



SEEKING THE WELFARE OF THE CITY:

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THEOLOGY TO
NEW ZEALAND'S PUBLIC SQUARE

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The biggest challenge facing someone seeking to do “public theology” in New Zealand is the unease many New Zealanders feel about religious voices being heard in the public square. The virtual absence of any conviction-based language in public debate is striking. In part this is grounded in our self-designation as a “secular” country. Exactly what we mean by “secular” in this context is a topic for debate,¹ but in part it has to do with ensuring religiously-inspired voices are marginalised in public discourse.

Hence one finds in the media, hostility, or at best indifference, toward religion. Minimal space is given to religious news or commentary;² church figures are seldom approached for comment or reported when they speak publicly; broadcasters are out of their depth when required to cover a religious story. While Māori are less inhibited about using religious language in public, generally there is a shared perception here that religion is principally for the *private* not the *public* domain.

This was given a degree of official endorsement in July 2010 when a draft report on “Human Rights in New Zealand Today” was released by the Human Rights Commission. This carried a statement that “Matters of religion and belief are deemed to be a matter for the private, rather than the public, sphere.”³ The wording was subsequently changed following complaints (though the text is still on the HRC website), but it would be hard to dispute the claim that we generally feel more comfortable if individuals or organisations, when speaking publicly, refrain from parading openly any religious convictions they may have.

RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

The question of whether religiously-grounded opinions should be allowed to be voiced in the public square has been debated for many years. The main reasons cited as to why they should not be are:

1. Religious voices always want to dominate debates, to “seize control of the political realm and... override and nullify opposing convictions”;⁴
2. If religious arguments are heard there is a risk that they may prevail and their proponents will end up imposing, on their fellow citizens, laws

which rest on a particular moral or religious doctrine. (An editorial in *The Press* in May 2008 captured this well when it suggested that, even if opponents of euthanasia are right in their view that only the Christian God has the right to terminate life, “they have no fiat to impose their views and suppress discussion of them.”)⁵

3. Governments must adopt a stance of liberal neutrality in the face of moral and religious disagreement, and maintain impartiality between competing moral and religious doctrines. As John Rawls has written, “Which moral judgments are true is not a matter for political liberalism.” Political liberalism “does not take a general position” on the moral questions over which these doctrines divide.⁶
4. Public discourse must be truly *public* and therefore employ language, principles and reasoning which are intelligible to any reasonable person and based on public canons of validity. Religious voices pose a threat to freedom by introducing assertions which are not accountable to ordinary processes of reasoning and evidence and assumed to be beyond challenge and critique.

Behind these arguments lies a concern that religious-based arguments are incompatible with the maintenance of liberal-democratic politics. As Richard Rorty once wrote, “we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty.”⁷ Not all the above claims carry weight here, but there is a widespread fear of religious views being imposed on wider society, and of our secular culture and liberal democratic tradition being undermined.

A CHANGE IN THE TIDE

Interestingly, in the last decade or two, a concerted intellectual challenge to the conviction that secularism is a necessary presupposition of democracy has also been promoted by thinkers of both a religious and non-religious orientation. Reasons adduced as to why religious voices should no longer be excluded from the public domain include:

¹ It has been the subject of a University of Otago-funded research project undertaken by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, the results of which will be published in due course.

² The *Otago Daily Times* is an exception among NZ newspapers in publishing a weekly “Faith and Reason” column.

³ “Human Rights in New Zealand Today. Ngā Tika Tangata O Te Motu.” Online: <http://www.hrc.co.nz/report/chapters/chapter09/religion02.html>. Accessed 2 March 2014.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 26.

⁵ “Lifting the Shroud,” *The Press*, 12 May 2008. Online: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/418151/Lifting-the-shroud>. Accessed 2 March 2014. Some expressions of this view can be quite comical, e.g. a letter to the *Dominion Post* on the same topic which asked, “why should Christians and any other groups with vested interest have any say? Let New Zealanders decide.”

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xx, xxvii.

⁷ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 171.

