

Responding to human need as Christians: a fresh approach

'Human Need and Christian Care' conference
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1. Two oddities

I'd like to begin by observing something rather odd about this talk, and something rather odd about this conference. It *is* odd to discuss 'Human Need and Christian Care'—for what really needs thinking about? Consider Jesus' parable of the thinky priest:

Luke 10:30-31: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.'

I am a thinky priest (of sorts) and I relate to this man who crossed on the other side of the road. There must have been reasons for this action. The best guess has to do with the purity laws of the time—priests weren't meant to risk touching death. But who knows? Censure him though we may, we all have our reasons for such acts.

My friend was nearly crushed by a brick wall the other day. He was riding his pushbike, and as he reached out to steady himself against the brick wall it turned out to be old and unstable, and it thundered down upon his chest. He lay there stunned for about fifteen minutes, in full view of cars driving by, and people walking on the other side of the road. Eventually he came-to and called his wife, who took him to hospital. Presumably the people had their reasons for staying in their cars and for walking on by.

Jesus address is actually addressing one such person—a thinky lawyer:

Luke 10:25-29 [A] lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.' But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'

We may censure this lawyer—but I feel for the thinky lawyer, who is only doing as lawyers do and trying to navigate the law that is over him—in this case Leviticus 19:18, which told him to ‘love his neighbour as himself’. I’d wager you would ask the same question: there are so many people! What are the limits to my care? Who is my neighbour?

But there is a certain point where thinkyness becomes offensive, as when Barry lay there with dozens of kilos of bricks on his chest. At some point thinkyness crosses over into offensiveness, and the lawyer crossed that line and something flared in Jesus.

That’s why we don’t really call it ‘the parable of the thinky priest’ because it is not about the likes of me, or that lawyer. It is about someone who did what needed to be done, in that very detailed list that Jesus gives:

Luke 10:33-37: ‘But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.” Which of these [...] do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’

Going across, washing wounds in oil and wine, binding them, carrying the man to safety, caring for him, paying for ongoing care. It is the story of the man who deals with what is in front of his eyeballs, because *the best way to respond to human need is to meet it when you see it*, says Jesus, who almost seems to say ‘I am done with all the thinkyness – you go and do likewise – just copy this man because your thinking is failing you.’

This stunningly simple story of Jesus, with its capacity to cut through the shameful ways that we can think our way past the person next to us, has indelibly etched into Western culture (with several similar themes in Scripture) a concern for the person next to us.

Hence the oddness of this conference: we are open to the criticism that talking about human need is not the same as meeting it, and our time together could almost seem a little offensive. I would be very sympathetic to anyone sitting here or hearing about our conference and saying ‘come on, let’s just do it. Let’s help people.’ In a sense they would only be saying what Jesus said to that lawyer—indeed I’d go so far as to wonder whether our imagined critic *has* his or her impatience, precisely *because* Jesus Christ has put among this culture the obviousness of helping human need.

Which leads in turn to the something rather odd about my title. For I've promised 'a 'fresh' approach' to the Christian response to human need. But what kind of arrogance is this? Christians have been responding to human need in response to *Jesus'* fresh approach for centuries, and we may say in hindsight that their responses are generally uncomplicated and instinctive replies to whatever evils were being lived out in front of their eyeballs. So 'fresh' as compared to what? What could possibly be stale about this longstanding Christian habit of responding to human need?

It is not so much that I have anything particularly revolutionary to say. I am thinking of the local community of evangelical Christians whom I love and to whom I owe a great deal, but who may have become stuck in a rut on the matter of human need. And sadly, it is a thinky mental rut. Whenever this Christian community tries to think about Christian care and human need, there *is* an approach to the topic they will recognise and generally use. Today I want to suggest that it is stale approach, and that we need to give it a kiss and put it to bed. It may need to be reawakened in future, it may have its uses in future, but we don't need it for the moment.

2. 'Gospel and social action'

I can go to our cupboard at the Social Issues Executive and at least find seven or eight papers written by Anglican evangelicals over the last twenty years on the topic of 'Gospel and social action'. These papers are the tip of an iceberg, a decades-long analytical debate about the complexities of being the church. This debate in my view represents a threefold search:

- a search for precision on what we mean by 'the gospel';
- a search for the relationship between this gospel and the task of human care; and
- a search for instructions on how to live: how and when to preach, and how and when to care.

