

In Search of the Good Society: Theology, secularism and the importance of vision

Public theology is a relatively new discipline – or at least, the *term* is new, coming into vogue only in the 1970s. Fashioned partly in reaction to a trend in the United States to interpret faith in terms of individual piety and salvation, to essentially *privatize* it, public theology addresses the possibility of utilizing the resources of the Christian faith to speak *publicly* into contemporary discourse. The narratives, teachings and insights of Scripture have much to offer to debates on current issues, public theology would contend, provided these texts are interpreted imaginatively, wisely and with due attention to the specific context addressed. Noting how public discourse can be refreshed and deepened by insights drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, public theology will offer its contribution with confidence and boldness, albeit with an awareness of the marginal position of ‘faith’ in modern societies and the need for critical engagement with other disciplines. Rather than seek to enhance the status or privilege of ‘the church’, so often the motive behind the articulation of ‘religious’ perspectives in the past, public theology will seek, in words found in the prophet Jeremiah (29.7), ‘the welfare of the city’, in particular the welfare of those least able to enjoy the ‘life in all its fullness’ which Jesus came to announce (John 10.10).

Given the sometimes shallow and restricted nature of our public discourse, public theology would appear to have something worthwhile to offer us here in New Zealand; yet there are a number of challenges facing anyone seeking to do public theology in this country, not the least being the uneasiness we feel about the idea of ‘doing’ religion in public.

Just as many historical accounts of New Zealand tend to play down the role that religion has played in the country’s evolution, so today we feel happier keeping religion from our public life. This is not because most people in New Zealand are implacably *opposed* to religion – though, when given the opportunity, on a talkback radio show or the ‘comments’ section of a website, more than a few will engage in attacking religion with considerable venom. Nor is it necessarily a factor of the proportion of the population adhering to ‘religion’ at any one time – though, again, there would appear to be a widespread perception that the practice of religion is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the majority of the population, and declining to the point where sooner or later it will disappear. In August 2011, for example, when Christchurch City Council released a draft plan for the rebuilding of the earthquake-damaged city centre, a major article

appeared in the *Press* suggesting that one building could accommodate the needs of all the different denominations, provided it had ‘one or two large auditoriums catering for the few days of the year when more than the one or two ailing and frail pensioners come through the door!’¹ To judge from the comments this article garnered, the journalist responsible was certainly not alone in holding his views.

Rather it would seem to be that a concern to avoid conflict, disagreement and causing offence, together with a scepticism toward the value of big-picture thinking or all-encompassing ideologies, prompts an attitude of caution toward talking in public about beliefs and convictions. We prefer to change, rather than broach or discuss, the subject. Hence one finds in the media an attitude generally of indifference toward religion, with minimum space afforded to discussing either the merits or demerits of religious belief and practice. While it is true that some media interest in the recently-appointed bishop of Wellington did extend beyond his slightly unconventional appearance to his slightly unconventional form of Christian witness, and that a Saturday morning radio host might find herself seduced into a lengthy conversation about faith with a charismatic visiting archbishop, generally engagement with religious or ‘faith’ issues is avoided in our newspapers, television and radio. (The *Otago Daily Times*, our local paper in Dunedin, is, I understand, an exception among New Zealand newspapers in having a regular column devoted to discussing beliefs.) So while on a public holiday with secular roots, like Anzac Day, our broadcasting schedules and newsprint will overflow with stories and reports informing us about, and helping us to reflect on, its significance, and even bring these to our attention during the days leading up to actual event, a four-day holiday weekend for the main Christian festival of Easter can pass with no reference on mainstream radio or television to the reason for the season.

While Māori are less inhibited about using religious language in public – we think of the frequency with which *karakia* are offered, for example, and our ready understanding of concepts such as *tapu* and *noa* – generally there is a shared perception here that, regardless of its popularity or otherwise at a given time, ‘religion’ is principally for the *private* not *public* domain; and this was demonstrated rather starkly in July 2010 when a draft report on ‘Human Rights in New Zealand Today’ was released by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission containing a statement that ‘Matters of religion and belief are

¹ Martin van Beynen, ‘Save space, just one church should cover it’, *The Press*, 7 August 2011 - <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/columnists/martin-van-beynen/5403339/Save-space-just-one-church-should-cover-it> [accessed 11 July 2012].

