

## **USING GOD-TALK IN A SECULAR SOCIETY: TIME FOR A NEW CONVERSATION ON PUBLIC ISSUES?**

**Andrew Bradstock**

**University of Otago Winter Lecture, 2010**

One of the responses I regularly get, after explaining to enquirers that a function of my job is to seek to contribute from a faith perspective to public debate on current issues, goes along the lines of ‘well, you’ll have a hard job here, New Zealand is a very secular society’. If I had a hundred dollars for every occasion a well-meaning person has said that to me in the last eighteen months, I would be looking at retiring very soon and living comfortably on the proceeds.

The main focus of this paper is a consideration of how we might develop a ‘better’ conversation about public issues here in ‘secular’ New Zealand. It’s my belief that the quality of debate about some of the important questions we face could be improved and, more importantly, better solutions to those questions reached, were the climate such that we all felt *more* able to bring ‘values’ into public focus and *less* precluded from using specifically faith-based language in public discourse. So my question is, is that possible in a culture which prides itself on its secularity and appears to understand that ‘secularity’ in terms of ensuring that religiously-inspired voices have little influence in ‘the public square’?

That this is the case was emphasised rather starkly in July this year when a draft report on ‘Human Rights in New Zealand Today’ was released by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, with a Foreword stating that ‘Matters of religion and belief are deemed to be a matter for the private, rather than the public, sphere’. This draft also affirmed that ‘New Zealand is a secular State with no State religion’, and made it clear that this demarcation between the public sphere – in which religion has no place – and the private sphere – the proper place for ‘matters of religion and belief’ – is what essentially defines New Zealand as ‘secular’.

As you might recall, the publication of this document caused no little consternation in religious circles, with a number of churches and Christian organizations lodging objections to its assertion that New Zealand was a secular state and that religion was only for the 'private sphere'. As it happens I think these complaints had some justification, but since they demonstrate that there is a measure of disagreement about what is meant by the term 'secular', and we are talking here about the context for a 'better discussion', it is important to look more closely at what we mean by the term. How, then, do we understand the term 'secular' and what does it mean to talk of New Zealand as a 'secular society'?

Secularism, of course, has long been a topic of debate, and there has been particular interest in it in the last decade or two as a consequence of the revival of 'public religion' (I use that term in the broadest sense). A number of significant books and papers have appeared exploring the concept and offering possible definitions and understandings of the term, and the debate is proving to be a lively and important one. Potentially I think one of the more interesting of these studies is Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* published by OUP in 2007. Fitzgerald wants to challenge the whole notion that there is something called 'the religious' that stands apart from something called 'the secular', and having spent much time engaging with texts that emanate from cultures which either preceded or were unaffected by what we are pleased to call 'the Enlightenment', I have much sympathy with the tenor of his book. Fitzgerald's suggestion that what we assume today to be 'given in the nature of things is actually a rhetorical construction' seems to me to have some merit, but because for practical purposes I want to engage with the debate where it seems to be mainly located at present, I shall do no more than flag up his hypothesis here.

Another influential study of secularism in recent years has been the North American philosopher Charles Taylor's magisterial tome *A Secular Age*, winner of the Templeton Prize in 2007. At the outset of this Taylor helpfully maps the territory by considering three broad ways in which we might speak of 'secularity' today. The first, he writes, concentrates on 'the common institutions and practices' and points to the fact that, whereas in the past political organisation 'was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God... the modern Western state is free from this connection.' Secularity is therefore in one sense to be understood in terms of public spaces, which 'have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality... in striking contrast to earlier periods when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions... which could not

easily be ignored...’ There are resonances here of the definition articulated by our Human Rights Commission: while it might be claimed, as some critics of its draft report did, that Christianity informs the principles upon which the institutions of New Zealand society were built, it is possible to engage fully in public life here ‘without’, as Taylor puts it, ‘ever encountering God’. Indeed, such an approach is encouraged.

Taylor’s second suggested meaning of the term ‘secularity’ has to do with what he calls ‘the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church’. This definition undoubtedly also informs some New Zealanders’ thinking when they speak of their country as ‘secular’, but is, I suggest, less helpful than Taylor’s first in helping us to understand the terms under which public debate is conducted here. What is critical to that, it seems to me, is not so much the percentage of people who ‘practise’ religion here, but the degree to which what we might want to define as ‘the religious’ plays a role in public life.

