

Public theology and public policy

Tom Frame

There is much debate about the character and remit of ‘public theology’ as a sub-discipline of theology. The public theology seminar held in 2008 at St Mark’s National Theological Centre revealed the many divergent shades of opinion. Reading the special edition of *St Mark’s Review* (Edition 203) that contained the papers, one sees evidence that one’s own philosophical/political/ideological outlook and the contours of one’s Christian convictions, particularly one’s vision of the Kingdom of God – of what it consists, how it is proclaimed and when it is drawn nearer – are crucial to the shape and substance of public theology.

My own view is very similar to that of Professor Robin Gill, who conducts the MA in Public Theology course at the University of Kent at Canterbury. We share a belief that the focus of public theology is quite simply public policy and that the objective of public theology is to inform and influence public policy in the direction of the Kingdom of God. It is, then, a blend of reflection and advocacy. The focus of the reflection is the identification of values and virtues that bear upon every deliberation over public policy; the focus of the advocacy is the practical proclamation of those values and virtues in the church’s own life and in its interaction with the host society. The foundations of public theology are dug into the Biblical texts and political theory. Let me comment on the latter with respect to our own church and its experience.

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Since the 1960s, the Anglican Church has struggled to formulate a comprehensive vision of a distinctly Anglican contribution to Australian public affairs quite apart from a Christian vision of Australian social life. There has been no shortage of sloganeers but a holistic outlook has been slow to emerge because, in my view, due consideration has not been given to what is termed 'political theology'. Although many philosophers tend to restrict political theology to either the charter or the conduct of government, I believe its remit is much larger. It begins with distinguishing political theory from political practice and political ideology. In terms of its content, I believe that *political* theory is a social activity that has to do principally with the allocation of authority and the arrogation of power to visible institutions and agreed processes. These institutions and processes enjoy common consent arising from the recognition of shared convictions and acknowledged conventions. They allow a society to identify its aspirations, deal with its insecurities, marshal its resources and manage its differences. In terms of its broader remit, political *theory* is a philosophical response to practical problems arising from the complex interactions between individuals and groups of people in the form of principled solutions.

Once problems have been clearly identified and accurately interpreted, the task of philosophy is to bring some principles to bear on whatever might be proposed as solutions. The existence of principles, however they are discerned or described, elevates political theory from partisan opportunities or mundane administration. For me, the principles given expression in any political theory are vital because they inform judgements about what constitute, for instance, things we regard as good and bad or beneficial and desirable. Political theory therefore encompasses values and virtues. Developing political theory is a morally complex activity drawing heavily on a range of theological resources. If, however, theologians decline any involvement in the development of political theory, they should not be surprised when technocrats, economists and scientists play a dominant and, potentially, distorting role in the discussion of political imperatives and priorities.

Whereas an external observer might have presumed that the Anglican Church – with its English Establishment inheritance – would be adept and experienced at nominating and describing the values and virtues that inform a coherent political theory, there is little evidence that those who presently lead the Anglican Church have taken the trouble to articulate them clearly

or to apply them creatively to a well-thought-out and carefully enunciated vision of the political order. Conversely, the Roman Catholic Church has done this very well. It has been able to develop and depict a very powerful and persuasive account of the kind of social order that flows from Christian convictions utilising Biblical texts, the teaching of the Fathers and the Roman Catholic Church's own experience. It has attended to the work of St Augustine of Hippo and St Thomas Aquinas, both of whom were obliged to theorise about the connection between political life and religious order, the rights of citizens and the responsibility of rulers in the context of Roman and Christian empires. Roman Catholic teaching has been able to define the ethical status of the state and the moral standing of the nation, to differentiate between the church and the world in terms of faith's expectations and love's duties, identifying the realms that are proper to both church and state while outlining the duties and responsibilities of governments and statesmen, clergy and congregations. Some serious work has also been done by Roman Catholics on the remit of politics and the contribution that Christianity and the church might make to peace and prosperity.

By way of contrast, some Anglicans act as though they already know what kind of society ought to exist and proceed directly to advocacy and agitation. In many instances it is not apparent to me that a church statement or program reflects or embodies a well-thought-out understanding of the things that constitute a healthy society. This is surprising because so many Christians, including Anglican clergy, have made substantial contributions to political theory in the past by emphasising the biblical insight that humanity consists of body, mind and spirit, and stressing the theological significance of empathy, altruism and compassion. Indeed, political theory drawing on the insights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – an era in which the modern nation-state began to emerge alongside participatory democracy – ought to be richer and fuller in the hands of Anglican Christians than religious unbelievers because many of the principles upon which modern statecraft and contemporary politics are based drew directly on Anglican theology for their inspiration and substance.

In previous centuries Anglican theologians thought deeply about social reformation and pondered the appeal of political revolution. The competing claims of monarchism and republicanism attracted the attention of the Anglican Church's leading minds. Anglican theologians critiqued various approaches to civil government (from minimalist proposals to

absolutist ideas) and took issue with diverse accounts of the privileges and prerogatives of the state and its instrumentalities. Drawing on the Anglican experience of the public square, theologians explored the expression of faith and reason in the interaction of church and state, debated the place of the laity and clergy in the regulation of public life and strived to determine the limits of civil and ecclesiastical authority. While the domains of theology and politics were more clearly differentiated after the English Reformation, they were still intertwined because both drew on similar ideals and aspired to similar things. The domain of political theory is, therefore, not a new or even an emerging area of Anglican theology. Until 1945, political theory was a central preoccupation of Anglican theology. Sadly, it has become a much neglected one and an indicator of the serious decline in the Anglican Church's intellectual culture.