deemed to be a matter for the private, rather than the public, sphere'. Although following discussions with various parties the draft was subsequently changed (though it can still be found on the HRC website),² it would be hard to dispute the claim that we generally feel more comfortable if, when speaking publicly, individuals or organisations refrain from parading too openly any religious convictions they may have. We have politicians in New Zealand who are Christians, my colleague Bryce Edwards put it recently in one of our public forums, but not 'Christian politicians'.³ The rather striking address in reply made by Green Party co-leader Russel Norman in Parliament just before Christmas last year, in which, albeit for his own political purposes, he drew heavily on the biblical narrative of the Incarnation and expounded the core values underpinning the Christian faith, was perhaps only possible because, as Norman himself affirmed several times during its delivery, he is an atheist. Had such a speech been offered by a known Christian politician he or she would surely have attracted unfavourable comment and been accused of preaching. As Bryce Edwards also noted in our panel discussion, even when discussing 'moral' issues publicly, religious organisations will often avoid employing explicitly religious arguments,⁴ and at least one research and public policy think tank in New Zealand with Christian foundations is careful not to make those public for fear of being dismissed in advance.⁵

It would be interesting to know how far a concern to respect and uphold the country's 'secular' status underpins this reticence to speak 'religiously' in the public square.⁶ I am struck how far the situation here reflects the intellectual consensus that has obtained over the past few decades, that public discourse, particularly around political and other issues that matter, should employ language, principles and reasoning which are intelligible to any reasonable person and based on public canons of validity, with religious voices needing either to be excluded or to 'translate' what they say into a secular 'Esperanto'. As the leading and most sophisticated proponent of this position, John Rawls, has argued, while of course citizens

affirm a diversity of reasonable religious and philosophical doctrines, they should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality.⁷

² <http://www.hrc.co.nz/report/chapters/chapter09/religion02.html> [accessed 16 July 2010].

³ <http://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/resources/podcasts/otago032170.mp4> [accessed 8 July 2012]

⁴ at <http://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/resources/podcasts/otago032170.mp4>

⁵ The Maxim Institute – www.maxim.org.nz.

⁶ I discuss this in some detail in 'Using God-Talk in a Secular Society: Time for a New Conversation on Public Issues?', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6 (2012), pp.1-22.

⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993, p.218.

Or, as Richard Rorty puts it, to introduce into public debate arguments rooted in a religious worldview is not only in bad taste but potentially dangerous to the stability of the liberal democratic polity: ‘we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going’, Rorty writes, ‘unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty’. ‘The main reason religion needs to be privatized’, contends Rorty, ‘is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper’.⁸ Thus, on a liberal-secular reading, religious believers must either find arguments which fit within the bounds of ‘public reason’, or offer no arguments at all. If they do not do that then there is a risk that their arguments may prevail and they will end up imposing on their fellow citizens laws which rest on a particular moral or religious doctrine.

Rowan Williams is one who has noted an in-built fear in the liberal consciousness of one set of ideas or values triumphing over all others. To maximize individual freedom, enabling people to achieve what they want with minimum interference is considered a suitably neutral stance for a government, Williams notes, given that the alternative, facilitating a genuine exchange of ideas, would inevitably raise the question of how to ‘avoid a prescriptive approach, an imposition of one version of what human integrity or flourishing means’. There is a certain type of secularism, Williams maintains, which assumes

that any religious or ideological system demanding a hearing in the public sphere is aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It finds specific views of the human good outside of a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere.⁹

But this widely-held conviction that democracy and religion are essentially incompatible, that secularism is a necessary presupposition of democracy, has been rigorously challenged in recent years. Now, as writers such as Archbishop Williams, Jonathan Chaplin,¹⁰ Madeleine Bunting,¹¹ Roger Trigg,¹² Chris Marshall¹³ and others are saying, religious voices should no longer be excluded

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London: Penguin, 1999, p.171.

⁹ Rowan Williams, ‘Secularism, Faith and Freedom’ in Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl, eds, *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, London: Continuum, 2008, pp.47-8.

¹⁰ see, for example, Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning*, London: Theos, 2008 - www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2008/12/08/talking-god-the-legitimacy-of-religious-public-reasoning]

¹¹ see, for example, Madeleine Bunting, ‘We must talk about our need for faith’, *The Guardian Weekly*, 10 April 2009, p.24.

¹² see, for example, Roger Trigg, *Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?* Oxford: OUP, 2007.