Here, though, I acknowledge that the water can soon get muddy, for to what extent is it helpful to talk of the United States, for example, as a ‘secular’ society because it has *de jure* separation of church and state but a large percentage of citizens attending church regularly (and considerable church influence in public affairs), and the United Kingdom as ‘non-secular’ on account of the existence there of an established church, despite the much smaller proportion of its citizens who now regularly go to church. Perhaps what we can say is that while it may be the case – and the last Census in 2006 suggests that it is – that the majority of New Zealanders are happy to describe themselves as ‘religious’, the Christian churches and religious communities in New Zealand do not play a significant role in shaping public debate, nor do they have the constitutional privileges that the Church of England continues to enjoy in the UK and the opportunities for engagement in public life attendant upon those privileges.

Interestingly, Taylor himself devotes little space to a discussion of this second meaning of secularity, preferring to concentrate on his third definition which relates to ‘the conditions of belief’ within a society. Taylor’s concern here is primarily the extent to which there has been a move, in most societies, from a situation where belief in God was ‘unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace’. What strikes Taylor particularly about this shift is not just how, in the past, belief in God was taken for granted whereas now the default position

for most people is unbelief, but how, while earlier societies saw human flourishing as an important goal, it was never for them the 'final goal'. In pre-modern societies, Taylor contends, there was always a sense of serving a goal which was beyond, or independent of, human flourishing, perhaps loving or worshipping God. The coming of modern secularity, however,

has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.

Secularity in this third sense, then, understands that societies are no longer held together by any shared acknowledgement of 'the transcendent'. 'We no longer live in societies in which the widespread sense can be maintained that faith in God is central to the ordered life we (partially) enjoy', Taylor writes. In pre-modern times religion, or at least some idea like 'The Chain of Being', provided a framework within which people acted and which was independent of their action: what constituted a society was the 'metaphysical order' it embodied. Today, Taylor concludes

the public sphere is an association which is constituted by nothing outside of the common action we carry out in it: coming to a common mind, where possible, through the exchange of ideas. Its existence as an association is just our acting together in this way... This is what makes it radically secular.

Taylor's discussion is helpful in many respects, not least in so far as it explores the process by which we have come to accept a closing off of public spaces today to 'talk of God' or reference to any 'ultimate reality'. In his attempt to grapple with and define the complex phenomenon which is the subject of his book, he points up, it seems to me, the long-held assumption of most thinkers and opinion formers in the West that secularism is a necessary presupposition of democracy. The British academic Jonathan Chaplin has picked this up in his recent essay, 'Talking God: the Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning', noting that a familiar response by what he calls 'liberal secularists' to the recent re-emergence of public religion is that 'liberal democracy mandates "secularism"'. Chaplin notes that this view was actually articulated in 2003 by the European Court of Human Rights when, in a landmark judgment, it upheld a decision by the government of Turkey to dissolve an Islamic political party. Yet, as Chaplin himself notes, there is a degree of complexity about the ways in which states exercise their secularity, and he suggests that it might be helpful to imagine a

spectrum with, at one end, those which seek to be secularist in the sense of aggressively removing all traces of what they define as 'religion' from public life – for example the former Soviet Union, or modern-day France as evidenced by its attitude to the public wearing of headscarves by Muslim women – and, at the other end, governments which seek to adopt a stance of even-handedness between different faith communities. A number of scholars and commentators in recent years have identified the two poles of this spectrum as 'secular fundamentalism' and 'inclusive secularism', and the distinction is, I think, a helpful one.

Indeed, I want to return to it in a moment, but do so via the thinking of another intellectual who has challenged us to think afresh about secularisation in recent years, Rowan Williams. In an address given to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome in November 2006 entitled 'Secularism, Faith and Freedom', Archbishop Williams begins by observing the link we have just commented upon between 'secularism' and the ideals of freedom and equality, noting that secularists would ground this in a fear of 'any privilege [being] given to an authority that is not accountable to ordinary processes of reasoning and evidence.' 'A secular society', Williams writes,

is one in which it is possible to have fair and open argument about how common life should be run because everyone argues on the same basis: the ideal of secularity means that there is such a thing as "public reason". Argument that arises from specific commitments of a religious or ideological nature has to be ruled out of court. If arguments of that kind are admitted, there is a threat to freedom because assertions are being made which are supposed to be beyond challenge and critique. Behind all this lies the strong Enlightenment conviction that authority that depends on revelation must always be contested and denied any leverage in the public sphere.

