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Lecture Series: Mission in Australia: Challenges and Opportunities

4. Being Heard in the Square: Public Theology

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Today I'd like to turn to the role of Christian mission in the public square, that is, in public issues, politics, science, the arts and so on. What is our role and in what way is it part of our mission?

Let me begin with two examples of how the church has engaged constructively in public theology.

This year is the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his famous book on *The Origin of Species*. I've been impressed with the pro-active stance of Christians, putting on conferences on Christianity and evolution and discussing what a challenge it was for the church to respond to Darwinian theory in the nineteenth century. Several times I've heard on radio a Baptist geneticist I know in Melbourne, explaining that Christians can believe in both evolution and a creator God. The discussion has been informed, rational and open.

Compared with the extremes of the evolution debate in the United States, I've been encouraged that a reasoned Christian voice has been heard in the Australian public arena.

The second example is the voice of the churches over a decade on the treatment of asylum seekers. At every point at which government policy became harsher and more fearful of arrivals without legal papers the churches have spoken up consistently in defence of asylum seekers. We have reminded the government of its obligations under the United Nations Human Rights charter. We condemned the heartless turning away of the hundreds of boat people picked up by the Tampa in mercy when their fishing vessel was sinking in international waters near Christmas Island in August 2001. We drew attention to inhumane conditions in detention centres, the separation of children from their families and the inordinate length of time it was taking to process applications. We spoke out against Temporary Protection Visas because they denied access to health, excluded visa holders from work and didn't allow them to leave the country and return. I could go on. The churches were the moral voice of the nation, voicing what many Australian felt.

We linked it to the biblical tradition of welcoming strangers and orphans and widows, but in public we also appealed to basic human justice and mercy, and international legal obligations. This was public theology in action. It was part of the church's mission to be prophetic, that is, to discern what we thought God's Word was to this society at this specific time.

I think it is a difficult time to speak as the church in Australia at the moment. We're not sure in what language to speak. We are aware that we differ on major social issues such as homosexuality and anti-discrimination. Many of us find it safer to retreat to personal evangelism and private religion, concentrating on our relationship to God alone, and ignoring the social and political dimensions of the transformation that the gospel promises and calls us to.

Let's look at some of the contours and possibilities of being heard in the public square.

1. The Gospel Speaks to Society

First, let's remind ourselves that the gospel is good news in all dimensions, not just at the personal level, but with radical implications for relationships at every level, including interpersonal relationships; social, national and international relationships; and our relationship to the environment. It is holistic and multidimensional.

Jürgen Moltmann puts it well. He says that Christian identity is all about longing for and working towards the gracious realm of God, which by its very nature impels us into the public sphere. Theology, he says,

> thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God. It becomes political in the name of the poor and the marginalized in a given society. Remembrance of the crucified Christ makes it critical towards political religions and idolatries. It thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists, and presents its reflections as a reasoned position.[1]

The Uniting Church, it seems to me, has grasped the social and political implications of Christian faith very well, and leads the way among the churches in holding the torch for social engagement at every level. So I don't need to labour this point.

In my context I've been encouraged in recent years to find that there is almost a consensus amongst Evangelicals that the Good News is holistic and integral and that social concern is an important aspect of the church's mission. Whereas thirty years ago I felt I was in a small minority amongst Evangelicals, today it is the conventional wisdom. The exceptions are to be found in conservative Evangelicalism, as expressed in Sydney Anglicanism, and smaller fundamentalist groups, who still insist that mission can be reduced to saving souls from hell.

2. A Public Theology Movement

The term "public theology" has come into use a fair bit in theology in recent decades.[2] David Tracy was an early voice in the 1980s, when he suggested that theology needs to

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[1] Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a secular society: The public relevance of theology* (Minnesota: Fortress, 1999), 1.

[2] A good summary is to be found in Max L Stackhouse, *Globalization and grace* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 77–116.

speak into three "publics"—the church, society and the academy.[3] The call for theology to address society—the wider public—sparked interest in particular.

Since then many have written in the area, including Duncan Forrester and Will Storrar. A journal of public theology was launched two years ago, and the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) is a partner in an international network for public theology, under the leadership of James Haire.[4] I got caught up in it myself when the first national conference of the Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS) was held in Canberra last year in partnership with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) on the theme of "Mission in the Public Square".