1. Religion is more high profile than before and is demanding a hearing;
2. Religious insights can add much to public discourse;
3. The idea that “neutral” or value-free language can be found for public discourse is a myth;
4. Religious voices do not always seek a privileged right to be heard;
5. All forms of reasoning should be treated with equal respect in the public square;
6. “Secular” space does not necessarily imply one where religious voices are excluded.

I now examine these reasons more closely.

1. RELIGION IS NOW MORE HIGH PROFILE.

There has been a steady de-privatising of religion in the last two decades, leading to a revision of the secularisation thesis associated with Marx, Weber, Berger and others. As Berger himself conceded in the late 1990s, “the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”⁸ “In our enlightened world god is still everywhere,” the *New Scientist* noted in a special “God issue” in 2012.⁹ Secular writers John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge claim that religion is now a part of the intellectual discourse in Europe and elsewhere,¹⁰ and José Casanova concurs that it is possible to detect a “significant shift” in the European *Zeitgeist*.¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, who perhaps embodies this shift, now talks of our societies being “post-secular.”¹²

This is not necessarily to say that there are more religious believers than heretofore, though there has been a phenomenal growth in some unlikely and

previously very secular places.¹³ Rather, it is the case that religious voices are more aware of the public dimension of their faith, are better equipped to make forays into the public square, and are clamouring to be heard there, claiming that democracy has to recognise the existence of a range of varying viewpoints. The future will therefore be both “religious” and “secular,” which presents, I suggest, a challenge for us here. As New Zealand becomes increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious, so we will need a better understanding of the “world faiths” and how they can contribute to our public life.

2. RELIGIOUS INSIGHTS CAN ADD MUCH TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE.

There has been a perceptible shift in intellectual circles towards acknowledging religion’s potential to make a worthwhile and distinctive contribution to public thinking. As the shrill voices of “New Atheism” are increasingly ignored, even by fellow atheists, embarrassed by their stridency and lack of openness to informed and serious dialogue, so the climate is moving, if not towards a mass return to faith, then at least “towards a reluctant recognition that religion can’t be blamed for everything – indeed that it has made and still makes positive contributions to our common life,” to quote Rowan Williams.¹⁴

As Williams argues, religious perspectives can imbue the language of public deliberation with a “depth and moral gravity that cannot be generated simply by the negotiation of... balanced self interests.”¹⁵ Religion does not offer an alternative to scientific research or reasoned argument, but seeks to ask different questions and offer different perspectives. To bring to the conversation about climate change the observation that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24:1) is not to challenge scientific ideas of origins but to encourage appreciation of the planet as something held on trust and to be stewarded responsibly. As Douglas Murray

RELIGION DOES NOT OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE TO SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH OR REASONED ARGUMENT, BUT SEEKS TO ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS AND OFFER DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

8 Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

9 *New Scientist*, 17 March 2012, 37.

10 John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 137, 194–95.

11 José Casanova, “Public Religions Revisited,” in Hent de Vries, ed., *Religions: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101.

12 See for example the subtitle of Jürgen Habermas, ed., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

13 For example, in Russia and China and the cities of London and (post-earthquake) Christchurch. See for example, Micklethwait & Wooldridge, *God is Back*; David Goodhew, ed., *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) chap 2; and research by Te Raranga (Online: <http://raranga.org.nz/resources>). This latter has identified 113 churches in Christchurch with membership of 100+, including 28 with 200–400 members and a further 22 with over 400 members.

14 Rowan Williams, Easter Sermon 2012. Online: <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2440/archbishops-easter-sermon-2012-god-raised-jesus-to-life#Text>. Accessed 2 March 2014.

