Doing God, Doing Good:
The Role of Theology in the 'Public Square'

By Andrew Bradstock

In a *New York Times* article in 1968 the distinguished American sociologist Peter Berger predicted that '[by] the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture'. Thirty years later, in his book *The Desecularization of the World*, Berger admitted that events had not borne out his forecast: 'the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false', he wrote: 'the world today, with some exceptions.. is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.'

About this he was clearly right: religion is now certainly 'back on the map', in some places with a vengeance. While the number of actual believers may not have risen dramatically, statistics show that coverage of 'religious' stories in the Western media has increased enormously in the last decade. Faith is now a matter of great interest and concern to many – not just in the media but in the policy and business communities and, for obvious reasons, the police and security services. It is under the microscope to an extent we could never have imagined a generation ago, and we fail to understand it at our peril. Certainly any government serious about social cohesion now has to take the major faith traditions seriously and grapple with their history, traditions, culture and dynamics. Eight years ago the editors of the book *God and Government* noted that, even in a relatively secular state like New Zealand, religion retains its capacity 'simultaneously to inspire, animate, and offend'. And surely another indication of the influence religion is having today is the growing number of books coming off the presses devoted to attacking it – such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great*. What would be the point of such invective unless 'God' were now perceived to be making a come-back?

Partly this come-back has been triggered by developments which have cast religion in a negative light, such as the unspeakable events of 9/11, the subsequent indiscriminate attacks in Madrid, London, Bali and elsewhere, and the equally unjustifiable events consequent upon these at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. But there has also been a

new 'assertiveness' about religion across the board, whether it's strident protests by Hindus and Christians about stage-shows and works of art they deem offensive to their faith, violent demonstrations by Muslims over cartoon images of the Prophet published in newspapers, anti-government activity by Buddhist monks in Burma, or the sometimes less than wholesome influence on US politics exerted by the so-called 'moral majority'. Religion is here, and its renaissance has clearly caught politicians, media people and other opinion formers on the back foot and struggling to find the grammar to make it intelligible. Much ill-informed talk in the Western media about 'Muslim fundamentalism' and 'militant Islam' has served both to confirm suspicions about the destructive potential of religion when it 'goes public', and to discourage people in public life from anything approaching a confessional statement, for fear of being misunderstood and claiming divine sanction for their policies. Prominent among these has been former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who explained his almost total silence about his faith whilst in office in terms of a fear of being taken for a 'nutter'. His advisors also worked hard to ensure he never strayed into public discourse about his faith, his official spokesperson Alistair Campbell on one celebrated occasion cutting in before the Prime Minister could answer a journalist's question about his religious views by saying, 'We don't do God; I'm sorry, we don't do God'!

I see this as a great challenge to those of us who understand faith to be a force for *good* in the world: at a time when religion is under the spotlight and when much of it is dismissed as dangerous, toxic and murderous, we need to be assertive with our own alternative model. Surely, we will say, the answer to 'bad' religion is not – as a Dawkins or a Hitchens might assert – *no* religion, but *good* religion, and we have seen examples of this in recent years as millions of believers world-wide have campaigned against global poverty through Jubilee 2000, Drop the Debt and Make Poverty History. Churches have deepened their commitment to their local neighbourhoods through engagement in regeneration projects, community action and welfare provision. For many people of faith, 'doing God' also means 'doing good', and I want to spell out more precisely how I believe we can do this in a moment.

First, though, I want to affirm that theology does have a public dimension. I have long argued, in print and other media, that the only authentic Christianity is a *radical* Christianity, by which I mean one that constantly refreshes itself by revisiting its roots in Scripture; and when we look at the figure of Jesus as presented to us in the gospels we see one whose mission was undeniably public. At the heart of Jesus' life and teaching was the message of the kingdom which, for him, clearly did not cash out solely in a post-mortem existence but posited a profound challenge to the status quo. It was a message that not only transformed individuals in their behaviour and orientation but profoundly challenged cultural assumptions about power, status, wealth and identity. Of course there *was* an eschatological dimension, but, as the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz has reminded us, envisioning of the kingdom as the 'omega point' of history further contributes to its 'public' dimension by highlighting its public verifiability.