What is this movement about? It seeks to tease out how theology is meant to engage at the ideas level. Forrester says,

> Public theology is … a theology, talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth that is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues which are facing people and societies today.[5]

Then he says—and I find this interesting—that because it speaks out of a faith tradition into the public arena, "public theology is thus confessional and evangelical. It has a gospel to share, good news to proclaim."[6] So, public theology is an aspect of mission.

3. Religion in Australian History

It's one thing to do public theology in a society as religious as the United States. It's another to do it in Australia.

In my presentation on the Australian context I alluded to the fact that Christianity got off on the back foot in Australia in its early days as a colony. But it was not for lack of trying.

When a penal colony was set up in Sydney in 1788 the British masters tried to establish a state religion, the Church of England. Even though Christendom had crumbled in most of Europe, it had hung on in Britain.

Christendom is the marriage of church and state in a generally-accepted "Christian society". To this day in England the Archbishop of Canterbury crowns the King or Queen, bishops are given a seat in the House of Lords, and the Prime Minister officially appoints bishops.

In the early days of Australian settlement church attendance was compulsory for all. The government paid stipends to Anglican clergy, granted land for churches and church schools, paid for churches to be built, and required that births, deaths and marriages be

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[3] David Tracy, *The analogical imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 21.
[4] The International Journal of Public Theology, <www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/about/gnpt/journal.htm>.
[5] Duncan Forrester, *Truthful action: Explorations in practical theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 127.
[6] Forrester, *Truthful action*, 127–128.

registered through the Church of England.[7] It lasted until the 1830s, and after another seventy years of squabbling between the churches for government money, the Australian Constitution finally made clear in 1901 that there would be a separation of church and state.[8]

But we were never very religious. Within a few months after the arrival of the First Fleet, despite compulsory church attendance, as few as ten people — out of hundreds — attended the Sunday services led by the chaplain, Rev Richard Johnson.[9] Hostility towards Christianity was obvious in the 1820s as secularist newspaper editors openly ridiculed the clergy, seeing them as gloomy and negative.[10] From then on, the development of distinctively "Australian" culture, along with its gallery of Aussie heroes, has tended to ignore Christianity, except for a few practical Christian heroes such as John Flynn, who pioneered the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

One of the reasons for all this was that the main type of Protestant religion which arrived here in 1788 was a moralistic strand of evangelical Anglicanism. It was unsupported by the men of the Enlightenment who governed the colony.[11] It was ignored by the military, who were notoriously irreligious.[12] It was opposed by the Catholic Irish convicts. And the church had long been alienated from the English working class, from which the rest of the convicts came. The church was seen as part of the oppression of the criminal classes.[13] It was a very bad start for God in post-1788 Australia!

God has remained European for most of the two hundred years since and has been confined mostly to churches. As Catholic historian Patrick O'Farrell has put it, this imported faith was seen as "somber, constricting [and] stifling in a land of colour, fun and freedom".[14]

When the first universities, such as the University of Melbourne, were established, their Enlightenment founders excluded the study of divinity, saying, "We'll stand before the bar of reason, not of superstition or revealed faith, in the life of this university."

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[7] Ross Border, *Church and state in Australia, 1788-1872: A constitutional study of the Church of England in Australia* (London: SPCK, 1962), 16–18, 45, 47.
[8] Ross Langmead, 'Not quite established: The gospel and Australian culture', *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14.3&4 (Sep/Dec 2002), available at <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/11771.htm>; Ross Langmead, 'Introduction: Reimagining God and mission in Australia', in *Reimagining God and mission: Perspectives from Australia*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), xii-xxiii.
[9] David Millikan, *The sunburnt soul: Christianity in search of an Australian identity* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1981), 69–70.
[10] Roger C Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A history* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.
[11] Michael Hogan, *The sectarian strand: Religion in Australian history* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987), 10–12.
[12] Iain H Murray, *Australian Christian life from 1788: An introduction and an anthology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 4.
[13] Ian Breward, *A history of the Australian churches* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 13.
[14] Patrick O'Farrell, 'The cultural ambivalence of Australian religion', in *Australian Cultural History, Vol 1: Culture and the state in Australia*, eds. S L Goldberg and F B Smith (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities and the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1982), 4.

For the greater part, Christian faith has been ignored in Australian politics, science, the arts and intellectual life.

God made a comeback in parliament in John Howard's government[15] and Australians are slightly bemused that the current Prime Minister should be theologically articulate enough to write a full-length article on Dietrich Bonhoeffer,[16] so these are interesting times.