15 Cited in Jonathan Derbyshire & James Macintyre, “There is a Universal Human Nature,” *New Statesman*, 19 July 2010, 32.

put it in a recent Cambridge Union debate on whether “religion” has a place in the twenty-first century (in which he partnered Richard Dawkins against Rowan Williams), one “can be in agreement with Professor Dawkins that Adam did not exist, and yet know and feel that the story of Eden speaks profoundly about ourselves.”¹⁶

I turn now to the specific focus of this essay, Christian theology. One of the things theology can help us to do is explore issues to do with meaning, purpose and value, which other disciplines would acknowledge are beyond their territory. If Tony Judt is right that we have lost our ability to conceive of alternatives to the present reality and the capacity even to think in terms of whether a political policy is “good,” “fair,” “just” or “right” rather than simply economically prudent,¹⁷ disciplines like theology can equip us to recover that capacity. It can also help us to inject fresh thinking into tired debates and think creatively about the future. With the market now setting the parameters for discourse in almost every area of life – from education to prisons, from communications to sport – including questions relating to meaning and value, places dealing in theology may be among the last where talk of valuing things and *people* other than in terms of economic benefit will be possible. As Marion Maddox put it in a public lecture in Auckland in 2006, Christian churches can offer “a wealth of ways of holding out against the dominant values of the day.”¹⁸

As Michael Sandel observes in his book, *What Money Can't Buy*, markets cannot tell us whether transactions are “right” or “wrong,” nor whether there might be goods we should consider sufficiently worthy of dignity and respect not to allow them to be used as instruments of gain and objects of use. “If someone is willing to pay for sex or a kidney, and a consenting adult is willing to sell, the only question the economist asks is, ‘How much?’” Sandel writes. “Markets don’t wag fingers.”¹⁹ But if we do want to make moral judgments about market activity we need a different type of conversation to help us think

16 Cited in Nick Spencer, “What role for Christianity in 21st-century politics?” Online: <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2013/03/05/what-role-for-christianity-in-21st-century-politics>. Accessed 1 April 2014.

17 Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 1–2.

18 Marion Maddox, “God and New Zealand Public Life,” Ferguson Lecture 2006. Online: <http://www.saintdavid.org.nz/FergusonLectureJune2006.pdf>. Accessed 1 April 2014.

19 Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 14.

through the issues, one to which religious perspectives can contribute. Religion can also provide a source of resistance to those practices which concern us.

Theology can contribute to other issues of relevance to us in New Zealand. The Jewish and Christian Scriptures are rich in wisdom on issues like wealth and poverty and how societies might practise economic justice, for example. As Walter Brueggemann said, *apropos* the recent global economic crisis,

while the specifics of the current market collapse are peculiarly modern, biblical perspectives are pertinent because the fundamental issues of economics are constant from ancient to contemporary time, constants such as credit and debt, loans and interest, and the endless tension between the haves and have-nots.²⁰

Used with imagination and due regard for difference in context, biblical models such as

Jubilee, Sabbath, fasting and gleaning – not to mention the need for special provision to be made for widows, orphans and strangers – can have much to say to a culture

struggling to discover meanings of wellbeing and happiness amidst constant invocations to consume, and unable (or unwilling) to face the human, social and environmental consequences of an obsession with economic growth. Many biblical models prompt us to reflect that, while the dominant discourse today employs the despairing language of loss and scarcity, there is value in discovering what we already have and how we can share it.²¹

Criminal policy is another sphere to which theology can contribute much. While the biblical authors are hardly writing as experts in the area of “criminal policy,” and their contexts could not be more different from our own, they offer a wealth of intriguing insights of great relevance today. For example, there is a strong emphasis in Scripture on caring for prisoners as well as their victims. In Matt 25:36, the “righteous” who inherit the kingdom are commended with the words, “I was in prison and you visited me,” the original Greek suggesting that these showed practical care for, as well as spent time with, those inside. Jesus identifies himself in this passage as a prisoner.

20 Walter Brueggemann, “From Anxiety and Greed to Milk and Honey” in *Faith and Finance: Christians and the Economic Crisis: Discussion Guide* (Washington, DC: Sojourners, 2009), 5.

21 See, on this, Malcolm Irwin, “Economic Elephants: Notes on a Practical Theology of Enough.” Online: <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/uploads/EconomicElephants.pdf>. Accessed 1 April 2014.

