

Religion and Social Policy in Australia and Neighbouring Countries

Professor Peter Saunders and Dr Minako Sakai

Workshop Report

This workshop was funded by the Academy in conjunction with the strategic research support from three sections of the University of New South Wales (The School of Humanities and Social Sciences, The School of Physical, Mathematical and Environmental Sciences, and The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences). This supplementary funding allowed the convenors to invite a number of overseas participants who provided an important regional (and a broader religious) perspective on the issues discussed.

The workshop was convened by two UNSW academics, Professor Peter Saunders and Dr Minako Sakai, and was held at the Social Research Policy Centre, UNSW on the 24-25 November 2011.

The aim of the workshop was to examine the role of religious non-government organisations (NGOs) in social policy by addressing the following questions:

- What is the relationship between religious organisations and the state in the formulation of social policies in different countries and how has this relationship changed?
- What are the features of the religious and social context which affect the growth of the NGOs and social enterprises more generally?
- What forms of partnership between state and religious groups generate the most efficient delivery of social services?
- How can countries in the region best learn from each other in terms of the role of religion in social services?

This workshop brought together a wide range of social scientists at varied levels of research career (ECR, mid-career and established scholars) to examine the role of religion and religious organisations in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. The participants also included representatives of some of the large religious organisations that provide social services in Australia, who discussed how their organisations are being affected by recent changes in their service provision role, which has expanded under the contracting-out regimes of successive federal governments.

The workshop consisted of four sessions and held over two days and discussed 13 original papers. The workshop program is included at the end of this report.

The workshop was opened by Professor David Lovell, the Head of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. He commented that the topic of the workshop is important and timely and the workshop results were expected to make contributions for both academics and policy makers.

Following these opening remarks, Professor Saunders summarised the origins of this workshop and its main purposes. He explained that the two convenors met in 2010 to discuss possible collaboration on the role of religious organisations and their role in social policy. Sharing research contacts, he and Dr Sakai agreed to propose a workshop with a focus on

the two-way relationship between religion and social policy that would be expansive in its scope of both the varieties of religions covered and the national contexts within which the topic was located – hence the focus in the workshop title on Australia and its neighbouring region.

Session 1, Reviewing the Relationship between Religion and Social Policy, consisted of five papers with a specific focus on Australia. All the papers explored aspects of the relationship between the state and religious organisations in the Australian context, and the implications for, and consequences of, social policy formulations. The first paper by Saunders focused on examining how religious beliefs affect social policy formulation through their impact on support for the values and objectives that social policies embody and seek to achieve. Based on an analysis of recent national survey data, he explored how attitudinal differences related to religious belief and practice, showing that there are significant differences according to whether or not religion is practiced (by attending a religious institution regularly).

The second paper was presented by Gary Bauma from Monash University. Based on recent research conducted among religious groups and comparative work in other countries, Bauma's paper highlighted an intriguing relationship between faith and social policy in Australia. He also showed that religious diversity in Australia has increased and inter-faith contacts have become more frequent. However, a fast growing sector of the Australian population is the people who do not have a religion, and he noted that while the percentage of the population who does not have a religion has been significantly increasing, a high percentage of tax dollars is still channelled into religious NGOs offering social services.

The third paper was presented by Laura Bugg from the University of Sydney, whose paper drew on data from a case study on the refusal of development applications for two minority religious facilities on the rural urban fringe of metropolitan Sydney. Her case studies on a Hindu temple and an Islamic school illustrated how a particular hegemonic Anglo-Australian understanding of 'the character of the local area' contributed to refusals by planning authorities of minority religious facilities, because these applications were seen as threatening to an assumed Anglo-Saxon farming community identity.

The paper by Brian Howe (The University of Melbourne) and Renate Howe (Deakin University) contained an historical overview of the relationship between the state and Australian Christian organisations. The authors argued that while the Australian State has guaranteed religious freedom as in the right to worship without political interference, social services by church and church agencies have come to be increasingly subject to government regulation as they have received government subsidies. As a result, the church and church agencies feel pressured to accept conditions that may conflict with the professed values of the agency. Some of the issues raised were taken up in the following session that involved representatives from some of Australia's leading religious organisations.

The paper by Jacqueline Nelson, Alpha Possamai-Inesedy and Kevin Dunn from the University of Western Sydney examined public submissions to the recent inquiry into Freedom of Religion and Belief in Australia. Despite the fact that freedom religion is guaranteed by the state, in policy making processes, the authors argued that Christian-centric majorityness is

identified with core culture, and consequently has undermined movement towards more inclusive social policy.

The second session was titled Practitioner Perspectives: The Impact of Policy Change on Religious Organisations. The session was designed to seek views from practitioners and also to locate the areas of partnership in research between practitioners and academics. The First speaker, Grant Millard, CEO of Anglicare, Diocese of Sydney mentioned that Anglicare was established in 1856 by the Anglican church to provide social services, but currently two-thirds of their funding derives from various government sources. He stated that increased funding and the quest for additional funding have sometimes compromised the agency's original mission. In addition, their reliance on government funding means that they have to deal with more regulations. The second speaker, Rev. Harry J Herbert, Executive Director of UnitingCare, NSW/ACT raised the point that the organisation has been in quest of appropriate leadership quality. This situation has occurred as the organisation has to have managers who can lead a modern organisation, but such managers do not necessarily have the theological skills required to lead a religious organisation. The third speaker, Fr. Joe Caddy, Executive Director, CatholicCare, Melbourne shared similar views, arguing that his organisation originally started with faith and was motivated by missionary values, but has gradually encountered situations in which they have to compromise with their religious and compassionate values because of the requirements attached to government funding. He argued that his organisation eventually stopped offering social services funded by the government because CatholicCare did not want to take punitive measures against vulnerable people.