Further, the Hebrew scriptures which informed Jesus' ministry assume that faith will be lived in what we now call the 'public square'. Imperatives to public engagement might include, for example, a recognition of the human calling to stewardship of the Earth in the creation narrative in Genesis; an understanding of the Fall of humankind in terms of what Hannah Skinner (of the William Temple Foundation) has called 'the presence of finitude and sin such that we must live within and address the consequences and shortcomings of a broken context'; a conviction that all women and men are created in the image of God and are to be valued equally; and an appreciation that the poorest and most vulnerable are of special significance to God and deserving of a 'preferential option' in their favour.

The early Christian communities also understood the public dimension of the message with which they had been entrusted by their risen and ascended Lord. While we cannot find in the Acts of the Apostles a blueprint for engagement with public issues, in the way that the early believers engaged in *public proclamation* – telling the story of what God had done in their lives; in *public assembly* - meeting in the Temple courts as well as privately; in *public action* – performing signs and wonders and sharing their possessions to give to the poor and needy; and in *public confrontation* – a rejection of an automatic 'yes' to the demands by the powers that be, a public commitment to an alternative

authority – they demonstrated that authentic obedience to their Lord's command 'follow me' would challenge *their* own communities no less than the mission and witness of Jesus had impacted on his. Much as sceptics might want to keep faith away from the public arena, and much as the church itself has interpreted the faith in largely individualistic, privatised terms, since the challenges presented to it by 'the Enlightenment', I would argue that, from its very origins, the Christian church has been called to tell – perhaps more accurately, as Hauerwas would say, perform - its narrative in the public gaze and with a view to making a public impact. In my book *Louder Than Words* last year I discussed some of the big issues on which I believe we are challenged to reflect theologically today – including climate change; war, terrorism and peace-making; inter-faith relations and social cohesion; and material and spiritual poverty – while also demonstrating how, in all these areas, churches are making, and should continue to make, a significant impact for good. A book I edited a few years prior to that, *Asylum Voices*, undertook a similar approach with respect to the issues around refugees and people seeking asylum.

So – to return to the central concern of this paper - how do we most effectively make our theology impact on our society today? I want to suggest eight criteria:

First, we need a clear vision of what we want to achieve. Often the church will make a contribution to a public debate on a knee-jerk basis or simply because it is expected that it will 'say something'. In his classic study of the church and public affairs, Keith Clements notes that one of the most widespread demands from within – and even without – Christian circles, whether in response to a famine in Africa, an upheaval in Eastern Europe or a government announcement of public spending cuts, used to be that 'the church's voice be heard', whether or not it had anything meaningful or interesting to say. It was simply expected that the church would want to comment. But if they are to make any impact, religious leaders will need to be strategic in how they respond, recognizing that simply 'saying something' for the sake of it is not enough: issues of coherence, timing and narrative need to be taken into account.

Second, and closely tied in with this, contributions to public debate from a theological perspective need to say something distinctively theological. Church statements should not merely say what could have been said – or is being said – from a secular standpoint, but draw on our rich heritage of Scripture and church teaching to provoke a deeper understanding of issues, provide fresh insights into contemporary debates and thereby enrich public discourse. A church authority particularly adept at this is the Vatican, whose statements over the last hundred years – while they might be critiqued on other grounds – are unashamedly rooted in Catholic Church teaching and claim an originality based on the singular understanding of the human condition that the Church, as custodian of the Apostles' teaching, claims to have inherited. Thus a Christian public theology for today should be informed, for example, by an understanding of the redeeming, life-affirming and transforming power of the Cross, the importance of 'community' which we see modelled in the doctrine of the Trinity, the vision of justice implicit in teaching of the kingdom. Proclaiming the life and message of Jesus with respect to 'public issues' should be as natural for the church as proclaiming it in other contexts – and might be summed up in Jesus' words 'I am come that they might have life in all its fulness', a teaching central to any assertion that to 'do God' is to 'do good'.