A 'secular' perspective then, Williams concludes, has to be the 'default position' for a liberal and intelligent society, which expects its government to take at face value citizens' accounts of what they want, and pursue policies which enable these to be met without interference. In this schema, according to Williams, there is no place for a belief in a 'hierarchy of inner selves', and

a certain wariness about the suggestion that basic critical questions still need to be asked concerning human capacity or destiny as such, or that there is some serious difference between what people claim to want and what is in their true interest.

Williams might well have been thinking about John Rawls at this point who, in his later thinking – particularly as evidenced in his 1993 book, *Political Liberalism* – argues that, while

individuals may well have 'certain religious, philosophical, and moral convictions' which they view as absolutely integral to who or what they are, these convictions should have no bearing on their identity *qua* citizens. When engaging in public debate around issues such as justice and rights, people need to set aside their personal moral and religious convictions and argue from the standpoint of a 'political conception of the person,' independent of any particular loyalties, attachments, or conceptions of what constitutes the good life. This, Rawls says in a later book, *The Law of Peoples*, is not so much to talk about religion being 'privatized' as not being 'politicized'.

If we were to ask Rawls *why* we should not bring our moral and religious convictions into the public square, he would cite the need to respect the fact that people in modern democratic societies disagree about ideas of the good life, and do so on very reasonable grounds – what he calls 'the fact of reasonable pluralism'. From this line of reasoning he adduces the case for states to adopt the stance of liberal neutrality in the face of moral and religious disagreement: 'which moral judgments are true', he writes, 'is not a matter for political liberalism'. Political liberalism, in other words, in order to maintain impartiality between competing moral and religious doctrines, does not address the moral questions over which these doctrines divide. Governments must not endorse any one particular conception of 'the good'.

Richard Rorty, too, fears the consequences of religion playing a role in public discourse, arguing that 'we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty.' 'The main reason religion needs to be privatized', Rorty writes, 'is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.' For Rorty, a major achievement of the Enlightenment was 'the secularization of public life' and the separation of religion from the realm of reason.

In a similar vein Rawls argues that separating our identity as 'citizens' from our deeply-held moral and religious convictions is necessary because, when engaging in public discourse about justice and rights, we must observe the limits of liberal public reason. If we do not do that, as Robert Audi has also powerfully argued, there is a risk that our arguments may prevail and we will end up imposing on our fellow citizens laws which rest on a particular moral or religious doctrine. All of which suggests that the liberal, secular ideal requires of governments little more than that they ensure maximum freedom for individuals to make

their own moral, and economic choices. A right of centre government might place more emphasis on economic freedom, and a left-leaning administration be more hesitant about legislating on moral issues, but in both cases the commitment to 'neutrality' is paramount.

Williams, too, notes the in-built fear in the liberal consciousness of one set of ideas or values triumphing over all others. Maximising individual freedom, enabling people to achieve what they want with minimum interference, is considered a suitably neutral stance for a government, he 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 an assumption in the mind of secular liberals, Williams maintains,

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. It assumes that the public expression of specific conviction is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction. Thus public support or subsidy directed towards any particular group is a collusion with elements that subvert the harmony of society overall.

There is, of course, a substantive criticism to be levelled against this argument that liberal secular states maintain neutrality on moral issues, and the eminent philosopher and political scientist Michael Sandel has recently done just this. In his 2009 book, *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?*, Sandel points out that key questions like abortion and stem cell research – and even, he would go on to say, same sex marriage – simply cannot be resolved without taking a stand on an underlying moral and religious controversy. For example, the standard liberal position with respect to abortion is that the state should not take sides in the complex moral and theological debate over when life begins, over the moral status of the developing foetus, and simply allow women to decide for themselves whether to have an abortion. But, Sandel says, this argument does not succeed, for

if it's true that the developing foetus is morally equivalent to a child, then abortion is morally equivalent to infanticide. And few would maintain that government should let parents decide for themselves whether to kill their children. So the 'pro-choice' position in the abortion debate is not really neutral on the underlying moral and theological question; it implicitly rests on the assumption that the Catholic Church's

teaching on the moral status of the foetus – that it is a person from the moment of conception – is false.

