

CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

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Religion and politics

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We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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Seasonal resources will also appear on the resource bank. Any resources you would be willing to share with others on these themes would be gladly received.

Contributions can be sent to Sharon Ensor: ministerwpc@xtra.co.nz
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Courting controversy

Amanda Wells

Religion and politics: two topics best unaddressed in polite conversation, perhaps?

British entertainer Elton John, who visited New Zealand late last year, had this to say about religion: “I would ban religion completely. Organised religion doesn’t seem to work. It turns people into really hateful lemmings and it’s not really compassionate.”¹

And what is politics? One of the first essays I wrote in my time at university concerned the proposition that the novel in question (Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*) was essentially political. What did this mean, I wondered. My eighteen-year-old self associated the term with elections and political parties. But politics is really about power, as the lecturer’s question intimated; about “who can do what to whom”, which Atwood’s novel explores.

Combine the two ingredients above to produce an explosive mixture.

But politics and religion can’t be separated. Think of the struggles of the Sanhedrin and the myriad Jewish factions confronting Jesus. Denying the impact of power plays in the sphere of faith is to take an overly naïve view. Anything that hits people on an emotional level will induce non-rational reactions that are vulnerable to manipulation. In this issue of *Candour*, Frank Glen’s sensitive exploration of being representing minority view in a congregation suggests ways in which putting politics in perspective can provide a more Christ-like model for loving one another.

Put “Christianity” and “politics” in the same sentence and right-wing implications aren’t far away, particularly if it’s the US political climate under consideration. I had many conversations in January about right-wing manipulation of the Bush/Gore election (the literary fiction I insist on reading while tramping having considerably less conversational potential than US satirist Al Franken’s *The Truth (with jokes)*). One of this book’s more fascinating features was an analysis of both overt and covert evangelical support for Bush, and the apparent arrogance with which this skirted a number of US electioneering laws. Whether you see truth in this interpretation or not, there can be little doubt it makes the New Zealand political climate seem comparatively tame and

healthy. Perhaps the persistence of Christian parties in the Kiwi political context has been a blessing in terms of effectively shutting religious extremes out from the mainstream of power.

But everyone’s actions are informed by their worldview, and to imply that politicians act in a religion-free vacuum is to deny reality. To deny that religious belief is increasingly significant politically on the global stage is similarly perverse. Examples are scarcely needed. Perhaps 10 years ago it seemed that postmodernism had squelched religious fervour with its uncertainties and relativism. In today’s climate, the influence of faith is hard to underestimate.

Any group generates internal power dynamics; any kind of institutionalism induces politics. Most of the essays in this month’s collection explore the connection between the Church and external political processes but to have considered our internal political balances would have been just as valid. Kevin Ward considers the role mainstream Christianity has played, and continues to play, in the New Zealand political context. George Bryant provides a personal reflection on his long involvement in the political process, and considers whether Christian parties provide an effective approach. John Murray asks some questions and answers some others in an attempt to negotiate the delicate balance of state and faith. Nathan Parry offers an insight into the paper presented by Chris Marshall at last year’s Focal conference entitled “A prophet of God’s justice: Reclaiming the political Jesus”. The issue appropriately concludes with Rinny Westra’s review of an essay collection focusing on the work of the recently honoured Lloyd Geering.

The March issue of *Candour* has the theme “Maximising pastoral visiting” and contributions would be appreciated. The deadline is Thursday 1 March; anything between 700 and 2500 words is fine. Reviews are also welcome and these can be shorter if desired. Email contributions to me at candour@presbyterian.org.nz

References

¹ Quote cited in “Elton not shy about views”, the *Dominion Post*, 27 November 2006.

Religion and politics: A healthy mix

Kevin Ward, School of Ministry, Dunedin

“Religion has no place in politics” proclaimed the Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Cullen, as he mounted the platform to speak at the New Zealand Labour Party 2006 conference in Rotorua. He was expressing a commonly held view that is not only naïve but also suggests that most of New Zealand’s political history has in fact been flawed, including much of that of his own Labour Party. The statement is naïve in that it assumes that politicians, many of whom are religious, are able to operate with a split persona that enables them to leave the perspectives that comes from their religion behind when it comes to making decisions in the political arena. Religion is so intertwined in all areas of our lives, affecting all that we think and do, that this, of course, is an impossibility. It is one of the critiques of the split world view of modernity that postmodernity has been so helpful in critiquing.

Not only is it a naïve view, it in fact is a distorted view of the political story of “secular” New Zealand. New Zealand was secular since its political inception, in the sense that there was no state Church and therefore no particular role for the leaders of any particular Church in its public institutions, in particular politics and education. This was the reason why it was decided that sessions of parliament should be commenced in prayer by the speaker rather than having a chaplain appointed to parliament. This practice, still continued, indicated of course that religion was seen as having a place in politics. Many of the politicians of the first decades were strongly involved in Church life, and Christian morality significantly shaped many of the laws that were passed by parliament.

There was a period in the early decades of the 20th century when sectarian religion became divisive in politics, when Prime Minister William Massey aligned himself with the fanatical Protestant Political Association. In some ways this had some similarities to the Religious Right today, except that rather than “atheistic secularism” being the enemy it was “Romanism” and people such as former PM Sir Joseph Ward and Bishop Liston who became the target. However, politicians and New Zealanders drew back from this kind of religious involvement, and politicians continued to express their religious convictions in more ecumenical and inclusive terms.

It is well known that British socialism grew primarily out of Methodist rather than Marxist roots. When the Labour

Party emerged in New Zealand, it included many prominent churchmen among its leading members. Harry Holland had been a street preacher with the Salvation Army. When it came to power, its first Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage, reclaimed his Roman Catholicism and described his Government’s policies as “applied Christianity”. A Victoria University Professor of Religious Studies, in a workshop at the same Labour Party conference, urging Labour members to reclaim their Christian heritage, commented that “Savage sometimes sounds like the book of Leviticus.” His successor Peter Fraser was clearly shaped by his Scottish Presbyterianism and Arnold Nordmeyer was a practicing Presbyterian. Walter Nash was a committed Christian strongly identifying with the Anglican Church and often spoke of the “fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.” Of later leaders, Norman Kirk had a Salvation Army background, David Lange’s Methodist involvement continued for a significant period of his political life and despite later cynicism clearly significantly shaped his politics, while Helen Clark, an avowed agnostic, may well be more influenced in much of her outlook by her Presbyterian upbringing than she is willing to acknowledge. Sometime acting Prime Minister, and former Labour Party member, Jim Anderton is unabashed in bringing up his Catholic identity and religious beliefs. Of course, the longest continuous political religious involvement in New Zealand has been by the Ratana Church, and that has been until recently solely with the Labour Party. If religion has no place in politics, how come the annual Labour pilgrimage to Ratana?