The prediction in the 1970s that secularisation would lead to the death of religion and spirituality turned out to be wide of the mark. It may well be that the marginal role of religion in Australian society turns out not to be permanent either. We don't know. What I do know is that there are opportunities for Christians to speak into the public arena if we do it well.

4. What Language Shall We Speak?

If there are opportunities, how should we do it? In particular, what language should we use?

It seems to me that there are three basic possibilities. The first is to speak Christian language—for example, the government should do this or that because God says so. The second is to use secular language—appealing to reasons everyone can understand and agree to. The third is somewhere in between: to speak as far as possible in language that persuades other people, but at the same time speaking out of a confessional tradition.

I'm going to disagree with the first and second position, because I suspect it's the combination of the two that will best serve the cause of Good News for the whole of society.

5. A Language of Our Own?

The first language is the language of faith. The clearest supporter of this approach is Stanley Hauerwas, a United Methodist with Anabaptist sympathies who teaches Christian ethics at Duke University. When he was named the 2001 Best American Theologian his response was "Best is not a theological category!".[17]

Hauerwas follows the Anabaptists in calling Christians to live as a countercultural community, demonstrating what the kingdom of God might look like. Our job isn't to persuade wider society through reasoning but to show what the alternative might look like. You can tell how he sees the Christian community by the title of one of his books, written with William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*.[18]

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[15] Marion Maddox, *God under Howard: The rise of the religious right in Australian politics* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005).
[16] Kevin Rudd, 'Faith in politics', *The Monthly* No. 17 (2006), available at <http://www.themonthly.com.au/monthly-essays-kevin-rudd-faith-politics--300>.
[17] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Hauerwas>.
[18] Stanley A Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *Resident aliens: Life in the Christian colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

Of course, when Christianity was close to the centre of society—that is, when we had Christendom, in medieval Europe, for example—it could speak the language of faith into politics and politics obeyed. There are Catholic countries where you can't get a divorce or abortion, because the church says so.

But the Anabaptist perspective is today combining with a strong awareness of our post-Christendom context. We should not try to run things, say those who want us to first and foremost to be a living alternative. We should insist on a stronger separation of church and state.

The Ekklesia project, which is an internet-based think tank inspired by Hauerwas's thinking, puts forward these two principles:

> The proper role of government in a plural society is to maintain a level playing field in public life … for people of all faiths and none—without endorsing one faith or ideology to the exclusion or disadvantage of others.
>
> The role of faith communities is to self-organise, to live by example, to participate creatively and critically in civic life, and to seek to exercise a beneficial, questioning influence in society as a whole—without seeking to grasp state power or privilege for themselves.[19]

Hauerwas and Willimon go even further than these fairly moderate principles. They say, in *Resident Aliens*:

> We argue that the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world.[20]

My main problem with this is theological, and indeed missiological. What is it to be a sign of the kingdom of God if doesn't include pointing to social transformation? To settle for being a countercultural minority within a lost wider society doesn't tackle the issue of how we communicate with those beyond the faith community. It doesn't try to explain to those around us why the gospel might be good news for wider society. I look for a more engaged public theology than this.

We could say about it that it is theology, but it isn't really public.

6. The Lowest Common Denominator?

A second language we can speak in public theology is the language of wider society. Australia follows the United States, Great Britain and Europe in speaking the language of Western liberalism.

Liberalism stands for the sorts of things fought for in the American and French revolutions: democratic rights, the rule of law, the desirability of equal opportunity and

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[19] Simon Barrow, 'Redeeming religion in the public square', *Ekklesia*, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/oldsite/content/article_060724redeeming.shtml>, 2006, accessed 21-8-09

[20] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident aliens: Life in the Christian colony*, 38.

defence of the individual. Of course we don't fully achieve it, but we aspire to these things. For example, if a Cabinet Minister gets caught speeding or driving while drunk, the average person will get upset if the prominent person is not treated under the law just like anyone else.

There's a debate about to what extent these values reflect the Judaeo-Christian heritage, but that's not the point here. The point is that for many Christians involved in public debate the best option is seen as speaking in language other will understand, not in distinctively Christian language.

I couldn't find many theologians who have taken this line, though names like the social gospeller Walter Rauschenbusch and the famous ethical realist Reinhold Niebuhr go close.

