

A welcome to Dr Derek Woodard-Lehman

David Tombs, 'Making a Mutual Connection: Deepening the Conversations between Theology and Public Issues'. A presentation at St. John's Presbyterian Church in the City, Wellington, 7 June 2016, to welcome Dr. Derek Woodard-Lehman as Lecturer in Theology and Public Issues.

Good evening.

My name is David Tombs, and I am Howard Paterson Professor of Theology and Public Issues, at the University of Otago.

It is a great pleasure to be at this event, to welcome Derek and his family, to launch this new and important position here in Wellington, and to mark this important partnership between St John's and the University of Otago. Particular satisfaction that, as a member of the Department of Theology and Religion, Derek will be a member of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues.

Some of you will have known my distinguished predecessor, Andrew Bradstock, the founding Director of the Centre of Theology and Public Issues.

It has been such a pleasure that so often when I am asked who I am, why I am here, and what I am doing, it is so often the moment that Andrew's name is mentioned that the connection is made, and people nod enthusiastically with welcome.

Often the explanation that I have taken over from Andrew as Director of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues leads to a follow up question though, when I am asked what does 'Theology and Public Issues' mean?

This is a very good question. It is one that I am working on, and I hope that Derek will soon be able to tell me the answer.

At one level the easy answer is that it is 'making the connection between public issues and faith, values and theology'. This is certainly true as far as it goes. But a little bit more needs to be added to this. And I would like to suggest three things towards this.

1. Deepening the conversation on public issues

First, it often prompts a further follow up, 'What do you mean by Public Issues'.

Again, at one level the answer is fairly straightforward. Public issues are the issues that are in the **public arena**, reflect a significant **public concern** and have an important **public interest**. As a general guide, if a story is in the newspaper or on RNZ it is at least potentially a public issue. This does not mean that all public issues are of equal importance. On the contrary, some of the stories in our newspapers don't seem to be all that important at all, and just because there is widespread curiosity about them, it does not mean that they should be seen as having important public interest.¹

Often the more important public issues are not in the featured stories, but in what might be going on behind them. For example, the news that a particular celebrity is going on a diet (or should be going on a diet in the eyes of the gossip columnist), or is having cosmetic surgery, or has made a controversial wardrobe choice, is not a public issue in terms of genuine public interest. It might, of course, interest the public a great deal to read about it, but it does not serve the public interest in any substantive way. We should therefore at least ask whether a matter like this should be discussed in public.² However, the issues that might underline it may be much more important and should be seen as genuine public issue. For example, our attitudes to our bodies and how much control we have over our bodies or should have over them, to what extent men and women are subjected to different standards on this, and what consequences it can lead to. How young people, boys and girls can be especially vulnerable to how their bodies are perceived by others. How it might relate to issues like bullying or body-shaming in school, the links from her to cyber-bullying, and to depression and even suicide. Or perhaps developed in a different direction, how an issue like cosmetic surgery raises questions about long-term changes to our bodies and how much we should embrace these or resist these, and what lines should be drawn to guide our thinking in these matters.

¹ For example, there is a story in the New Zealand Herald today on newspaper coverage of what a Games of Thrones actress Maisie Williams wore to a charity fundraiser. 'Thrones star slams 'braless' headline', *New Zealand Herald* (7 June 2016).

http://m.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=11652215

² There might be an important distinction here between more strictly personal matters and what a star wears, or does not wear, at a public event. However but even if there are less concerns over privacy in the Williams story, it still raises the question as to how much a story like this story serves a genuine public interest.

Of course, these underlying stories are rarely picked up in the newspapers in any serious way.³ If we want to know what is underneath the headline there is little point in turning the page to see what is underneath, we just find a different headline and a different story. If we want to explore public issues in a more meaningful way we need to nurture alternative conversations and analysis in an alternative public forum.

This is what a Centre of Theology and Public Issues seeks to do. It seeks to identify the substantive issues in our society, including political, economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects of our common life, and promote a deeper conversation about what is really going on with them, and draw a wider public into this process. It has been immensely gratifying to hear from people that the work that the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at Otago is valued and appreciated for what it does towards this. It perhaps reflects the relative absence of this type of conversation in our society that this is so appreciated. It may well be more common here in Wellington, but it does not seem to be all that common elsewhere.

But that is not the only thing that the Centre seeks to do, in making the connections between theology and public issues.