When it comes to the National Party, the record is equally strong. Sydney Holland had a Methodist upbringing and later became Anglican while Keith Holyoake was brought up in the Open Brethren (which it is important to clearly distinguish from the Exclusive Brethren), later becoming Presbyterian. John Marshall remained significantly involved in the Presbyterian Church his whole life. Robert Muldoon was raised a Baptist and later spent some time in the Anglican Church, while Jim Bolger was always reasonably open about his Catholic commitment. Bolger says he “absorbed ethics of social responsibility and caring for your neighbour and being concerned for the disadvantaged every Sunday of my life”. Both Jenny Shipley and Don Brash were children of Presbyterian ministers and of the current leadership Bill English’s Catholic involvement is well known. Clearly then, New Zealand’s political life has been significantly determined

by people for whom religion is to a greater or lesser extent part of who they are. To think that all of these people, as well as countless other significant politicians, expressed their politics without significant input from this religious involvement, is both naïve and a denial of what reality has been.

As the theory of secularisation, in the sense of the decline and ultimate demise of religion, gained momentum from the late 1960s on, a religious voice became more muted and there was a clear reluctance to bring it into the debate. The secularist world view, expressed by people such as Cullen, indicated this was the way things should be. New Zealand was not unlike other western countries in this regard. Not only in politics, but also in other areas of public life, religion was pushed to the margins.

From the 1990s on, this has begun to change. In one of the most significant treatments of secularisation theory, Jose Casanova in *Public Religions in the Modern World* describes the re-emergence of Church and religion to a more significant public role in a number of western countries. “Religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatised role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.”¹

This can be observed in New Zealand. As the market reforms of the late 80s and early 90s rolled on and cutbacks were made in welfare provisions, alarmed Christians began to express concern about the impact of these reforms on the poor. In 1993, the leaders of 10 Churches issued a pre-election Social Justice Statement indicating their unease at the effects of neoliberal economic policies, saying “we hope to discover how New Zealand can become a more just and caring society”. Before the 1996 general election, 148 well known church members, including bishops, heads of the Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist churches, academics and lay people, encouraged all Christian voters to ask candidates “what they plan to do about poverty if elected”.

In late 1998, the Anglican Church organised a Hikoi of Hope; a protest march to parliament to demand government action to reduce poverty. The leader of the opposition at the time, Helen Clark, realised the potential political gain to be made by identifying with the march. A year later it became a factor in the Labour Party election victory. The new government agreed to meet regularly

with church leaders and out of this came an investigation of problems faced by voluntary and community organisations in interfacing with government. This political involvement, as well as the religious identity of the politicians noted above, has mainly been from those in mainline Christian churches.

At the other end of the religious spectrum, the conservative stance had been that the Church should not be involved in politics and focussed on personal piety. There were exceptions such as the Baptist J K Archer who was both President of the Baptist Union and President of the Labour Party. However from the mid 80s on they came to believe that the state (in particular the Lange Labour government) was failing to maintain certain moral stances, such as the sanction of the criminal law against male homosexual acts, and felt forced to act. Out of this emerged a plethora of conservative groups with links to similar organisations of the religious right in the US. Ultimately, as MMP allowed the formation of new political parties,

it led to the Christian Heritage Party and other Christian political parties including the current United Future and Destiny. Viv Grigg in a recent University of Auckland PhD claims that

Those of other faiths, who make a significant proportion of new immigrants, do not see religion in the privatised way that “modern” western societies do.

“the evangelical mindset in New Zealand includes a perception of disempowerment, a sense of shock at the rapid breakdown of social structure, a quiet rage at their sense of the loss of legitimacy and morality of the established Church, then anger at the ‘benign’ governments.”² It is the expression of this sense of rage that led to the involvement of the Exclusive Brethren in the 2006 election, which is the context in which Cullen’s remark was made and also in which Paul Morris made his call to the Labour Party to re-own its Christian heritage and not allow the religious voice in the political to belong exclusively to the conservatives.

Another factor in the re-emergence of a religious voice in the public square, including politics, has been immigration patterns. Those of other faiths, who make a significant proportion of new immigrants, do not see religion in the privatised way that “modern” western societies do. This is particularly so of Muslims. Religion is concerned with all of life. This of course is also true of Maori religion. Hence from these groups religious issues have increasingly made their way to public attention. I have noted over the past few years an increasing amount of coverage being given to religious issues in all of our

media. It was quite staggering in the last three months of last year how much religion and politics was commented on in the media, including such surprising regular columnists as Chris Trotter and Rosemary MacLeod. It was interesting to note that despite Cullen's comment, both Prime Minister Helen Clark and party President Mike Williams responded positively to Paul Morris's call to the Labour Party to rediscover a religious voice. A number of analyses of the US election results last year suggested that a significant factor in the Democratic victory was the decision of more moderate religious voices to become actively involved and not allow the religious voice to belong to the religious right in support of the Republican Party. Democratic Party Presidential hopeful senator Barack Obama says that "to say that men and women should not inject their personal morality into public policy debates is a practical absurdity". It is clear globally, as well as in Western societies such as New Zealand, that rather than declining in its public significance, religion is actually gaining in its saliency. Politics is not exempt from this.

I would want to argue that it is important for the health of society that religion does in fact play a part in politics. It always has in our history, which is why our law is largely based on the Christian religious tradition. Even further Winston Peters argues that "our system of government in large measure is a result of the Christian ethic". The issue is not whether religion should be involved in politics or not, but how it should be involved. Most of us would agree that the secrecy and seeming hypocrisy of the Exclusive Brethren involvement is not a healthy way and would also recoil from some of the demagogic

ways of others such as Brian Tamaki or the self righteous judgmentalism of Graham Capill. We need to recognise that we no longer live in Christendom and therefore can no longer seek to impose our "particular" world view and values on all, which is what many conservatives would like to do. Whether we like it or not, we live in a multicultural and plural society, and need to learn how to operate in that reality. We cannot expect all to agree, with all of our beliefs and the values that come from those.

That does not mean we remove religious perspectives from discussion of issues of economics, morality, education, healthcare or whatever but rather that we contribute to the discussion alongside others with different perspectives seeking to work together for the creation of a healthy, just and caring society. As we do that, we often discover the goals we have may have more in common than we had thought. It seems to me the Presbyterian tradition, with its vision of the Church existing, not just as a lifeboat to rescue people from an evil world as a sectarian view would see it, but rather having a critical role in creating a good civil society, has much to offer.

References

- ¹ J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994, p.2.
- ² V. Grigg, "The Spirit of Christ and the Postmodern City," unpublished Ph D, University of Auckland, 2006, p.93.

Should Christians be involved in politics?

George Bryant, lay appointee, Bethelhem Community Community Church, Tauranga

For 13 years I was involved in politics, nearly four of them as president of New Zealand's third party in the 1970's.¹ Since then I've followed the political scene with considerable interest. For years I have debated, with myself and others, the most appropriate way for a Christian to effect political change towards a more Christian society. What follows are some of my key learnings.