Thirdly, public theology, while being rooted in Scripture, will be informed by contemporary research. Nothing is more likely to lead to the dismissal (or ridicule) of a statement than evidence that it is unencumbered by sound knowledge and understanding of the issue addressed, no matter how finely tuned its theological underpinning. The liberation theologians of the 1980s drew much (largely ill-informed and highly politicised) criticism upon their work by suggesting that, in order to relate the values of the kingdom to their particular context, they needed to draw upon insights offered by the social sciences and, in particular, Marxism. As some of the priests and theologians whom I encountered in Nicaragua in the 1980s – when I was researching and writing about the role of the churches in the Sandinista-led revolution – used to say, Scripture may provide the imperative to build a just society but it cannot offer guidance as to a programme for its realisation in specific historical settings. Crucially, for public theology to engage meaningfully in contemporary debates, it must take a cross-disciplinary approach, demonstrating its awareness of the current state of expert and

professional thinking in the relevant field, be that genetics, economics, climatology, education, transport or the arts.

This has been an issue for a network I co-founded in 2001 called 'JustShare'. Bringing together a number of mainstream Christian churches and agencies, and based in a church at the heart of the City of London, JustShare seeks to raise awareness among the financial institutions in the City about social justice and challenge them about the role they can play in tackling global poverty. We use a variety of approaches to achieve this, including sending delegations to meet with the chief executives of banks, inviting senior City people to breakfast with bishops and directors of large NGOs, promoting Fairtrade within the City and hosting public debates and seminars. In addition, because we believe these issues should be debated 'on the street' as well – and perhaps to maintain an edginess and unpredictability to our work – we stage an annual May Day rally on the steps of the Royal Exchange with a 'sermon for the City' delivered by a well-known figure. We have found a real niche for this form of public theology and our work has steadily grown, but it was not until a year or two after our formation that we acknowledged and addressed our collective ignorance about how the City operates and what our specific 'asks' of its institutions were. Engaging the services of experts with a commitment to our vision and establishing teaching seminars for city clergy have helped significantly to sharpen JustShare's work and enhance its effectiveness and credibility.

Closely linked to this idea of informed theology is that of authentic theology, theology articulated not only as reflection upon knowledge, research and understanding but upon *experience*. A statement about the possible detrimental effects for poor people of a proposed government measure on taxation is likely to have much more impact, and be received with more seriousness by the policy community, if it is articulated from a context of engagement with impoverished communities and people living in hardship. A critique of a party's asylum policy will similarly carry more clout if delivered by a church working on the ground with people seeking asylum. One of the reasons why Anglicare and the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Australia, or the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, are taken notice of when they critique government thinking is that they are fully committed to providing welfare on the ground. In some recent work I undertook in the

UK on the future of welfare provision I was told by a range of different stakeholders that nowadays voluntary sector organisations – of which the church is the largest – only appear on the government's radar if they are partners in service delivery. It was significant, too, that at the breakfasts that UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown used to host at No 11 in his days as Chancellor to discuss progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, it was the views of agencies and faith organisations and churches with an active commitment to meeting those goals who were regularly invited.

Fifthly it is important to remember, as the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, that as well as there being a time to speak there is a time to keep silence – and, we might add, to find an alternative course of action. As I have already suggested, the church can have a tendency to speak too often, and the gift of discerning when a statement may be counterproductive, or when it would be better to listen, to learn, to ask questions, to undertake further research, even to acknowledge ignorance, is one that all engaged in public theology should cultivate. While the early church might have felt compelled to speak about what they had seen and heard (Acts 4.20), the Bible also warns against verbosity – and we might also heed Katherine Mansfield's rather deprecating remark about 'poor, talkative little Christianity'. The Chief Rabbi in the UK, Jonathan Sacks, is surely right when he says that religion should never profess to have all the answers, though one contribution it can make is to ask the right questions. And as hinted earlier, while speaking should be accompanied by action whenever possible, there will be times when deed and not word is what is really required. As a leading figure in the UK voluntary sector said during our research project on the future of welfare and the role of the church, church leaders sometimes think they are being very 'prophetic' when they engage in lobbying for more affordable homes, when the real question they should address is whether, given the choice, homeless people would rather have an actual roof over their head than a good campaign.

