

Rewriting the Social Contract – the Role of Christian Social Institutions

Dr Christopher Watkin | @DrChrisWatkin | christopherwatkin.com

This guest lecture was delivered at Parliament House, Canberra, on 22 February 2021, at the invitation of the Church Community Restoration Project, an alliance of Christian community organisations committed to partnering government, individuals and communities as they face the challenges of a COVID-19 recovery. It draws on research from the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship research project “Rewriting the Social Contract: Technology, Ecology, Extremism.” For more information about the research project, please see <https://www.monash.edu/arts/languages-literatures-cultures-linguistics/social-contract-research-network>

Thank you for inviting me to take up some of your precious time today to speak about the social contract. My job is to try my very best to make it time well spent.

Perhaps one of the least controversial things anyone can say in 2021 is that we are living in extraordinary times. The pandemic has been called an “unfrozen moment”, when people are unusually open to thinking about radical social change.

In the last 12 months, dignitaries and major organisations have been queuing up to call for a new social contract. We have heard that language from the UN Secretary General, Joe Biden, the World Economic Forum, Black Lives Matter activists, and Extinction Rebellion, among others.

Both Prime Minister Scott Morrison¹ and leader of the opposition Anthony Albanese² have used social contract language in recent months, and liberal MP Tim Wilson published a book in 2020 with the title *The New Social Contract: Renewing the Liberal Vision for Australia*.

Political debate is awash today with attempts to brand a version of the new social contract, under names like the “Green New Deal”, “Build Back Better”, or the “Great Reset”.

And this is not just the elites talking to each other. Mentions of a new social contract on Twitter roughly doubled between 2018 and 2019, and then doubled again from 2019 to 2020.

Given that social contract language is so prominent right now, it’s important to be clear about what we mean when we use it and, specifically for this audience, how Christian social institutions relate to it.

Philosophically speaking, there are a number of different ways at getting at the idea of the social contract. Today, I’m going to look at it through the lens of the common good.

The social contract is premised on an idea of the “common good”, that in some way my good and your good are bound up with each other: we are both better off living together in society than we would be fending for ourselves in the forest. (This is an idea that Anthony Albanese stressed to us this morning). So we give up some of our natural freedom to make life in society possible. The social contract, then, is the implicit agreement of members of a community to value and foster that common good in the way they live and interact.

¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=717879535623450>

²

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2F7675207%22;src1=sm1>

Today I want to ask two questions: What do we really want, when we want a new social contract? And what is the role of Christian social institutions in this renewal of the social contract?

And in order to address those two questions I want to make two points: 1) Renewing the social contract is about the whole society, and 2) Renewing the social contract is about the whole person.

So first...

1. Renewing the social contract is about the whole society.

Many social contract theorists tend to see the contract as the relationship between *two elements* of society: individuals, on the one hand, and the state, on the other.

But this misses out a crucial part of society: what has been called “civil society”, those groups and bodies that are separate from the state, and separate from the corporate sector, like sports clubs, schools, activist groups and of course Christian social institutions and churches. (It’s what Minister Stuart Robert earlier today called the “hands and feet” and, we might add, part of the brain of our society as well).

In September last year the British MP Danny Kruger wrote a report for the UK Conservative government called *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*.³ (The language of “covenant” is sometimes preferred, as PM Scott Morrison suggested when he met us, because it conveys a richer sense of personal investment and responsibility than “contract”).

In the report, he sets out a vision for what he calls “a more local, more human, less bureaucratic, less centralised society” in which there is space outside the control of government and corporations for discussion and cooperation.

It is a plea for the recognition of the importance of civil society in renewing the social contract.

Civil society has been called the “missing middle”, missing from many discussions about renewing the social contract. We tend to move straight from government and law to the individual, jumping over the civil society that mediates between them.

Now, Christian social institutions and churches play an important role in strengthening this “missing middle”.

