

MAX CHARLESWORTH AO

1925–2014



PHOTO: COURTESY OF TONY COADY

Emeritus Professor Max Charlesworth, who died on 2 June 2014, at age 88, was an important Australian philosopher and a remarkable man. He was part of the University of Melbourne Philosophy Department during the years that it exerted a profound influence upon the sort of philosophy that was done in Australia, but his own considerable philosophical impact was significantly different in direction and style from that of most of his colleagues in the department. In addition, he was an outstanding contributor to public debate about ethical, social and political issues, being, for instance, one of only two philosophers to have given the ABC Boyer Lectures (the other was John Passmore).

Charlesworth graduated MA from the Melbourne department in 1948 and although he had learned much from Wittgensteinians such as Douglas Gasking and Camo Jackson, he felt there was a certain narrowness in analytic philosophy that he hoped to move beyond. But further academic work was interrupted when he contracted tuberculosis in 1950 and was confined to a sanatorium for two years, suffering damage to a lung in the process. Recovering from the illness, he was awarded a Mannix Travelling Scholarship for

overseas study, the first time this benefaction from the controversial Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne had been given. Max took the unusual path of travelling to the Catholic University of Louvain (or Leuven) in Belgium for postgraduate study instead of following the customary route to Cambridge or Oxford. This was no doubt partly influenced by his Catholic faith and the reputation of Louvain for advanced thought in both theology and contemporary Continental philosophy. Charlesworth gained his PhD from Louvain ('avec la plus grande distinction') in 1955 and was appointed to a lectureship at Auckland University in 1956. His first book, based on his PhD, and entitled *Philosophy and Linguistic Analysis*, was published in 1959 and aimed both to introduce the merits of linguistic philosophy to a European audience and to criticise what he saw as its limitations. In 1959 he was appointed to the Philosophy Department in Melbourne University and stayed there until 1976 when he was appointed Foundation Dean of Humanities at Deakin University. There he created a distinctive Philosophy Department with interests in Psychoanalytic Theory, Continental Philosophy, Religious Studies and Indian Philosophy. He retired from Deakin in 1990.

While at Melbourne University, Charlesworth was responsible for or had a major part in creating a number of teaching innovations that had powerful repercussions elsewhere in Australia. The first was the introduction of a course on Medieval Philosophy, an area that had been largely ignored throughout the country in the curious belief that it was all about theology or religious apologetics. The second was a course in Philosophy of Religion that was the work of several philosophers both religious and non-religious but was introduced to the dismay of a substantial number in the department and indeed of others in the university community. Many believed that the teaching of anything to do with religion was out of place in a secular university, and that the university's statutes, or at least its traditions, expressly prohibited it. The course encountered similar opposition at Professorial Board but was eventually allowed, and it may have helped that the Philosophy Department introduced a rule that if the lecturer in the subject was religious then the tutor(s) should be an unbeliever, and vice versa. When the skies failed to collapse, the rule was gently abandoned. Later, Max

created an interdepartmental programme in Religious Studies that ran successfully for several years. Almost as disturbing was his introduction of a course in Contemporary European Philosophy that worried many of the analytic philosophers, who were a big majority of the department and thought that a dose of Sartre might be almost as damaging to the students' intellectual health as a dose of religion. All three of these subjects subsequently became standard fare in most Australian Philosophy departments, and have, to different degrees, become popular with students. Even those who were ill at ease with the wilder rhetorical flights of Continental philosophers from Heidegger to Sartre and on to Derrida (and beyond!) should be pleased that Max initiated a sober, academic examination of these theorists that stood in striking contrast to the way that their ideas were sometimes deployed in less rigorous fashion in other areas of the humanities. In addition to these subjects in philosophy, on all of which he published books, he also taught and researched bioethics, publishing several books in the area, most notably *Bioethics in a Liberal Society* (Cambridge University Press).

But Charlesworth's influence was not confined to the academy. Max was what is often called 'a public intellectual', a term I dislike, but which betokens a person who has wide intellectual skills and interests and brings them to bear publicly on a range of issues that are of concern to thinking people everywhere in his or her community. As mentioned earlier, he gave the Boyer Lectures in 1989; the topic 'Life, Death, Genes and Ethics' arose from his increased interest in medical ethics and bioethics in the 1980s, an interest that united his philosophical and public concerns and saw him serve from 1987 to 1990 as Chair of the Advisory Committee for the Monash University Centre for Human Bioethics. Further public recognition came in 1990 when he was named an Officer of the Order of Australia.

