

## Public Theology

### (THE FERGUSON LECTURE, 19 AUGUST, 2005)

Transparently, the role of the Churches in New Zealand society is changing with bewildering speed. Much attention has been paid to the negative aspects of this, the manifestations of institutional decline we all can recognize at first hand. Simultaneously, however, startling new possibilities are opening up, not least in this country, and particularly in the area of policy formation. Parallel with the more sophisticated techniques for the massaging of public opinion deployed by governments new opportunities are emerging for the influencing of policy through consultative processes. These new developments, which can be observed throughout the developed world, have only limited continuity with traditional state-church interactions.<sup>1</sup> Public theology, therefore, is a relatively new animal. It involves the wider public, a raft of professional organizations, the media, and the tertiary sector as well as church and government bodies. It is an eminently theological response to some of the gravest political and ecological issues humanity has ever had to face.

It is also a very diverse phenomenon. Look it up on the Web and you find some five million entries. Much of what is entered under the heading of public theology is comment on specific social and political issues: everything from ecology to the treatment of AIDS; citizenship in an internet society; human rights; health; education; poverty; welfare; prisons; parenting; violence against women and children, the media. Often there are highly critical analyses of US foreign policy or multinational companies.

The aim of this paper is not to attempt that type of specific analysis, but to draw attention to the potential for a fruitful conversation between the churches on the one hand, especially lay people and theologians, and politicians, the media, and indeed the wider public on the other.

What makes our society tick? Where does power lie these days? How is what we might loosely call the 'public good', the 'common good' to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peter Lineham, 'Government support of the churches in the Modern Era', *God and Government. The New Zealand Experience*. Eds. Rex Ahdar and John Stenhouse (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2000).

be envisaged and refigured?<sup>2</sup> Are there alternatives beyond the collapsed socialist model and the collapsing liberal one? In our market-driven context how can we overcome the resistance to even talking about ‘the common good’? What is the role of theology and the Churches in a pluralist society like ours? How do we turn around the view that the Christian ethic is applicable if at all only to personal life, private matters? That in the real world a ‘pagan ethics’ is required.<sup>3</sup> And what sort of language are we to use when we do talk about it? The language of the technocrats, the language of Zion? Is there something to be said for Ursula le Guin’s call to complement what she calls the ‘father tongue’ of analytical language with the ‘mother tongue’ of neighbourly over the fence conversation? How do you talk about the hunger for integrity, for example?

John de Gruchy, the South African theologian, offers a vivid description of the so-called Multi-Event 99, a gathering which included distinguished academics and leading politicians such as Thabo Mbeki. The aim was to review the role of religion in the new South Africa. Just before Mbeki took the stage a group representing countless village Christians made this passionate statement:

*Our religion does not end in church buildings. It propels us into public space to function as agents of transformation.*<sup>4</sup>

Agents of transformation. That is the challenge for theology in the public square. We may live in a globalised world, but we operate increasingly on a village level, emotionally and financially. Each tribe or village is an interest group, focused on its own welfare, loyal to its own ‘gated community’, to tax-payers or single parents, for example, to car-owners or public transport users, to employers and consumers.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf *In Search of the Common Good*. Eds. Patrick D. Miller and Dennis P. McCann. (New York/ London: T & T. Clark, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Wlikazi Sokutu ‘A Voice from the Periphery...’ in Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection*, 58ff quoted by John de Gruchy, ‘From Political to Public Theologies’, in William F. Storrar & Andrew R. Morton (eds) *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 60.

So-called reality TV programmes, depicting the ludicrous, cut-throat rivalry of competing groups on improbable desert islands, mirrors quite accurately this tribalised conflict. Increasingly, even in the public sphere, we operate contractually, calculate gains and losses, hedge ourselves legally against all contingencies, form tactical alliances and identify opponents. We think ‘politically correctly’ or embrace anti-PC positions equally devoutly. What are the chances of transcending such frozen, sloganised positions in the interest of the common good?

The ancient conviction expressed by Thomas Aquinas that every law is ordained to promote the common good seems infinitely remote. I would like to suggest that when democracy and our whole concept of ‘freedom’ is debased to legitimize the pursuit of atavistic, ‘tribal’ aims the end-result must be the subversion of all community. The neighbour, whether locally, nationally, internationally, becomes simply the bitter and embittered competitor for finite resource.