IF WE DO WANT TO MAKE MORAL JUDGMENTS ABOUT MARKET ACTIVITY WE NEED A DIFFERENT TYPE OF CONVERSATION TO HELP US THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

Radically, the Bible encourages restitution, redemption, reconciliation and forgiveness as responses to criminal behaviour. In the Old Testament, criminal actions were thought to reflect a deficiency in the whole community, not just in the individual concerned, and the community itself was called to repent and return to God. Seeking restitution was thought to be for the good of the victim, the offender and the wider community. There are parallels here with traditional Māori practices which – in contrast to the British system which prevailed here, in which a crime was considered an offence against, and therefore punishable by, the State – saw crimes as offences against *people*, with reparation thus owed to the affected *whānau* and community. In the New Testament, when Jesus confronts a man who has defrauded others to get rich, the outcome is that the man is both allowed to make restitution for his wrongdoing, and be received back into society as a useful member. He more than pays for his crimes – *and* gives half his income to the poor – in a way that enables him to find his true humanity, and his community to be healed (Luke 19.1–10).

So one lesson Scripture might have for us today is that real change to people's behaviour comes less through their being punished in a spirit of retribution than by being afforded opportunity to reflect upon the consequences of their actions, make restitution, and seek forgiveness from – and reconciliation with – those they have wronged. This reflects the core message of the Christian gospel, that however serious our sin, God offers us forgiveness in Christ. Rather than want to punish us for our sins, God offers us his grace. And what God requires of *us* is that we not only “do justice” but “love mercy” (Mic 6:8).

In his recent book, *Compassionate Justice*, Chris Marshall explores the possibility of a marriage between justice and compassion by reflecting upon the parables of the good Samaritan and prodigal son. Among the insights Marshall draws from these parables are the need for “thick” accounts of justice “with the capacity to hold justice and mercy together in the domain of corrective and criminal justice,” and for a deeper appreciation of the *humanity* of the people involved in criminal events.²² Marshall draws a striking parallel between the attitude of the prodigal's older brother, “unable to understand

his father's forgiveness because he feels no need of forgiveness himself”, and our “fantastically misnamed ‘Corrections System’... invariably sustained by a similar refusal on the part of the ‘righteous’ to admit their common, flawed humanity with those they deem to be intractable sinners and criminals.”²³

In discussing how these parables might stimulate fresh thinking in the area of criminal policy, Marshall considers the case for using law to punish bad Samaritans and compel good Samaritanism. He also suggests judges might receive a “spiritual education” to remind them of human fallibility and the propensity of all to commit great evil in certain circumstances.

3. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF NEUTRAL DISCOURSE AND A NEUTRAL PUBLIC SQUARE.

The argument is often made that allowing religiously-inspired opinions in the public square would compromise the neutrality of that space and the requirement that liberal states maintain neutrality on moral issues. However, as Michael Sandel has pointed out, many questions cannot be resolved without taking a stand on an underlying moral and religious controversy.

Sandel cites the standard liberal position with respect to abortion, namely that the state should not take sides in the complex moral and theological debate over when life begins. It should simply allow women to decide for themselves whether to have an abortion. But this argument does not succeed, Sandel argues, because it involves making a value judgment on the status of the developing foetus. If the foetus is morally equivalent to a child, then abortion is morally equivalent to infanticide – “and few would maintain that government should let parents decide for themselves whether to kill their children.” So the “pro-choice” position in the abortion debate is not neutral but “implicitly rests on the assumption that the Catholic Church's teaching on the moral status of the foetus – that it is a person from the moment of conception – is false.”²⁴ As Sandel says, to acknowledge this assumption is not to argue for banning abortion, simply to point out that it is not possible to resolve the legal question without taking up the underlying moral and religious question.

TO ACKNOWLEDGE THIS ASSUMPTION IS NOT TO ARGUE FOR BANNING ABORTION, SIMPLY TO POINT OUT THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO RESOLVE THE LEGAL QUESTION WITHOUT TAKING UP THE UNDERLYING MORAL AND RELIGIOUS QUESTION

22 Christopher D. Marshall, *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice* (Eugene, Ore: Cascade Books, 2012), 218.

23 *Ibid.*, 239.

24 Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 251.

Neutrality is impossible because the issue is whether the practice in question involves taking the life of a human being.