Of course, political theory will also bear upon one's view of ecclesiastical authority and influence one's attitude to church order. And yet, the connection is rarely made. This has effectively severed the church from the community and made it a less-than-useful dialogue partner with those concerned to develop a political theory that refuses to accept the extant Westminster bi-cameral system in which two entrenched parties – one on the Left and one on the Right – claim to offer the only possible approaches to responsible or effective government. There is not much thinking 'outside the square' within either the political fraternity or the ecclesial community. Australian politics is adversarial and predictable, and lacking any attention to political theory in its fixation with gaining and retaining power. This represents an incredible shift since the 1930s when Communism, Fascism and democratic capitalism offered consolidated worldviews and an implicit political theory.

The church's calling in this context is to remind the world of its origins and destiny, its point and its purpose. This calling has become even more urgent as Western societies become fragmented, national boundaries give way to multinational affiliations, and the Christian tenor of many First World countries is supplanted by an atheistic secularism unchastened by any admission of past failures. There is clearly no going back to Christendom as the dis-integration of religion and politics seems destined to relegate religious beliefs to the personal and therefore private realm, whereas purely political convictions become ascendant and achieve dominance in discussion about the common good and the public interest.

Although the church does not exist to help the state make the world more prosperous, more peaceful or more purposeful, there are more options available than comprehensive political disengagement and world-renouncing theology. This is why I have been drawn to the political approach of William Temple and have commended it in several places in my own published work. My interest has tended to concentrate on identifying the possibilities offered by political systems although not in terms of what they deliver, because these kinds of judgements can only be made when the system exists and is fighting for its survival, but in their potential to illuminate choices and to elucidate certain principles.

Regrettably, the church is now less likely to be invited to contribute to conversations in which its insights and perspectives ought to be heard. In many contemporary fora dedicated to exploring both the future direction and present state of Australian society, the church is rarely credited with having any role in either what Australia was or what it might become. Although there is widespread interest in social identity, community cohesion and personal wholeness, there is seldom mention of the spiritual wellbeing of Australians, moral or ethical considerations in public policy, or any discussion of those things that contribute to human fulfilment. It is almost as if the efficient and targeted delivery of goods and services would both meet the expectations of Australians individually and collectively and provide at least an acceptable level of happiness as a result.

For instance, many speak of a 'decent' society and talked about the 'aspirations' of the Australian people, but how might 'decency' be defined? What is the origin of these aspirations? They are certainly not produced in a vacuum. These notions ought to be opened to debate and discussion in the light of values and virtues such as prudence, temperance, humility and charity – concepts which remain largely unexplored by secular contributors. Australians are encouraged to have 'hard heads and soft hearts' but is this little more than justification of a system in which people agree on the means but not the ends of human existence? So often economists, political scientists, demographers, lawyers, statisticians and health care specialists are all given a place around the table while theologians are absent and no one seems to notice or even to care.

Surely, one might imagine, the Anglican Church has something worthwhile to say about most aspects of human happiness – about fertility and human reproduction in the context of the social and political function of

the family; the place of work in human dignity, the balancing of work and domestic responsibilities; the necessity of job security; the wellbeing of children in welfare-dependent families, let alone the responsibility of the community for the disadvantaged and helpless and the nature of collective responsibility for individual misfortune. And what of the necessary balance between economic growth and social equity, and between capital accumulation and wealth distribution; of the debate between maintaining high minimum wages against targeted fiscal payments for families, and the emphasis on eradicating unemployment and job creation through labour market assistance? What of the understanding of 'poverty' as an economic, social, political and spiritual reality, and the calculation of its existence and extent? Is there nothing to be said about the status and standing of national boundaries and local needs in the movement towards economic globalisation, or the tension between promotion of opportunity and encouragement of excellence in the distribution of educational resources?

What of the extent of resources that should be made available to the care of the aged and infirm, the existence of a crumbling universal health care system alongside a growing private health insurance sector, and the effects of managed competition in the health care sector? Do Australians expect too much and invest too heavily in health outcomes that are not shared by their nearest and less affluent neighbours? Is there nothing the Anglican Church can contribute to discussions of the effects of economic competition on collective altruism and the expression of human compassion; on the difficulty of achieving a range of desired social outcomes when so much activity has been shifted from the public to the private realm? What of the relationship that ought to exist between the individual and the state, and the proper allocation of rights and responsibilities? How could the allocation of an equitable share of the taxation burden be established without encouraging tax avoidance or unethical minimisation strategies? Surely the Anglican Church has something to say about how the consumption patterns of our society could and should be challenged and corrected in terms of environmental sustainability?

The church has things to contribute and it tries to contribute. But it now needs to work especially hard at getting a place around the table because there are those who want to banish the Christian voice from the public square, mistakenly believing that secularism means excluding anyone

with a Christian conviction from uttering the name of Christ in relation to any matter beyond religion which is, some allege, a wholly private concern.

The Anglican Church is presently engaged in reclaiming its place in the public square. The Public Affairs Commission (PAC) and its activities are integral to that objective and, in my view, critical to the Anglican Church's mission and ministry. But we need to acknowledge that organisation is needed as well as ideas. We have the latter in abundance but not the former. I think we need a think tank like the Public Policy Institute headed by my friend Professor Scott Prasser that was established at the Australian Catholic University last year, and I believe that St Mark's might be a suitable home for a comparable Anglican institute given its proximity to Parliament House and the range of interest groups that are situated in Barton. The PAC could serve as the governing council or a panel of reference, with the institute being tasked by the PAC to continue its work between formal sessions. The members of the PAC know that the work of political and cultural change must be conscientiously and carefully sustained over a prolonged period. I am grateful for the opportunity today to contribute something to its work and its effectiveness.