

A Look Back

Social Issues briefing #100, 1/03/2012.

Welcome to briefing #100 for the Social Issues Executive! We've come a long way since the release of our first briefing in March 2004, 'The French headscarf ban and the tragedy of fear' – numbered, oddly enough, #000. (So technically, welcome to our one hundred and first ...)

In this briefing, we take the time to look back at some of our more unusual topics and most popular briefings. We've chosen ten of our favourites. Please click on the link to read the briefing, but we've included a brief summary of each.

We hope you enjoy reading through these earlier briefings on key issues over the past 8 years. And please take some time to browse through our other briefings (all available at www.sie.org.au/briefings).

[How to be discriminating about anti-discrimination](#)

Social Issues Briefing #004, April 2004, Andrew Cameron and Tracy Gordon

Anti-discrimination legislation and the exemptions contained within it have divided public debate for many years. On the face of it, exemptions to anti-discrimination legislation seem sinister: why should some people be allowed to discriminate? But exemptions can make sense, if they reflect differences among us that should be recognised and upheld.

In 2004, a NSW Private Member's Bill sought to change NSW anti-discrimination law to give independent schools and some religious organisations less say over who works for them. This briefing was written to provide a preliminary response to this bill, as well as to consider some of the complex issues surrounding anti-discrimination exemptions. Interestingly, this matter is in the news again as the [Federal government works to consolidate](#) its body of anti-discrimination law, a process that some have used to call for the repeal of all religious exemptions.

(On the semi-related matter of religious vilification law, we also like #044, 'Wise Leadership to an Important Goal'; but note #086, 'The limits of freedom'.)

[Lost in Space](#)

Social Issues Briefing #014, June 2004, Andrew Cameron and Tracy Gordon

On June 8 2004, Venus began a rare four-hour passage across the face of the sun. (It's happening again on June 6 2012!) Half the world watched. There was something spectacularly humbling about the transit, dwarfing the usual human sense of power and control. Nature was dictating the terms of this event. Space is vast and impersonal, yet draws people upward to explore and discover. This briefing considers the *meaning* of space exploration for many people – that exploring seems to be more about us and what it is to be human, than it is about what is being explored and a celebration of God's cosmos. For others, space exploration seems to have become almost a spiritual search: pretending God to be dead, we search for the company of some older, wiser alien. There is a wonder to the unknown that is worth searching out; but Christians know that *earth* is where the real action is. Earth is the good home, given to us by God, so that our quest can be completed on a new earth, under a new heaven, in the enjoyment of God and of another in God.

[Why 'social issues'?](#)

Social Issues Briefing #018, July 2004, Andrew Cameron and Tracy Gordon

Join us to consider the 'theory of social issues'. What is a 'social issue'? Christians seek to live lives of praise under the sovereignty of God, guided by his Word. Yet we are still forgiven sinners who have old habits of thinking, and who have a long way to go to become wise about living in a broken, fallen and sinful world. There are hundreds of matters of everyday life that are hard to think about wisely – business, money, society and politics, sexuality, families and divorce, power and obedience, war, birth and death, animals, ecology, the environment. These areas lead to all sorts of questions which provoke public debate.

These social issues are not unrelated to the gospel, but neither do they embody it. As we think about social issues, we seek responses and solutions, in light of the Christian gospel. This is a difficult task. Read on in this briefing to think more about what new ways forward can be found as we consider various social issues in a complex world.

Weakness and the Olympic Spirit

Social Issues Briefing #023, August 2004, Andrew Cameron and Tracy Gordon

Few Australians would have forgotten what happened in the final of the Women's 2000m Olympic Rowing event in 2004. The eight member Australian crew started well, a gold medal in sight. But with 650 metres before the finish line, Sally Robbins collapsed, later saying she was paralysed with fatigue and anxiety, and could not continue. Australia finished last. What dominated the media over the coming days and months was the vitriolic reaction from some team members, and even other commentators speaking without personal knowledge of the situation. It seemed that if the failure was a physical one, it could be excused; but if it was a 'mental' failure, a defect of her 'will' – well, Sally deserved everything that was given to her.

This way of seeing things typifies the idolisation of the will that is central to modern Western thought. It avoids the knowledge we have in the good news of Jesus: that all of us are weak, powerless and helpless, whether physically, mentally or morally. There can be a dark side to the 'Olympic Spirit' – the attempt to so exalt human power over weakness that no room is left for grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, care or support.

The fate of the ugly duckling – Beauty Part 1, and The fate of the beautiful swan – Beauty Part 2

Social Issues Briefings #41 and #42, May 2005, Tracy Gordon and Andrew Cameron

There is a modern creation myth: that pretty people represent a premium genetic legacy, and so deserve top care. It's a perfect match for a society that imagines one's place in society rests upon what merits one can bring to it. The Christian gospel is the only coherent way to rescue humanity from the darkness of this alternative myth-making, and from our seemingly 'natural' tendency to gravitate towards the beautiful. The good news of the gospel continues as we learn that "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart". Our God, who looks to the 'heart' and who makes people in his image, frees his people to love beyond looks.