As Sandel rightly says, to acknowledge this assumption is not to argue for banning abortion, but simply to acknowledge that neutrality and freedom of choice are not sufficient grounds for affirming a right to abortion. Similar issues arise with stem-cell research, given that this raises the question whether the early embryo is morally equivalent to a person. In both these cases, Sandel concludes, it is not possible to resolve the legal question without taking up the underlying moral and religious question. Neutrality is impossible, because the issue is whether the practice in question involves taking the life of a human being.

Rowan Williams is also dissatisfied with the liberal, 'secular' idea that governments be required not to prescribe moral priorities but simply allow a maximum degree of individual choice. 'Political freedom is more complex than the licence to pursue a set of individual or group projects with minimal interference', he writes: 'it also needs to be the freedom to ask some fundamental questions about the climate and direction of society as shown in its policy decisions'. A fundamental question like how we should respond to the current environmental crisis needs to draw in larger considerations that simply how to preserve 'individual freedom', as do debates about the status of the human embryo in relation to genetic research or the legalisation of assisted dying, both of which involve contested opinions about the fundamental issue of what it is to be 'human'. Into this category also comes the question of how to protect the rights of those who cannot exercise what we would normally think of as 'reasoned consumer choice' – the unborn, disabled people, prisoners. All of which, Williams concludes, 'suggests that political freedom is more complex than the licence to pursue a set of individual or group projects with minimal interference': liberty cannot simply be understood in terms of 'consumer choice'.

So 'liberal secularists', then, to borrow Chaplin's term, will always hold a suspicion that to allow into the public square arguments and views drawing on what we might broadly term 'religious convictions' is to risk social disharmony and disruption. And so the alternative, a public square largely empty of discussion informed by values, is to be preferred. There *is* public reasoning in this arena, as we have noted Williams acknowledging, but it cannot afford to be about anything 'fundamental': it stretches no farther than, as he puts it, 'testing more and less administratively successful methods of continuing the provision of undisturbed public order.'

I have considered Williams' arguments at some length because I think he gets to the heart of where we are today in terms of political discourse. Not only is *vision* largely absent from politics, so is any discussion which recognizes the real differences people have in terms of ideas, values and beliefs: management, or administration, is now the order of the day. When we consider, for example, the economic crisis which has been preoccupying most of the world for the last two or three years, we note that the overriding preoccupation of the media, parliamentarians and opinion formers has been with returning as soon as possible to 'business as normal', to ensuring that economic growth is maintained, above all to making sure that our ability to consume as freely as we want is unhindered. There has been virtually no debate about, for example, whether economic growth really is in our interests individually or collectively, whether the ever-widening gap between rich and poor which our current economic arrangements promote is a good thing for society, whether maximising our potential to 'consume' really is adding to our quality of life. We operate with what are assumed to be shared, neutral, minimal values, and close down the possibility of any debate that would acknowledge the convictions and differences we hold deep down – which is why politics seems to be so unimaginative and predictable and why the big issues remain untouched. As Williams somewhat soberly concludes, if this is where programmatic secularism leads us, it threatens to add up to political bankruptcy.

But is what Williams calls 'programmatic secularism', characterised by "the almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality and the public invisibility of specific commitments", the only type of secularism? Not necessarily, for – and here we return to the distinction we observed earlier – Williams also wants to talk about 'procedural secularism' which, in contrast, allows for 'a crowded and argumentative public square' and 'acknowledges the authority of a legal mediator or broker whose job it is to balance and manage real difference'. Under the terms of this 'procedural secularism', religious convictions *are* granted a public hearing in debate – not a privileged hearing, or one in which these convictions are considered beyond criticism, but one which acknowledges that they represent the considered moral basis of the choices and priorities of certain citizens. This, writes Williams,

is a potentially noisier and untidier situation than one where everyone agrees what will and will not 'count' as an intervention in public debate; but at least it does not seek to conceal or deny difference.