A 2019 Pew survey found that “people who attend religious services at least monthly often are more likely than ‘nones’ to join other types of (nonreligious) organizations, such as charities and clubs”, and that they are more likely to vote in elections.⁴

On an institutional level, Christian organisations are a major presence in the NGO and charity sector. In 2015 (the most recent statistics I could find for this talk), a Federal Government-commissioned report identified four of Australia’s top five charities as Christian, and concluded that :

Faith-based charities make an enormous and arguably under-recognised contribution to Australia’s social infrastructure and social well-being. They are by far the largest single category of charity in Australia with a third of all charities including ‘Advancement of Religion’ as one of their charitable purposes and with “Religion” nominated as the main activity for a quarter of all charities, more than four times the size of the next largest category of activity.⁵

³ <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/communities-report>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/31/are-religious-people-happier-healthier-our-new-global-study-explores-this-question/>

⁵ <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/faith-based-charities-australia-2013>

I don't quote this so that Christians or members of other religions can brag about it. We all know too well, and grieve over, the harm that Christians and Christian institutions can do in society. I mention it so that Christians realise and maximise the amount of good we *are* in a position to do in society, the contribution we can make to the common good and to strengthening the social contract.

Because Christianity is not the opium of the masses, lulling us to sleep and to quietist inaction. It is the adrenaline of the missing middle, galvanizing and catalysing civil society.

Civil society is where the relationships are

It is in this missing middle, in civil society, that meaningful relationships are forged across boundaries, that common purpose is found among people who would not otherwise associate with other. Civil society is the glue that holds the social contract together.

In a word, it is about relationships.

With a population of 25 million it's impossible for everyone in the country to know the Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition personally. It is valuable that we are here in Parliament meeting them today – there is something important and irreplaceable to us embodied human beings about being face to face, and haven't we all discovered that in lockdown this year! – but not everyone in the country can come here and meet ministers in the flesh. Many people will not even recognise, much less know, their local MP.

But there's a heavy cost to pay for that. Because it is concrete, embodied, face-to-face relationships that cultivate the values of trust, mutuality, engagement, ownership, loyalty that the social contract needs. And those relationships are fostered in civil society.

In *The New Social Contract* Tim Wilson argues that responsibility isn't just about ownership – he's a big fan of home ownership – but about proximity. We shouldn't just believe in small government, he argues, but in big citizens, echoing David Cameron's idea of the "big society". The big society is a thriving civil society characterised by subsidiarity, "decentralisation, accountability, and responsiveness". (A similar idea of the importance and weight of people amid all the structures and programmes of the state was, I think, part of what Anthony Albanese meant this morning when he spoke of "an economy that puts human beings at its heart.")

Whether or not we agree with Wilson's liberalism – and no doubt some in this room will and some won't – his point about civil society and proximity has resonance, I think, for those of all political persuasions.

Christian churches and institutions have some of the most developed networks of proximity and responsiveness in civil society. Danny Kruger writes:

Faith communities have a greater asset than their wealth when it comes to providing support and succour to people in need. Their values, their concern for the spiritual wellbeing of individuals and society, provide a motivation and commitment that often exceeds that of paid professionals. They have deep roots in local communities and are there for the long-term. Indeed they often have big buildings in the heart of communities, including the poorest, and they operate both nationally and at the hyperlocal level. The networks of a faith community, the relationships within a

congregation or faith group, are a source of huge resilience and opportunities for the people they seek to help.⁶

When I was preparing this talk I sent out a tweet to ask for advice on what I should say. A colleague who had seen the tweet later approached me at work and told me of the work done by churches in the Indonesian community in Melbourne during the pandemic, delivering food and providing support when other groups were either unaware or unable to help, because of their deep links in the community.

(This was also a note struck by the International Development Minister Zed Seselja earlier today).

If civil society is missing from our attempts to rewrite the social contract, what we end up with is a vision that relies exclusively on new laws and regulations, and that is gutted of trust, mutuality, engagement and responsibility.

So that was my first point: renewing the social contract is about the whole of society.

But there's a second important consideration, namely that...

2. Renewing the social contract is about the whole person

One dominant understanding of the social contract seeks to exclude religious convictions from public discussion.

The highly influential philosopher John Rawls is single-handedly responsible for reviving social contract theory in the mid-twentieth century. Rawls thought that the only way to find the common good in society was to leave all religious views, included in what he called "comprehensive doctrines", at the door. Religion is an incidental husk that you can thresh away, he thought, leaving behind a pure kernel of public reason.

Religious convictions belong to what Rawls calls the "background culture" that must be kept out of "the public political forum". Only public reason, free of all religious convictions, should be the basis of our social contract. Reason produces consensus, religious conviction produces division. Reason is public, religious conviction is private.

Let's call this the "Rawlsian Reduction", reducing complex comprehensive doctrines to one single mode of expression. It has at least two serious problems.