¹³ see for example, Chris Marshall, ‘What Language Shall I Borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology’, *Stimulus* 13:3, August 2005.

from the public domain, not only because religion is more high profile than before, but because, as Williams himself puts it, one of the consequences of religious interests being excluded from public debates is a coarsening of political discourse. Religious perspectives, argues Williams, are able to imbue the language of public deliberation with a ‘depth and moral gravity that cannot be generated simply by the negotiation of . . . balanced self interests’.¹⁴ British public theologian Elaine Graham has noted how ‘political theorists of many kinds are now asking questions about the self-sufficiency of the secular to furnish the public domain with sufficiently robust values for consensus.’¹⁵

Challenging the notions that a supposed neutral or value-free language can be found for public discourse; that religious voices will always seek a privileged right to be heard; and that a ‘secular’ space necessarily implies one where religious voices are excluded, scholars are arguing that, in the interests of justice, all voices, and all forms of reasoning, should be treated with equal respect in the public square – that we need an ‘inclusivist’ not ‘exclusivist’ secularism.¹⁶ As Yale law professor Stephen Carter has argued,

what is needed is not a requirement that the religiously devout choose a form of dialogue that liberalism accepts, but that liberalism develops a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers . . . What is needed . . . is a willingness to listen, not because the speaker has the right voice but because the speaker has the right to speak.¹⁷

This is a debate which I am keen to promote here in New Zealand, and it is interesting to note that part of the backdrop to it has been an increasing de-privatizing of religion in the last decade or two. While aspects of the secularization thesis associated with Marx, Durkheim, Weber and more recent scholars such as Peter Berger, still remain credible, its central assumption that religion is in permanent decline has necessarily become subject to revision as religion has re-emerged as a public phenomenon. As Berger generously wrote in the late 1990s, the assumption that we are living 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’, he wrote.¹⁸ The title of the influential

¹⁴ Jonathan Derbyshire and James Macintyre, ‘There is a Universal Human Nature’, *New Statesman*, 19 July 2010, p.32.

¹⁵ Elaine Graham, ‘Public Theology and the “Post-Secular” Condition: Politics, Pluralism and Public Discourse’, unpublished paper, 2011, p.3.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams defines these respectively as ‘procedural’ and ‘programmatic’ secularism.

¹⁷ Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, NY: Anchor Books, 1993, p.230; cited in Chaplin, *Talking God*, p.36.

¹⁸ Peter L. Berger, ‘The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview’ in Berger, ed, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1999, p.2.

recent book by Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God is Back*,¹⁹ is no mere rhetoric, and as eminent US sociologist José Casanova has observed, not only has religion ‘returned as a contentious issue to the public sphere of European societies’, it is even possible to detect a ‘significant shift’ in the European *Zeitgeist*²⁰ – a point underlined by the *God is Back* authors when they state that religion is now a part of intellectual discourse in Europe.²¹ Recent statements by, for example, Jürgen Habermas, might also be cited in support of this assertion.

This is not necessarily to say that there are now more religious believers than heretofore – though, *pace* certain reporters on the *Christchurch Press*, there is evidence that the practice of Christianity, and certain other faiths, is alive and growing even in some quarters here in New Zealand; it is more that religious voices are clamouring to be heard in the public square and arguing, as Roger Trigg has put it, that democracy has to recognize the existence of a range of varying viewpoints. Even if ‘conversations stop, and people cannot convince one another’, writes Trigg in response to Rorty, that ‘does not mean that the issues are no longer of public concern. ‘Public’ reason cannot be limited to what is easily resolvable. Democracy itself cannot afford to shirk contentious and difficult matters.’²² Thus what should happen, as Jonathan Chaplin argues in a recent essay, is that

all of us, whether religiously or secularly motivated, need to reckon with, and indeed encourage, the practice of what might be termed ‘confessional candour’ in political debate. In a culture characterised by clashing religious and secular world views, 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.²³

What I think makes this debate even more interesting – and relevant – is the acknowledgement which seems to be informing it that religion has something worthwhile and distinctive to say – an acknowledgement being made by scholars representing both ‘faith’ and non-believing or sceptical positions. The shrill voices arguing that religion is either inherently malign or so preposterous in its claims as to be worthy only of ridicule or disdain, now appear to be increasingly ignored and sidelined, even by fellow atheists embarrassed by the stridency of their tone and their lack of academic rigour and openness to informed, serious dialogue. Now, as Rowan Williams noted in his Easter Day sermon this year,

¹⁹ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, NY: The Penguin Press, 2009.

²⁰ José Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’ in Hent de Vries, ed, *Religions: Beyond a Concept*, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008, p.101.

²¹ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God Is Back*, pp.137 and 194-5.

²² Trigg, *Religion in Public Life*, p.206.