This option is usually taken on specific issues in society when we Christians want to persuade others. In early 2003 I found myself saying, "Don't go to war in Iraq. We have no proof that there are weapons of mass destruction. It hasn't got anything to do with 9/11 or Al Qaeda, despite the way George Bush runs together Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. It will cost us a lot of money. It will make enemies in the Middle East. It will make us targets for terrorism. And it will entangle us in a war with no exit strategy."

These were all "secular" arguments. In fact, most of them were pragmatic secular arguments, not especially principled. Interestingly, I didn't say to governments or newspaper editors, "Jesus stands for non-violence; so Australia should stay out of Iraq." Why not? Because to persuade we often choose to speak "their" language, the language of the lowest common denominator.

The problem with this approach to public theology is that is public, but I'm not sure it is theology.

It is restricted to assumptions and values that the widest group of people—the majority—happen to hold. It is captive to Western liberalism, with all of its failings, such as extreme individualism and over-confidence about the goodness of human nature. Our role as we speak is reduced to being citizens alone, rather than citizens with a distinctive vision for the good of society. We are forced to bracket out most of what we find inspiring and guiding about the kingdom of God. If I use my preferred term for the kingdom of God, "the commonwealth of God', we immediately see that as Christians we have an alternative vision for the Commonwealth of Australia, in which we believe life will be much better for all if we lived according to God's ways.

There may be times when we still choose to speak the language of liberalism alone.

For example, the local Muslims in my area have been seeking council permission to build a mosque. It's gone on for years, with fearful locals organising against it on flimsy grounds. In my small contribution to the debate I didn't say that Jesus stands for freedom in our search for God. I didn't say that the Bible encourages us to welcome the stranger and to discover God in "the other".

I said that our country stands for religious freedom and that if we don't stand up for others' religious freedom this time, it might be our religious freedom that is being trampled on next time. In fact, I could have pointed to Christian foundations for this sentiment.

The line I was taking comes straight out of an often-forgotten Baptist tradition of religious toleration. Why do Baptists care about this? Because we have known what it is, in England, to be excluded systematically from public office, from universities, from births, deaths and marriage registers—all because we were not members of the Church of England.

It also echoes the famous words attributed to German Confessing Pastor Martin Niemoller, who said, "First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me."

My argument was also an echo of the Old Testament refrain, where God says to Israel, "Remember that you were once poor and oppressed. So defend the widow, the orphan, the stranger."

No, I didn't say any of this religious stuff. I appealed instead to Australian values of tolerance and freedom of religion.

7. A Vision of the Common Good

But I'd like to suggest that there is third way to engage in public theology which is both public and theological.

Along with Duncan Forrester, whom I quoted earlier, I believe that as Christians speaking out of a confessional vision but in plain language, we can "contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth that is relevant to what is going on in the world".[21]

What I have in mind is to have sufficient confidence in the gospel to promote its values in wider society for the sake of the common good, while having sufficient humility to acknowledge that we are only some of many competing voices in a pluralistic society. The difference between this and simply using secular liberal language is that we are prepared to link it to our vision of the common good Jeremiah urges us to "seek the welfare of the city where you find yourself" (Jer 29:7).

I would venture to say that Tim Costello does this well in our context. He is known for being Christian. In fact the media always makes a point of calling him "the Reverend Tim Costello". He seems somehow able to articulate what many Australians in their higher values would want in a decent and humane society in which the poor are cared for. He is even able to say things such as, "In the Christian tradition in which I stand, we value such and such". He has defended some predictable causes with proportion and

[21] Forrester, *Truthful action*, 127.

sense, such as reducing gambling opportunities but not shutting them down completely. But he has also defended some unpopular causes, such as rights and conditions for sex workers, on the basis of human rights and solidarity with outcast groups in Australian society. He speaks out of an articulated Christian vision, but manages to find some common ground. He appeals to many liberal values, but brings that "something more", which is his confessional stance. He is a Christian engaging publicly on issues where he is convinced we have something distinctive to contribute.

We hold to a vision that is distinctive and yet we use what is sometimes called an analogical imagination, drawing analogies between two worlds, to imagine how our vision might be at least partly reflected in societies that are not necessarily committed to our vision.[22]

In theological terms this stance contains a bit of the two sides of the spectrum: It takes human sin seriously and believes that the Good News is central in the possibility of social transformation. But it also takes into account God's grace and mysterious presence and activity in the world. It doesn't condemn society to darkness; nor does it see society as the kingdom of God in the making. There is affirmation and critique.

