

## PAPER 5

### CHARLES STRONG AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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I originally proposed to address you on the topic of Charles Strong's views on non-Christian religions expecting to find in the inspirer of the Trust that bears his name and is devoted to that wider ecumenism, a man ahead of his time in this respect. Perhaps he was but the documentation I could find did not bear this out.<sup>1</sup>

There was much more material on Strong and social justice, and I came to greatly admire his energy, persistence and to the end of a long life engagement with the changing problems of Australian society. I also found in his career much to stimulate useful reflections on issues that greatly concern me in my involvement with the social justice activities of one Christian Church, the Roman Catholic. What happens when a prophetic role is adopted that is ahead of and contrary to the mainstream congregation? And who authenticates such prophecy? Is it better to work inside or outside the confines of one's church? When does Christian advocacy which eschews politics become futile moralizing?

One final problem I had were glimpses (no more than that) of a side to Strong that we today would find unpalatable. He made profession of support

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<sup>1</sup> This may have been due to lack of response. In the 1890 report of the Australian Church he laments the poor attendance at his weekly lectures on 'the Science of Religion'. However, he himself lectured that year not on religion in general but on First Century Christianity and his assistant William Addis on Islam –using Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* as a textbook! Apart from this I found only some stereotyped allusions in his sermons to non-Christian religions e.g. to Confucianism as a model of respect for ancestors (undated sermon on 'The Power of Unconscious Influence')

of women's rights<sup>2</sup> but refused to allow them on his church committee. He believed in social change but at least early in his career strongly opposed socialism as materialistic (later to some extent he tried to co-opt the name for his own kind of Christian programme<sup>3</sup>). He was an ecumenist except of course in regard to Catholicism which he always dismissed as idolatry and, it goes without saying, regarding the Free Church Presbyterians. He believed in one great Church of Australia but on his terms. But all this is simply to say that, like all of us, he was a man of his time unable to escape his conditioning and social circumstances.

On the whole I believe his contribution to social justice in Australia was an outstanding one which should be commemorated as the following account will demonstrate.

## **INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

From his arrival in Melbourne as minister of Scots Church in 1875 the Reverend Charles Strong took a leadership role in organizations for social improvement generally of a fairly conservative kind such as the Australian Health Society which focused on improving sanitation in the city and especially the crowded inner suburbs; the Convalescent's Aid Society of which he was president; the Society for the promotion of Morality; and the Society in Aid of Maternity Hospital Patients (a euphemism for unmarried mothers). Whatever the limitations of such intervention from above these

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in his pamphlet *Religion in Poetry*, p.10, where he accuses Tennyson of neglecting women's rights. It would appear, however, that while the charter of the Australian Church prescribes 'representative and elective' church government it did not extend the representation to its female members.

<sup>3</sup> In a 1925 sermon on 'Socialism, Communism and Christianity', in C.R.Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne (Abacada Press) 1971, pp.308-309.

societies were going beyond traditional ‘charity’ to treating the causes of social problems. After his expulsion from Scots Church and the establishment of the Australian Church he continued to be active in founding and leading what we might call social amelioration societies. But in the crisis of the great depression of the 1890s he began to move towards more radical social action.

Unfortunately many of these attempts were failures. Strong was not a good manager, his responsibilities in the church and outside were many and we have to say he was often naive. I think Colin Badger is excessive in his comment that ‘Strong had no sociology, no grasp of the economic or political factors which governed the society he lived in and conditioned its operations.’<sup>4</sup> He had a long association with political reformers such as Alfred Deakin and Mr. Justice Higinbotham. He read widely, and engaged personally with all levels of society. His ideas were often sound; it was the implementation that was faulty.

The classic case is his cooperation with the famous Anglican social reformer, Father Horace Tucker, in the utopian Village Settlements scheme of 1892-3 which was a disastrous failure and almost bankrupted Strong. The concept of providing work for the unemployed was exemplary but to send urban families out into the bush with leaky tents and a few tools and vague promises of government contracts was pure folly. Certainly he was doing something, neither blaming the poor for their improvidence nor simply condemning the excesses of the land-boomers as many of his fellow clergy did. But he was still very attached to individual and non-political Christian effort, the classic charity model.

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<sup>4</sup> Badger, p.114.

Strong seems to have believed at this time that individual moral and spiritual action would suffice to transform society. As he wrote in a sermon on individualism, socialism and Christianity:

We shall find that the true Society can be a Society only of free persons, and that the true personality can be developed only in and through a true Society. Thus do Individualism, Socialism, and Christianity blend in the Ideal of fully-evolved humanity, what the Scriptures call 'the fulness of the stature of the perfect man in Christ.'<sup>5</sup>

This is rhetoric not analysis and Strong remained to the end of his days primarily a preacher rather than a social reformer.