²³ Chaplin, *Talking God*, p.51.

there are a few signs that the climate is shifting ever so slightly – not towards a mass return to faith but 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.²⁴

One intriguing indication of this, to which I shall return shortly, has been Alain de Botton's much-acclaimed treatise *Religion for Atheists*, subject of a special issue of *The Listener* earlier this year.²⁵ While having no truck whatsoever with the idea of belief in God, de Botton sets out, as he puts it, 'to reverse the process of religious colonization' whereby religion has claimed (probably unjustly) 'as its exclusive dominion areas of experience which should rightly belong to all mankind – and which [secularists] should feel unembarrassed about reappropriating for the secular realm'.²⁶ Two other recent books, *What Money Can't Buy* by the Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel,²⁷ and Robert and Edward Skidelsky's *How Much Is Enough*,²⁸ both raise the (to some, perhaps, surprising) possibility that a religious perspective might be helpful in enabling us to look more critically at where our recent economic activity has led us. What this new direction in intellectual thought would seem to point up is the truth of the claim, articulated with great clarity and grace by the Chief Rabbi in the UK, Jonathan Sacks, in a lecture in 2009, that humanity's ultimate search for meaning has to take us beyond what can be offered by 'science', 'philosophy', 'the market', 'the state' and other putative sources of meaning.²⁹ 'It is our last best hope', says Sacks, 'if we seek to find meaning, as people in the Abrahamic monotheisms have always tried to do, in concepts like freedom, justice, human dignity, compassion, love, forgiveness and hope.'³⁰

That we should still seek meaning in religion in the twenty-first century, that ideas and values drawn from worldviews based on *faith* should still claim attention among serious, liberal-minded scholars, seems on one level surprising. Yet in point of fact, as a number of writers have been arguing in recent years, it is not as though faith has played no part in how the world has been run in the last decade or two (and to that extent claims that the public square has always been value-free need to be tempered). As John Gray, another writer from a non-religious standpoint who acknowledges the contribution that religion can make to political discourse, has pointed out, while the return of theology to public

²⁴ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2440/archbishops-easter-sermon-2012-god-raised-jesus-to-life> [accessed 20 April 2012]

²⁵ *New Zealand Listener*, Issue 3747, 3 March 2012.

²⁶ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion*, London: Hamish Hamilton, p.15.

²⁷ Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.

²⁸ Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough?*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.

²⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *Religion in Twenty-first Century Britain*, London: Theos, 2010, pp.12-14.

³⁰ Sacks, *Religion in Twenty-first Century Britain*, p.14.

debate may horrify secularists, [m]uch in recent discourse - not least the ideology of market fundamentalism – has consisted of faith masquerading as science.³¹ Theology, in other words, is at least open about its rootedness in faith! Alain de Botton also notes how, in their imagining ‘that paradise might be realized on this earth after just a few more years of financial growth and medical research’ secularists are no less naive and credulous than the religionists they frequently deride: ‘With no evident awareness of the contradiction’, de Botton writes,

they may, in the same breath, gruffly dismiss a belief in angels while sincerely trusting that the combined powers of the IMF, the medical research establishment, Silicon Valley and democratic politics could together cure the ills of mankind.³²

Even before the recent crisis Harvey Cox observed that, while questions to do with meaning, purpose and value once came from centres of society other than the market, now the market has assumed a godlike status with the qualities of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence;³³ and the US theologian Joerg Rieger notes how, whatever the circumstances, 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.³⁴ Here in New Zealand the respected commentator Bryan Gould has noted how it was a ‘touching faith in the infallibility of the market’ that produced our current difficulties,³⁵ and a senior economist with research and investment house UBS, Robin Clements, earlier this year took Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee to task for not intervening in Christchurch’s rental housing crisis and saying that the city’s critical rental shortage was ‘best left to the market’.³⁶ Gould suggests that we have now reached the point where to challenge the market is considered ‘immoral’,³⁷ and UK commentator Madeline Bunting talks about our having ‘lost a language in which to think about ethics’.³⁸

³¹ John Gray, review of *Red Tory* by Phillip Blond, *The Independent*, 2 April 2010.

³² de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, pp.183-5.

³³ Harvey Cox, ‘The Market as God’, *The Atlantic*, March 1999; cited in Jim Wallis, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street*, NY: Howard, pp.30-1.

³⁴ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009, pp.1-7.

³⁵ Bryan Gould, ‘Blind faith in market robs nation of its full potential’, *New Zealand Herald*, 12 January 2012 - <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/news/print.cfm?objectid=10778102&pnum=1> [accessed 18 January 2012]

³⁶ Olivia Carville, ‘Rental shortage: “State must step in”’, *The Press*, 13 April 2012, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/6734583/State-must-step-in-economist> [accessed 20 April 2012]

³⁷ Gould, ‘Blind faith in market robs nation of its full potential’.

³⁸ Madeline Bunting, ‘Time to dust off the big moral questions’, *The Guardian Weekly*, 26 February 2010, p.19.