2. Contributing a theological perspective

In addition to focussing on important issues, and deepening the conversation in relation to them, it also seeks to contribute a perspective in light of faith, and draw upon biblical and theological resources. For example, how are we to understand our conversations about the body in light of a Christian understanding that as embodied beings we are made in the image of God, that Jesus Christ was God incarnate in human form, and that after his suffering, humiliation and execution his body was raised to glory by God?

These convictions do not give us immediate answers to issues like body-shaming or cosmetic surgery, but it is clear that they may have something to contribute.

³ To be fair to the NZ Herald, their reporting on Williams is at least notionally not reporting the event itself, but reporting the story of inaccurate reporting on the event. Even so, it is still run under a provocative headline, and provides an opportunity to present a photo of what Williams was wearing at the event as a newstory.

Of course, we should not expect that everybody will want to listen to what is said. Christian theology has a right to speak in the public square, but it does not have a right that people be required to listen. For people to listen, the voice in the public square must have something relevant and valuable to say. Taking the time and trouble to think through what this might be, before sharing it more widely, is a task that the Centre of Theology and Public Issues can both encourage and resource. This makes it such an exciting as well as creative and challenging place to work.

So a quick review, we have talked about two things so far that characterise how the connection between theology and public issues can be deepened. First there is the promoting a deeper and more public discussion of public issues, second, there is connection of these issues to Christian faith so that theological perspectives and resources can be brought on them. This takes us to the third feature I want to mention.

3. A two-way conversation

At its best, theology and public issues can seek to be truly conversational (or 'dialogical') by not just promoting a conversation **about** public issues, or bringing theological insights and resources to bear **on** public issues, but also a conversation between theology **and** public issues. In saying this, I am probably influenced by my own understanding of liberation theology, and how it can shape a creative encounter between faith and lived experience. What I have in mind here is that the illumination is not just one way. It is not just that theology sheds light public issues (although that is certainly common and important) but often theology and faith can learn and grow from the encounter with public issues, and what public issues tell us about ourselves, our interactions with others, and our encounters with God. I often think of Mt 25 as an extraordinary statement of this approach. The encounter with Christ is not separate from our encounters with others in our society, but is through the encounter with others, and especially with encounters with those who are seen as 'other' in our society.

By working seriously on public issues we can expect to develop a deeper understanding of our faith, the presence of Christ in our world, and our relationship with God. For example, to illustrate the three aspects of connecting theology and public issues which I have been speaking on, we might reflect on a Christian response to refugees.

First, a better understanding of the social experience of refugees in Europe, in the US, in Australia, and here in New Zealand would of course be valuable in its own right. I was at a conference on

refugees some years back when I realised that I did not know why the word 'refugee' was used in this way. We typically think of refugees as fleeing from one place to another, and that fits with the Latin root word *fugere* – to flee. But what about the 're'? That usually suggests coming back rather than fleeing to, as in **return**? This is not just a semantic issue, because in Europe there has been talk of an 'influx' of refugees, which frames refugees as outsiders who are coming in from somewhere else.

So I looked it up and was surprised to learn that refugees are indeed returning, but they are returning not so much to a place but to a condition, and the condition is safety. A return to safety. Perhaps a greater awareness of this sense of 'return' rather than 'influx' might make a difference to how refugees are received and welcomed. It may strengthen the sense of refugees as belonging to our society rather than intruding into our society.

Second, this focus readily invites a Christian perspective in terms of Christian values like compassion and care, and peace and justice, that can be brought to this understanding. Much more can be said on this, but I won't dwell on it here.

Third, deeper awareness of refugees might also deepen our understanding of our biblical texts, and theological insights. For example, we might notice how biblical characters ranging from King David to the baby Jesus were refugees at different times. We may become less inclined to take these familiar stories and read them with more attention to the fears and the risks of what must have been involved. We might also read the stories with more recognition of the generosity of the Philistines and the Egyptians who offered the refuge in these cases.

I have probably said more than enough, but I hope I have given a sense why I think that working on theology and public issues is both such an interesting area, and also an extraordinary privilege.

I want to say thank you to Allister and St Johns for their support and assistance in furthering this work, and offering it a base here in the nation's capital. And of course I want to say welcome, welcome, welcome to you Derek. I hope I have not said anything to put you off. I am looking forward to working with you, and learning from you in this exciting work.