He had a vision but a rather muddled one. Science and religion, capitalism and socialism could all be reconciled in Christianity. Here is another example of this kind of thinking on Strong's part:

What I claim is that every real Christian is consciously or subconsciously socialistic at heart, and that the great work of the Christian Church is to inspire mankind with this gospel ideal of a Kingdom of God which is a Kingdom of humanity founded not on covetousness, not on every man for himself and a 'laissez faire' economic ideal, but on the scientific biological as well as religious foundation that we are members one of another, and stand or fall, progress or degenerate together.'<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless he was not just a talker and continued to be involved in reform activities all his life. He founded the Criminology Society and in 1922 the local branch of the Howard League for penal reform. He was involved in the Association for Mentally Defective Children which brought about the establishment of the first

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<sup>5</sup> In *Christianity Reinterpreted and other Sermons*, Melbourne (George Robertson) 1894. p.92.

<sup>6</sup> 'Socialism, Communism and Christianity' in Badger, p.308.

specialized schools for such children. But the title was significant and in a 1927 address he includes among the major social evils of the time allowing 'the defective to be at large and multiply'.<sup>7</sup>

Strong continued until his death in 1942 to respond to what he saw as the needs of the time. He was a strong supporter of Pastor Doug Nichols' campaign for the rights of Aborigines. His congregation collected money for the relief of victims of the Spanish Civil War and the settlement of Jewish refugees in the late 30s when both causes were unpopular.

## **SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHURCH**

A glance at the 1890 Annual Report of the Australian Church (the only one I have seen) shows the variety of social activities of the church he founded. Strong himself appears in most as the president of the committee and seems to have been the inspiration of them all. It may however be significant that the most successful, the Social Improvement, Friendly Help and Children's Aid Society was run by someone else, Miss Dorothy Langley, whose management is singled out for praise in the attached government inspector's report. Again we might have doubts about their policy of 'rescuing' children from poor and abusive families and sending them to the country to work on farms for board wages. But the inspector commends the cleanliness of their house in Collingwood, the good food and care given to the children in transition while also commenting on the crowded conditions and lack of open space.

The Society provided small weekly grants in income assistance to the elderly and unemployed. And Strong by this time seems to have been aware

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<sup>7</sup> 'Humanity versus Crime and Criminal Law', in Badger, p.321.

of the structural problems that caused such distress. He organized a well attended meeting in the Collingwood to discuss sweated labour in the suburb. His church organized a creche for the children of working women. In addition to the 'visitations of the poor' he notes in the 1890 report his unsuccessful attempt to found a Working Men's Club:

A meeting of several workmen was held a few month's ago. Those present expressed their approval of the scheme, but until the termination of the Strike and the improvement of trade, it was not thought advisable to do anything further.<sup>8</sup>

Strong's statements on social reform often include curious lists combining moralistic, amelioristic and structural reforms. In one quoted by Badger<sup>9</sup> he defines his aims as:

Well-drained streets, where no typhoid devil lurks. Honestly built, well-ventilated houses with bathrooms and a plot of ground where flowers can grow and children play. Good food and proper cookery. Knowledge of the simple laws of health. Rents which do not oppress the poor and drive them to herd in the corners of the city. The restoration of the land by a just and gradual process to the nation. The abolition of taxes on all that is necessary to health and happy human life. The abolition of war. The abolition of intemperance which is the cause of so much poverty and misery. The abolition of poverty. Honesty and fidelity (and so on).

All undoubtedly admirable aims but there is not the slightest reference to means, programmes, priorities or political action.

When he did eventually found his Worker's Association he (or someone else with his approval<sup>10</sup>) wrote for them 'Songs of Hope and Progress' which proclaim:

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<sup>8</sup> The Australian Church, *Report of the Committee of Management for the year ending 30<sup>th</sup>. November, 1890*, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Badger, p.112

There's a good time coming, boys,  
Though the course of evil prosper yet.  
The truth alone is strong  
And albeit she wanders outcast now  
I see around her throng  
Troops of beautiful tall angels,  
To enshield her from all wrong,  
The truth goes marching on!

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!

It is not surprising that the working men of Collingwood in the midst of a depression did not respond to the vision of 'beautiful tall angels' leading them to a just society.