The question is: should Christians, and the Church, participate in any way in the nation's political process? Or should we leave it all to the secularists, with Church and state going their separate ways?

Church versus State

It's an age-old question, with which Christians have battled from time immemorial. And the answer is not as simple as some would have us believe. There are some groups of Christians who firmly believe that since politics deals with worldly affairs we should have nothing to do with it whatsoever, since our dealings are with spiritual matters.

At the other extreme are those who would have us deeply involved, lobbying politicians at every turn in an effort to determine government policies on a whole raft of socio-political issues. The Gospel is seen as a definite challenge

to the secular state. Hence the rise of Christian political parties whose bottom-line desire is to get into parliament and ultimately govern. The inferred agenda here is: “we want the country governed according to our manifesto, our way of thinking”.

But wait a moment! Who wants a state run by a doctrinaire Christian political party or the Destiny Church? Ironically, by far the majority of Christians would not want our government run by the Church – like Old Testament Israel. Or like some modern-day Islamic states. There are grave dangers where religion governs countries. Such authorities can be as totalitarian as any secular rule, ignoring minorities and riding roughshod over civil rights. Witness the widespread cruelty of the Spanish Inquisition, where Church and state colluded to suppress “blasphemies” and “heresies”.

Besides, our modern, multi-cultural, multi-religious society cries out for a separation of church and state if order is to prevail. Of that I am convinced. Indeed, democratic societies have developed most satisfactorily under secular government, with the Church in a supporting role.

The Government is God’s?

According to Scripture, particularly Romans 13, secular government is “ordained” by God. St Paul clearly states that we should submit ourselves to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except what God has established, and if we rebel against it, we rebel against God. Peter reinforces this idea: “submit yourselves to every authority instituted among men” (1 Peter 2:13).

I confess to having difficulty in supporting this view when we have parliamentary leaders who, by their own confession, are agnostic and cynical towards Christian bodies. But the Scripture is clear. Maybe my trust in a providential, sovereign God is lacking.

The Bible tells us to be good citizens and respect our rulers – even though we might not vote for them. Paul even urges us to pray for those in authority and live “peaceable and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim 2:1,2). But does this mean, as some believe, that we should simply lie low and go with the flow and let our Government, whatever its hue, get on with it? After all, if the nation is “under God” then we should let God and His rulers rule.

However, Christians are part of the body politic. It is our right and duty as “good citizens” to take an interest and be involved. In fact, Jesus challenges us to do so. While it is true He told us to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”

- that is, be good citizens and pay our taxes - He also told us to “give to God what is God’s”.

In Acts 5 where Peter and the apostles were brought before the supreme Jewish court for preaching the good news, they declared for a second time: “we must obey God rather than men”.

Our dilemma

And herein lies the dilemma for the individual Christian and, indeed, the Church at large. What do we do when a secular government’s policies follow pathways that are not in keeping with the Christian gospel? How should we act when Christians perceive that a piece of proposed legislation will be, in effect, contrary to what they conceive to be God’s will for “His Kingdom”? “Give to God what is God’s” invites us to challenge such legislation.

We cannot live in society, with our heads buried in the sand, and ignore the way we are governed. We are to work in partnership with God. We are to work for God’s Kingdom to come – a Kingdom of peace, love and justice. We are to protect our environment, God’s creation. We are to look after the wellbeing of our neighbours, identify with the poor and seek better means of distributing the nation’s wealth. Where personal dignity is abused or sound moral principles threatened, Christians need to be heard. So where secular governance and Kingdom values clash, Christians and the body of Christ have a right and a Biblical responsibility to speak out and help transform society. But how?

A Christian Party?

Is the establishment of a Christian Party the answer? I believe not.

Christian political parties are doomed to failure. Recent New Zealand history is littered with the skeletons of such. True, some overseas “Christian” groups have succeeded, but by the time they govern they have become purely nominal and their original Christian principles compromised.

After 10 years on the political scene Christian Heritage came nowhere near the five percent of the vote required for parliamentary representation. And after 10 years its leader was convicted of child abuse and imprisoned despite his ongoing moralistic pronouncements. And in the late 1990s, even the Christian Democrats shed the word “Christian” in favour of Future New Zealand, basing policies on general Christian principles rather than specific doctrines.

It is naïve to think Christian political parties can attract voters from across the political spectrum in sufficient numbers to gain parliamentary representation. They can't. Their manifestos are usually very narrowly doctrinal, and somewhat absolutist, therefore antagonising other Christians who follow a different doctrinal stance. And their talk is so "religious" that even nominal Christians steer clear.

True, they appear sincere and enthusiastic, especially in their keenness to do something about family life, but they simply never gain popular appeal. It is dangerous to view legislating for the progress of the lives of human beings in black and white terms. Politics is the art of compromise – appreciating the greys. Besides, there is no political blueprint in the Scriptures. We are not presented with any kind of political ideology, whether it be socialist or capitalist, but there are very clear principles for living, for condemning evil, for being impartial, for seeking justice.

Christian differences confuse

The entry of Christians en bloc into the political arena can cause dissension among various Christian groups and confuse the non-Christian.

I remember the Clergy for Rowling campaign in 1975 where a large group of Christian leaders gave support to the Labour Party, ostensibly viewing it as "more Christian". Congregations up and down the country became quite agitated, condemning such an association. The campaign did little to advance Christianity.

I remember, too, the Coalition of Concerned Citizens in the 1987 General Election campaign. They tried to warn against the increasing secularisation of society and sought a return to moral standards of the past. They felt traditional values were being eroded. They may well have been right. But the more liberal Christian groups attacked them very strongly. "The moral right", they claimed, "had got it all wrong". They even campaigned against them! Such a clash did little to expand God's Kingdom.

And in 2005, we witnessed the Exclusive Brethren support for National. Unfortunately what was probably a very sincere attempt to influence a political party towards a more conservative morality became highly politicised and thereby reflected negatively on Christians in general.

These kinds of Christian lobby groups don't help much to "build up the body of Christ". They simply confuse Christians and non-Christians alike. One's political views are often shaped by one's religious views. Even on issues

like euthanasia, war, the legalising of prostitution, civil unions and the smacking of children there appears to be no one, single Christian viewpoint. Different Christian stances are advocated.

What then can we do?

Should this prevent Christians from participating in politics? Certainly not. The debating process is important. God's love for people does have political implications and we are obliged, as His servants, to endeavour to work them out in the world, being His "salt and light". Our efforts will surely contribute towards understanding the truth.

We may lobby, sign petitions, present submissions and work within political parties. We need to stand up and be counted for what we believe, and add the Christian voice to the other voices.