The crucial contribution of public theology is that it points to the root of this problem, which is spiritual, and releases down to earth, contextual energies and perspectives for its transformation, displaying what the sociologist Roland Robertson has called a ‘glocal’ approach, operating in other words on the cutting edge between the global and the local, the cosmos and the kitchen<sup>5</sup>

The churches are not alone in being alarmed at the way in which this synergistic collaboration of globalisation and tribalisation is currently ravaging and polarizing our world. All those concerned about community and grass-roots democracy are our allies. . We may well, however, have a contribution to make from a Christian perspective to the debate within Aotearoa/New Zealand about national priorities, economic and social, and about what it is to be human in this place as a bicultural people.

No doubt about it, however. The challenges are formidable. I am reminded of the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid

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<sup>5</sup> R. Robertson, ‘Glocalization: time space and homogeneity-heterogeneity’., in M. Featherstone etc. ( eds), *Global Modernities* ( London: Sage, 1995) 25-44.

*But in this huge ineducable  
Heterogeneous hotch and rabble  
Why am I condemned to squabble?*

I am also reminded of Walter Nash, who bestrode the political scene from the 1930's to the 1960's: as politician, Prime Minister and devout Christian, confronting Bishop Averill of Auckland: 'Our Church authorities are so keen on running the church in a business manner that they forget their mission...to run business in a Christian manner.'<sup>6</sup>

Public theology has been defined as an attempt to throw light on the urgent moral questions of our time through explicit use of the symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> That's fine as far as it goes. The language of urgent moral questions, however, is flaccid and tired. I would prefer our focus to be elsewhere, on expanding imaginative horizons, on harnessing the age old yearnings for a new Jerusalem, on the dreams we cherish for our children and children's children. On spotlighting and celebrating the good things about this land and people and peoples of ours. On identifying the rituals which continue to nurture our togetherness, and maintain the critical mass of compassion and creativity among us.

Public theology has a two-fold task: to engage, to listen, and to dialogue but it has also to find a way, and that is the rub, to make clear that it believes itself under an inconceivably absolute claim on its allegiance. Its 'ecology of responsibility' goes far beyond the bar of public opinion, of what is acceptable to the politician or comprehensible to the academy.

. In the short run, we will always meet hostility. Indeed, it is a good rule of thumb that unless we are attacked we will not be on the right lines. I rather like Martin Luther's comment that we should cheer up if the Devil is against us! For wherever religion threatens to stray beyond the private realm, to raise questions about spending priorities. to deplore structural injustice politicians have tended to cry foul. In our recent history they have also been quick to withdraw funding, or to suggest that church interventions represent a carry-over of medieval, or theocratic

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland University Press, 1976), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

attitudes which have no place in the modern world. It is worrying, said Prime Minister Jenny Shipley in 1993, responding to the church leaders statement in election year, that what purports to be a church position 'in fact comes from some of the most left-wing thinking areas of New Zealand.'<sup>8</sup>

What Germans call *Gesinnung*, a religious sensibility, may be tolerated. The churches are welcome as mood modulators, but when they speak out as churches on concrete political issues they hit a neuralgic point for shock-jocks, media pundits, and politicians alike. Yet ever since Paul spoke out on the Areopagus Christianity has affirmed its right to be heard in the public forum, although sometimes its language has been the embodied one of the lives and deaths of the saints and the martyrs. In recent decades public theology has sprung to prominence in the wake of European political theology and Latin American liberation theology, one fired by shame at the silences of the churches about the Holocaust, one by a passion for social justice. Both have insisted that faith cannot be reduced to the private realm without making nonsense of most of Scripture. Theologies of peace and reconciliation and the environment have burgeoned.