In the business of prompting reflection on such core issues as how, and in whose interests, the market operates, issues which shape the very nature of our shared life together, ‘theology’ has a valuable contribution to make. If, as Michael Sandel and others claim, how priorities are allocated for spending on health, education, defence and so on are *moral* as well as economic questions,³⁹ then theology can have much to say about how such choices may be made and the principles and values involved. Of course, until two or three centuries ago, the idea that Christian ethics should inform thinking on issues like trade, usury or profit was axiomatic, and there are resources deep within the Judaeo-Christian tradition to challenge accepted wisdom on economic matters. We forget at our peril that Adam Smith was primarily a moralist, even if his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* – with its claim that ‘the perfection of human nature... is to feel much for others and little for ourselves’ – is less well known today than his *The Wealth of Nations*. And so drawing upon its Scriptures, which it will do with care, wisdom and imagination, theology can help to address deeper issues like the scope and purpose of market activity, what constitutes well-being and happiness, how to negotiate the tension between private accumulation and the welfare of the wider community, and – a question the Skidelskys address in their book – whether we can ever talk about an economics of ‘enough’.

Commenting on the recent global financial crisis Walter Brueggemann said that, while the specifics of that crisis were peculiarly modern, ‘biblical perspectives are pertinent because the fundamental issues of economics are constant from ancient to contemporary time...’⁴⁰ Thus, for example, we can argue that contemporary thinking can be usefully informed by Hebrew concepts such as *Jubilee*, which sought to see justice and mercy inform economic policies such that the poor and disadvantaged were enabled to remain full members of the community, and *Sabbath*, which allowed for breaks in consumption and encouraged responsible use of the earth’s resources. There is also much of value in the stories and narratives of the gospels, where Jesus is to be found challenging individuals who have cheated others to repent and change, symbolically overthrowing institutional expressions of exploitation and injustice, and anticipating a kingdom in which the most devalued and downtrodden will have the highest place at the banqueting table. The Judaeo-Christian scriptures also provide powerful visions of life as it might be lived, communities where all enjoy an abundance of life and, all having a stake in society, live together in peace and

³⁹ Michael Sandel, ‘Markets and Morals’, Reith Lectures 2009: ‘A New Citizenship’, 1, BBC Radio 4, 9 June 2009.

⁴⁰ 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), p.5.

harmony.⁴¹ The Hebrew word *shalom* perfectly encapsulates this: as British economist Hannah Skinner puts it,

shalom is a powerful concept that describes God's societal harmony, order, blessing and prosperity. It describes the biblical vision of the 'good life'. It covers total wellbeing in all aspects of life and describes a situation of abundance in which people have more than they need and communities live in peace.⁴²

So theology, I suggest, can both question naive, unreflective faith in the market, and prompt deeper reflection upon the purpose and goal of our economic activity. It will want to raise questions like: How can the market promote a good quality of life for all and not just some? Does our wellbeing consist primarily in our wealth and possessions, or do we have deeper, even spiritual needs which should be met? Is the main purpose of our existence to consume and possess, or were we created for higher things? Are we primarily motivated by self-interest or by a concern to co-operate, to be our brother's and sister's keeper? Should we measure an economy's success purely in terms of its growth, or also take into account objectives such as sustainability and wellbeing? Since almost every survey has shown that, as affluent societies have grown richer, so rates of anxiety, depression and other social problems have risen, not least among children, these questions are both necessary and urgent. What is our vision of human flourishing, individually and collectively?

Behind these questions lies the even more fundamental, and for that reason often ignored conundrum, what constitutes the 'good life' – which, I suggest, theology should not be afraid to address. It is, of course, one on which no community is likely to come readily to a common mind, but, as de Botton says, 'a lack of absolute agreement on the good life should not in itself be enough to disqualify us from investigating and promoting the theoretical notion of such a life.'⁴³ Indeed, just as Socrates maintained that the unexamined life is not worth living, so I suggest there are perils attendant upon a society which does not continually reflect upon *itself*.

One reason we would not readily explore this question in a liberal democracy is, of course, that it requires us to draw upon the language of beliefs, convictions and faith; and, as the former bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, has argued, libertarians in particular will 'fear that bringing comprehensive doctrines into

⁴¹ see, for example, Isaiah 65.17-25.

⁴² Hannah Skinner, 'Going Public with Public Theology: Developing Meaningful Discourse with the Wider World' in John Atherton and Hannah Skinner, eds, *Through The Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations Over Political Economy*, Peterborough: Epworth, 2007, p.17.