I am not entirely clear whether Williams thinks ‘procedural secularism’ is already a reality in some contexts, or simply a state of affairs to which we should aspire. On the one hand he talks about a recent debate in the UK over legalising assisted dying in which he notes that ‘considerations based on religious conviction were certainly in evidence’, but he also talks about it being possible to ‘*imagine* a “procedurally” secular society and legal system which is always open to being persuaded by confessional or ideological argument on particular issues, but is not committed to privileging permanently any one confessional group.’

Perhaps one might point to India as an example of a procedurally secular state, since although its constitution, in speaking of the country as a secular republic, does not define the term, the commonly-used Hindu equivalent for the term means literally ‘indifference towards religion’. Apologists point to the fact that religions are an important part of public life in India while having no claims over one another, nor to state or political power. We might note, however, that Tim Fitzgerald, in the book mentioned earlier, would disagree, arguing that term ‘religion’ makes no sense in an Indian context, since those aspects of life that we might understand to be covered by that term are completely interwoven into society and politics. Another interesting case study is the United States, where president Barack Obama has explicitly argued the relevance of religion to political argument. While we have just noted Rowan Williams arguing that there are some issues which cannot be addressed with the depth they require according to a liberal, secular model of discourse, Obama – in a speech actually delivered six months before Williams presented his in Rome – notes that issues such as ‘poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed’ would require ‘changes in hearts and a change in minds’ and thus it is mistaken to insist that moral and religious convictions play no part in politics and law.

But what might be our response to this here in New Zealand? What are the terms of our public discourse? Is the ‘secularism’ of which we are so proud here of the ‘programmatic’ or ‘procedural’ kind? Does it matter?

I certainly think that how we frame the terms of our public discourse matters enormously, for precisely the reasons Williams adduces, though I am less vexed about the labels we might use to describe our present context. And let me just explain why, because it has a bearing on the conclusion I want to reach this evening.

In the essay which I mentioned earlier, Jonathan Chaplin makes the case that, even where we observe what we might want theoretically to call ‘procedural secularism’, in *practice* it will tend towards being ‘programmatically’. He cites examples like the European Court of Human Rights’ judgement mentioned earlier in favour of the Turkish government’s decision to dissolve an Islamic party, noting that the Court concluded that even to *campaign* for the introduction of Islamic personal law was incompatible with the principles of liberal democracy. The important criterion for the Court was ‘fairness’, and it argued that states had a duty to treat all religions impartially: were a state to allow for a change of law mandated by religious belief this principle of fairness would be subverted. ‘The general idea of procedural secularism’, concludes Chaplin from this example,

does not in itself resolve that disagreement. It requires taking a substantive view of the relative value of free speech over that of religious integrity... The religious ‘neutrality’ or ‘even-handedness’ of a procedurally secular state will always be a neutrality ‘from the standpoint of’ some particular, contested political vision. Thus, where society is pervasively secularised – where public life and institutions are principally governed as if transcendent religious authority is irrelevant – it will in practice almost inevitably lean towards programmatic secularism, *if only by default*.

In a sense we are back to Charles Taylor’s conceptions of ‘secularity’, where the public space is effectively emptied of God and our discourse and action take place without reference to any overarching, transcendent reality. And Chaplin, who writes from a Christian perspective, is not a lone, let alone disgruntled, voice in making this point: Julian Baggini, who writes as both a secularist and an atheist, admits that while liberal secularism should not privilege atheism, ‘religious vocabulary has been absent from public discourse in a way in which atheist vocabulary has not’. The need to find a language which both the religious and non-religious can accept, writes Baggini, means that while there may be ‘few distinctly atheist beliefs or concepts this discourse must admit... there are rather more religious ones it cannot include.’ The liberal philosopher William Galston, a supporter of freedom for minorities to participate in public life, also acknowledges that these minorities are more often than not tolerated by the political community rather than integrated into it as active participants in shaping its destiny.