The state also cannot be neutral with regard to what vision of the “good life” it chooses to pursue. As Jonathan Boston points out, one version of the good life might be to create an egalitarian society where there are only modest differences between the incomes and opportunities enjoyed by the rich and the poor, while another might be to create a highly unequal society. The state cannot be neutral between these differing conceptions of the good, and the policy choices it makes with respect to taxation, welfare provision and so on will support one or other of these conceptions of the good life.²⁵ Rex Ahdar suggests that all states have to operate with a world-view, even if it is held implicitly. A state with no coherent vision of humanity, knowledge, good and evil would be “nihilistic, anarchistic and inherently unstable,” Ahdar writes, and thus, whether or not they are consciously aware of it, “[t] here is always an operative world-view... that those in the corridors of power act upon... it may be a hybrid of various philosophical and religious strands. But it will exist. No state is neutral in this sense.”²⁶

So it is not at all obvious why opinions rooted in a faith commitment should be excluded from the public square, especially when we consider the extent to which “faith” has contributed to how the world has been run in recent years. As Joerg Rieger points out, in economic circles beliefs such as “a rising tide lifts all boats,” “wealth accumulated at the top inevitably trickles down,” and “things will get back on track in due time” will always be held to as articles of faith, whether the circumstances support them or not.²⁷ The New Zealand Government’s assertion that Christchurch’s rental housing crisis is “best left to the market” could be similarly classified.

Economic theories would appear to be no less predicated on a comprehensive doctrine of human nature than religious perspectives. In October 2008 the late Roger Kerr argued against excessive regulation of markets on the grounds that this would undermine the trust upon which markets operate, crowding out “the spontaneous individual willingness [of people] to

behave in a trustworthy and cooperative way.” Noting that a “passive altruism” dissuaded individuals from cheating and stealing, Kerr asserted that markets operate, and can only operate, on the basis of trust, and thus they “cannot be sites of pure selfishness and greed, which militate against trust.” For this reason, Kerr concluded, markets are “intrinsically moral.”²⁸ Not only is this manifestly a statement of faith, but one which some might think it was barely credible to hold during the global banking crisis which provided the context for Kerr’s speech.

4. FAITH VOICES DO NOT SEEK A PRIVILEGED HEARING OR TO DOMINATE PUBLIC DISCOURSE.

Like all agents in the public square, religious people offer their contributions because they believe they have merit and would serve the common good if adopted. This is not the same as “special pleading,” and there would be few occasions in this post-

Christendom era when a religious voice would speak explicitly to shore up or defend a privilege or position in its interest.²⁹ Instead, religious voices recognise the marginal location of the Christian faith in a post-

Christendom world and the value of other disciplines. Indeed, public theology is undertaken decidedly *not* to further the interests of the church or “the faith” but to “seek the welfare of the city” (Jer 29:7) – which in Jeremiah’s case was a place of exile.

That this is so often misunderstood is partly a consequence of the tendency for the media to highlight extreme examples of religious people wanting to exert influence in the public sphere – the 9/11 terrorists, for example, or right-wing Christian fundamentalists – thus perpetuating the myth of religion as irrational, dogmatic and potentially violent.

5. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO CONTRIBUTE TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

It is a matter of simple justice that the “religious” should not be the only contributors to public discussion required to translate what they say, to behave as if they were “agnostic” about their beliefs. As Nigel Biggar points out, theological arguments can be accessible and cogent and pose no special threat to public reason – indeed, a consequence of

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25 Jonathan Boston, “The Quest for the Good Society: Economics, Ethics and Public Policy.” Unpublished paper, 2013, 11.

26 Rex Ahdar, ‘Is Secularism Neutral?’ *Ratio Juris* 26, no. 3 (2013), 420.

27 Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress, 2009), see especially Chapter 1.