Recent sociological and historical studies leave no doubt, moreover, that the influence of mainline churches in recent years on policy-making has been anything but negligible.<sup>9</sup> Peter Lineham has traced the way in which the institutionally declining churches of the 1990's used their moral muscle most effectively in the New Zealand political scene.<sup>10</sup> Largely, of course, they were successful because they were sensitive to the public mood. The recent moves in 2005 to cancel the debts of impoverished third world countries by the so-called G 8 nations meeting in Scotland, limited as they were, would have been inconceivable without decade long lobbying by the churches on the Jubilee issue. Bishop Tutu had a certain modest role in the overthrow of apartheid in

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<sup>8</sup> *The Future of Christianity*, Eds. John Stenhouse and Brett Knowles (Adelaide: ATF Press), 166.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *The Quiet Hand of God. Faith-based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*. Eds. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> 'Social Policy and the Churches in the 1990's and Beyond', in *The Future of Christianity*, 142-182; 'The Inter-church Council on Public Affairs: an Exercise in Ecumenical Political Influence', in *Christianity, Modernity and Culture. New Perspectives on New Zealand History*. Ed. John Stenhouse (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), 269-310.

South Africa. Cardinal Sin toppled two dictators in the Philippines. One uses these names of course as shorthand for hundreds of thousands of Christian women and men, who, largely non-violently, transformed their worlds against all the odds. Such transformation has happened, It is happening. We just need to wake up to it in this country.

So how does the Christian square up to the public forum?<sup>11</sup> Partly the claim to speak into public issues has rested on the **natural law** argument, which presupposes that there is, so to speak, a moral and rational order built into the very structure of things, the *ordo rerum*. Second century theologians such as Justin Martyr drew connections between Christ as Logos or Word and the very logic of creation. The Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, talks of seeing ‘ethics in relation to the rationality of the knowledge that is immanent in being’<sup>12</sup> The strength of this natural law tradition is that one can argue for ethical principles and engage with secular partners without appealing to an exclusively Christian stream of revelation. Clearly this is an attractive option for what is meant to be a **public** theology. There is one tiny difficulty. It is formidably difficult to get any consensus on what this natural law is!

Probably the most common approach to a public theology seeks to complement human common sense and rationality, with the insights of Christian revelation. The J.H. Oldham’s, John Baillies and William Temples were fine exemplars of this in the British tradition of the 1930’s and 1940’s, not telling the politicians their business, but offering ‘**middle axioms**’, bridges between Christian principle and realistic application.<sup>13</sup>

This approach can drift, however, rather close to what is called civic religion. Russian Orthodoxy, Polish Catholicism, German Protestantism have often found it notoriously difficult to separate out the nationalist and Christian strands of their thinking. As late as last year there was an extraordinary explosion of anger in Australia when a Uniting Church

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gerrit G. de Kruijf, ‘The Challenge of a Public Theology’, in *Theology between Church, University and Society*. Ed. Martien Brinkman (Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2003) 139-148.

<sup>12</sup> *Entre Nous. Thinking of the Other*. Trans. by Michael B Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: The Atholone Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent critique of this approach cf. Jonathan Boston, ‘Christianity in the Public Square: the churches and Social Justice

minister confronted some of the presuppositions of civic religion by declining to allow a Digger's coffin wrapped in the Australian flag, to be carried into the Church part of the funeral service.

A third option is the anti-foundationalist approach to Public Theology, associated with theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Ched Myers, and Jim Wallis of Sojourners Community.<sup>14</sup> In our postmodern world, it argues, we can no longer refer society to commonly held transcendental norms. We must begin, rather, from the moral witness of the faith-community of the Church, and offer this to the public arena for acceptance or rejection on its own merits. . A danger of this approach is that behind it can lurk a dualist assumption that God has forsaken the world.

Traditionally Catholics tend to have been associated with the natural law option, Anglicans and Presbyterians with the complementary one, Baptists and Methodists with the third. I wonder, as you listen, to which you find yourself nodding in agreement. Perhaps, like me, you can see some virtue in all three approaches.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of the considerable dangers of being theological in public. From the heart of the Third Reich, he wrote his *Ethics* and his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but it's not always remembered that he first went into the wilderness for years, shutting himself away with a tiny group of ministerial candidates in the obscure East Prussian village of Finkenwalde, structuring the day with silence and biblical meditation and worship. While German rearmed and the Nuremberg Laws tightened their grip on the Jews they focused on the *lectio divina*, the contemplative study of Scripture, on prayer, on discipleship.