This debate tends to pop up whenever one of these three searches is underway. What can we say about those three searches?

- There will always be those (like me) who think that wrath and hell are real states to be avoided, with forgiveness and heaven on offer to those who accept the gospel of Jesus; and there will always be those who disagree.
- There will always be thinky types who puzzle over the connections between this eternal gospel that is in some ways about what is unseen, and the very real-world problems that we do now see.
- There will always be those who lead evangelical churches who have to puzzle over operational judgments about where our finite energies, money and resources are best spent;

Unfortunately each search has become inextricably entangled with the others, so that a simple discussion about where to spend our energies quickly becomes the more explosive question about whether heaven and hell still matter. Put any two or more of us in a room, light the fuse on one of these three searches, and within seconds a ‘gospel and social action debate’ will ensue.

Yet the odd thing is that at least in this part of the world, the discussion has been settled. Here is a good statement of its conclusion:

[W]ho would deny that we have neglected our duties. It is right that we should be called again and again to care. But when that obligation is given the theological undergirding that belongs properly to the task of evangelism, when the evangelistic task is no longer seen as unique in importance, when evangelistic responsibility is taken for granted, and our neglect of social action causes deeper remorse than our neglect of evangelism, then the cart has got before the horse, and is trying to grow legs.¹

The community of Christians from which I come has settled this matter, and seeks both to care and to proclaim; yet even so, this ‘gospel and social action’ debate has primed many of us to be the thinky priest in Jesus’ story. When we see or hear of a need, our minds lurch into this debate rather than to what is in front of our eyeballs. Meanwhile there are those who have simply grown impatient of that, and are getting on with caring without us. There are two other respects in which this discussion is a little unhelpful.

Firstly, it blinds us to the NT’s apparent ‘seamlessness’ between a Christian’s faith-in-Christ and their life-in-the-world. When I read the each of those seven or eight papers in my cupboard, I find an kind of dualism at work in them which just doesn’t seem to be apparent in the pages of the Bible.

Secondly, for all its precision on ‘the gospel’, there is in this discussion a serious lack of specification of what we mean by ‘society’ and ‘social’. Therefore the main reason I think this debate needs to be retired from the field is because it robs us of the opportunity to help ourselves and our community think through what we mean by that self-descriptive word, ‘society’. In the absence of any clarity on this concept, any attempts to consider ‘social action’ or whatever, can’t find any real traction.

My ‘fresh approach’ is not really all that new. I propose simply to introduce some recent thought about society and human need. I’m going to borrow from a recent book by the English theologian Oliver O’Donovan,² and I’ll compare and contrast his thought to some recent secular thinkers in the area of human need.

¹ John Woodhouse, “Evangelism and Social Responsibility,” in *Christians in Society*, ed. B.G. Webb (Lancaster, 1988), 20

² Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 45-49. All the quotations of O’Donovan that follow are from this work.

3. Thresholds of need

What do we mean by human need? It was obvious enough for the Samaritan. A man was dying.

At the risk of sounding a little offensive again, we should pause to ponder what makes it that dying people exert some kind of call upon us. The simple answer is that the dying have a call upon us because we are aware that human lives have a fitness to exist that is unique and irreplaceable. This irreplaceability, Christians point out, derives from God's imprint of his own very self, 'his own image', upon every human being. Even unbelief in God cannot suffice to eradicate this truth about every human, therefore human communities regularly find themselves rallying to save the dying.

There is also a hint in this about the basic givenness of our social nature, an aspect of human life that humans don't invent or construct, but simply receive and live. Again, Christians point to the image of God in this: that the human community is one made in the image of him who is himself a trinitarian community—three persons, Father, Son and Spirit who enjoy a community of perfect steadfast love. We cannot alienate ourselves from this truth about our social selves anymore than we can alienate ourselves from the truth about ourselves as oxygen-breathers.

Hence we find that the threshold of death is a place where we treat each other equally. We feel the call of the dying *because* we are social; we feel the *urgency* of that call because the dying one is irreplaceable and equally precious as our own precious selves.