Jesus is our guide. He was a political figure! He told Israel it was going in the wrong direction. He talked of a new Kingdom and a new order. He confronted vested interests. His pronouncements were often quite radical. And He did it all in love.

In summary, therefore, Christians are to live good lives and witness to Christ within a non-theocratic, civil state. God is in control. But if they sense the Government is proceeding contrary to Christian principles, they have a right and duty to speak out and act, even though they may attract criticism.

But I sound a warning. Beware of becoming sidetracked. Beware of thinking that the solutions to the problems of modern living reside in political processes. Socio/political activism is only a means to an end, not the end in itself.

One time Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple believed that Christians should tell the politicians what ends to promote but leave the precise means to them. We need to remember that the Christian's prime mission is to change hearts; to bring human beings into stronger personal relationships to Christ.

References

¹ New Zealand Social Credit League. See my recently published autobiography: *George: The Secrets of an Ordinary Kiwi*, Daystar, 2006.

Religion and politics don't mix?

John Murray, minister emeritus, Wellington*

Add religion to politics and what have you got? An explosive mixture! In the Middle East it destroys stability, kills people. Add in the Philippines, Nepal, Eritrea, the Balkans, Sri Lanka - and you add more conflict and brutality.

Then add in the great Western nations of USA and UK - with their confessed Christian leaders - and you have war. Talk about Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations"!

The interesting thing is that many different peoples and cultures have been able to live side by side worshipping different religions. Then politics - aka political leaders - have wanted more and called on the gods of their religions to justify and bless their guns. Righteous crusades need the gods of righteousness to ensure not so much victory but the loyalty of their believing peoples. And to justify their leaders in their actions, that even in failure and defeat, in the deaths of so many enemies and friends, they did only what God wanted.

But let's leave all this big stuff to the 6pm TV news and to the banner headlines of the press. That is the world of religion and politics we live in - and all our forbears lived in. It's the world of last century, in which we and our country were involved in at least four international conflicts apart from peacekeeping exercises. So let's turn home, to Aotearoa New Zealand, to find how religion and politics act on one another, with or without strife and violence.

What did you do in 1981? If you were 18 years old or more, you would have been involved - for or against - in the Springbok tour of New Zealand. You remember the "civil war" on our streets, in our media. What about in your congregation? What did your Presbytery do about it? Were our Church leaders leading the street protests? And what was it all about: playing rugby? No politics in sport? Accepting the Government's decision? What was "apartheid" to you? Who did you support your favourite sport? your political party? your service club? your profession or union? your Public Questions Committee? What effect did it have on your Sunday worship?

Religion and Politics are always partners - in some form or another. Think of 6 February 1840. If it hadn't been for the "good offices" of Henry Williams and the other

Church of England and Methodist ministers, not to mention the "good advices" and directions given by the Christian men, officials of the Colonial Office in London, what might have happened on the day?

And on the same day, what might have been a decision, in answer to one religious leader's question as to which, if any, Church might become predominant as the Established Church of the new country, which could have repeated here the bloody religious - and political - history of Britain and Europe. Over the years, this situation has been maintained - there is no Established Church or religion. It is our government's and our privilege, in the growing religious milieu that is New Zealand today, to respect all religions as having their proper place among us. All this comes from that first Waitangi Day in a mixture of religion and politics.

What did you do on Waitangi Day this year? Lots of different people gathered for services, ceremonies and celebrations. Was there a special focus in your worship on 4 February? Our Assembly, some years ago now, changed its name to include "Aotearoa" and to include the Treaty as a significant document. So what do you think about the work of the Waitangi Tribunal - now and when it started? Do you think our governments have done enough, too little, too much, in giving land and money to Maori? When it was signed, the Treaty was likened to a religious Covenant.

One of the greatest partnerships of religion and politics in our country, happened in 1893. It was the Vote for Women. As New Zealanders, we are proud of this - the first nation in the world to pass this legislation. Whatever was in the minds of Seddon and his government, we know the story of Church women, led by Kate Sheppard and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Many of our Grandmothers and Greatgrandmothers signed that petition. And in passing, we should note the same prophetic leadership of Rutherford Waddell in helping to set up the Dunedin Tailoresses' Union.

All this was about the rights of women in our land. Women - and some men - in the Churches influenced the Government to accept new policies that gave a stamp of identity to our country. Yet the same Churches took another 50 years or more to change their own ways and to allow "half" their membership to assume their full and rightful

place in their own governance. Whereas in disobedience to our own Gospel of accepting people for who they are, and on the grounds of faith in Christ, the politics of the Churches have spent many of these past years engrossed in arguing issues of women's rights, wanting to control first the State and then, themselves, in these matters - and more recently, to control the rights of people of other sexualities, wanting to exclude them from forming legal partnerships - and also from being chosen to fill religious leadership roles in their own church.

In this religion and political partnership, sometimes religion can point the way but more often, it seems, try to hold back human rights.

A learned judge said "I am not in favour of abortion but I am against any law which punishes a woman who seeks an abortion". Abortion is a perplexing moral issue in that it concerns intimately the conflict of two - or more - human lives. There is no perfect answer. Parliament passed a law disallowing abortion except in some very restricted circumstances. Some of us set up an opposition movement, Repeal, to give rights to women. Whose choice is it to abort? Is it a choice or is it murder? If this matter reaches in to your family, on what grounds do you decide? What decision would your parish make? What did our Assembly decide? Was it - is it - all too hard?

Religion and politics are always in partnership. In our Western Christian history - and I think in all societies - there are three main patterns of partnership. The question for us, as 21st century Christians, is do we recognise the three patterns - and which will we, as individuals and as members of a community of faith, choose? Let me explain how I see it.

Both religion and politics are about "power". Read history and see! So the first choice is "who gets the power"? Perhaps thousands of years ago, it was the "priest" who understood all things and communicated them in "mysteries" to the people. But it was not long before the strongest, smartest man took over as lord or king. So the struggle between priest and king began; the rivalry between Church and State has continued.

In the first instance, where religion gives in to politics, we have the example of the United Kingdom. The Government who is the Queen, rules the land and the Established Church supports the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister chooses the Archbishop of Canterbury, who then becomes second to the Queen. If the Archbishop criticises the Government, as Robert Runcie criticized Margaret

Thatcher over the Falklands War, he is in real trouble. So the next Archbishop, George Carey, was a very mild Establishment man.

In the second instance, where religion lords it over politics, take for example the authority of the chief Imam of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, who tells the President what to say and where he steps out of line. And maybe this is not so different from the conservative religious leaders in the USA guiding their President's thoughts and policies in domestic and international affairs.

And see what is happening in Iraq, since "they" have put an end to the secular state! In Europe we are used to this. One of the oldest states is ruled by a religious leader, the Vatican, a nation in its own right - not to mention the world-wide religious state, ruled by the Pope.