Similarly in a sermon during the 1909 coalminer's strike entitled 'Some religious and Ethical Aspects of Industrial War'<sup>11</sup> he sees Ethical Religion as opposed to Dogmatic Religion as the solution:

If Religion means believing certain dogmas and observing certain rites and sacraments with a view to safety in another world then it need not take any notice of what is going on around us....There will be no strikes in hell or in heaven and it will not matter to you or me much when we come to die whether there have been strikes in our lifetime or not or whether we took any interest in industrial and commercial wars....

But when we cease to think of Religion in this way, and regard it not as dogma, but as a great guiding principle of life whether here or hereafter, as a constraining sense of relation to the Highest and to our fellowmen, as the deepest bond also of human fellowship and the

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<sup>10</sup> Badger who quotes this (*Charles Strong*, p.113) seems to imply that Strong was not the author but given his literary tastes – Tennyson in particular – I am not so sure.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt in Badger, pp.286-289.

basis of universal brotherhood, we cannot ignore any experience of call any common or unclean.<sup>12</sup>

This is again nice rhetoric but it is hard to see that what he variously calls Ethical Religion, Spiritual Religion and Prophetic Religion (always capitalized) is necessarily more socially concerned and activist than what he calls Dogmatic religion (equally capitalized and often set up as a straw man). In practice the ‘dogmatic’ churches were often just as socially committed and usually more effective than the Australian Church.

### **CHARLES STRONG ANTI-WAR ACTIVIST**

There is, however, one area in which my admiration is unqualified and where Strong’s prophetic role is in contrast with the mainstream churches – his views on war. In the sermon already quoted on the 1909 strike he says:

Wars of all kinds, whether between nations or classes are symptoms of moral wrong or decay, of some violation of the ethical and religious law of brotherhood, of selfishness and injustice at the root of Society, or of refusal to adapt ourselves to new conditions and to follow the light of human relationships.<sup>13</sup>

Earlier he had made himself very unpopular by his opposition to the South African (Boer) War arguing, as most historians would today agree, that a war which allegedly started in pursuit of justice became one of ‘conquest and repression’.<sup>14</sup> Consistently he kept to this position in the First World

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<sup>12</sup> Badger, p.287.

<sup>13</sup> Badger, p.289

<sup>14</sup> v. ‘Patriotism’, a published address to the Peace, Humanity and Arbitration Society, 14 March 1902.

War finding himself a strange ally of Doctor Mannix in the anti-conscription campaign. A marked decline in the size and social standing of his congregation occurred around this time and I think it likely that his anti-war opinions rather than his liberal theology or views on society were the cause.

## AN ASSESMENT

Charles Strong fought hard all his life for what he believed but it seems to me there were some fatal flaws in his approach to social justice. In many of his works there is an association of ‘poverty and sin’<sup>15</sup> which suggests an unresolved paternalism as well as an unexamined theology of sin. Similarly the aim of the Australian Church ‘to spiritualize society’<sup>16</sup> was ambiguous and self-defeating in the obdurately secularist society of Australia. His vision of a harmonious society governed by good fellowship was of little use to the unemployed and desperate he was appealing to.<sup>17</sup> And finally his hostility to the institutional church negated much of his effectiveness.<sup>18</sup>

However, I don’t want to end on that note. Strong was a remarkable man who left his mark on Australian society not the least by his struggle for social justice inspired by his peculiar Christian vision. When he died in

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<sup>15</sup> e.g. in a somewhat inappropriate context in *Religion and Poetry* where he accuses Tennyson of being by his class and education raised above ‘the grim battle with poverty and sin’ (p.10)

<sup>16</sup> Strong’s Pastoral Letter in the 1890 Report, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> The aims of his Social Improvement, Friendly Help and Children’s Aid Society as set out in the 1890 Report were ‘to promote good fellowship between all classes, and enlightened Social Opinion, and to improve by every means in its power, social conditions.’ (19)

<sup>18</sup> In a sermon delivered just a month before his death he was still contrasting ‘the true spiritual nature of a faith in Jesus’ with what he apparently regarded as a non-spiritual institutional church (‘Prophetic religion’, 4 January 1942).

February 1942 the congregation in the church which had expelled him sixty years before, Scots Church Melbourne, stood in tribute to him and acknowledged, after noting the ‘disputations’ now ‘dead and buried’:

What we prefer to remember today is his service in another sphere, his long, faithful and consistent witness to the truth and his unremitting labours for the Kingdom of our Lord. Not to many is given to toil on in the cause of Christ till almost a century of years is completed and, at the end, to die in harness.<sup>19</sup>

It is perhaps the man and his actions in the fight for justice for all Australians that will endure when the religious controversies that shaped his life are forgotten.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Badger, p.154.