ibid*, p. 288

⁴ David Hollenbach SJ: *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights and Christian Ethics* (Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 2003)

⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1972); *Political Liberalism*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993); "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited", *University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (1997), pp. 765-807

⁶ J. Philip Wogamon: *Christians and the Great Economic Debate* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1977)

⁷ Ignacio Ellacuria: "Historización del bien común y de los derechos humanos en una sociedad dividida", *Escritos filosóficos III* (San Salvador, El Salvador, UCA Editores, 2001), pp. 207-217

⁸ Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, (trans Martin Oswald, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 1094b.

⁹ St Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 92. a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁰ Ignacio Ellacuria: op cit, pp. 209-211

¹¹ David Hollenbach: op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, pp. 5-6

¹² Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises imply his broad and historical understanding of the common good stemming from the sense of his appreciation of the historical nature of both evil and mercy, the two opposing forces in creation. It is to the latter to which we are called to adhere as we experience Jesus and seek to testify to God's greater glory. See the First Week of the Exercises where the emphasis is less upon individualistic sin (despite the way it has often been interpreted) but more the comprehensive nature of sin in history and God's greater historical mercy shown to human beings in and through Jesus Christ. See Jose Ignacio Gonzalez Faus, *La Experiencia Espiritual de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio* (Madrid, Aqui y Ahora, Sal Terrae 7), p. 9

¹³ David Hollenbach: op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, pp. 5-6

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 8

¹⁵ Not surprisingly this deeper dimension is less easy to measure and therefore less suited to current political and economic language where quantification is a preoccupation, perhaps obsession. See Don Watson; *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, (Sydney, Knopf, Random House, 2003). Watson brilliantly analyses the manner in which the English language has become denuded of everything other than managerial-corporate speak that has infected all areas of English. "There have been signs of decay in the language of politics and academia for years, but the direst symptoms are in business; and the curse has spread through the pursuit of business models in places that were never businesses. Universities that once valued and defended culture have swallowed the creed whole. Libraries, galleries and museums, banks and welfare agencies now parrot it. The public sector spouts it as loudly as the private does. It is the language of all levels of government, including the very local. They speak of focusing on the delivery of outputs and matching decisions to strategic initiatives....In this language schools, banks branches and libraries are closed down. In an education curriculum or the mission statement of an international fast food chain, you will hear the same phrases". (p. 13)

¹⁶ Eberhard Bethge: "Bonhoeffer's Theology of Friendship" in *Friendship and Resistance - Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Michigan, WCC publications and William B Eerdmans, 1995)

¹⁷ David Hollenbach, op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, p. 82

¹⁸ My point is that the cultural emphasis on individualism and personal tolerance for the other, having replaced the community driven concept of the common good, has actually created the conditions for an economic philosophy that has no understanding of the shared, let alone the common good.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 201

²⁰ David Hollenbach, op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, p. 9

²¹ The Cronulla riots of December 2005 while easy to exaggerate, nevertheless may well reflect a deeper underlying anger over multi-cultural reality in Sydney.

²² Martin Marty: *The One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good*, (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3 Referred to by David Hollenbach, op cit p. 21.

²³ David Hollenbach, op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, p. 21

²⁴ David Hollenbach, ibid, p. 30

²⁵ Alan Wolfe: "Couch Potato Politics" *New York Times* (Sunday, March 15, 1998) sec4, p. 17. Cited in Hollenbach, ibid, p. 31.

²⁶ The term democracy is constituted in the classical Greek by two terms: *demos* – the people, and *kratein* – to rule. In short democracy involves the rule of the people not the mere consumption by the people.

²⁷ The first stream, the dignity of the individual over capital was underscored at the very genesis of the Catholic Social Tradition through Leo XIII's declaration of the rights of the worker (*Rerum novarum* – *New Things*, 1891), continuing through a range of encyclicals to perhaps most notably one hundred years later, John Paul II's insistence on the priority of labour over capital (*Laborem exercens* – *On Human Work* 1981). The second stream embraces the social nature of the human being and the call to form political society for the common good. While Leo XIII affirmed in this context the right of private property, later teaching has qualified this, placing it within the broader context of the God-given destination of the goods of creation to serve the needs of all. In this connection *Populorum progressio* – *On the Development of Peoples*, Paul VI, 1967) quoting the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II, 1965), affirmed, "All other rights whatsoever, including those of property and of free commerce, are to be subordinated to this principle"

²⁸ Protestant ethics are quite complex, with the three schools mentioned above as central to consideration. The Dialectical School headed by Karl Barth but including others who came to differ from him, was suspicious of preconceived notions of the good, insisting that the ethical is by its nature open, communal and highly practical. Barth himself is best considered a socialist humanist. The Social Gospel movement of the US had enormous clout within the US through the early to mid twentieth century. Central to its message was what was preached by Jesus of Nazareth - the Kingdom of God and the law of love. Christian Realism, again a child of the US was led by Reinhold Niebuhr holding sway in the 1950s to the 1970s. A reaction to the Social Gospel movement, it was suspicious of utopian ideas like the Kingdom of God and sought to take seriously political reality. Predictably,

having rejected the utopian dimension of the Gospel, it fell into a pragmatism that undercut its prophetic radicalism. For Karl Barth's approach to political ethics see George Hunsinger (ed), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1976). For an understanding of the Social Gospel movement and Christian Realism's reaction see Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society – The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995) and Reinhold Niebuhr's passionate condemnation of the Social Gospel movement in his "The Law of Love in Politics and Economics" in Boulton, Kennedy and Verhey (ed) *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B Eerdmans, 1994). For a broad view of each of these schools see James C Livingston, Francis Schussler Fiorenza: *Modern Christian Thought. Vol. II – The Twentieth Century* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 2000)

²⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr; "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy" in William Stacy Johnson (ed), *Theology, History and Culture: Major Unpublished Works of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996), p. 155. See also Douglas A. Hicks: *Inequality and Christian Ethics* which examines Niebuhr's social thought. (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000)

³⁰ Jurgen Moltmann: "Community with Others", in *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London, SCM, 1978), pp.27-36

³¹ Aristotle, op cit, 1155a and 1160a

³² David Hollenbach, op cit, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, p. 193. Leo XIII's *Rerum nivarum* (1891) stated that there is a demand of justice that is "more imperious and more ancient than any bargain". Needless to say the question of wage justice is complex since a just wage raises the question of a just price, not to mention the fact that labour is not nor ever has been a mere commodity, despite current trends. See John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage*, revised and abridged (New York, MacMillan, 1920) esp ch 3 "A Personal Living Wage"

³³ Thomas refers to contributive justice as "general justice".

³⁴ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, Basic Books, 1983)

³⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 77