For to cry out one's Christian wares in a corrupt public square such as Nazi Germany was, he felt, inevitably to cheapen them. Bonhoeffer coined the term **arcane discipline**, to describe the need for an ascetic

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Theology without Foundations: religious practice and the future of religious truth*. (Nashville: Abengdon Press, 1994); most recently the fine and fiery volume of essays by Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: why the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it....*(San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

withdrawal from conventional views. On the face of it there couldn't be anything more different from public theology. Even later, during the war, when he reflected theologically about a Germany after Hitler, an honourable Germany again, it was in small secretive, conspiratorial groups, and to a tiny number of trusted friends. It is a miracle that any of Bonhoeffer's fragmentary sketches for a new ethic survived. And of course he himself did not survive. Sadly, the most 'public' theologians in the Third Reich were the most compromised ones.

We may not have to cope with a totalitarian regime. Thank God we do not. Yet our society has its own totalitarian features, its own addiction to junk spiritual food, to its 'sex and shopping' idolatry.<sup>15</sup> Before we start offering it 'answers' we will have to be sure to which of the swine our pearls are being thrown!

We may need to steer cautiously between Scylla and Charybdis here, between engagement and prophetic detachment. If one approach can cheapen the Gospel, the other can put such an exorbitantly high price tag on it that it is beyond the reach of ordinary humans. Caution is required in any country. But Aotearoa/New Zealand is a special case. For there can be few countries in the world which have been so inoculated against taking 'God talk' seriously in the formation of public policy.

As churches we face a profound loss of credibility. It's not just the license we have given to the sexual predators in our midst, that when we did have power and influence we used it to crush dissent and whip up guilt, went around blessing battleships while muttering cosmic generalizations about peace. It's not even our pathetic reliance on brand names such as Anglicanism or Presbyterianism or Roman Catholicism in a post-colonial culture.

For decades middle-class Presbyterian Assemblies prosed away complacently about the dangers of drink and gambling and teenage sex. Anglicans cuddled up to the social conventions and were obsessed by their own internal conflicts. Catholic clergy drove prophetic figures such as James K Baxter to despair with their inhibited Jansenism and clericalism. With rare exceptions the churches took the path of least

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<sup>15</sup> The image is drawn from Michael Houellebecq's novel, *Atomised*; trans. Frank Wynne (London: Heinemann, 2000).

resistance during the wars. Finally we are reaping today the bitter harvest of the failure of the bright ecumenical hopes of the 1960's and 1970's. Who can have much respect for churches so riven among themselves?

At the same time, moreover, we face the haemorrhaging of memory about good interventions by church and theology in the past: the advocacy of education for all and of public integrity, the contribution of the Selwyns and Hadfields to what we would today call biculturalism, the civic-mindedness of the Waddells and the Majors, the robust Christian witness of laypeople such as Walter Nash or John Marshall, and of countless thousands of lay women.

There have been creative appearances in the public square in the past, but they have been largely forgotten, or written out of our history. Prior to and during the New Zealand Wars, for example, quite fundamental issues were raised by missionaries and mission societies about human equality and what we would call today universal human rights. The contribution of the quiet echelons of women's missionary societies in every congregation to broadening the world-view of ordinary New Zealanders has yet to be evaluated. Or take the critique of chauvinistic nationalism after the tragedy of the First World. First the liberal Kingdom of God theology and then the post-war Dialectical Theology of Bates and Rex and others offered critical norms to counter the racist imperialism and crude positivism which held sway in the staff rooms of so many secondary schools. The contribution of the Student Christian Movement to training future leaders of society and encouraging ethical debate can hardly be over-estimated.<sup>16</sup> In the Peace Movement of the 1980's theological perspectives on the nature of peace and justice and security and reconciliation, played an important role, while today there is a quiet flow of reflection on spirituality and the ecological crisis, and the connections between them.<sup>17</sup> We need to recover these memories.

Yet who can blame Mr or Ms Average New Zealander if they expect little wisdom from theology? Shortly before Pope John Paul died I asked a business friend, who keeps his ear to the ground if those he

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<sup>16</sup> Christine Berry, *The New Zealand Student Christian Movement 1896-1996: a centennial history*. (Christchurch: SCM, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Land and Place. He whenua, He Wahi. Spiritualities from Aotearoa New Zealand*. Eds Helen Bergin and Susan Smith. (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2004).

mixed with were at all interested in the speculations about a new Pope. He looked at me as if I were totally demented. Half an hour later, when he had finished analyzing the endless follies of religion he summed it all up by saying: 'All that stuff is a luxury'.

