PUBLIC THEOLOGY? NO THANKS, I'LL STICK WITH THE NORMAL KIND

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It is, of course, a great honour to be standing here, and one which I have in no sense come to terms with. When I look back over my 'career' since I left school under a cloud at the age of 16, this is hardly the outcome I would have imagined. And when I think of my teachers and others who knew me in my teens and twenties, their faces would simply have glazed over in disbelief had they been told that I would one day hold a chair in the most prestigious university in a major commonwealth country.

My route to this point has hardly been that of the conventional academic. Thirty years ago, at the age of 25, I was just completing my ninth year in a dead-end job in a small government office, and although by that point I had begun to sense that there *might* be more to life than forty years as a civil servant followed by an index-linked pension, I had little expectation of building a radically new career. Even when I negotiated my way into Bristol University the following year – something I had to do on account of my unorthodox qualifications – there was no vocational intent behind my choice of subjects – I simply opted for two that I had a passion for, Theology and Politics. It was while at Bristol, however, that I conceived the idea of an academic career, and count myself fortunate to have been able to spend a further few years, after graduating, laying the foundations for that.

Included in that process was a period here in Dunedin in the early 1990s when, having written a thesis under David McLellan at Kent comparing the 17th-century Diggers with 20th-century priests inspired by liberation theology, I took up a post-doctoral fellowship in church history with Peter Matheson to do some work on Thomas Müntzer. It did not seem in the least bit strange, either to Peter or me, that someone should come from *England* to *New Zealand* to work with a *Scotsman* on a *German* Reformer – and nor does it now. In order to impose some discipline on my studies I enrolled for a Master of Theology by dissertation, and submitted my research for that degree. I am proud to be wearing that particular hood –

which I have never worn before, since I did not return to Dunedin for my graduation – this evening.

One of the things that made my first stay in Dunedin so enjoyable was living at Knox College under the mastership of the Rev Peter Marshall, and it has been good to renew acquaintance with Peter, and many other friends from that time. Through being a part of the community at Knox I came to understand a little about the New Zealand worldview, about what matters here and what doesn't – in particular, how few things matter more than sport, and how beating Australia at any form it matters more than anything. Humour is a major part of this, of course, and I have often dined out on one particular incident which took place at Knox during my stay there. In anticipation of a visit to Australia I had acquired the necessary visa form for a UK citizen, and a few friends gathered round to help me fill in out. All was going smoothly until I reached the question which read 'Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offence?' and, as my pen hovered over the 'no' box, one of my helpful advisors said, 'of course, you know what you should really put in there?' No, I said, and as one person the group responded, 'Oh hell, is that still a requirement?'

If I have one regret about this evening it is that neither of my parents has lived to share in it. I sometimes wonder what they would have made of all this, not just because I gave them so much heartache during my time at school, but because my mother in particular, coming from a family with no history of post-compulsory education, was firmly of the view that 'going to university' was the kind of thing *other* people did, not us. I remember well her discomfort when my sister began a teacher-training course a few years before I enrolled at Bristol, encapsulated perhaps in a remark she made when told a few years later that I was to be awarded an MA: 'I used to think you had to be really clever to get one of those'.

If one of the reasons I put myself in the frame for this job was the fond memories I had of Dunedin, the overriding factor was the challenge of the job itself, and the rare opportunity it offered me to draw on the different experiences I have had over the last 25 or so years. One has been exploring through research and teaching the history and 'theory' of the relationship between faith and public life, and this has led me both back to mainstream and marginal figures in Christian history as well as to South Africa emerging from apartheid and Nicaragua under a revolution inspired by a 'liberation theology' reading of Scripture; but I have also had considerable 'hands-on' experience, particularly during my five years with the United

Reformed Church, of seeking to articulate the concerns of the church in the public square, and of working at Westminster to develop conversations between politicians and church-people. I do not underestimate the value of this extra-academic work, this engagement in the arena where the rubber of faith actually hits the road of politics, because what this post demands of its holder is not that they spend all of their time writing learned theoretical papers about what 'public theology' might be, but actually *doing* it. (OK, they will spend *some* of their time writing papers – I have the letters PBRF engraved on my heart like everybody else in the division! – but not all of it.)