Jesus' abruptness to that lawyer is designed to arouse what we would call his 'humanity' in this sense—to cut through the absurd notion that the call of the neighbour upon us has somehow to be legally argued as if it is a positivist human construction. The call of the neighbour, most obviously on the threshold of death, is *an elemental given* that only the most corrupted human perversity begins to fail to see.

What do we mean by human need? At very least, then, we mean that condition that must be met to rescue someone from the threshold of death, a threshold where we may unapologetically refer to an *equality* among humans.

But – the human need in modern Australia that we most need to talk about, does *not* generally refer to the threshold of death. We inherit a common-wealth of longstanding infrastructure designed to meet that need. Emergency services, hospitals and medical training reflect our ongoing commitment to solve that need.

Of course this excellent situation is often not the case in other parts of the world, where human need often arises from total depoliticization and social devastation, and the threshold of death hovers near:

Let us imagine a society confronting a serious problem of refugees, who have lost their homes and their possessions in a disaster or a war, and are sitting in large numbers in camps. The first call they make, of course, given the predictable threats from starvation and disease, will be for a program of food, shelter, and medicine. That is their claim to equal treatment on the threshold of death. (p. 49)

But modern Australia is not depoliticised in this way. The problem of ongoing human need does not confront us as a threshold of death. When we speak of 'poverty' today, almost always we no longer now mean that someone is so poor that they are about to die. We sense now some new lack, some new kind of need that tugs at us.

But specifying *what this need is*, and *what should be done about it* is rather more subjective and always the topic of some argument. In order to begin that task, let us return to Oliver O'Donovan's example of the camps to outline what is in play once the threat of death has passed. The threat of death passes when there is food, health and shelter. What next? Do we walk away from that camp, thinking our task is done? Of course not; the task that remains is to assist those people *to begin to establish a workable society*. For the same social nature that impels us to rescue the dying, is also central to life among the living.

Yet it is notoriously difficult to define society. Evangelical ethicist Michael Hill makes a start when notices that society is not merely a mass of individuals who ignore each other; nor is it some undifferentiated collective; but its basic unit is what he calls *interrelationship*.³ By 'social' and 'society' we refer to that myriad of relationships that constitute human affairs.

But that insight still leaves us at too general a level of abstraction. To notice that society's basic unit is the relationship is helpful against hard individualists like perhaps Margaret Thatcher, or extreme collectivists like perhaps Karl Marx; but once said, it is also fairly obvious and doesn't say very much about how those relationships build to form a society.

Oliver O'Donovan prefers to refer to the myriad of what he calls *communications* between people as constituting society. And by 'communications' he is referring not just to verbal communication, but to the thousand different ways that we pass on and share all the various goods of creation to one another, picking up these goods and adding meaning to them as we share. We do this in markets, in culture, and as all our various institutions deal with people. Indeed the institutions of society are simply different specialist spheres of communication. These spheres penetrate one another to become a complex tapestry of communication that grows and builds over time. 'A society,' says O'Donovan,

³ Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford, N.S.W., Australia: Matthias Media, 2002), 99-120.

‘has no “business”; it exists simply as the *coherence* in which the spheres of communication flourish in relation to each other.’ (p. 253)

In other literature, this thick, rich interwoven tapestry of human communications goes by the name of ‘social capital’, and I was rather taken by a recent publication by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that seeks to map society by reference to its various networks and institutions (fig. 1, p. 8). I appreciate this attempt to show the way all natural bonds of affinity (family, friends, neighbours etc) are sustained by cultural patterns (such as trust, sharing, common purposes etc.), and then guarded by more formal elements (such as political and legal institutions). This is a bold attempt to sum up several elements of our social nature and of our society’s life together.

But one feature of ‘society’ that O’Donovan would add cannot easily be represented in this diagram—and that is the *space* that it inhabits. As he puts it,