Sixthly I would argue that doing theology in the public square should be about seeking to make a material difference to people's lives – locally, nationally and globally. Theological statements should certainly be about influencing public opinion, about winning hearts and minds, but within a wider context of seeking to influence policy and

move the levers of power in certain ways – towards bringing 'life in all its fulness' nearer to reality for all people. Jesus, after all, did not – to paraphrase Marx – come simply to offer a fresh interpretation of the world, rather to transform it through the power of love – and to call his followers to do the same. Hence we cannot be satisfied, if we are engaged in doing theology in the public square, simply with producing well-crafted, biblically-grounded, theologically-literate statements on, say, welfare to work, health care or education: we need also to see those statements used to bring about improvements to the quality of these services.

I do not suggest this is easy – indeed, here I ease myself painfully onto the horns of an old dilemma (and find myself in danger of being impaled by both); for while politicians will always look to submissions to provide concrete, workable policy proposals, theologians will rightly see laying down specific 'remedies' as something beyond their competence to do. Much criticism was heaped at the door of the Church of England following the publication of its *Faith in the City* report in 1986, on the grounds that it proposed specific (and, as it happens, rather well-worn) economic solutions to the problems it identified in Britain's inner-cities. This, it was argued by both right and left, was beyond its competence and undermined the value of the report. Similar hesitation was expressed around the statement on the Gulf War issued by the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991. Yet there is always a fear with producing statements of 'general principles' that they will be dismissed as irrelevant by both the media and politicians, and it is sometimes a criticism of Vatican documents that they are pitched at too abstract a level to have purchase in the world of *realpolitik.*

What I do think is crucial is that theological responses to issues seek to move beyond straightforward criticism and denunciation to propose alternatives: it is too often said of the church that it is very clear about what it is against but less ready to articulate what it wants. An admirable model of what I mean is the 'Six Point Plan' produced by US church leaders in the run-up to the US/UK led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The genius of this Plan was that it sought to address the central concern of those it sought to influence, namely the removal of the brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein, from power, while suggesting practically how this might be done without putting at risk the lives of ordinary

Iraqi civilians. It also confronted the issue of restructuring Iraq once Saddam had been removed and placed on trial, and the need for a peaceful resolution of wider issues in the Middle East, calling for a clear timetable towards a two-state solution that guaranteed a Palestinian state and a secure Israel within two years. It was consistent in its principles by opposing armed aggression, yet went beyond mere opposition to offer a realistic *modus vivendi*. In terms of doing public theology – doing God and doing good – this was an exemplary model.

Linked closely with this we need, seventhly, to know how to communicate our thinking effectively, to make the impact we desire. This requires, obviously, a keen understanding of the media in order to ensure that what we say receives fair and prominent coverage – which is notoriously difficult in the case of any religious story unless it involves schism, sexual infidelity, financial irregularity or plain buffoonery. But unless we want to end up speaking into a vacuum we need to develop both a 'savviness' with respect to the media and a degree of political acumen, including a preparedness to work with allies and co-belligerents who may not share our world-view but can make common cause on core issues (and I believe there is a very strong case for working across faiths on a number of key issues around social justice, care for the planet and so on). Again, the case of the Six Point Plan is instructive, for its advocates sought its implementation by using contacts to get it onto the desk of the UN Secretary General, the leaders of all the G7 countries and the Pope. In the case of the G7 leaders, a delegation of US church leaders visited each individually seeking to persuade them personally of their Plan's merits. And there is evidence to suggest that the Plan was seriously considered at the very highest levels of government and might even, other things being equal, have been adopted.

Perhaps I could mention my own experience of disseminating research. While national secretary for church and society with the United Reformed Church I oversaw a project which involved some forty local churches collecting data from local 'jobcentres'; this was in order to ascertain the quality of work on offer to long-term unemployed people, and the extent to which the wages attached to these jobs were likely to enable them to break out of a cycle of dependency on welfare and return to meaningful employment. This was

original work of which the Church was rightly proud, but we had to work hard to gain for it the recognition it deserved in the public domain. The week we launched the report in the Houses of Parliament a leading UK newspaper ran a week-long feature on 'work', yet our press people were unable to gain their interest. On the other hand, our report was studied closely by the senior advisers to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with whom we subsequently had an hour-long meeting and the opportunity to share, in detail, the points we wished to make. Overall, we learnt some important lessons from this experience.