First, it doesn't let religious groups – or indeed any group that has a settled vision of the good life – take an authentic role in society. They have to deny the reasons for their convictions, pretend that their values are not drawn from their worldview and from biblical doctrine, pretend that their plants grow without soil. But leaving your religious convictions at the door is like unmaking a cake to take out the flour: it is not only impossible, it also ruins the cake. The Rawlsian reduction strangles much of the work that Christian institutions can do for the common good, because serving the common good is not just about putting bread in people's hands, it is also about kindling hope in people's hearts.

The second problem with the Rawlsian reduction is that it allows one position, one comprehensive doctrine, to act as if it isn't one at all. As many commentators have shown, Rawls doesn't realise that he too has a comprehensive doctrine. The principles that he thinks are universal – including fairness and making sure that no-one is too disadvantaged – are just as much a vision of the good as the perspectives

⁶ Kruger, *Levelling Up Our Communities*, 35.

he bars from the debate. One player on the pitch has picked up the referee's whistle and started calling fouls on the other players. And this doesn't make for a strong or healthy social contract at all.

Contrary to Rawls, renewing the social contract should address the whole person, including their comprehensive doctrines, not just those parts of the person that can be reached by secular public reason.

A more holistic way of Christians working for the common good can be summed up under the term "good neighbourliness". The idea of the neighbour emphasises that Christians are not above everyone else in society like patrician benefactors, only ever giving and never receiving, but nor are they below everyone else, locked outside the room of public debate and reduced to shouting through the keyhole. And of course Christian neighbourliness also means loving those whom society would otherwise ostracise and shun. The Good Samaritan parable (that Shayne Neumann MP evoked this morning) is a powerful aspect of a Christian approach to the social contract: we are to love our enemies.

Good neighbourliness takes account of the whole person, and its contribution to renewing and strengthening the social contract can be summed up in Miroslav Volf's term "sharing wisdom".

Part of "sharing wisdom" means sharing the distinctively Christian perspective on life, what Rawls would call the Christian "comprehensive doctrine" and what we might think of as a Christian worldview. This is the overarching framework of creation, fall, redemption and consummation through which a Christian sees the whole of reality and lives all of her life.

Done sensitively, and with a listening ear, this sharing can greatly serve the common good.

It is widely acknowledged today that we are facing what some have called a mental health crisis, others a mental health epidemic.

The causes are certainly complex and multi-faceted, but one aspect that researchers have identified is a feeling of purposelessness or meaninglessness, linked to a lack of belonging, and feelings of isolation and loneliness. A 2019 Yale University Study interviewed individuals who had screened positive for depression, and found that "The problem for participants was a world in which they now faced a declining sense of purpose and incapacity to reach goals".⁸

I'm not going to insult you by suggesting that Christianity can offer a quick and easy fix for this. What I do want to do is draw a link. In a philosophical register, what the Yale study found resonates with what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "immanent frame", where there is nothing beyond our immediate experience of the world, no greater meaning.

In the immanent frame people can suffer from an absence of what Taylor calls "fullness", of being taken outside ourselves into some larger purpose, an experience of life and the world as imbued with meaning, beauty, and connection. And it is the need to satiate this desire for fullness that leads some people down the road of radicalisation (as Assistant Minister to the Attorney-General Sen. Amanda Stoker was vividly arguing earlier today).

This fullness is what the Christian view of reality offers, but also, and crucially, transforms or, to quote theologian Dan Strange, "subversively fulfils", taking it from being merely a therapeutic remedy into a new paradigm of other-focussed existence that overturns what has been called the "therapeutic attitude".

⁸ Desai, M. U., Wertz, F. J., Davidson, L., & Karasz, A. (2019). An investigation of experiences diagnosed as depression in primary care—From the perspective of the diagnosed. *Qualitative Psychology*.

In his book *Making Sense of God*, pastor and author Tim Keller argues that Christianity offers “a meaning that suffering can’t take from you”, “a satisfaction that is not based on circumstances”, “an identity that doesn’t crush you or exclude others”, “a hope that can face anything” and “a justice that does not create new oppressors”. Those are things that strengthen the common good, promote flourishing, and that flow directly from the Christian “comprehensive doctrine”.

So, in the words of the theologian Miroslav Volf: “A vision of human flourishing—and resources to realize it—is the most important contribution of the Christian faith to the common good.”⁹

Another aspect of good neighbourliness is sharing the practical wisdom that flows from this view of the world.