It's still early days, of course, but I believe some useful groundwork has been done. Over the last sixteen months I have written and taught new courses; given lectures, talks and sermons across the two islands; initiated a number of research projects; begun to attract postgraduate and post-doctoral students; and hosted a series of 'conversations' with public figures and created space for a type of discourse not often found elsewhere. Thank you if you've been able to support any of these ventures: it's been heartening to see good numbers attending our public events and interest in them and the Centre steadily growing, and if you aren't yet on the mailing list to receive news of events hosted by the Centre please e-mail me at the address on your card.

This is not the place for a summary of the past year's activities, nor a preview of the Centre's future plans. What I would say, in terms of the last year, is that I have valued immensely the opportunity to meet so many people and organizations doing public theology in Aotearoa/New Zealand and, in conversation with them, begin to ascertain the most appropriate and effective role for a Centre situated some distance from the seat of power and within an academic rather than an ecclesiastical structure.

In terms of the future, it is good to report that a number of plans are beginning to assume a concrete form. In partnership with a sister think-tank in the UK we are developing a resource to feed into the forthcoming debate around MMP, and putting together an event to explore the question 'what makes a good city?'. This ought to prove particularly interesting given the issues with which Dunedin is currently grappling and with local body elections on the horizon. We are also planning some values-based training for young leaders, a project in the area of prisoner rehabilitation, an event looking at hymns and social justice with a well-known Dunedin hymn-writer, and a couple of events involving dialogue with members of

other faiths. Finally, I am proud to announce this evening that, thanks to the generosity of the Paterson Charitable Trust, the first Howard Paterson Memorial Lecture will be held later this year, and will be given by one of the best-known and most effective 'public theologians' around at the moment, Jim Wallis, founder and CEO of the Sojourners Community in Washington DC and member of President Obama's inner circle of faith advisors. That will be on Tuesday 28 September, and a whole afternoon of events is lined up – so do make a note of that in your diary.

I guess I need to do something here that an engineer or an architect or a historian in this position might not need to do, and that is explain what my discipline is. Theology *period* we might understand as 'the study of the nature of God and religious truth' and – unless we are followers of Richard Dawkins – recognize it as a mainstream academic discipline. But what does it mean to talk of 'public theology'?

Answering that is not quite as straightforward as one might wish, for while the term 'public theology' has only been in use for about three decades, it has already attracted a number of definitions and been used in a variety of different ways, sometimes even in contexts where its use has not been explained. As leading US public theologian Harold Breitenberg writes in an essay published only last month, part of the problem lies in the fact that the term 'public theology' can be used 'to refer to a body of literature, a form of discourse, a way of doing theology and ethics, a tradition within the Christian church, and a field of study.' However, Breitenberg does also note that 'most conceptions of public theology overlap in various and significant ways' such that it is possible to fashion 'a consensus understanding and definition of [it] that is marked by several key features'. So let me outline briefly what I see as those key features.

Let's start with a good working definition: '*public theology involves inputting constructively to contemporary discourse in the public square, drawing upon the insights of the faith which it offers as "gift" to the secular world.'*

I think this captures its essence pretty well, but let me expand on it a little.

First, what do we mean by the term 'public square'? Traditionally this might have been a physical 'public space' where people gathered to discuss the issues of the day, the 'agora',

perhaps, of the Greek city states. Today we conceive of this square rather more abstractly, perhaps using something like the definition Charles Taylor employs in his magnificent book *A Secular Age*, of a ‘common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters’. So, Taylor suggests, our public square today is the world of newspapers, TV, radio, and increasingly the internet, the blogosphere, though as he stresses, we can still talk of ‘a’ common sphere, in the singular, ‘because although the media are multiple, as well as the exchanges which take place in them, these are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. The discussion we’re having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio debate yesterday, and so on.’

Taylor, of course, betrays the culture out of which he is writing, and I have to say that the public square *here* in New Zealand seems rather more *confined* than that in countries like the USA and my own. Coming from the UK I cannot help but observe how, for example, the absence of a choice of daily or Sunday newspaper seriously limits the space for public debate – notwithstanding the high standard of comment and analysis offered by our own ODT – as does the virtual absence on ‘free to air’ TV of programmes devoted to serious discussion of current affairs. Such news programmes as are available on these channels seem to want to entertain more often than enlighten, and to work on an assumption that viewers are incapable of absorbing anything longer than a 10-second sound-bite – in marked contrast, I have to say, to the fare provided by national radio. I think there are serious questions to ask about the reduced space for debate in this country, and the apparent lack of appetite for it, and the consequences of this for the effective functioning of democracy. As has been suggested to me, there is much that the popular media could learn from the model of the marae in terms of facilitating genuine and constructive discussion.