Theologian Douglas Hall seems to side with the old Anabaptists when he talks of disengaging from the nations. But he goes on to say, "Intentional disengagement from the dominant culture … is the essential precondition for a meaningful engagement of that same dominant culture".[23] In other words, we don't end up against the nations (which is the title of one of Hauerwas's books),[24] but for the nations.[25]

In practical terms, there are many ways of engaging in public theology as part of our mission. I would begin with the positive truth at the heart of the Anabaptist position: We can model an alternative.

Our vision, our ethos and our practice of community are a powerful witness to the Good News we proclaim— or at least they can be. If our life as a church isn't a powerful witness, such as when our leaders abuse people or when we divide and split all the time over minor points of doctrine, then what we say will be drowned out by who we are.

But there are many levels at which we can engage, particularly in a relatively free society such as Australia. I have more trouble giving advice to my Christian friends in Burma on public theology, because if they raise their heads in protest, their just as likely to lose them.

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[22] Duane K Friesen, *Artists, citizens, philosophers: Seeking the peace of the city. An Anabaptist theology of culture* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 224.

[23] Douglas John Hall, 'Ecclesia Crucis: The theologic of Christian awkwardness', in *The church between gospel and culture: The emerging mission in North America*, eds. George R Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 198.

[24] Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the nations: War and survival in a liberal society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

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In our context we can participate in democracy. We can do this by standing for office, by speaking out in the media, by gathering others who agree and mounting pressure on governments.

We can also protest. We do this sometimes as a church, though I don't think Christians like taking to the streets much. At other times we do it in coalition with others of good will. I regard some of the more significant protests I've been on to be worthwhile, though many of the smaller ones are forgettable. The walk for reconciliation, almost a celebration rather than a protest, was a significant statement by nearly a million Australians, making it the largest political demonstration in Australian history.

We can engage in community service, in policy making, in submitting to processes of inquiry, and in serving in a multitude of vocations. To use the biblical terms, we can act both as salt, flavouring the whole, or light, uncovering the darkness and being a beacon on a hill.

Although there is less call for it in ours society than some, I also consider civil disobedience to be a form of public theology, whenever the laws of the country run counter to how we feel we have to live as followers of Jesus. Martin Luther King is universally praised forty or fifty years after he protested using civil disobedience, but it's interesting how much he was criticised by many Christians at the time for breaking the law. I wonder if today we are too timid to discern clearly when we need to stand up to laws that challenge the ways of God.

8. Doing Our Homework

There are two more aspects of engaging in public theology that I'd like to mention briefly.

The first is the need to do our homework thoroughly. The most common retort by politicians when the churches speak up is to tell us to go back to looking after our flocks and leave running the country to the politicians. (I must say that last scenario is frightening! …)

I'm stating the obvious when I encourage us all to know what we're talking about if we enter the public arena, whether it's on the causes of homosexuality, or the economic benefits of lowering executive salaries, or the costs to society of reducing levels of public housing. I mentioned at the beginning how refreshing it is when Christians who are top scientists talk about evolution.

9. Seeking a United Christian Voice

The second comment is also obvious. The churches will be most effective when they speak with a common voice.

But in this case, I don't actually expect us to be able to do it. Why? Because amongst millions of Christians of all types, there will always be disagreements. We are keenly aware that Christians are on opposite sides of the debate on nearly everything from

spending more on defence to liberalising laws on same-sex marriage. The term "Christian" is too encompassing. We actually fall into differing groups, living from different visions.

So the best we can hope for is to begin our engagement with public theology with some charitable dialogue within the Christian communion. There will be issues on which we can more-or-less gain consensus, and other issues where we have to accept that we differ. At least we should model good discussion and debate amongst ourselves. After that we might have to accept that we too represent the pluralism of a human society, and will have differing voices.

In conclusion, I'd like to encourage all churches and church leaders to choose where they might engage effectively in public theology, in political debate, in social reform, in policy making, in swaying public opinion and in active democratic participation in the public square. It isn't a longing for power or the privileges of a new Christendom; it will always know that the gospel critiques as well as fulfils every culture. But public theology amounts to proclaiming the public consequences of the gospel, and therefore is a central part of our mission.

Ross Langmead, 28-8-09