“Wisdom” here has the broad meaning that it covers in the book of Proverbs in the Bible: it begins with the “fear of the Lord” and it leads to making wise decisions in all practical aspects of life.

Whereas the creation-fall-redemption story of the Christian “comprehensive doctrine” is distinctive and unique to Christians, there is more overlap with other traditions when it comes to wisdom. Indeed, some of the book of Proverbs itself is taken from ancient Egyptian sources.

There is wisdom not only for practical things like how to manage finances, get on with other people and not ruin your life, but more fundamental values like the dignity of human beings and the preciousness of life.

As the historian Tom Holland persuasively argues in his recent book *Dominion*, this sort of wisdom has had a profound effect on promoting the common good. It has played an important role in the development of: human rights; the idea of leadership as service (And I was struck by what Tanya Plibersek said this morning: in politics you have to choose: “is it an invitation to power, or an invitation to service?” We would be much less likely to ask that question, I think, if our culture had not been shaped as it has by Christianity); the ethic of humility, as opposed to glory (another theme that came up this morning); the compassionate treatment of the weakest among us, the “widows and orphans” to use the language of the Bible; the very idea of the common good; political pluralism (as Volf argues); and of course the abolition of slavery. Christianity, Holland argues, has made a contribution, often a decisive contribution, to all of these aspects of our society.

The reason these things are now part of the fabric of society is that Christians in the Roman Empire didn’t take a Rawlsian approach. They didn’t simply seek to serve the vision of the good life that was current the Roman empire, but they challenged and ultimately subverted that vision in the name of what almost everyone today would say is a better society than that of ancient Rome.

When individual Christians and Christian institutions share wisdom to help meet the practical needs of society, they do so in a way divorced from their worldview. Graham Tomlin, the Anglican Bishop of Kensington in London, writes:

The Church’s civic engagement is not a simple extension of the social services. The role of the Church is not to fill the gaps left by the welfare state. This is why the identification of the Church’s social and political engagement as primarily an act of witness is so important. We set up food banks, offer debt advice, give homes to the homeless, care for creation and combat childhood poverty not simply because our society needs a bit of help or because government can’t do it on their own. We do these things in the name of Christ as acts of witness to the God of compassion,

⁹ See Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011) 63.

mercy and justice. These are, in the language of the gospel of John, ‘signs’ that point to another reality. Their significance is not found in themselves or in their political meaning but in their capacity to point to the Kingdom of God that is one day coming, and to the God whose Kingdom it is.¹⁰

People sometimes have the view that all the good neighbourliness of Christian institutions, all the work for the common good, is in alleviating people’s physical burdens, improving their material lives.

But to think in that way is to fall back into “the Rawlsian reduction”. Sharing worldview and sharing wisdom sit alongside practical measures in serving the common good, and those measures, while valuable in themselves, are also signs that point to a fullness that itself promotes the common good.

Let me finish with two takeaways from this brief talk. First, Christian institutions have an important role to play in a renewal of the social contract that includes the whole society: not neglecting the missing middle where relationships are made, and where trust, mutuality and engagement are fostered. And secondly, Christian institutions have an important role to play in a renewal of the social contract that addresses the whole person: being good neighbours by sharing both worldview and wisdom.

I would like to finish by quoting an account from a meeting of faith-based leaders gathered in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 in the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, who was killed by a 28-year-old white police officer. The account is written by Michael Ray Matthews from the PICO Network (People Involved in Community Organizing).

As I continued to lead songs and chants in the pouring rain, one of the seminarians grabbed the bullhorn and asked if we could change our chant from ‘show me what democracy looks like’ to ‘show me what theology looks like.’ She was calling her sisters and brothers in the faith to go all in—to be totally immersed in mind, body and spirit, to bring the richness of our faith into the public space.¹¹

What is the role of the Christian social institution in helping to renew the social contract? I am sure there are oceans of wisdom in this room, and I would be very interested to hear other people’s responses. Let me try to add a drop to that ocean:

Part of how we renew the social contract (as well as the legislative and regulatory levers, which aren’t everything but aren’t inconsequential either) is to be good neighbours and foster the common good, by sharing wisdom, so that we can humbly show our society what theology looks like.

¹⁰ <https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/a-theology-of-compassionate-communities/>

¹¹ Quoted in Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, ‘Introduction’, in Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (eds.), *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 1.