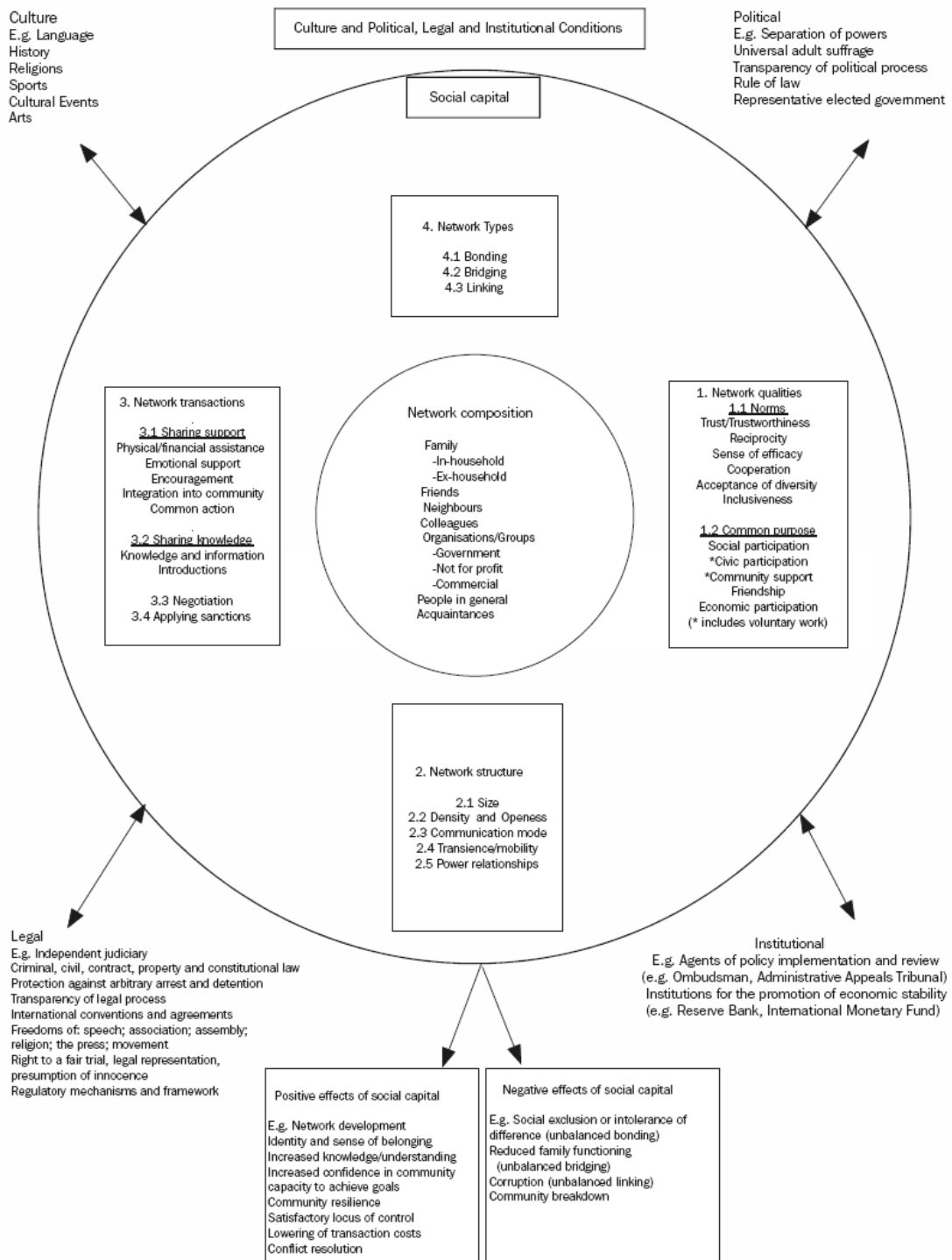
It is a high achievement to define society in terms of place, rather than blood-relationship, language, economic practice, or whatever, and so conceive it as a concrete universal, embracing all the forms of society that arise within a formally defined area of spatial contiguity. (p. 256)

We call social spaces *places*; and ‘places’ alert us, at a most basic level, to take notice of everyone there. We tend to take this for granted—but it *is* a high achievement so to treasure the excellence of every human being that they have a social claim upon us, merely by being near us. It’s not hard to come up with societies where the people who matter are not everyone in the place, and some are outcasts.

Which brings us back to human need. For O’Donovan, once the threat of death has past, ‘We are called on to give equal treatment to human beings, in the second place, when they lack essential resources to participate in social communications as such.’ (p. 45)

When O’Donovan applies this claim in reference to ‘the poor’, he notes that ‘the poor’ have been identified as different things in different ages. But he believes that there is one consistent element in poverty: ‘an insufficient command of material resources to take a part in the communications of society, so that one’s social role is impeded or denied altogether.’ (p. 45) The people in that refugee camp, once the threshold of death has receded, need resettlement in a place, and such basic assistance as will enable them to begin to share the goods of that place together, and so begin to rebuild a society.