28 Colin James, “Companies, grow some fit morals,” *Otago Daily Times*, 20 April 2012.

29 An example might be the right to retain seats for Church of England bishops in the UK’s House of Lords.

theologians translating their ethical content into a supposedly universally accessible, non-theological, language might be precisely to discard the beneficial capacity they are trying to transmit. Theologians do not expect everyone to agree with them, but there is no reason why people should not understand them.³⁰

Challenging the idea that “natural reason” is the form of discourse to which all persons are supposed to have equal access, Charles Taylor asks whether Martin Luther King’s secular compatriots were unable to understand his argument for equality because he couched it in biblical terms. Would more people have got the point had he invoked Kant? And how does one distinguish religious from secular language? Is the Golden Rule clearly a move in either one or the other direction?³¹

Reframing a religious concept like “all people are created in the image of God” into secular terminology is far from straightforward. As Chris Marshall has said, such a proposition is not reducible simply to the language of “human rights and human autonomy,” since that cannot embrace the “relational and spiritual implications” of speaking of humanity bearing the *imago Dei*.³² And Charles Taylor asks how the fact that we are “desiring,” “enjoying” and “suffering” beings, or the perception that we are rational agents, can provide any surer basis for arguing the “right to life” than the fact that we are made in the image of God.³³ Stephen Carter is surely right when he says that “[w]hat is needed is not a requirement that the religiously devout choose a form of dialogue that liberalism accepts, but that liberalism develop a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers.” As Carter says, there should be a willingness to listen, “not because the speaker has *the right voice* but because the speaker *has the right to speak*.”³⁴

30 See for example Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2011).

31 Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 400.

32 Christopher D. Marshall, “What Language Shall I Borrow?: The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology,” *Stimulus*, 13 no. 3 (2005), 14.

33 Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” Eduardo Mendieta & Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 54.

34 Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 230 (emphasis original).

6. A SECULAR PUBLIC SQUARE DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN ONE FROM WHICH RELIGION IS EXCLUDED.

There are various ways of understanding the term “secular,” and while in New Zealand it is often taken to mean “keep religion out” (note our education policy, for example) it is no less valid to define a “secular space” as one where all voices are welcome and none predominates. Rowan Williams makes this distinction when he talks of “programmatically secularism,” which is characterised by “the almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality and the public invisibility of specific commitments,” and “procedural secularism,” according to which religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate – not a privileged one or one in which these convictions are considered beyond criticism, but one which acknowledges that they represent the considered moral basis of the choices and priorities of certain citizens.³⁵ Thus, what all parties in political debate need

to adopt, argues Jonathan Chaplin, whether religiously or secularly motivated, is “confessional candour”: in a culture characterised by clashing religious and secular world views, Chaplin argues, “democratic debate will be stifled and left impoverished if we discourage the articulation

of the deeper convictions leading people to take the conflicting policy stances they do.”³⁶

IMPROVING PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN NEW ZEALAND

Given that so many of our political and public debates in New Zealand are shallow, artificially polarised, and consist of little more than sloganising, would not the adoption of “confessional candour” by all parties, faith-based or not, improve their quality – not for its own sake but in the interests of better policy outcomes? Imagine, for example, a debate on criminal policy, which avoided emotive and sloganising language like supporting “victims” or “offenders” or being “soft” or “tough” on crime, and involved a sharing of views about the purpose and goal of punishment, or the individual’s potential to change, or the role of repentance, forgiveness, restitution and restoration. A debate which asked whether prisons should merely be places where

35 Williams, “Secularism, Faith and Freedom,” 27.

36 Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (London: Theos, 2008), 51.

society “gets its own back” on those who have offended against it, or where people can be redeemed by experiencing the opportunity to break out of their destructive cycle of behaviour and rediscover their true humanity. A debate which saw our politicians and media exploring Marshall’s suggestions about the possibility of marrying justice and compassion or of recognising our common humanity and propensity to commit great evil in certain circumstances.

I hope it is not naïve to encourage a search for ways to make our public square more diverse and inclusive and a place where “confessional candour” could be employed by all without embarrassment or fear. It *would* be naïve to think that consensus between all voices will be achieved, but that is not the ultimate purpose. What changing the terms of our public debate *would* demonstrate is a commitment, in the search for the most effective, workable and just solutions to the many challenges we face, to the importance of serious deliberation and reasoning, to a genuine and open exchange of views that is the mark of a liberal democracy worthy of the name.

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