⁴³ de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p.83.

the political sphere could lead to the oppression or marginalisation of minority views by the majority whose view prevailed.⁴⁴ Indeed, for libertarians, from Mill on, any suggestion that the state should encourage us to think in any particular way, or intervene at all in a person's life other than to prevent him or her harming another, is unthinkable. Yet it is possible to say two things in response to this: firstly, in Scripture and much Church teaching, the state is called to have a more proactive role and govern in the *common* interest. As Jonathan Boston, Professor of Public Policy at Victoria University Wellington has written, reflecting St Paul's affirmation that governments are to be God's servants for human good,

the state is a divinely sanctioned institution whose primary purpose is to establish and enforce public justice and pursue the common good. This includes protecting the interests of the least advantaged citizens and ensuring that everyone has a permanent stake in their society and economy.⁴⁵

And second, it simply cannot be the case that societies – including ours – operate without *some* conception of what the 'good life' consists in, or how they wish each member to live, even if it does so more by default than design. Hence to suggest that we debate the nature of the good society is less to initiate a new project than to seek to make explicit what is currently *implicit*, unacknowledged and, crucially, unexamined.

There is a sense in which the state *does* consciously promote certain values, of course, and that is through the school system: 'diversity'; 'equity through fairness and social justice'; 'community and participation for the common good'; 'ecological sustainability'; 'integrity – embracing honesty, responsibility, accountability and acting ethically'; these are all values which we seek, officially, to encourage our young to embrace from an early age.⁴⁶ The problem is, we might say, that these values are often not reflected in the lives of the adults our children witness in the media and elsewhere, pausing us to ask how serious we are about expecting children to take them seriously, or, perhaps more interestingly, why they are not promoted *outside* as well as inside schools.

I'll return to this in a moment, but let me first identify the central question I suggest we need to ask, namely, what is our society for? We ask such a question

⁴⁴ Richard Harries, *Faith in Politics? Rediscovering the Christian Roots of our Political Values*, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2012, pp.21-2.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Boston, 'Building a Responsible Society', unpublished paper, 1998; cf. Jonathan Boston, 'Christianity in the Public Square' in Jonathan Boston and Alan Cameron, eds, *Voices for Justice: Church, Law and State in New Zealand*, Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, pp. 18-20.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Education: The New Zealand Curriculum Online - <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-documents/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum/Values> [accessed 19 July 2012]

of our institutions, but not so often of our societies. Do we in fact see ourselves as a ‘society’, as a collective entity, or as separate, and separated, individuals and families? Are we content simply to strive for our own individual comfort, and to see our individual rights protected, or can we hold to some higher object connected with our quality of life together, our shared wellbeing and happiness? Do we want to create maximum opportunity for individual accumulation, or focus more on our collective wellbeing? Or can we do both? And can we weave into our thinking that strong emphasis on the spirit promoted within Māoridom, that sense that the spiritual aspect of the human is as important as the physical attributes, an integral part of human personality? Whatever answers we may come up with, is it not worth debating such fundamental issues – issues which take us far beyond mere party politics to the very foundations upon which our society is built?

The fear in our democracy, as we have noted, is that, if such a discussion were ever to occur, some voices would be heard over others, some values imposed which not all could concur with. But the point, surely, is that our public square is never free from voices seeking to influence our behaviour and thinking – for example, the advertisers who fill our television screens and public spaces with their enticements (or sometimes it seems commands) to buy their product, the ‘celebrities’ whose views are constantly sought on every topic and whose fame is used to encourage us to act in certain ways. Would promoting different messages be an infringement of personal freedom, or a way of offering greater choice in the values we might adopt?

To illustrate what I am trying to say let me draw again from de Botton’s insightful new book. In reflecting upon the concern we might have as libertarians to keep our public spaces neutral and value-free, de Botton speculates what might happen were billboards to appear in our streets proclaiming the merits of a virtues like ‘forgiveness’ or ‘kindness’ (he even has a photo of what such a hoarding would look like!)⁴⁷ Such postings would, of course, ‘constitute dramatic infringements on our much-prized “liberty”’, de Botton concludes, yet ‘even in societies theoretically dedicated to leaving us free to make our own choices, our minds are continually manipulated in directions we hardly consciously recognize.’⁴⁸ The invitation – one might also say impulsion – to spend and spend again is with us every moment, no less so in our homes than outside them. Thus were a state to decide to promote values such as, for example, ‘sharing’ or ‘generosity’ – to extend, in other words, what it currently does only within schools – it would be no more an infringement of our collective freedom than we experience now. Indeed, in de Botton’s view, ‘a libertarian state worthy

⁴⁷ de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p.89.