Second, what does it mean to talk about ‘drawing upon the insights of the faith’ to contribute constructively to public discourse? Here we get to the nub of what it means to do public theology: what resources do we have, what authority do we accord those resources, and *how* are they to be used?

I would want to argue that an authentic Christian public theology will be informed by both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, recognizing both as disclosing information about the nature of God and the nature of God’s dealings with, and purposes for, humanity.

Public theology will be informed by many other sources as well – it can hardly contribute effectively in the public square without drawing upon the insights of other disciplines, for example, and it goes without saying that it will use the wealth of social teaching in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions: but the character of its work, the principles upon which it is predicated, must emerge from an honest and open engagement with the texts upon which the Christian faith is grounded. Any other approach, it seems to me, leaves us making it up as we go along, and while such a process will also lead to creative and constructive contributions to the public square, it cannot qualify as theology.

But this whole area is hugely problematic. How, we might ask, can writings emanating from disparate communities scattered around the Middle and Near East over a period of several centuries have anything relevant to say to 21st-century New Zealand or to the wider global community? And why should it be thought necessary that they should?

In contrast to those confessional positions which understand texts contained in Scripture to be 'normative' for human conduct and binding on society today, public theology rejects the 'Christendom' approach which looks for an imposition of Judaeo-Christian 'values' from the top down. Quite the reverse, in fact, as my earlier use of the word 'gift' in relation to the insights of the faith suggests. Public theology *does* derive from Scripture a sense of the value God is perceived to place on human life, an understanding that God has (as liberation theologians used to call it) a preferential option for the poor, an appreciation of how a creation perspective can deepen respect for the eco-system: and it will want these insights to inform public discourse, contribute to the creation of just and peaceful communities, and increase the potential for human flourishing. But it will offer them as one contribution alongside others, recognizing that the days when theology was the only voice in the public domain are well and truly past. If theology is heard today it must be solely on account of the merit of what it has to say.

So public theology will not be afraid to engage with the Bible, recognizing that the God to be encountered there is inherently 'public' in character, acting decisively in human history and even identifying with it by taking human flesh. It will argue that a doctrine such as the Trinity has inescapably social implications, both in the sense that God, in becoming human, offers a model of social engagement and incarnation, and that God in Godself is characterized by community, dialogue and interaction.

To develop for a moment the theme of incarnation, the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus form an important resource for public theology, offering suggestive insights into how it might shape its praxis. From the outset, Jesus makes plain his intent to bring good news to the poor, the imprisoned and the oppressed, and then fleshes this out as he challenges individuals about their priorities with respect to money and possessions, embraces and heals those ignored and disdained by respectable society, affirms the peacemaker, the merciful and the meek, attacks the extortioner and the profiteer, challenges selfishness and corruption in high places, and announces and anticipates the coming of the kingdom by offering an alternative model for social relationships grounded in love.

The Hebrew Scriptures which informed Jesus' ministry highlight similar themes of relevance to public theology. In Genesis, for example, God is depicted as the author of life, the creator of all people in the one Image – with an equality of status and dignity – who are mandated to steward and tend the earth. In the Exodus narrative, God is the liberator from captivity and slavery, the one who promises abundant life symbolized by a surfeit of milk and honey in place of exploitation and death. In the provision of manna, or daily bread, in the wilderness, God is seen to be fostering among the people a spirit of gratitude for the 'enough' of God's bounty, curbing the tendency to seek private gain at the expense of others. In instituting the Sabbath, the Jubilee and days of fasting, boundaries are placed upon material consumption and the exploitation of the earth, preventing an entrenchment of social inequality and ensuring that those temporarily pushed to the margins are drawn back into the community rather than made permanently dependent upon its charity. And in recounting how God periodically raised up prophets to 'speak truth to power', the biblical writers emphasise the duty of governments to rule in the public interest, ensure that justice is practised, and hear the cause of the poor and needy.

Even in these brief references we can discern principles with potentially wider applicability than their original context, narratives which can prompt us to ask uncomfortable questions about, for example, our attitude to the planet and the created order; about the purpose of our market activity and the interests that our economy might be thought to serve; about the value we place on human life and criteria we employ when according respect, worth and status; about what makes for human wellbeing and flourishing and whether this is to be measured

solely in terms of material wealth; about the core values upon which we build our lives, our communities, our nation.

