

## Faith in Politics

*This is an approved and edited extract from Kevin Rudd's article 'Faith in Politics' published in The Monthly journal in October 2006. His article draws upon the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to examine the practice of the Christian faith in the social and political realms of Australia today.*

The essence of Bonhoeffer's famous work, *Ethics*, is seen in two quotations, the first concerned with the faith of the individual and the second with the role of the church, "Obedience to God's will may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions that can be socially valued", and "The church stands not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village".

These words of Bonhoeffer give us the guiding principles for the interaction of the Christian gospel in the life of the individual, and the life of society.

The Christian church has moved through three distinct phases in its two thousand-year history. For the first 300 years the church was an oppressed minority. From the 4th century until the 19th century, the church was the official religion of the State in the western world. For the past 200 years the church has been confronted by secular humanism and scientific discovery. Today, in the 21st century, the church has become largely marginalised in society. Whatever form its future engagement in society might take, the church must take the side of the marginalised, the vulnerable, and the oppressed, if it is to remain true to its gospel, its origins, and its God.

The church's engagement in society must give power to the powerless, voice to those who have none, and highlight the silences in our public discourse about inequities, injustices, and inhumane treatment of our fellow humans.

The Christian gospel is both a spiritual and a social gospel. It is as much concerned with the decisions I make about my own life as it is with the way I act in society. It is therefore concerned with how I interact with the power of the State. The gospel is a call to social action and to a participation in public debate within an informed Christian ethical framework. Whilst a Christian perspective may not prevail in public debate on social issues, it is a voice, amongst others, which needs to be heard.

The divide in western society today, between the rights of the individual and the coherence of society is seen in the current debate about 'Australian values'. On the individual side of the debate, are the values of liberty, security, and prosperity. On the societal side of the debate are the values of equity, community, and sustainability. The Christian gospel embraces both, the individual and the collective 'other' in society. Christian social ethics provides the balance between self-interest, and the collective interests of society.

Global issues requiring a Christian perspective are climate change, and poverty. Who is giving a voice to the earth and its environmental degradation? Who is giving a voice to the 1.4 billion people who live below the poverty line?

The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals are an important part of the response to these global issues. The failure by many governments, including Australia, to give full effect to these goals represents continued ethical failure. Australia must take the lead on the Millennium Development Goals both in word and deed, and lead by example in dealing with the chronic poverty in our region.

Micah Challenge is a voice speaking into the public and political debate about these critical global issues, and bringing a Christian perspective to social action on behalf of the marginalised, the vulnerable, and the oppressed.