Of course there is another way for religion and politics to relate - by rejecting each other. Each live in a different world. We saw this recently in the extraordinary story of the Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand - and other places around the world - and one of our leading political parties. The Exclusive Brethren hold themselves aloof from joining in public life and in particular from participation in politics and voting. Yet they were deeply involved - read Nicky Hager's book *The Hollow Men* - in trying anonymously to sway the results of our last national elections. So much for separation!

On the other hand, our Governments are paying less and less heed to the voices of the Churches. However it is worth noting that at the present time, 2007, the Government is aware of the growing importance of religion worldwide and has requested from our many religious communities a draft National Statement on Religious Diversity. This raises two points - religion and politics must go hand in hand, but, secondly, how should we walk shoulder to shoulder?

Our Reformed tradition says that as people of religious faith, we should not strive for political power, by dominating or supporting particular parties. Nor should we reject, honestly or otherwise, any involvement in the political process but we should walk side by side with politics, free to support policies for the good of the people and the earth, and equally free to challenge and confront policies we see as bad.

This is our religious duty - to speak truth to the powers. Here is a quotation to ponder, taken from a recent edition of UK newspaper *Guardian Weekly*.

We Christians believe that Jesus invented secularism [he broke with the power of the Religious Establishment]. Jesus' teachings desecralised the State: no authority, not even Caesar's, was comparable to God's. As Nick Spencer writes in Doing God, the secular was Christianity's gift to the world, denoting a public space in which the authorities should be respected but could be legitimately challenged and could never accord to themselves absolute or ultimate significance. Christianity, far from creating an absolutist state, initiated dissent from state absolutism.

Religion and politics are partners, two members of the same family, each with different talents, needed to play their own roles. So what are these roles? Here there is no space to discuss "local" politics though that is where local parishes may best be able to play their role. What about "national" roles? The role of the state is to organise the whole society for the greatest good of all its people, no matter what gender, race, religion. This is the order called Law, which not only limits the actions of some who would hurt or disable others, but also opens up new freedoms and choices for all to encourage them to fulfil their natural talents and opportunities. It is called "pro bono publico"; for the good of all people. The word "polis" has nothing to do with the police but is the word for "community-city", how best we can live together. That's politics!

As religious people, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists or who you will, we have the necessity, the responsibility, to support this "polis", not because it is our special brand, not because, as Christians, we want New Zealand to be a "Christian country" - which raises the question, which brand of Christianity? - but because we all belong to the same human family who, even more in this global world, must learn to live together.

But there is another, a deeper, more insistent reason that we must, as religious people, play a special part in the partnership. The state organises, the Spirit guides - and religion as a recognised embodiment of the Spirit, has the profound privilege to "speak truth to the powers".

In the best form of religion, not as has been often prevailing through the centuries, where religion tried to take over politics or to kowtow to it, lie the values, the truths about living well together. This is the prophetic voice in every generation. Values like sharing the wealth among the community; caring for the sick and disabled; making sure that everyone gets a just, affordable "fair go"; respecting the diversity of ways of thought and forms of religion; and creating peace for all.

So what's new about that, you ask? Nothing! So why is it taking so long to happen? This is where we come back to the beginning of this article. Religion and politics are an explosive mixture! Still explosive, even after Moses, Socrates Gautama, Jesus and so many more, prophets, speakers for God.

The partnership of religion and politics is not so hard to work out if they are seen as two halves of human community, not as opposition forces trying to gain power over the other. Religion the guide to the deepest values of our world, people and creation - and politics the organiser of how these values are made real... "incarnated" some might say.

As followers of Jesus of Nazareth, whom some call Messiah, bringer of God's, not the Church's or Religion's "Kingdom", we most of all are committed to the purpose of peace. Peace the message of Christmas - and of so many other moments in our spiritual story - which we share with so many other religious people. That's what is best in all religions.

No matter how many of our leaders, religious and political, have abused the truth in the past, the best of all politics is when we organise peace and goodwill, on earth, among all people.

Where were you on 6 August 1945? I know where I was but I didn't realise what had happened. And if you were not born then, have you realised in your own lifetime what happened on that day? Most New Zealanders are now "on-side" with our nuclear-free politics - that was a hard struggle! Even very recently one of our major political parties has just said "yes" to our national policy. So what's the problem? The world since 1945! It's the continuation of conflict, the horrendous arms industry, the belligerent - political and religious leadership and the warrior attitude of so many people which fills our press and our television, both news and entertainment! Has your parish - did our Assembly in 2006 - in the name of the Gospel of peace and of "the Prince of Peace" - make as its top priority, peacemaking? The world depends on it. Think if all Christians - and all the other people of goodwill - in the world, if we all worked together for peace, what an impact it would have, then as the Psalmist might have written, religion and politics would kiss - and the peacemakers would be called the children of God.

**The Very Rev John Murray has a long history of activism, including anti-Springbok Tour, pro- Homosexual Law Reform and pro- nuclear free.*

'A prophet of God's justice: Reclaiming the political Jesus'

A review of a paper by Chris Marshall by Nathan Parry, *Island Bay Presbyterian, Wellington*

In this paper I want to offer an appraisal of some of the political themes that emerge in the Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus. My thesis is radically simple (as well as simply radical): it is that Jesus was an overtly political figure; that he had an identifiable political platform; and that the political values, commitments, and priorities we see displayed in his teaching and praxis ought to play a determinative role in shaping and directing all subsequent Christian engagement in the political process.¹

So began Chris Marshall as he presented his paper "A Prophet of God's Justice: Reclaiming the Political Jesus" at the Focal conference on "Church and Politics" at Wellington Central Baptist last year. Chris currently lectures theology at Victoria University and should be well known to most New Zealand students of the New Testament or Church and Society. He was one of four key-note speakers at the conference, but, agree with him or not, I found his presentation particularly thought-provoking and relevant to our current political climate, and so I have agreed to review it here and give his argument a wider airing.

If people are inspired to read further, full transcripts of the conference (including comments on Chris' presentation by the MPs Chester Burrows of National, and Gordon Copeland of United) were printed in *Stimulus* Vol 14, Issue 3, August 2006.

The reason why Chris described his thesis as "simply radical" is because he sees it as contradicting the conventional view of Jesus as a purely apolitical figure. Generally (he says) Christians have viewed Jesus as a spiritual saviour not a political activist, interested in the salvation of souls and not the transformation of society. But, Chris asks, is a non-political Jesus historically or theologically credible? Is it possible to isolate Jesus from the social and political problems of his time?

In answering these questions he places a lot of store on the "criterion of crucifiability". Basically this asserts that crucifixion was mainly reserved for slaves and rebels, so for Jesus to have been condemned to this fate he must have been regarded by the Romans as an insurrectionist

of some sort. Any reconstruction of the historical Jesus must adequately explain why he was crucified or it is invalid.