FIGURE 1 SOCIAL CAPITAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL, LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS



Source: Measuring Social Capital, an Australian Framework and Indicators, 2004 (cat. no. 1378.0)

Fig. 1: a diagram of the structures that form 'social capital'⁴

⁴ Dennis Trewin, "Aspects of Social Capital: Australia 2006 (Reissue)," (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), vii; online: <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/E4F6E98AA14943F3CA256F7200832F71?Open> (accessed 25/10/2005).

In rich nations, on O'Donovan's view, the problem of human need is to enable people to find their place in an already functioning polity; and we will find what look like global inconsistencies when it comes to assessing human need. O'Donovan uses the interesting example of British farmers:

How elementary social enablement must be, will, of course, be determined by reference to social conditions. British farmers, who would count as wealthy by African standards, were committing suicide in record numbers some years ago because they found nothing left for them to do to stave off disaster. That suggests, at least, a measure of social disablement. (p. 49)

O'Donovan's view is that once the threshold of death has receded, human need then becomes the problem of *social exclusion*. 'As we must respond to [human beings] on the threshold of death, so we must respond to them on the threshold of social exclusion.' (p. 49)

But this term, *social exclusion*, has become very loaded, since it is largely replacing the term 'poverty' both here and in the UK. Indeed the Blair Government has set up a 'Social Exclusion Unit' in the Cabinet Office. Yet at the same time, one of the most vocal opponents of this style of thinking about human need can be found in north Sydney (and I'll quote from him later). I will now try to introduce 'social exclusion' at a general level.

After mentioning the British farmers, O'Donovan comments that 'Financial indicators alone cannot tell us whether people have the necessary minimum; only the human economic reality of people finding, or being unable to find, the opportunity to work can do so.' (p. 49)

Here in a nutshell is the nub of the social exclusion account of human need. We simply don't say enough about human need if we only measure income levels. Social exclusion theorists have a great deal more to say here, which I will touch on later. But O'Donovan is not in the first instance taking his lead from modern social exclusion theory. Rather he begins with the ancient OT biblical law. He's not the kind of thinker who argues that this law should be reinstated in the here and now; far from it. But he notices several economic themes in this early civil law that seem to suggest the importance of attending to economies in ways that continually offer re-entry to individuals. I have reproduced his argument in full because the tapestry of text he uses deserves our attention:

[W]e may consider the approach of Old Testament legislation to poverty, which is directed to preventing the poor from falling out of their ordinary social capacities through the economic floor. The Deuteronomic legislators, adapting a law-code of rural provenance to a nascent money-economy with an element of international finance about which they are frankly enthusiastic (15:6), protect against chronic indebtedness by confining interest-loans to dealings with foreign merchants while encouraging Israelites to borrow on pledge. (This extends to all Israelites the protection offered only to the poor in the Law of the Covenant, Exod. 23:25.) An innovatory septennial pledge-release (15:1-6) provides an elementary measure against bankruptcy, presented in the

confidence that the increased prosperity created by a ready money-supply will reduce the level of defaulted debt and enable commercial lenders to absorb the loss (15:4). In addition to these general measures, the poor are further protected by a special casuistry. The weakest class of borrower is protected against the drying-up of credit in a remarkable provision (15:7-11) that confers, in effect, a right of access to short-term lending. Following the Law of the Covenant (Exod. 23:26f), the Deuteronomists require the release of a garment given in pledge for a loan at sundown (24:10-13), thus restricting the very poor to very short-term liabilities. [In] dealings with the poor certain provisions [are observed]: wages must be paid daily (24:14f); a millstone may not be taken in pledge, because it is a means of livelihood, nor a cloak if the borrower is a widow (24:6, 17f.). Certain taboo-like provisions in the source-text concerning gleaning, reaping, and fruit-picking are interpreted as intended for the benefit of the "sojourner, fatherless and widow." These requirements are supported by arguments from the history of Israel in Egypt, which should create sympathy for the poor (24:18, 22), and that the poor man's cry is heard by YHWH (15:9; 24:15), who counts mercy to the poor as righteousness (24:13), and blesses the merciful (24:19).