But is there a *problem* with beauty? Should beautiful people seek to become plain? Responding rightly to God's good world will mean there is an appropriate place for receiving beauty – *even other people's beauty* – with thanks. And yet – we can't do this. For many people and women in particular, such thanksgiving is an outright absurdity and an impossible dream. The Christian community can become light in a culture lost in obsessional idolatry of beauty. Christian rules of engagement with beauty will be different to what is prevalent elsewhere in the world. These two briefings expand more on these issues, and offer us a new way of thinking about beauty.

Nguyen Tuong Van and punishment by death

Social Issues Briefing #46, October 2005, Andrew Cameron

On Friday December 2, 2005, Nguyen Tuong Van was hung at Changi prison in Singapore for a drug-trafficking offence – a sentence many considered too severe, including many who concede a place for capital punishment.

But Christians exhibit deep division over capital punishment. For some, the need of a life for a life is stitched into the 'justice-fabric' of the universe. For others, the death of Christ is the life taken to requite for the world's horrible evils. How should we decide between these two views? Perhaps, rather than choosing one, we can find a way to make sense of both of them. When they judge, our justice system and governments face this same paradox: that people are precious enough to need serious judgments against criminals, but also precious enough that we have to think carefully about the fate of the criminal. This briefing considers capital punishment in more detail.

On the Twelfth Day of Christmas...

Social Issues Briefing #47, December 2005, Andrew Cameron

Do spare a thought for the loved one of this song. On a true reading of the light-hearted tune, by early January, he or she will own 12 or 13 partridges, 22 turtle doves, 30 French hens, 36 calling birds, 42 laying geese, 42 swimming swans, hundreds of cattle, dozens of people drumming, lording, piping, milking and generally being 'ladies', and 40 gold rings. And this is before even thinking about the space required for that many maids to milk cattle all day and the milk produced, the food required to feed hundreds of people and thousands of animals, the need to separate highly excitable lords and ladies, the inevitable conflicts between

drummers and pipers... well, the list just goes on. And you thought finding space for the new kitchen appliance you received for Christmas was hard!

Is the song a lesson on the hidden dangers of our gift-giving, or a celebration of God's outrageous abundance? Read the briefing for a giggle, and to find out more.

The peak oil society

Social Issues Briefing #65, June 2007, Andrew Cameron

Assume we have passed the point where half the planetary oil has been used. With billions of people now using oil, the remaining half will last nowhere near as long as the 150 years it took to use the first half. The first signs of trouble are inexorably rising oil prices, slowly at first and then accelerating. Food prices follow. As various suppliers are forced out of the market, some lines become harder to get. At first, it's just exotic delicacies, but as staples slowly become available, we begin to worry. Expanding the scenario takes in air and car travel, clothing, tools, food distribution, government paralysis as confusion increases. This scenario is not high on many people's radars, but might become a topic of conversation in the near future.

Is it possible to tell a different story from the complex discussions about technology, biofuels, resource distribution and government policy? Can we tell the world about a theological story that brings hope? Read this briefing to discover this story – about human interdependency and churches that show what is possible when people love each other well.

The Queen and the humanity of marriage

Social Issues Briefing #070, November 2007, Andrew Cameron

In 2007, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip celebrated their Diamond Wedding anniversary. Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth were married in a culture that celebrated and set before them the three purposes of marriage as understood in scripture: steadfast, lifelong companionship and support, the proper home for sexual love and openness to welcoming children. Yet over the past six decades, they have also experienced the dark side of marriage – both in the very public dissolution of the marriages of their children and (we may safely presume) in the privacy of their own marriage. We know that the Bible, whilst celebrating and honouring marriage, is equally frank about the path that all married couples stumble through in a fallen world marred by sin and selfishness. This briefing considers why it is good for society to positively discriminate in favour of marriage, and how communities can also remain in deep fellowship with those who are single, widowed, separated or divorced.

The Work of Ageing

Social Issues Briefing #081, August 2009, Lisa Watts and Andrew Cameron

'When we are old it is too late to learn how to grow old. We must be taught how to live well when we are young if we are to know how to live well when we are old...This will require the church to find ways to avoid isolating the young, the not-so-young and the elderly from one another' (Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, p. 185)

Australia is ageing. There are more older Australians now than ever before, and their numbers are rising. Does this prospect excite you, or does it worry you? It seems to worry our government. The statement 'Australia is ageing' can be a statement open to new and intriguing possibilities. This briefing explores what government responses, as well as what Christians know about the aged, and finally considers how an ageing Australia could have some hidden bonuses.

- **Rebecca Belzer and Andrew Cameron**
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney

Sources/Further Reading:

The Social Issues Executive, www.sie.org.au

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