A second reason he gives for the radical nature of his thesis, is that since Constantine made Christianity the state religion of Rome, our faith has in a way been co-opted by the state: "...the institutional church itself began to replicate in its own life and behaviour the hierarchical structures of the wider imperial order..."² "In Christendom's orthodoxy the figure of Christ came to function more as a central link in the doctrine of salvation than as a meaningful paradigm for Christian values and praxis."³ A symptom of this he sees as being the basic omission of ethics from the historic creeds. Was the moral/prophetic voice of Christ silenced while his theological/soteriological place was championed?

This leads Chris to state that "most confessing Christians, and a disappointing number of our pastors, bishops, and theological educators, not to mention our politicians, are still disturbingly deaf to the political dimensions of Jesus' preaching and practice, and to its far-reaching implications for shaping an authentically Christian witness today."⁴

From my own evangelical/charismatic background I found

this true to a point; it resonated with my own experience of church to some degree but not entirely. However, I have met Christians who seem to embody what Chris is describing and they do seem to dominate media portrayals of our faith and involvement in politics. Why is this? How has this apolitical view of Christ come about? Chris goes on at length to give five main reasons for this state of affairs in the Church today, which I will summarise.

1. Jesus didn't engage in politics as we would today. He didn't form a political party, run for office or theorise about the nature of society or economics. Therefore, "modern readers quickly conclude that he was an apolitical spiritual teacher who kept himself aloof from the sordid realities of political life."⁵

Chris attempts to combat this by pointing out that religion, politics and economics were not separate in Jesus' day. The religious leaders exercised political control and

came from the small wealthy elite. Therefore, Jesus' conflicts with the religious leaders were at the same time a conflict with the political and economic leaders of Israel.

Also, the Gospels make it clear that Jesus directed his ministry at the poor masses, a group Chris asserts were already highly politicised – very prone to revolt and unrest. In preaching to these people how could he have avoided politics? “Politics is essentially about the exercise of power – social, economic, cultural, religious, and coercive power – in the *polis*, in society, and about these matters... Jesus had much to say.”⁶

2. Another barrier Chris sees for a modern reader to recognise Jesus' political activity is our post-Enlightenment individualist mindsets. We see Jesus as a solitary figure interacting with detached individuals; we don't appreciate the impact he had on wider community and family relationships. Chris argues that the ancients did not have our individualistic worldview and lived very communal lives; we need to be aware of this when studying his life.

3. Next Chris goes on to critique our tendencies to dismember the Gospel – to focus our attention on individual sayings of Jesus without reading them in relation to the Gospels as a whole, or the context of the socio-economic realities of the world in which they are set. He sees this as a problem with both popular and scholarly readings of the Bible, and insists that reading Jesus without reference to his context is like reading Martin Luther King without reference to segregation or the history of American slavery.

4. The fourth point is an exclusive emphasis on Jesus' divinity. Chris does assert his belief in Jesus' divinity, but suggests that too much emphasis on that aspect of Jesus' nature has “squeezed out his prophetic credentials”.

*The evidence that Jesus considered himself to be a prophet, and was regarded by his contemporaries as such, is overwhelming. It is true that his closest followers came to regard him as much more than a prophet, but they never saw him as less, and it was in this basic mould of a prophet that Jesus made his most decisive political impact.*⁷

He goes on to list several types of prophet, and the paradigm into which he feels Jesus fits.

5. This section is concluded by turning to the text itself. Chris argues that all the above issues come home to roost in our actual interpretation of Scripture, and that two passages in particular are regularly interpreted and preached

in a way that bolsters the common view that Jesus was fundamentally apolitical.

These are John 18:35-38 (Jesus' discussion with Pilate about whether he considers himself to be king of the Jews), and Mark 12:13-17 (the question of paying taxes). Chris goes on to give a concise but solid alternative interpretation of these texts that I found convincing enough but which each of us will have to read and evaluate for ourselves.

In the last section of his paper, Chris describes what he labels Jesus' “dual political strategy,” and four major areas of ancient social life in which Jesus put it into action. This strategy was a) a prophetic denunciation of the injustices and social evils of the time, and b) the attempt to form a new community that lived out the justice and peace of God's Kingdom, “thereby to model and affect the renewal of Israel as a whole.”⁸

This is where we really get to grips with the alternative political vision that Chris is presenting; what he feels it means to be a true follower of Christ in the *polis*, in wider politics and society. It is a vision I have heard before, but which is quite at odds with the common stereotypes of Christian engagements in the political sphere – especially the dominant voices that have been coming out of America over the past decade.

A quick summary of the four examples he takes from the life of Christ...

1. Jesus rejected social discrimination.

Jesus criticised the self-righteous elite while at the same time being primarily oriented to the social margins – “he assembled a new inclusive, egalitarian community in which the poor were given preference, the sick and imprisoned cared for, women accorded dignity and equality, children esteemed as models to be emulated, and Samaritans and Gentiles embraced as equal objects of God's favour.”⁹

So, can we then say that modern Christian politics must be good news to the marginalised and socially disadvantaged, or it is the opposite of the politics of Christ?

2. Jesus critiqued economic exploitation

Jesus often preached against the dangers of Mammon as creating a barrier to trusting God, and Chris has grouped Jesus' criticisms of the rich into three main areas (with numerous Biblical references): a) accumulating unneeded surplus, b) ignoring the needs of the poor, and c) corruption and exploitation of the weak.

In contrast to that, “following Jesus entailed a commitment to share one’s material resources with those in need. A lifestyle of simplicity, material dependence and constant vigilance against the ‘deceitfulness of riches’ (Mk 4:19) are to be hallmarks of this new community.”¹⁰ This argument would assert that legitimately Christ-like politics does not idolise money or consumerism, and is indeed good news to the poor.

3. Jesus had a mistrust of governmental power

Chris identifies three levels of institutional political power that Jesus faced (spiritual/domestic – religious leaders; civil – Herod; imperial/military – Rome), and asserts that Jesus was critical of all three. “The basic presupposition of his political critique was that sovereignty or kingship belongs exclusively to God. God alone possesses ultimate authority in human affairs, and God’s justice must be the measuring rod against which the exercise of all human authority is to be evaluated.”¹¹

Each level of power is examined in turn, with most time spent on Jesus’ criticism of Empire and up-ending of the prevalent social order.