⁴⁸ de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p.87.

of the name would try to redress the balance of messages that reach its citizens away from the merely commercial and towards a holistic conception of flourishing'.⁴⁹

Though he may be writing from a thoroughly secular perspective, de Botton makes, I think, a profound point. Not only is he saying that consciously promoting values is entirely consistent with a secular 'public square', but that we do, in any case, despite our pretensions to freedom and neutrality, allow and even embrace the promotion of certain values and ways of behaviour and thought over others. What Phillip Blond, one of David Cameron's former advisers, points out with respect to the UK is, I think, true here, that the voices we hear most today are no longer those who 'will put different points of view before us with integrity and after careful consideration of alternative positions': rather it is those of what he calls the 'new persuaders', 'the advertising executives, the spin-doctors, the pollsters, all the contemporary sophists'. It is their voices that we hear in preference to those of 'leaders of voluntary associations, energetic priests ministering to their flocks, local trade union leaders, mothers helping each other with childcare, and local charities.'⁵⁰

So where does this leave us, and how might we go about promoting a conversation about the good society? One of the aims of our Centre at Otago is to promote informed, constructive and respectful dialogue around issues of current concern, and we have found such a ready appetite for our public discussions that we are increasingly making them accessible beyond Dunedin by live-streaming them across the internet and recording them for subsequent download. So the academy could be one forum for taking these ideas forward and promoting reflection upon the 'good society'. Government, too, could have an important role, and it would be interesting to see the response should a government of any political hue seek to generate a nationwide discussion about the nature, goal and purpose of our society and the values we wish to see endorsed. But vital, too, as already hinted, is the contribution of the media, which currently would appear to see its role as more to reflect ourselves back to us than inform, stimulate or challenge us to higher ideals. Seldom do we see on our main television channels – and especially now with the passing of almost our last public service station – programmes which aspire to take us, as individuals or a society, above ourselves, which seek, in the Reithian spirit, to inform and educate as well as entertain. The current trend of both radio and television to give the opinions of the person in the street on matters of law or technology equal status to those of acknowledged experts in those fields is just one example of the reflective rather

⁴⁹ de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p.88.

⁵⁰ Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, London: Faber & Faber, 2010, pp.169-70.

than educative or uplifting approach of the media. In the same way that we could not stick up posters on the sides of buildings promoting the virtues of forgiveness or compassion for fear of being charged with imposing values on the public consciousness, so television and radio stations would undoubtedly eschew suggestions that they offer programmes with a strong moral content or which seek to promote genuine debate about what we should collectively value and admire. Yet as Philip Blond has remarked with respect to the BBC, which explicitly *does* take the line that it should not suggest what people ought to watch or be, the media do suggest what we should be, even if they do so ‘in negative mode’ by ‘saying that we ought as a culture to represent nothing very particular or distinct at all.’⁵¹

So do we live without an adequate account of society and, if so, are we content with that? Or should we examine our society and imagine how things might be better, what fresh approaches we might find to the challenges we face? Would it not be a sign that we are truly a free society that we were able to do that in an informed, respectful and open way? Can we find a way to decide together the issues we want to prioritise, those sections of the community whose needs we especially want to see met, and how to resource the choices we have made? Can we together find ways to continue to create the wealth we need while also ensuring that the most marginalized share fully in the life of their society? Can we even touch areas which have long been taboo, like whether we are too selfish to pay the taxes, or contribute in other ways to raising the new money necessary, to solve the housing crisis afflicting our poor communities, or to resource properly the mental health sector, or programmes to rehabilitate prisoners, or even our emergency ambulance service? In other words, in shaping a vision of what we want, can we explore new and creative ways to resource its realisation, rather than peremptorily finding reasons why it cannot be achieved and limiting our horizons accordingly? The challenge with all visions is to keep them firmly earthed in the real world, but a commitment to think creatively about the future, to tackle problems with a different mindset from that which created them, is to lay oneself open to new and potentially exciting possibilities.

And can we have a dialogue that is seasoned with respect and grace and which genuinely seeks out the truth? The point about Socrates, whom I mentioned a little earlier, is not just that an encounter with him encouraged you to question everything you thought you knew, it was a joint effort to obtain a new understanding conducted with gentleness and without malice. We are, of course, not short of dialogue and conversation today, as even a quick surf of the internet or spin of the radio dial will remind us, but little of it appears to be within a

⁵¹ Blond, *Red Tory*, p.141.

genuinely Socratic spirit. In his *The Passionless People Revisited*, published earlier this year, Gordon McLauchlan contends that ‘it is a characteristic of this country that there are no debates, only arguments which immediately become seen as personal attacks.’⁵² And Karen Armstrong makes the point that, all too often in debates today ‘it is not sufficient for us to seek the truth; we also have to defeat and even humiliate our opponents.’⁵³

This is in many respects one of the happiest, safest and most enjoyable places in the world to live. A Gallup Poll in 2010 ranked us the 8th happiest country in the world,⁵⁴ and a poll last November showed that 70 per cent of people who live in New Zealand consider the quality of life here to be ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’.⁵⁵ We are among the top ten countries offering an ‘appealing lifestyle’,⁵⁶ and for the last two years have topped Transparency International’s league table of least corrupt nations.⁵⁷ Yet, as we all know, we face some profound challenges today which require careful analysis, fresh thinking and long-term solutions – to which we all need to contribute employing ‘confessional candour’, drawing upon our own deeper insights and, where we have them, convictions grounded in faith.