So whether a society’s ‘secularism’ might be defined as ‘programmatically’ or ‘procedurally’, there will, in practice, be little space in its public square for ‘religious language’. Discourse in that square, as Rawls, Rorty and others explicitly argue, must be truly ‘public’ and therefore must

employ language, principles and reasoning which are intelligible to any reasonable person and based on public canons of validity. So, for example, terms like 'sanctity of life' or references to marriage as 'a sacred institution' must be ruled out of court because such language embraces the concept of 'holiness' which can only be conferred upon something by God. Similarly, we cannot speak of the equal value of all people in terms of their having been 'created in the image of God'. Religious speakers need to recognize the need for a common language to exist in the public square, the argument goes, and when they do not 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 that public theology wants to make.

In a more recent statement of his position Rowan Williams has suggested that one of the consequences of religious interests being excluded from public debates is a coarsening of political discourse, while religious perspectives, on the other hand, can imbue the language of public deliberation with a 'depth and moral gravity that cannot be generated simply by the negotiation of... balanced self-interests'. I suggest that those words have some resonance here in New Zealand, and that there would be much benefit in a debate here about the nature of our public discourse (which, if no one else will lead it, will need to be initiated by people of faith). We now face a number of issues – from climate change to economic inequality to binge-drinking to the education and development of children to how we deal with criminals – that require much deeper analysis than we seem prepared to engage in at present. These are issues which call for a new quality of debate, one in which values can be freely aired in a spirit, not of striving to have one's own individual worldview dominate, as secularists apparently fear, but of genuine exchange and collaboration to find new and possible ways forward. Despite examples of where religious people have tried to impose their views on others – whether the Religious Right in America or Hindu nationalists in India or the Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand – we need to help shed the fear that the motivation behind religious discourse is either the establishment of a theocracy or the promotion of some private moral agenda, and demonstrate how religious communities have much to offer that can actually benefit the public good. As John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge conclude in their recent book, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, the enemy for secularists is not religion *per se* 'but the union of religion and power' – a very different thing.

In fact, good 'public theology' is precisely about showing how a theological perspective can contribute to the 'common good', about drawing upon the insights of the faith and offering these as 'gift' to the secular world. Public theology draws upon 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; it is also informed by the insights of other disciplines and the wealth of social teaching in the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions. But it explicitly rejects the 'Christendom' approach which looks for an imposition of Judaeo-Christian values from the top down – in fact, its approach is quite the reverse. Public theology may lay claim to deriving from Scripture a sense of the value God is perceived to place on human life, an understanding that God has a particular concern for the poor and marginalized, 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 if it is to be heard it will be solely on account of the merit of what it has to say.

One of the distinctives of public theology is that it 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. These are questions which I am suggesting we need sorely to address, but how might this be possible in a self-consciously secular society like New Zealand?

I believe a helpful starting point might be to try to initiate a debate about what we understand by secularism. As I have noted, it is a subject much under debate at present, and there may be considerable interest in exploring it in our context. I would hope that one thing that such a conversation will draw out is that 'secular' does not mean a space where there are *no* absolutes, rather one where no one absolute prevails over others, where in fact we learn as a society, as Stephen Heap has put it,

to face the undoubtedly real and disturbing conflicts our opposing claims create. It means a level of public discourse in which truth and truth claims are dealt with

without ridicule but with a deep acknowledgement that we disagree, at times profoundly so, and yet somehow have to survive together on the same plot of land.

Arguably, this has always been important, but it is even more necessary now given the rising number of religious voices clamouring to be heard in the public square, and their increasing volubility. The title of Micklethwait and Wooldridge's book is not mere rhetoric: God really *is* back, and making a considerable impact in the public sphere. As long ago as 1994 the eminent US sociologist José Casanova asserted in his book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, that we were witnessing a process of 'deprivatization' of religion as a relative global trend, and in an essay written in 2008 reflecting on that work, he observed how 'religion had returned as a contentious issue to the public sphere of European societies' and how a 'significant shift' could be sensed in the European Zeitgeist. Micklethwait and Wooldridge themselves make the point that religion is now a normal part of intellectual discourse in Europe. So, what I suggest we need now is a new type of political conversation, one which respects the secularist requirement that religious voices enjoy no *privileged* right to be heard, but which *does* allow those voices actually to be heard and their perspectives and thinking to contribute to shaping responses to the challenges we face.

Part of this project will involve exposing 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. 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*.