And it is because asking these questions is vital for the health and wellbeing of a community, and because these questions surface all too infrequently in the 'public square', that public theology has the temerity to describe its contribution to that space as both 'constructive' and 'gift'. It is not that theology's contribution is always distinctive or different or even original, but because it seeks to further, not its own interests, but, in the prophet Jeremiah's words, the 'welfare of the city', it may be better disposed to ask the difficult and disturbing questions than many others. At the heart of public theology is a conviction that the insights it can offer are relevant to all humanity, and on that basis it offers them in a spirit of generosity.

Two examples may exemplify this depiction of public theology as 'gift': first, the 'truth and reconciliation' process established under Desmond Tutu in South Africa after apartheid, which sought to enable that country to move on from its past, not by trying to forget that past or paper over the deep divisions that were its legacy, nor by indulging in recrimination, none of which could have laid the foundations for a peaceful and stable future; but by seeking to concretize the gospel categories of forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration, to make available the possibility of new start, reflecting the model which Jesus himself practised and promoted. Second, the drafting and promulgation by church leaders in the United States, in the months leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, of a workable, alternative strategy to invasion, one which, while taking account of the need to remove the tyrannical and hated regime, argued that this could be achieved without the death, destruction and destabilisation which followed the Bush- and Blair-led invasion, and which urged that the longer-term and wider geo-political issues of that region also be addressed. Had this plan been adopted, as it very nearly was, how different might the situation in that region be today.

The point of the rather silly title for this lecture will now, I hope, be clear: what other type of theology *is* there than a public kind? Is it possible to read the biblical texts other than as inherently 'public' in their focus? Is 'public theology', despite its apparent newness, simply what 'theology' has been about from the start? There's a degree of hyperbole in this of course, for theology announces the possibility of transformation at the individual as well as societal level and places much emphasis on the work of the cross in reconciling sinful men and women with a loving and forgiving God. But public theology does seek to expose the

impossibility of defining faith as simply a private matter – something which both Christians and atheists can, for different reasons, have a tendency, to do – and as Marion Maddox, until recently at Victoria University, points out, in one sense 'public theology' arose as a reaction to the 'privatization' of faith that had become so much a feature of late 20th-century religious practice. Jim Wallis, I think, gets the balance right when he defines faith as 'always personal but never private'.

This is not the place for a detailed critique of 'private' religion, but its almost exclusive focus on rescuing souls for heaven – and it's the focus itself that worries me more than the actual activity – can promote a profound indifference to the affairs of this world, a tendency which, I believe, renders it highly unorthodox. It is not just that it plays down the 'public' consequences of a faith position – how, one might ask, can one 'love one's neighbour' in today's global village without asking questions about the rules of global trade, the status of refugees or the impact of global warming; it overlooks the fact that the God we encounter in Scripture seems less passionate about 'religious' activities like worship – asking only that it be rooted in the practice of justice – than what goes on in the hurly burly of everyday life where the hungry need to be fed and those at enmity reconciled. Private theology's implicit assumption that there are, as it were, two histories in progress, one in which souls are being rescued for a far-off heaven – the 'history' God is really interested in – and the mundane world of terrorist attacks and economic downturns, famines and unemployment, rising sea levels and nuclear holocausts – seems to fly in the face of orthodox belief that it is into that mundane history that God became incarnate. Neither Scripture nor the creeds of the Church suggest that it is our destiny to live forever in a world beyond – as an alternative, I suppose, to the even worse fate of being 'left behind' – since it is *this* world that is waiting with eager longing to be set free from its bondage to decay (as St Paul puts it), it is here on this earth that we pray for the kingdom to come and God's will to be done as in heaven, and from this world that, according to the writer of Revelation, God will fashion a new heaven and a new earth.

That is why the resurrection, which still lies at the heart of the Church's creeds, is so central to public theology: whatever actually happened on that first Easter Sunday – and without there having been, as Bishop Tom Wright puts it, 'an event that actually occurred (in some sense) in time and space' Christianity makes no sense, either as a phenomenon or a praxis – the resurrection speaks of the irruption into history of 'the kingdom', of the future momentarily into the present. If, as Wright says, we understand the resurrection as 'only

(what we call) a “spiritual event”, either involving Jesus being alive now in some heavenly realm, or simply involving a new sense of faith and hope in our minds and hearts, the only events that will follow are various forms of private spirituality.’ But what in fact the writers of the gospels and Acts present is a challenge to concretize now the radical themes of peace, justice and inclusion that are at the heart of ‘the kingdom’ – to do, in other words, some serious public theology!