Contrast the lack of press interest in that piece of work with the fate of a report two colleagues and I completed early last month on the Church of England and the future of welfare – to which I have already briefly alluded. This was admittedly a larger piece of work, involving interviews with more than a hundred voluntary sector leaders, policy advisors, civil servants, politicians, bishops, diocesan officials and others, as well as consultations, seminars and questionnaires. Our research did uncover major short-comings at the heart of government with respect to its third sector policies – including an absence of any meaningful data on the civic contribution of the Church – and thus we might have expected it to have caused a minor stir. But in fact the report became the front page story on *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* on the same day, with the former also making it the subject of its second 'leader' and devoting two inside pages to an analysis of its main findings. In the days following, the report featured on radio and television news bulletins across the world and, as we hoped, has sparked a serious debate about the issues it raises. At a seminar I attended in another capacity in the Houses of Parliament a week after the report's publication, Archbishop Rowan Williams brought the report into the discussion and the twenty or so MPs and peers present then launched into a major discussion of it! In part the high profile this report has received is a consequence of its timing – it is fashionable in the UK media at present to 'bash' the government and Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and our report was seen rather simplistically as adding grist to that mill – but also of our efforts to trail its findings in advance. (Perhaps also it was due to the reputation of our centre at Cambridge, for our previous report – in which I had no part – also hit the headlines upon its publication in 2007.) But we are very aware of the challenge now to ensure that neither the Church

nor the policy community at Westminster ignores or sidelines the report, because primarily it is about encouraging serious reflection and fresh thinking within Government departments, the house of bishops and other significant bodies.

Eighthly – and finally – theology should make its public contribution with confidence, believing in the power of its message to transform individuals and communities and to have an influence even on the global stage. As Hannah Skinner has put it,

> a dynamic public theology with profound concern for strengthening connections between ethics and economics and creating social justice is a crucial way in which the Church can reflect to society that it, as Christ's body, is accepting the challenge to speak meaningfully to the current [national] and global context. Public theology's contributions must be made confidently, unashamed of its belief and value undergirding, in partnership with others and must be embedded in praxis. If we lack conviction in power, authority or responsibility we will never achieve this.

Yet this is not a licence to adopt the kind of 'Christendom' approach which served Archbishop William Temple well in his time, which assumes that there is a 'we', the church, which can speak from a position above the fray, setting out its stall of values and offering them to the world as the best solution possible. As Anglican theologian Malcolm Brown has put it, 'the divine drama of the Christian faith is played out in paradox and dilemma' – Christ's strength is demonstrated in his weakness and death, the kingdom is both here and 'not yet', we enjoy salvation yet are beset by sin and so on. Brown suggests adopting this 'dilemma-centred' approach to our engagement in the public realm, recognizing, for example, that while we can argue on theological grounds for an understanding of the human person as an active, responsible individual, another equally theological perspective sees the Christian life as one marked by 'being chosen' rather than exercising choice. 'Post-Christendom' we acknowledge a market place of competing values and perspectives within the church, for there are many Christian communities in many different contexts: there is no 'we' to speak with a united 'Christian' voice, for each tradition must start with a recognition of its own presuppositions and interests, of the fact that it is always an 'interested party' to any discourse and a partial observer of an incomplete picture.

Public theology should always be reflective and self-critical, and I offer this - hardly exhaustive – list of pointers as a small contribution to the quest to ensure that when we speak a theological word we do so with authority, authenticity and effect. What that word *is* will depend on a variety of factors and we will surely differ as to what it should be and how it should be framed. But as I have tried to argue, I do not believe we can – or should – avoid the act of speech itself. As Rebecca Todd Peters says in her appropriately titled book, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalisation*, in the face of a world in rapid flux and transition, 'we have the power, authority and responsibility to participate in the current political and social discourses that continue to shape the face of globalization in our world. God does not afford us the luxury of opting out of moral responsibility.'