The famous Levitical law of jubilee (25:8-55), while not primarily concerned with poverty but with establishing a leasehold structure for land-transfers so as to protect the continuity of family landholdings, has, nevertheless, three special provisions to assist the poor: The first requires a public maintenance allowance for the poor, and repeats the prohibition of lending to them on interest (25:35f.). The second prohibits the enslavement of an impoverished Israelite (vv39-46), assigning him the status of a servant hired for a limited period. The third (vv47-55) provides a legal structure for the redemption of an Israelite debt-slave who has ended up in the possession of a foreigner not governed by the previous provision. These provisions have in common with the Deuteronomic ones the aim of retaining the impoverished Israelite within the social world. He is given such status and protection as makes it possible for him to expect to return to his alienated property when the lease runs out at the year of jubilee. Clearly they are responding to disturbing social and economic developments in which large numbers of Israelites are caught up helplessly. Yet they treat of our obligations to the 'poor man' in the singular, an individual member of the community whose poverty is an accident that has befallen him and who is in need of assistance and restoration.⁵

In the last sentence, O'Donovan distances himself from any conception of 'the poor' as a discrete class. He believes this biblical material doesn't encourage that more modern style of Marxist or socialist categorisation of 'the poor' as a powerful group. They are hapless individuals and families, who simply seek to join us. Perhaps by now it is worth comparing how social exclusion has recently been expressed elsewhere.

I will now make two general observations about social exclusion theory.

⁵ O'Donovan, *WoJ*, 46-47. A similar kind of investigation can be found in Michael Schluter, "Welfare," in Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 175-95, although with some different results and recommendations.

4. Social exclusion theory and competing discourses

I want first to describe how, according to Jonathan Bradshaw, social exclusion theory is situated in relation to some other discourses. Bradshaw recently summarised the way social exclusion discourse has developed in Europe and the UK. He points to three phases⁶ in social exclusion discourse:

- **MUD** or *moral underclass discourse* of the Tory party, ‘where the individual’s behaviour was blamed for their plight and education ... and a framework that enhanced incentives and responsibilities was the solution.’
- **RED** – the *redistributive egalitarian discourse* of the ‘old left’ ‘where social exclusion was the result of structural factors and policies involving redistributive taxation and public expenditure the solution.’
- **SID** – the *social integrationist discourse* of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’, ‘where rights as well as responsibilities were given equal sway but the solution to social exclusion was employment and education.’ The active declaration of this discourse was ‘work for those who can, welfare for those who can’t’ and ‘[a] hand up not hand outs’.⁷

In response, I suggest something resembling each of these ‘discourses’ can be found in the Bible, and I believe they can be found there in complementarity rather than in tension.

I should add that the moments where the Bible spotlights an individual’s behaviour are radically moderated by the biblical emphasis upon the grace of God. The closest thing to MUD in the Bible is the language of folly, such as the lazy fool who sleeps his way to poverty (Proverbs 6:9-11). But the God of the Bible forgives folly and rescues fools; and so this discourse differs from the so-called MUD because in biblical thought, the offer of assisted reintegration to society is even open to fools. God’s world is abundant enough to tolerate freeloaders, even though they should repent.

Also, we could construe O’Donovan’s account as an interesting mixture of SID and RED. O’Donovan is a RED to the extent that he thinks the concept of ‘equality’ is a non-negotiable form of evaluation, and ‘redistribution’ a non-negotiable response, when dealing with those on the threshold of death and then on the threshold of society.

But very interestingly, he holds that the concept of ‘equality’, hence of redistribution, only has limited uses at those thresholds, and ceases to be useful once those thresholds have been met:

⁶ J. Bradshaw, “How Has The Notion of Social Exclusion Developed In The European Discourse,” in *Australian Social Policy Conference* (2003), 3; online: <http://www.sprc1.sprc.unsw.edu.au/aspc2003/abstract.asp?PaperID=57> (accessed 24/05/2007).

⁷ A 2004 Australian senate report was also titled ‘A hand up not a hand out’, although one opponent [Peter Saunders, CIS] has effectively argued that it represents RED not SID.