Here was someone with a profound love of the land.. Who knew a lot about human failings and not a little about the final mysteries of life. But he was unutterably alienated from institutionalized Christianity. He stands, I suspect, for much that is best in Kiwi society. We fool ourselves if we think there is only indifference to the Church. There is deep, and well-grounded hostility.

Let us be both realistic and hopeful, then, as we attempt to reflect on the essential ingredients for a good public theology.. Obviously the first step is that we do our homework. We have no privileged access to moral discernment. The meticulous research done by the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit of the Salvation Army on poverty and housing, and the similar work of Presbyterian Support on Dunedin housing has won respect. The Council for Socially Responsible Investment has a sharp focus on ecological issues.<sup>18</sup> The Edinburgh Centre for Theology and Public Issues has been fostering expert discussions for many years, and its flow of publications on a host of issues is complemented by careful reflection on how we engage with the secular world.<sup>19</sup> A global network of public theology is rapidly developing throughout the world, with centres in Edinburgh, Princeton, Sydney, South Africa. We need to hook into it.

Secondly, theology will carry weight when it is seen to spring from living communities who have earthed what they say in what they are and what they do. Jim Wallis speaks with authority because of a lifetime commitment to the Sojourners Community. Public theology may be crystallized by scholars at a desk, but that is very much the thirty- ninth step. The foundation will be laid by a specific type of spirituality. Here I find myself agreeing with Hauerwas or with Mary Grey's fascinating work on prophecy and mysticism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. its website: <http://www.csri.org.nz>.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. its website: [http://www.div.ed.uk/publications\\_3html](http://www.div.ed.uk/publications_3html)

<sup>20</sup> 'Living without dreams: is there a spirituality for justice in a globalized world?' *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 231-252.

It's hard to focus, they say, when you're knee deep in crocodiles. This is the Bonhoeffer insight.. We need to cultivate distance, be sustained by a community which is consciously counter-cultural. Dorothy Day, Dorothee Sölle., the Iona Community in Scotland all witness to this. Public theology goes beyond analysis. It is covenantal, partisan thinking, 'God's preferential option for the poor'.

This suggests a spiritual discipline. What we say and how we say it has to emerge from how we cultivate silence and work at our listening skills. An imaginative vision will be as credible as its rootage in a day to day struggle to integrate our speaking with our living. Our reading of the socio-political texts of reality needs to be complemented by the slow meditative ploughing of Scripture, or rather allowing ourselves to be ploughed by God's improbable Word. The second prerequisite then, is an integrative spirituality. Not easy.

Thirdly, public theology in its language will often be closer to poetry than to prose. We may have never had a more memorable public theologian in this country than James K. Baxter, though the hymn-writer Shirley Murray must run him close.. Such theology is iconic rather than representational. Like the prophets of old it embraces symbolic, outrageous actions: yachts against nuclear warships. So many of our Christian commentaries are like those side-line heroes you see on every playing field, offering excellent advice from the security of non-involvement.

Perhaps it's not more prophets we need, but more saints. Mind you, I'm not talking here about plaster saints. I sometimes wearily reflect that many church people that they have never been spectacularly evil enough to be of any practical use to anyone. True saints tend to be shockers. Even Mother Suzanne Aubert was decidedly stropy. Public theology will always rely to some extent on its shock/horror effect. What is today's equivalent of Dr Donald Soper on his soap-box in Hyde Park? Is it a renewal of medieval traditions such as the pilgrimage, or hikoi, or the all night vigil, or the fast? Thirdly, then, discursive argument won't hack it. We need to reach the heart and the imagination.