4. Lastly, Jesus repudiated violence and war

Three paths were being pursued by the Jews of Jesus’ time in responding to the brutality of Roman rule – revolt, withdrawal, or collaboration. “Jesus rejected all three. Instead he chose the way of non-violent, sacrificial love and required the same of his followers (Matt 5:38-48).”¹²

Jesus calls us to love and pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek. Chris strongly asserts that to fight for God’s Kingdom using the weapons of the enemy is to lose the Kingdom. Chris is well known for his Anabaptist, pacifist views, and this is where he includes one of his strongest criticisms of modern Christian politics: “Arguably it is by their compromise with military violence that the Christian credentials of so much conservative Christian politics are most open to question. It could not be sadder for Christian witness today that the two leading architects of the invasion of Iraq and the two most unapologetic proponents of the so-called war on terrorism are both confessing Christians who claim divine endorsement for their trust in the ‘tumult of war’ (Hos 10:14) instead of the ‘gospel of peace’ (Eph 6:15) in their quest for international security.”¹³

I found Chris’ paper very prophetic (though it is a shame it didn’t come out before the 2005 election to stimulate some more constructive debate). I find it hard to deny that

the ministry of Christ on earth was multi-dimensional, and that the political aspect of his words and deeds are indeed one (very complex) dimension of the whole. I also agree with Chris that it is an oft ignored or misunderstood part of the gospels, and that as this is an era of strong Christian involvement in politics, this ignorance leaves us very vulnerable to betraying the Lord we seek to follow.

I am quite a fan of Chris Marshall, I appreciate his scholarship and his honest approach to scripture. This presentation left me feeling greatly inspired with much to think about and reflect back onto my own lifestyle and values. I think it is well worth obtaining a copy of *Stimulus* to read for yourselves, and I hope that it may inspire others to prayer and study as well.

I will leave the final words to him:

*Inasmuch as the biblical vision for the Government of God is the setting up of a universal realm of peace and justice on earth, the Church as the community of the Kingdom is called to a twofold political task. On the one hand, it is to proclaim the breakthrough of God’s new order by giving visible expression in its own life to the peace, justice and righteousness of God’s Kingdom. On the other hand, it is to work tirelessly for peace and justice in surrounding society, to struggle against the forces of the old age – forces of nationalism, militarism, materialism, sexism, and racism – which Christ has dethroned and which one day shall finally yield to God’s glorious future. Such is the politics of Jesus.*¹⁴

References

- ¹ Chris Marshall, [A Prophet of God’s Justice](#), *Stimulus*, Vol 14, Issue 3, August 2003, p.28
- ² Ibid, p.29
- ³ Ibid, p.29
- ⁴ Ibid, p.29
- ⁵ Ibid, p.30
- ⁶ Ibid, p.31
- ⁷ Ibid, p.33
- ⁸ Ibid, p.35
- ⁹ Ibid, p.36
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p.37
- ¹¹ Ibid, p.37
- ¹² Ibid, p.39
- ¹³ Ibid, p.39
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.40

On being a minority of the majority

Frank Glen, minister emeritus, Christchurch

In the recent issue of *Candour*, one of our retired Presbyterian ministers announced his resignation in response to the recent Assembly decision not to give a leadership role within the Church to gays and those in a defacto marriage relationship. I read with interest some of the angry response from others who were disappointed and frustrated by the Assembly decision. We all knew this would be a difficult time of division.

The articles persuaded me to share with *Candour* readers the position that my wife and I experience in a congregation where we are a theological minority. We have retired after 33 active years of chaplaincy in industry, missions, military, social services and parish life. On arrival in Christchurch six years ago, we elected to worship at Knox Church, where the congregation's mission statement makes abundantly clear it is an inclusive congregation welcoming people of different genders, persuasions, ethnicity and theological views. We both knew that Knox had a strong tradition of support for gay ordination, but our interest was in the congregations stated acceptance of all persons of theological persuasions. A rare demonstration of catholicity at its best. One that is strikingly different from postmodern neo-fundamentalism with its insistence of a belief in a radical theology of social engineering (among other things) and political correctness. The subtlety behind these more radical and humanist beliefs that somehow are attached to the New Testament seems to us as almost an essential qualification to belong to a congregation of that persuasion.

We both felt Knox's open inclusiveness offered us a place of spiritual equality because being of an unashamed evangelical persuasion (but not fundamentalist in the slightest) we represented the middle path of the past golden era of a fading liberal evangelical ethos. A theological position that today struggles to retain representation within the place of the Church. Those of us who have had a lifetime of proving and living our experiential Christianity have become the source (and the focus) of evangelism for both the radical and the fundamentalist Christian social missionaries who are completely opposed to each other's theologies. It was the professed catholicity of Knox's willingness to accept wide and diverse difference that appealed to us. That does not for one moment imply there are times when both of us are stretched to the limit both of our patience, beliefs and understanding as participants within the Knox Christian community.

The alternative choice was to worship in a congregation that may well have been evangelical, but that was comfortable in its assurance of Biblical correctness and, although unwilling to admit it, judgmental of those not in fellowship with their beliefs. The fact that we hold a vigorous theological opposition to gay leadership and that we were electing to worship in a congregation where we were a decided minority did not deter us in the least. We took Knox at its word. Some of my evangelical colleagues told me bluntly I had sold out to my life-long theological beliefs and that my soul would die in such a congregation. My spirit would stagnate. It was for the Knox fellowship to prove that our commonness in Christ made us as acceptable as the gays and those of other persuasions and beliefs.

Indeed, over the past six years we have come to appreciate and to share thoughts with many who don't hold our convictions. The fact that my brother is gay, and the personal experience of the struggle to accept his orientation that his coming out caused within my own family all contributed to our decision to "try" Knox and test the validity of their claim. The claim that they could, and would, accept within their fellowship those Christians who find the whole question of the leadership and ordination of gays totally unacceptable in their understanding of the Christian tradition and Gospel was to be tested. It is not possible in this short piece, nor it my intention, to argue the case for that theology or belief for that is not the purpose of this paper.

The Assembly, under God's grace, has tested the articles of the case for gay leadership and it has made up its mind. Its ruling came as a hurtful surprise to many in the Knox congregation and this became more evident when I voted against, and spoke against a remit reasserting the place of gays within the leadership of the Church. It was at this point that the congregation was made plainly aware that there were within their midst a minority that did not accept, and would support vigorously, the issue that the Assembly had wrestled with. This was indeed a test of the claim for Knox to be inclusive, to include those within who represented a view, albeit of the Church, but not of that congregation. The situation since I stated publicly my theological position (not one of the United Nations or Human Rights) simply underlined the strong difference of opinion. The strong emotive response from some members of the congregation was real to them and to me.