The final speaker, Cecep Solehudin from the Dompot Dhuafa Foundation, Australia presented a brief overview of their services in Australia. The Dompot Dhuafa Foundation is a leading Muslim alms collection agency which offers social services for the poor in Indonesia. Their activities in Australia at the moment focus on assisting Indonesian nationals by offering services such as education and burial services. The fourth speaker, Sue King, also from Anglicare, Diocese of Sydney, commented that increasingly the government has imposed regulations which religious NGOs are required to follow. Although the origins of Anglicare are based on a Christian theology, as they have become increasingly reliant on government funding, the organisation often finds it difficult to match their theological basis with the accountability requirements of government regulations. Following these presentations, Professor Ilan Katz, from the SPRC, commented as a Discussant that the practitioners' views demonstrate how the changes in social policy funding and delivery are affecting the ways in which religious organisations function, raising questions about what exactly differentiates them from other service providers.

Session 3, Religious Diversity and Regional Experience, was held on the second day of the workshop. The session had seven papers and its focus was the role of religion and religious organisations in delivering social services in countries in the neighbouring region. The first paper by Minako Sakai, focused on the socio-political contexts affecting the operations of religious organisations delivering social services in Indonesia. The paper highlighted the recent successful fund raising initiatives by Muslim organisations using the concept of religious alms. The

raised funds have been used to assist the poor and the needy in a country where the state capacity to provide social provisions is limited. It was argued that the state sees Muslim organisations as a threat and has recently tightened the regulations so that the State could exert authority over the use of the collected funds.

The second paper was presented by Allan Borowski, who analysed Jewish perspectives on the Welfare State. He examined various Jewish concepts relating to assistance and support for the needy and has concluded that the theological Jewish basis is compatible with the concept of a welfare state. The third paper was written jointly by Alec Thornton (UNSW), Tony Binss (Otago) and Maria Talaitupu Kerslake (National University of Samoa). Their paper highlighted the emergent issue of landlessness in urban Samoa and argued that the expected obligations to make religious contributions to traditional Christian church has further increased the burden for Samoans, and contributed to urban poverty. However, the traditional church has not provided social services and assistance to the poor, and hence they are losing their congregations to new church groups such as the Mormons and the Seventh Adventists. These new church have been offering much needed social services to Samoans and conversion to new church-based Christianity is taking place in Samoa.

The fourth paper was presented by Kung Lap Yan, Chinese University of Hong Kong. His paper drew on data on religious NGOs in Hong Kong to show that different religions have different roles to play in social policy, and that this is subject to both theology and the social and policy context. For example, in Hong Kong Buddhist organisations run 12 per cent of the aged care services as Buddhist theology emphasises respect for the elders. The fifth paper, presented by Samina Yasmeen (UWA), analysed how the state of Pakistan failed to provide social services and hence created political and social space in which Islamist groups have emerged to win political support through their provisions of social services. Through offering effective disaster relief and social services, and clearly distinguishing themselves from a failed state, Islamic organisations are emerging as an alternative political force to the government.

The sixth paper was delivered by Graham Hassall from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Examining the state of welfare in the Pacific, Hassall argued that effective partnerships must be established between the State and social service providers which are mainly church-based organisations. Church and church-based organisations are the main social service providers in the Pacific. However, churches are not free from criticisms as they seem to choose certain topics for advocacy. The paper argued that more research is needed to examine policy formulation processes involving religious NGOs in order to deliver outcomes from social policy in the Pacific.

The final paper in this session was provided by Chandima Daskon from University of Jayawardenepura, Sri Lanka. Her paper has focused on a prominent Buddhist philosophy based Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. The paper highlighted the significance of religious principles in developing effective and pragmatic social policies in Sri Lanka, arguing that local cultural and religious values as shown in Sarvodaya are keys to solve social problems such as poverty and gender inequality in Sri Lanka.

Session Four, titled Pulling the Threads Together was led by two Invited Discussants, Professors Sheila Shaver (UWS/UNSW) and John

Warhurst (ANU). Shaver commented that the papers presented in this workshop had highlighted the importance of examining the meaning of action in the context of 'services'. Religion is obviously one important source of values and meanings, but not the only one. Warhurst shared similar views with Shaver, cautioning that it should not be assumed automatically that religious NGOs are different from secular organisations. They are based on a theological basis and inspired by missionary values, but how they interact with the state and contribute to social policies form an important topic for both scholars and practitioners.

Outcomes

In summary, through this workshop, we have achieved the following:

1. The workshop provided a fruitful discussion for religious NGOs and academics to discuss and debate the role of religious organisations in social policy. The convenors of the workshop in partnership with the contributors have agreed to explore a possibility of an ARC Linkage Grant to further explore aspects of the relationship between the state and religious organisations in social policy formulation in specific contexts.
2. The Workshop Convenors have made an agreement with the Editor of *The Australian Journal of Social Issues* to publish a Special Issue of the journal that will include the papers presented by the workshop that will (subject to referring) appear in 2013.

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