Point 4 Public Theology as Priestly. John Zizioulas, the Greek Orthodox theologian, one of the first to recognize the rape of the

environment as the greatest sin of our time, has memorably portrayed humanity's relation to nature as essentially priestly.<sup>21</sup> The 'care of souls' needs to be complemented by the 'care of the earth'. . The sacraments link us also to one another. Eucharist bonds together those who share bread and wine in a communion which anticipates cosmic justice and makes accommodation to current globalisation policies forever impossible. . In AIDS stricken South Africa, today, the baptism of a child is understood by some extraordinary congregations as a commitment to stand by the little girl or boy, whatever happens, if and when its parents die

Friends, the nub of the problem facing us in today's world is that no one really believes anything can be changed, except perhaps the fundamentalists. And they have got it wrong. We have become managers and social masseurs, trimmers and time-servers. Unlike our parents and grandparents we no longer believe the trade unions will deliver, that socialist solidarity will create a fairer world, that colonial liberation movements will bring in a new era.

This is why we need to recover the priestly aspect to eschatology, the eschatological dimension to priesthood, living God's tomorrow today. Ancient Israel, after all, flocked to the Temple singing, celebrating the great liberations of the past, and recognizing God's lordship in the present. Every baptism leads us through nakedness to the glittering raiment of paradise, every celebration of the Eucharist leads us through the dark grave to the banquet of plenty.. Sacraments are nothing if not political, and politics are meaningless unless they are sacramental, as I first learned so long ago in the Iona Community.

Finally, we have to fund the debate on the future direction of our society from our Biblical perspectives. A sixteenth century woman writer I'm studying managed to challenge every public institution of her day: church state and university because she had actualized the message of the prophets and apostles in her own mind and heart, flitting through

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<sup>21</sup> John D. Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation . Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology', *King's College Theological Review* 1989-9, 1-5, 41-45, 1-5.

text after text, harvesting from it her very own perspective on her time.<sup>22</sup>

Argula, too, was knee deep in crocodiles. She trembled with all her being at the abuses in the church, the university, the legal system. But she quite naively saw herself as standing with Jeremiah or Deborah or Jesus or the daughters of Philip. She managed to keep focus because the horizons of the prophets merged and melded with hers. Her baptismal vow meant she had to speak out against the Devil in high places, including ecclesiastical ones. We need to recover this naivete. Any fool can be intellectually honest. It's this core-deep, heart-deep, community deep emotional honesty that's the tough one.

Let's return to the debased notion of freedom. It has been reduced to the right of the potent individual to elbow his or her way through the crowd, to achieve maximal self-fulfillment. Such freedom, however, as we have seen, is subversive of all community. As a result our Western rhetoric about democracy grows more hollow by the day. Contrast that with the rich biblical understanding of freedom from self, freedom for the other, freedom in the truth. Other quite crucial values such as justice, security, equality, peace need to be similarly revived from biblical reflection.<sup>23</sup>

For part of the tragedy of modernity, as Charles Taylor has argued, is that a disengaged, instrumentalised rationality has lost contact with the deep sources of its values. When approaching issues such as genetic engineering for example, or reproductive cloning or even the patenting of life. Christian believers have crucial insights to offer.<sup>24</sup> In bioethics there is a growing realization that we have to get beyond the *how* of treatment to focusing on the *who* being treated, the 'virtuous patient', as Alastair Campbell and Teresa Swift put it. They draw on careful research about the desires of patients with incurable illness, to point to the centrality of notions of self-respect, the self in the image of God.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach. A Woman's Voice in the Reformation.* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> In *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic* the Socialist thinker, Terry Eagleton, explores with great sensitivity many of the classical themes of theology as expressing what cannot be expressed otherwise. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Gill, 'Public Theology and Genetics', in *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 253-265; *re-ordering nature. theology, society and the new genetics.* Ed. Celia Deane-Drummond et al. (London/New York: T& T Clark, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* In Search of the Virtuous Patient, 267-284

Very well then, we have done our homework. We know what's what and have found allies beyond the tent. We have forged our red-hot convictions in the furnace of community, We have woven, or painted or lyricised our convictions into iconic symbols, We have polished up our credentials as unbelievably randy saints, and we have transgressed public decency by gathering nakedly and repeatedly around font and altar. We have even been absurd enough to poke around the Hebrew and Greek Testaments for illumination. How do we crystallize all this into a truly public theology?