Or as Roger Trigg notes in his book *Religion in Public Life*, 'democracy assumes the existence of varying viewpoints'. In a pointed riposte to Richard Rorty, Trigg argues that the fact that conversations stop, and people cannot convince one another, 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.

And Jürgen Habermas, who perhaps himself embodies the 'significant intellectual shift' in Western thought we noted earlier, argued in a recent public conversation with Pope Benedict that

when secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates

– even though he goes on to say that they should also assist in 'endeavours to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole.'

But of course, it is not just religious people who should have the 'right' to speak their own language, to share their values and beliefs in the public square: they are not the only ones currently required to 'hide their working' when entering into public debate. As we observed Michael Sandel arguing earlier, secular reasons are no more or less 'tribal' than religious ones, and are grounded just as much in hidden, contestable assumptions; and Roger Trigg also looks askance at the suggestion 'that science has an agreed framework for discussion and settling disputes, while religion does not', and the assumption that science is 'intrinsically less controversial than religion'. So what should happen, as Jonathan Chaplin has put it, 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.

Of course, the purpose of this '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 finding better solutions to the challenges we face. So let me end with one or two examples of how a new type of conversation might benefit us here in New Zealand, because it is vital to provide concrete examples if the idea of a debate around the issue of 'secularism' is to be taken seriously. And these are just examples, to get

us thinking in specific terms: there may be other issues that are equally or even more important, but let's use these to get the discussion started.

One issue mentioned by Rowan Williams is climate change and the horrific scenario that confronts us, or at the very least our children, if we do not take action to reduce our carbon emissions and slow down the rate of global warming. It is, as Rowan Williams implies, axiomatic that this cannot be addressed satisfactorily by a simple appeal to the requirement that people be free to exercise their own choices in terms of their lifestyle. Hugely difficult decisions need to be taken, decisions that will be unpopular, that may actually *reduce* our lifestyle choices and, in contrast to what governments have been telling us in recent decades, require us to consume less rather than more.

There are domestic issues, too, presenting us with serious challenges, such as economic inequality. The evidence is now almost conclusive that societies that have greater inequality perform worse on a whole range of social indices as compared with those with less inequality – from child obesity to life expectancy to levels of literacy to lack of trust and cohesion – yet to seek to address this would, again, require a different kind of debate from what we are used to, one in which opinions about goals and values, about individual rights versus the common interest, about 'what makes for a good society', could freely be aired. We might decide in the end that pursuing measures to narrow the rich-poor gap is not the way forward, but the point is to have a truly candid debate, to bring together a wide range of varying views and beliefs in a spirit of seeking areas of convergence and exploring agreed and workable ways forward.

Then there is the question of how to reduce the size of our prison population, which is almost universally thought to be too high and rising too fast. In cost terms alone this increase is worrying – the Department of Corrections saw a real increase in its spending between 2004 and 2008 of 64% and it currently costs around \$250 per day or \$90,000+ a year 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 weakness of our present situation is that, not only do we seldom debate these sort of issues with the seriousness and depth that they deserve, the decisions we do take with respect to them are necessarily made within the context of seeking popularity with voters

rather than what might work best in the longer term. Policy is made, less on the basis of evidence or in the light of informed and thoughtful public opinion, than in response to popular perceptions about issues based largely on sound-bites and unreflective coverage in the media. Thus with respect to climate change, no politician serious about being re-elected will want to promote measures aimed at restricting individual freedom or advocating less use of the earth's resources, even if he or she were convinced personally that such measures were vital to ensuring humanity's survival as a species. Similarly, the sort of debate we need to enable us to get to grips with the issues we face in the area of crime and punishment will not occur while this topic remains a hot political potato, while policy is made in response to what is perceived to be the public mood, and while the media describe and sensationalize individual instances of crime without seeking to discuss or analyze the underlying issues.

The media do have a key role here but I want to avoid appearing to cast them as the 'villains of the piece'. Their bottom line is to attract viewers and sell papers, and they can hardly be blamed for seeking to do this, when the opportunity arises, by giving prominence to dramatic stories involving criminal behaviour. But one way they could become more obviously a part of the *solution* would be to agree to allocate as much air-time or column inches to serious reflection on the underlying issues as they do to uncovering different angles on individual crime stories. It is salutary to note that one important factor behind the dramatic drop in prison numbers in Finland in the last fifty years was an agreement by all sections of the media to adopt a non-emotive, factual approach to crime reporting.