In addition we seem increasingly to be losing faith in politics, with participation in elections declining and a growing belief in some quarters that our views no longer matter, that politics is not for us, that decision-making is increasingly happening further away. But democracy, as the South African theologian John de Gruchy argues, is both ‘a *vision* of what society should become, and... a *system* of government that seeks to enable the realization of that vision within particular contexts.’⁵⁸ How far can we recapture that understanding of democracy by both seeking a vision together and working together to see it realized? The eminent Indian economist Amartya Sen has argued that reasoning, even more than elections, is what democracy is about,⁵⁹ and if we could find a way to ‘reason together’ we might restore faith in our democratic processes, remedy the sense of alienation many feel from the process, and begin to fashion a shared vision of the kind of society we want together to build. As we noted Roger Trigg arguing earlier, democracy needs to grapple with contentious and difficult matters, and must find both the language and processes to do that.

⁵² Gordon McLauchlan, *The Passionless People Revisited: New Zealanders in the 21st Century*, Auckland: David Bateman, 2012, p.22.

⁵³ Karen Armstrong, ‘We must learn from Socrates’, *The Guardian Weekly*, 20 November 2009, p.24.

⁵⁴ ‘NZ 8th happiest’, *Otago Daily Times*, 5 July 2012.

⁵⁵ Michael Donalson, ‘20/20 vision for 2050’, *Sunday Star Times*, 13 November 2011, A4.

⁵⁶ ‘NZ ranked one of top five countries’ *Otago Daily Times*, 29 September 2011.

⁵⁷ ‘Least corrupt country’, *Otago Daily Times*, 31 December 2011.

⁵⁸ John de Gruchy, ‘Democracy’ in Adrian Hastings, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 157; cited in Harries, *Faith in Politics?*, p. 64.

⁵⁹ cited in Harries, *Faith in Politics?*, p. 66.

As I have suggested, in the search for a ‘good society’ theology would be an active partner, bringing as it would affirmations of our need to build a common life together; the importance of genuine and truth-seeking dialogue; the imperative that societies practice justice and compassion with respect to those who are most weak and vulnerable; and the value of vision. At the heart of most major faiths is a deep commitment to building and nourishing community, to finding ways of living together in peace, harmony and love, and to the promotion, as we noted Jonathan Sacks arguing earlier, to the concepts of human dignity, compassion, forgiveness and hope; and in the Christian tradition, with its understanding of the triune nature of the Godhead, and practice of regularly sharing a meal to remember the broken body of Christ, the values of community, equality, relationality and interdependence are particularly underscored. How far would we want to see such values underpin our common life?

I cannot prescribe how we take forward this discussion, or even how to gauge our appetite to have it. There are certainly others calling for such a conversation, including Gordon McLauchlan who, revisiting his famous 1976 thesis that New Zealanders are a ‘passionless people’, bemoans that here ‘there is no passion to give us a dream of the good life, a vision of love and beauty, a sense of a variety of lifestyles, of alternative viewpoints and philosophies through which we may fulfil ourselves in different ways.’⁶⁰ Gareth Morgan and Susan Guthrie, with their book *The Big Kahuna*,⁶¹ are also calling for a profound rethink about the priorities we follow as a society. Could the forthcoming review of our constitution embrace a consideration of our ‘core values’?

What I do know is that, in considering possible ways forward, we are always confronted with the choice between cynicism and hope – and that theology should always embrace and promote the latter. In the Christian tradition, hope is not some kind of wishful thinking, a sense of vague optimism that things may turn out all right in the end. As the American writer and activist Jim Wallis has put it, hope is primarily a *decision*, a decision based on what we believe at the deepest level, our most basic convictions about the world and what the future holds. We choose hope, not as a naive wish, but as a *choice*, with our eyes wide open to the reality of the world – just like the cynics, who have made the decision *not* to hope.⁶² How far might we, as a society, choose hope over cynicism as we look to the future?

⁶⁰ McLauchlan, *The Passionless People Revisited*, p.70.

⁶¹ Gareth Morgan and Susan Guthrie, *The Big Kahuna: Turning Tax and Welfare in New Zealand on its head*, Auckland: PiP, 2011.

⁶² Jim Wallis, ‘What Is Acceptable? What Is Possible?’, Commencement Address, Georgetown University, 19 May 2007 - <http://college.georgetown.edu/43583.html> [accessed 5 May 2012]