I remember a project I was involved in many moons ago. We were to look at a theology of peace for the UK, in Northern Ireland, in Scotland's hard places, in inner-city London. The process was good. We were a mix of activists and theologians, Catholics and Protestants, men and women, lay and cleric. We started simultaneously from the ground, from the cruel streets of Andersonstown in Belfast, with the Brit army in its forts and the helicopters swirling overhead, and from the high-flown theory of liberation theology. Papers were written and circulated to three different groups, and I travelled to the home ground of each and listened to their comments, which in turn were circulated to all the other groups. It was hard to find a common language. For our experiences were so totally different, as were our backgrounds and expectations. Yet at the heart of it there was a meeting of people, and amidst laughter and tears, a merging of horizons between the immediacies of the present and the ancient world of Israel and the Christian Diaspora.<sup>26</sup>

What would be the urgent themes for the farmer in Southland, the student in Christchurch, the single parent in Hamilton, the trade-unionist in Gisborne?. Perhaps the unforgiving, graceless nature of contemporary relationships, and politics, where one public slip can ruin one for ever? The appalling crime statistics for the marginalized groupings in our society? The bottomless banality of our TV? The deep vein of anxiety and meaninglessness among our young people? What are the good features of this island society we would be wanting to affirm? What are the dreams we have embraced and begun to realize?

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Matheson, *Profile of Love* ( Belfast/Dublin/Ottawa: Christian Journals, 1979).

I have recently returned from Australia, and while I had a wonderful time there, it has also sharpened my appreciation of how much we have going for us here in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is no small thing that towards the beginning of our colonial history a covenantal relationship was established in the Treaty of Waitangi., and that we are beginning to address what that means. It surely takes first place in the building of our public theology.

Revisionist historians rightly caution us against exaggerating the pioneering commitment over the years to democracy and social justice in this country, but we should draw a long breath, notwithstanding, and recognize how fortunate we are to have such a long and proud egalitarian history. It was precisely because the excesses of Rogernomics ran against the grain of our history that we finally rebelled against them. A heritage was being betrayed, one to which our Judaeo-Christian tradition has made its own formidable contribution. We are relatively free, of the endemic corruption that plagues so many of our close neighbours. The biblical theme of sacrifice has taken on new relevance in recent years with a particular and poignant focus on Gallipoli. Clearly the latter is seen as representative of something we have somehow lost and need to recover for our own day. Visitors comment, too, on the fairly unique role which environmental concerns, partly embodied in our conservation areas, play here. At the heart of the ecological awareness is a spiritual one, of course. Closely related to this is our profound commitment to a nuclear free and independent Pacific

So in closing I would make the point that slap-bang accusations of our society as secular, materialist, godless, liberal or whatever are sadly astray. Recently the Scottish theologian Will Storrar has talked of a civic Pentecost, drawing interesting analogies between Public Spirit and Holy Spirit. The implication is that an effective Public Theology must engage with and ally with that Public Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> His as yet unpublished lectures on public theology were given at the Uniting Church of Australia's Theological College at Parramatta, Sydney in 2004; my primary debt in this paper is to the exemplary work of Clive Pearson in developing and promoting the work of public theology, and to his countless articles in *Ecotheology*, *Uniting Church Studies* and elsewhere. Note his forthcoming book: *Re: public theology* PACT [CSU] / Australian Theological Forum

At times it may seem that all that sustains us in this country is a thin pragmatism and a superficial materialism. Where there is a vacuum, however devils tend to rush in. Perhaps public theologians should be these devils! Public Theology, by easing us out of our institutional or individualistic religiosity into the real world, and drawing the latter into contact with the God who is basis of all community, will shake us all up to our mutual benefit.

Seamus Heaney, talking about poetry and the imagination, speaks about establishing direct contact *with the image-cellar, the dream-bank, the word-hoard, the truth-cave ...*<sup>28</sup> In our case, the Judaeo-Christian tradition constitutes the 'image-cellar, the dream-bank, the word-hoard, the truth-cave' on which we can draw. Let's not be too miserly in offering its resources to the wider society. Let's flex our imaginations, as well as our compassion. Let's propel ourselves into public space and take the risk of being agents of transformation.

PETER MATHESON.

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<sup>28</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers* ( London: Faber& Faber, 2002) 227.