The case of Finland in this regard is interesting, not least because it succeeded in reducing its prison population from 200 per 100,000 population in 1950 – one of the highest rates in Europe at that time – to just 66 per 100,000 by 2005, among Europe's lowest. (In New Zealand it is currently 181 per 100,000.) Other factors crucial to this process were a public and political acknowledgement that the rate of imprisonment was a problem that needed to be addressed – which I'm not at all sure we *do* acknowledge here – and the development of a multi-party accord that de-politicized criminal justice policy. So might one way forward here in New Zealand be to encourage politicians to remove issues like crime and punishment and climate change from the party-political arena and make them subject to consensus politics, such as happens in times of war when the threat is perceived to be too great to be allowed to be the subject of political point-scoring? Were our politicians freed from the temptation to seek popular approval by promoting policies likely to meet with the least resistance, might we begin to be able to address these issues with the seriousness they so palpably require?

A bi-partisan approach is not exactly original or untried here – we already have a political consensus around, for example, our non-nuclear stance, funding for superannuation and the importance of the Treaty, and party leaders specifically advocated it with respect to their response to the recent horrific earthquake in Christchurch and Canterbury. There would appear to be merit in extending it to certain other key issues.

The challenge, of course, would be to do this in a way that involved ordinary voters – ourselves – *more* rather than less, that ensured that the democratic process was augmented rather than diminished and political accountability increased rather than reduced. But is it beyond our wit to imagine our political culture operating with a dynamic in which, on the one hand, an informed and reflective public debate encouraged politicians to work consensually towards fashioning more long-term and realistic solutions to deep and challenging crises; and, on the other, the legislators themselves, having moved beyond the politics of rhetoric and point-scoring, raised the level of their debate and stimulated and resourced the wider discourse by example (a duty which Walter Bagehot all those years ago argued was a prime responsibility of parliaments)?

I believe it is not, but a pre-requisite to such a new dynamic, to a new and deeper level of debate around public issues, has to be a willingness on all sides to be at least open to the possibility of employing the grammar of beliefs and values, to debate being informed by ‘confessional candour’. To get a flavour of what this might be like, consider for a moment the level of public discussion we have had in the past year around issues like the privatizing of prisons, the ‘need’ for double-bunking, the three-strikes legislation and the right of prisoners to smoke, and then imagine a debate on criminal policy embracing all sections of the community which involved a sharing of views about the purpose and goal of punishment; about the merits of alternatives to imprisonment in certain cases; about how better to equip inmates for their return to society in order to reduce their propensity to re-offend; about an individual’s potential to change as against the necessity to ‘write them off’; and which avoided emotive and sloganizing language like supporting ‘victims’ or ‘offenders’ or being ‘soft’ or ‘tough’ on crime. With the media committed to serious analysis as well as reporting, and politicians freed from the temptation to place popularity above conviction, might not a spirit of genuine openness prevail, with beliefs and philosophies shared and a consensus to meet agreed targets reached? Might we not begin to discover that workable lasting solutions to some of our more serious challenges *are* possible, that we do not have to be satisfied with

quick-fix, populist 'remedies' which do no more than treat symptoms – if indeed they do that – but are able to begin to tackle the much more deeply-rooted causes?

I do not suggest for a moment that any of this would be easy to achieve here: there seems very little appetite on free-to-air television stations for programmes devoted to serious analysis and deliberation, and it could also be argued that the absence of *national* newspapers reflecting a range of political stances is a limitation to debate, notwithstanding the high standard of comment and analysis most of our regional papers regularly carry. But the difficulties involved in finding solutions to crucial domestic and global concerns 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 acceptance of 'second best', and calling instead for vision and a new way forward. History is full of examples of how shifts in popular opinion, in changes to the direction of the wind, have occurred, leading to social revolutions almost unimaginable at the outset. In this respect, those of us who deal in faith should take heart from those familiar words penned by the writer to the Hebrews nearly 2000 years ago: 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'. Or as US activist and public theologian Jim Wallis likes to paraphrase that verse, 'faith is believing despite the evidence, then watching the evidence change'.