Charlesworth was a communicating Christian in the Roman Catholic tradition to the end of his life, but in religion as in politics he was a genuine liberal (though never a libertarian), an admirer of John Stuart Mill, and open to the intellectual and spiritual insights of a wide variety of traditions. He also admired John Henry Newman, and the influence of both Newman and Mill were at work in his strong commitment to the pivotal role of conscience in both religion and public life. This emphasis often put him at odds with the official leaders of his church and with various conservative political trends in Australia. The concern for conscience in religion and public life was at work in the role he played in minority Catholic opposition to B. A. Santamaria's famous (or infamous) anti-communist 'Movement' during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Movement was a secretive, Catholic-dominated anti-communist organisation formed to fight communist power in the trade unions. The Movement's influence in the Labor Party created the famous split of 1955 that produced the Democratic Labour Party and kept the Australian Labor Party out of federal office for 17 more years. Charlesworth was concerned about the damaging effects of the Movement and its false understanding of the relation between Church and State, having published widely on the philosophical basis for this relation. His opposition, and that of other Catholics (many involved in the Newman Societies at Melbourne and Sydney Universities in particular), to Santamaria's ideas were principally aired in the journal the *Catholic Worker* with which Charlesworth had been associated since the mid-1950s and of which he was co-editor (with me) in the late 1960s and early '70s.

The journal (which Santamaria had ironically played a significant part in founding) was dedicated to bringing Catholic social teaching to bear upon contemporary realities. It had a recognised position in the church and a wide circulation until it admitted the existence of the Movement, a fact widely denied by Catholic authorities, and criticised its operation. The *Worker* was then denounced by various clergy and its distribution in church porches forbidden, so that its very healthy circulation immediately dropped by around 90 per cent. By the time Charlesworth and I were co-editors (with the considerable unofficial support of the journalist Paul Ormonde) the journal had become more politically and doctrinally radical, publishing articles questioning or rejecting the moral case for the Vietnam War, and some of the social policies of the major political parties, on the one hand, and sometimes critically scrutinising some standard Catholic teachings, such as those on contraception, abortion, and divorce, on the other.

Some of this intellectual activism in the *Catholic Worker* was inspired by developments in Vatican Council II; the Council's more accommodating and open attitudes to other religions and to the non-religious led to Charlesworth's being appointed in 1970 to the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers. But the nervousness of Vatican conservatives (and their numerous followers amongst the Australian bishops) meant that the promising vision of Vatican II was soon dimmed. Charlesworth, however, had begun an important, related initiative as early as 1962 with his founding of the academic journal *Sophia*, which aimed at encouraging broadly encompassing discussion of the philosophy of religion. From its beginning, *Sophia* published articles from distinguished international scholars; its hope was to move beyond philosophers talking to each other and to advance discussion between the disciplines of philosophy and religious studies, as well as other relevant disciplines. In 2012 the journal

published a 50th anniversary commemorative issue dedicated to Charlesworth. For that issue Max wrote an essay entitled ‘Translating Religious Texts’, a wide-ranging discussion of the need for thoroughgoing interpretation not only of sacred written texts, such as the Bible or the Koran, but of all religious traditions and of religious authority and the teachings associated with it. The essay shows that, well into his eighties, his clarity, incisiveness and breadth of learning had not deserted him. His stress upon interpretation shows also that his early exposure to the hermeneutical tradition in Europe had continued its influence, and that his lifelong opposition to fundamentalist attitudes in all spheres of life was stronger than ever. Similar qualities are evident in the booklet he published in 2008, *A Democratic Church: Reforming the Values and Institutions of the Catholic Church*. To quote from the *Sophia* article: ‘Ultimately fundamentalism is animated by a profound distrust or even fear of the human and by an impossible desire that the “divine” should be kept pure and untainted by anything as human as interpretation, especially critical-historical interpretation.’

Max had a dignified, courteous, slightly aristocratic presence and was something of a gentlemanly European in manner, but he was born and spent his early years in Numurkah in country Victoria and conveyed an easy Australian friendliness and open warmth in his personal relations. He was an excellent teacher and was particularly keen to extend higher education to mature age students and others who might find access difficult. At Deakin, he enthusiastically endorsed and developed the university’s aims of pursuing off-campus education with open entry for mature-age students.

He is survived and much missed by his wife Stephanie, children Sara, Hilary, Stephen, Lucy, Bruno, Anna and Esther, their partners, and eleven grandchildren. His death has saddened his many friends in academia and beyond.

TONY COADY FAHA FASSA