All of which leads us back to what you might think is the elephant in the living room this evening, namely how to make sense *today* of the resources upon which public theology wants to draw? As I have already hinted, public theology does not suggest that systems of government or economic principles drawn from the practice of ancient nomadic communities can be applied without reserve today. It does not suggest that quoting Bible verses *in itself* will cut any ice in public debate or carry any weight with opinion formers or policy-makers. But, as I have also hinted, it does believe that serious engagement with these texts, and a commitment to relate to them to our specific context, can provoke penetrating and incisive questions, challenge accepted norms, and nudge contemporary debates in unexpected and creative directions. Believing that they address human and social concerns common to all periods of history, public theology can draw out principles and insights from these texts which it will seek to feed in to public debate. So, for example, with respect to the global economic crisis, a topic on which I have been invited to write and speak a good deal in the past twelve months, we could say, with US theologian Walter Brueggemann, that ‘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 times, constants such as credit and debt, loans and interest, and the endless tension between the haves and have-nots.’ And this would apply, I would argue, with respect to issues across the board, from the privatisation of prisons to foreshore and seabed legislation, from carbon emissions trading to last month’s budget. And also with respect to global issues like the war on terror and the work of our Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan: public theologians in the United States, like Jim Wallis, are currently urging their President to place more emphasis on development rather than combat in tackling terrorism in Afghanistan, highlighting in the process the prophet Micah’s assertion that it is only when people are able to sit under their own vines and under their own fig tree – only when they have a stake in their society such than none can make them afraid – that they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

In fact there are really two elephants in the lecture theatre tonight, and the other relates to the final part of the definition of public theology I offered earlier. Even allowing that it is possible to offer, as a gift to the secular world, insights drawing on the resources of the faith, what grounds are there for thinking that the secular world will listen? How can public theology get a hearing in a self-consciously secular society like New Zealand?

There is, I think, some confusion about what 'secular' means, and as Rowan Williams helpfully points out, secularism comes in two guises – one, which seeks to exclude and privatise religious faith as much as possible – which he labels 'programmatic' secularism – and another, which he calls 'procedural' secularism, which seeks to allow all faith perspectives (and none) equal access to the public realm but to confer no privilege on any. This latter type of secularism, of course, has its roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which, by asserting that only God was sovereign, challenged the pretence of a Caesar or Pharaoh to be the source of ultimate truth. But even if, in this post Cold War period, procedural secularism is what we find in most contemporary societies, including our own, there is still the widespread view that religious language has no place in the public arena, that public discourse, to be truly public, must employ language, principles and reasoning which are intelligible to any reasonable person and based on public canons of validity. So, for example, a term like 'sanctity of life' must be ruled out of court because it embraces the concept of 'holiness' which can only be conferred upon something by God, and it is unacceptable to speak of the equal value of all people in terms of their having been 'created in the image of God'. Those familiar with the work of Rawls, Baggini, Audi and others will know the nuances of this debate, but the argument broadly goes that unless religious speakers recognize the need for a common language to exist in the public square they treat their hearers with a degree of disrespect and exclude them from the conversation. They treat others as less than equal if they do not adopt the language of common discourse, and that severely limits the scope for the kind of contribution I have been arguing this evening that public theology wants to make. (It's worth noting, though, if religious people feel aggrieved at this supposed need to 'dis-integrate' their beliefs and language, that exactly the same thing happens in reverse in the USA where no person serious about holding political office dare leave God language out of their speeches, whether or not it reflects their personal beliefs.)

Having said all this, there have been signs more recently of a shift in the tone of this debate, not least as, against all expectation, religion has burst back on to the scene and been perceived as having something useful to contribute to debates. As the title of the new book by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge has it, ‘God is Back’, and what they call ‘the global revival of faith’, which stretches from Africa to Latin America to, perhaps most surprisingly of all, China, can no longer be ignored. Not every aspect of this so-called ‘revival of faith’ is of course positive, but it is increasingly hard to ignore the challenge this variety of religious voices present as they reverberate around the contemporary public square. Paul Vallely, sometime adviser to Bob Geldof, has concluded that the key question today is whether we can create ‘something positive and healthy’ from ‘this crucible’, or whether we are ‘sleepwalking into an age of confrontation and blind defensiveness’. ‘We do need to do something more than contain or translate that which we fear and do not understand’, Vallely writes,

> We need to find a balance which maintains the secularist separation of church and state but which allows the thinking and acting of religions to play a part in shaping the post-atheist culture which is forming all round us. It is the search for a new political language, and it is a massive and vital task.’