Equality of treatment never guarantees equality of outcome. 'Outcome,' indeed, is a chimerical notion. ... New communications will always ensue to produce new inequalities.

Measures of equal distribution, then, can achieve only momentary states of equality, and are not a universal response to poverty. They may or may not be a sensible strategy for dealing with it in any given circumstance. (pp. 47-48)

In O'Donovan's view, once people have been pulled back over the threshold of death and then of social exclusion, new considerations intervene: we begin to treat people according to what he calls 'attributive justice'—that is, the justice that accords to people whatever is fitting in view of their contribution to society.

This insight, where 'not all justice can or should be thematized under the head of equality' (p. 49) can help to break an impasse in some of the recent writing on poverty in Australia. Social exclusion theorists tend to appeal to 'equality' as their warrant for expanding government welfare, while their opponents resent the socialist and redistributivist overtones of this program. I think O'Donovan's insight could help arbitrate between these warring parties (compare Fig. 2, p. 15).

Perhaps then renewed attention to the Bible will help to show the way the MUDs, the SIDs and the REDs all have a kernel of truth to their argument. The best response to human need will take them all into account.

5. Social exclusion theory and the complexity of need

The second point I would like to observe about social exclusion theory pertains to its interest in noticing all the various ways in which people can find themselves split off from the communications of society. According to Bradshaw, 'The Social Exclusion Unit thinks that there is merit in not being too precise about what they focus on'.⁸ Hence 'social exclusion' and that which causes it are not easy to define. One researcher describes the theory as follows:

Social exclusion refers to the many ways in which members of our society find themselves excluded from fully participating in its processes and enjoying its benefits. It recognises that disadvantage runs broader than conventional measures of poverty. Not all of those who are poor are socially excluded. Moreover, a lack of economic resources is just one of the conditions that can lead to social exclusion. Others are:

- joblessness of insecure employment
- geographic isolation
- lack of access to transport
- homelessness or sub-standard housing
- vulnerability to crime
- poor education

⁸ Bradshaw, "How Has The Notion of Social Exclusion Developed In The European Discourse," 20.

- inability to communicate in English
- inadequate family support
- limited social networks
- absence of good role models
- lack of access to reasonably priced telephone services
- poor health
- physical or intellectual disabilities⁹

But for Peter Saunders of the Centre of Independent Studies, ‘social exclusion’ is too ‘highly elastic’ and ‘conceptually chaotic’ a concept to be of any use. In a typically entertaining *reductio ad absurdum*, Saunders suggests that

... the only person in the UK who could not be defined as ‘socially excluded’ is Prince Philip (the Queen qualifies on two counts, for she is old and she is female, and Princess Diana would have been eligible several times over as a female lone parent with mental health problems). In fact, on some definitions, even Prince Philip gets to be socially excluded too.¹⁰

‘Social exclusion’ may need further work to become a useful organising theme for thinking about human need; and Saunders has other objections that may be worth considering. But even so, Christian thought suggests to me two responses to attacks such as Saunders.

First, the concept of social exclusion has the distinct advantage of causing us to notice whatever is in front of our eyeballs. To view human need in this social way is to become like the Samaritan, able to recognise what is in front him—and this will always vary from society to society, from time to time and from place to place. Anglican researchers, using this approach, continue to find needs right in front of their eyeballs.

Second, whether or not this category for human need is a conceptually neat, whether or not it is elastic, we begin to find that human need is complex because society is complex. It really doesn’t matter if we suddenly find that the Queen and Prince Philip are ‘socially excluded’. Of course we might not extend state welfare support to them; we might not try to find some public policy to help them. But we might still be forced to concede that even the most unlikely people are suffering in what is ultimately a fractured, complex society.

And this realisation, that in a fractured society built of complex communications, human need can peek through in all sorts of unexpected ways, places Christian ministry and particularly evangelical Christian ministry squarely at the heart of the analysis of society and the needs of the people within it.

⁹ Andrew Leigh, “Tackling Social Exclusion,” in *For the People: Reclaiming Our Government: Labor Essays 2001* eds Denis Glover and Glen Patmore (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2001), 129.

¹⁰ Peter Saunders and Kayoko Tsumori, “Poor Concepts: ‘Social Exclusion’, Poverty and the Politics of Guilt,” *Policy* 18 no. 2 (2002), 35; online: <http://www.cis.org.au/policy/winter02/polwin02-6.htm> (accessed 25/05/2007).