I suggest we need to recognize the limitations of the requirement that religious people translate what they have to say into some supposed ‘common language’ (and there are, of course, questions about who determines what this ‘common language’ is). If all voices should be treated with equal respect in the public square, so, too, should all forms of reasoning. Another weakness of the demand that all public voices adopt a common language is that it tends to close down rather than open up genuine debate. Surely there is much to be gained by allowing all voices to speak with integrity and candour, by allowing for example, the full richness of a term like ‘sanctity of life’ to deepen ethical debates rather than insist that it be translated into some sort of secular Esperanto and lose its cutting edge.

Not that it is just religious people who need to ‘hide their working’ when entering the public square: as Jonathan Chaplin writes in a stimulating new monograph, secular reasons are no more or less ‘tribal’ than religious ones, and grounded just as much in hidden, contestable assumptions – such as ‘the moral autonomy of the rational individual’ or ‘the sovereign will of the people’. All of which makes very timely Vallely’s assertion that we need a new public discourse, one which allows space for all engaged in the public square to articulate the deeper

convictions underlying their language. As Stephen Heap has put it, this would result in a level of public discourse in which 'truth and truth claims are dealt with without ridicule but with deep acknowledgment that we disagree, at times profoundly so, and yet somehow have to survive together on the same plot of land. Creating such properly secular spaces', Heap concludes, 'is a major challenge to which we must rise if our conflicting allegiances are not to tear us apart.'

Of course, the purpose of 'confessional candour' must not be simply to enable all to parade their deepest convictions for its own sake: the point is to add to the quality of public debate, to contribute more effectively to the welfare of the city. So let me end with an example of how a new type of conversation might benefit us here in New Zealand, taking as a case study one which I plan to develop in the winter lectures I have been invited to give later this year on behalf of the University.

Almost everyone agrees that the size of our prison population is too high and rising too fast. While the rate of reported crime actually fell between 2004 and 2008, the rate of imprisonment over that same period rose by more than 20%. In cost terms alone this is worrying – the Department of Corrections saw a real increase in its spending over this period of 64% and it currently costs around $250 per day to keep someone in prison – but the trends at work here, and our apparent concern more with treating symptoms than causes, suggest the need for a very serious and wide-ranging debate.

The sort of debate we need, however, will not take place while the issue of crime and punishment remains a hot political potato, while policy is made less on the basis of evidence than in response to popular perceptions about the situation. The absence of space for informed public debate to which I alluded earlier does not help, and while the media can hardly be blamed for wanting to attract audiences by giving full coverage to major crime stories, that a similar amount of time and space is not accorded to seriously debating the issues, and most comment reduced down to 15-second sound-bites, clearly is unhelpful.

Were this issue to be taken out of the political arena – as has happened in, for example Finland – a debate informed by 'confessional candour' might be possible. Away from the glare of the media, and without the temptation to place popularity above conviction, a spirit of genuine openness could prevail, with beliefs and philosophies shared and a consensus to

meet agreed targets reached. This approach is hardly original – we already have a political consensus around, for example, our non-nuclear stance, funding for superannuation, the importance of the Treaty – and there would appear to be much merit in extending it to a issue like the one I have suggested.

I do not suggest for a moment that any of this would be easy – either getting agreement for a bi-partisan approach or finding any sort of consensus once it happened. These issues are complex: for example, rates of serious crime *are* increasingly at alarming levels, and tough measures are clearly necessary in many cases, but at the other end of the scale the suitability of prison in the case of other crimes needs to be considered in the light of evidence, as does our very high rate of recidivism and the potentiality of a restorative approach to help people make a fresh start after release. But the difficulties involved in finding a solution to this should not prevent us trying, and theology – which would have much to say on all these issues – should be among the voices drowning out those counselling despair, and calling instead for vision. If theology is about anything it is about hope and faith – which the writer to the Hebrews calls 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. Or, as Jim Wallis puts it, 'believing despite the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.' In fact, if there is one sentence that sums up what public theology aspires to be, that is probably it.