6. *The gospel's true inclusion*

For Christian thought is in the business of explaining to a fractured world that all its human needs stem ultimately from the fracturing of humanity's relationship with God, which in turn splinters us off from each other. We are 'socially excluded' from the Godhead, and from monarchs on down, we then proceed to turn against each other. If social exclusion theory is too broad and sprawling it is only because it is noticing what is in front of its eyeballs: that we are built for community, yet tragically, we are not up to community.

And into this sadness, evangelical Christian ministry points to the God who reconciles—reconciling humanity to himself, and then reconciling people to their communities, and so ultimately becoming the God who rebuilds communities.

My friend could lie under kilos of bricks for fifteen minutes. What Christianity once etched into our society is always still needed, and Christian ministry is continually in the business of showing the world the social nature that is intrinsic to who we are, but which we keep forgetting, reinventing, ignoring, or attempting to remake in our own image.

The early church had a fanciful allegorical interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan. In theological college, we are all taught this old way of reading as the way *not* to read Jesus' parables! In this version, the bleeding man is ourselves—humanity—broken, bruised and dying because of our sin. The Samaritan is Jesus Christ, who gives his all to a broken humanity, to heal and care for us.

Those who came up with this view of the parable may have been a little carried away. But knew that the Creator and Redeemer of our sociality, who created a Samaritan with the capacity to respond, knows no bounds in reconciling people to himself and to each other. It seemed obvious that Jesus told his famous story so forcefully and so passionately, because he himself comes from the heart of the God who seeks to include all of us—every broken person who come to him.



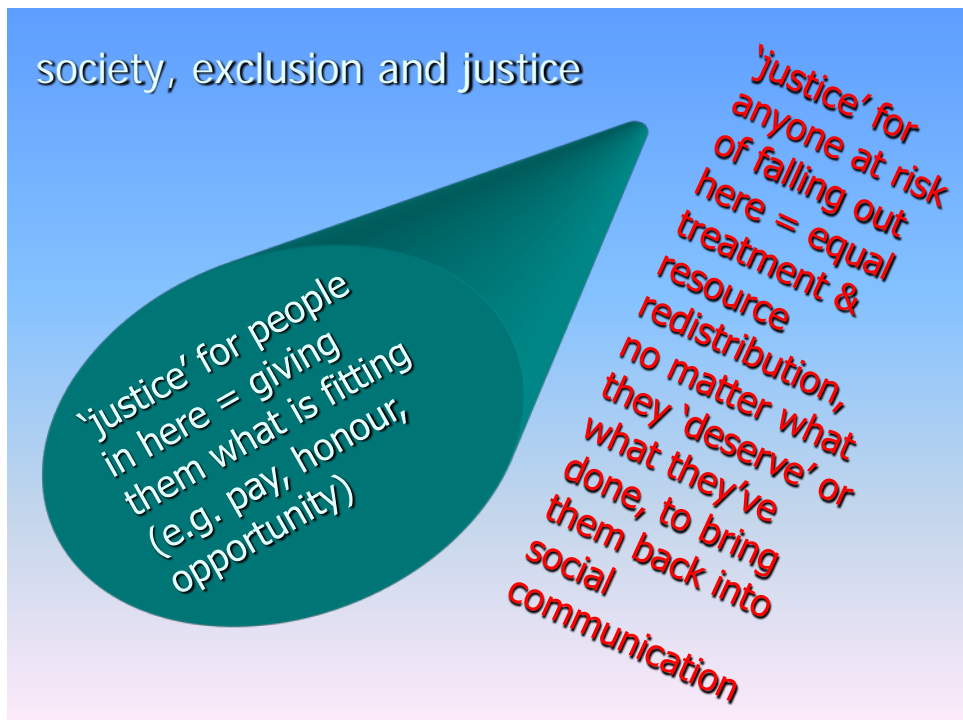


Fig 2: a graphical representation of O'Donovan's account

Within the circle are all the forms of 'communication' that make a society. We participate in less of these as we move toward the 'edge' of society. Once we reach the threshold of death or exclusion, 'justice' takes the form of a strict equality. But 'justice' takes a different form among those who are embedded in society's communications.

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