A response

The late Ian Dixon and I shared these differences over more than one meal, and I saw his pain and he heard my response. He touched my hand as we shared a meal one day and said “do you really believe that Frank?” What a privilege to share difference and that difference to become for us both the basis of a trust and not the pain of separation and ill feeling. Those times became for both of us a sharing and an appreciation of another view. Over the past few months some of those folk within the Knox congregation who support the move to gay leadership have tentatively approached me to discuss “why” Margret and I hold the views we do. Others now smile, and even speak! Previously perhaps I was formerly viewed with two horns and a tail. The testing period of the meaning of inclusiveness will continue. For it to be productive, it simply means sharing each other’s views without anger, emotion, and rancour. It is hard for those who support gay leadership to separate that objection, albeit theological, from the idea the objection is an implicit rejection of gays as God’s children. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Has it ever occurred to those who wish to see a change in the Church’s policy that if it ever became official by way of a minority vote the end result would be devastation within the Church similar to the nineteenth century Scottish disruption? In our human state we want answers to questions as fast as we can manufacture them and my reading of the Assembly decision is that God has not said “yes”, and God is asking us to struggle with the theology, and to find dialogue between differences. Maybe even by way of that difference to bring about a new change, a new direction one that is less abrasive, less of a dichotomy; for there are significantly more important social and world issues that demand our energy. Protestants have a penchant for hiving off on their own if there is strong disagreement. That answers nothing, but further divides Christendom.

The argument that people have been hurt is spurious. We have all been hurt one way or another by the opinions, doctrines and attitude of the Church. I most certainly have frequently been hurt when I believed both my suggestions, hard work, or entitlements have not been recognised or were overlooked by the Church. Where do we take our hurt as Christians? We return these to the Lord who shares that hurt with us. The Church is not a secular institution, although it recognises it is within a secular society. It is not for society to influence the Church at the cost of the values that are at the heart of the New Testament, but it is for the Church of Jesus Christ to influence society with the values of Christian ethics. A failure to do so (and contemporary history suggests this is the case)

results in the difficulty of many in the community to tell the difference between the Church of Jesus Christ and the football club. The stimulus for consistent Christian witness and example has its origins from the revelation and practice of a Christocentric and Kingdom of God theology that has until recent decades deeply influenced the mission of the Church.

Margret and I have a renewed determination to continue our dialogue as a minority; to share in worship as time and opportunity allows within the Knox fellowship and to struggle with the issues. To do less is to fall into the fascism of Christian fundamentalism and lose the plot entirely. There remains now only one choice: to talk and share, learn and pray and above all remember we are all loved and accepted by our common Saviour. Not everything is neatly resolved by decisions of the Assembly. We may well have to live in this state of debate and inconclusiveness for some decades to come. What a nuisance that we have to live in an untidy theological environment, but it is infinitely better than further division, and a sense of uneasy righteousness. Then have we not adopted a faith journey? Perhaps we all need to recognise that God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus is greater than the argument of gay leadership and it is indeed inclusive of us all regardless of gender, race or creed.

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Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart (editors), *A Religious Atheist: Critical Essays On The Work Of Lloyd Geering*. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Rinny Westra

This is definitely not a festschrift by “Geering groupies”. In fact the essays in Parts I and II read like an effort to white-ant the subject of this collection of essays before the specifics are dealt with in Part III. The negative tone is set in the introduction, and particularly in the very pedantic and nit-picky essay entitled “Reading Lloyd Geering” by Raymond Pelly. Pelly gathers a glossary of words characteristic of Geering that are “negative or pejorative”, or that “denote affirmation or correctness”, showing that his language is loaded to achieve the results that he wants, and that among other things he is not open to dialogue, that he is stuck in the rationality of the Enlightenment, and so on. The editors indicate in the introduction that they want dialogue with Geering and his followers, but their own loaded language is hardly likely to evoke such a response.

The remaining essays in Part II are not very promising either. They endeavour to show that “orthodox Christianity” is in fact superior to what Geering is promoting (Kai Man Kwan); that secularisation, a concept that is central to Geering’s work, is already outmoded (Christopher Lewis); and that Geering misinterprets the New Testament evidence on the physical resurrection (Christopher D. Marshall). Up to this point, the combined impression of these essays, spearheaded by the negativity of Pelly, look more like a demolition job on Geering than an invitation to open dialogue.

Things improve in Part III. John Bishop is sympathetic to Geering’s rejection of theism (he uses the term “omni-God”), but is open to an on-going realism in relation to God, keeping in mind that, unlike Don Cupitt, Geering is still open to “God-talk”. Gregory W. Dawes discusses Geering’s use of Feuerbach, particularly the theory of the Divine as the projection of the human, and wonders why he doesn’t follow the later Feuerbach and give up on religion altogether. Neil Darragh sees Geering primarily as a modern myth-maker, and has some serious things to discuss with him about that. Ken Booth is more negative again, in that he sees little that is concrete or practical in Geering’s vision of a global future that would lead to a helpful ecclesiology for the future. All these essays raise topics that could profitably be the subject of on-going dialogue and constructive debate.

The most devastating and, in the reviewer’s opinion, justified criticism is found in the final essay by Paul Morris. Morris sees Geering’s contention that the modern secular world is superseding Christianity in the modern world in the same way that Christianity superseded Judaism in the late classical world as another form of anti-Semitism. The already superseded Judaism is now doubly superseded! In the reviewer’s opinion, it is high time that we Christians came to acknowledge the dreadful damage that supersessionism, rooted as it is in the New Testament, has done, and that we came to acknowledge the historical reality that both Judaism and Christianity are parallel developments that have their origin in the same Hebraic sources. This seems to be a hard message to get through to Christians, and in this regard it is clear to Morris that Geering is a typical Christian theologian.

Whether my title for this review, “Weighed—And Found Wanting?”, applies to Geering or to the editors and writers of the volume under review, is a decision for the reader to make.

Speaking for myself, I have for a long time now seen that Lloyd Geering’s work has been too hide-bound by scientific rationalism. There is more to life and reality than that. I have also realized that the resurrection in the New Testament is primarily understood as a resurrection of the body, and involves, as does the incarnation (John 1:14) and the Hebrew background, a positive evaluation of the physical creation. That does not imply that one has to actually believe in a physical resurrection.

Having said that, I want to state my indebtedness to Lloyd Geering. As a result both of experience and logic, I have some time ago come to the conclusion that traditional theism, or what John Bishop calls “omni-God”, is untenable. It just does not make sense. That was reinforced for me when I read Julian Baggini’s *Atheism: A very short introduction*, some years ago, and realised that I was an incurable and convinced naturalist. Yet I was still filled with a sense of awe and wonder at the natural miracles all around me, and wanted to continue to respond to all that in a religious way.

That is why I want to salute Lloyd Geering. Both he, and Don Cupitt, have made it their life work, in the absence of the supernatural, to affirm the one physical universe, of which we are all a part, with a sense of awe and wonder that can only be described as religious, and they do so as members of the Christian Church, in spite of all the vitriol and suspicion that Christians and churches have thrown at them. In that way they are an inspiration to secular Christians like me.

Letters to the editor

For the benefit of the whole of our Presbyterian Church, we must sort out an untidy mess - and quickly. I seek definitive answers to the two questions I raise concerning this subject, questions that simply will not go away until dealt with in a judicious manner.

First, however, two brief background paragraphs. 1. On the National Radio Nine to Noon programme of Thursday 21 December 2006 an office-bearer of the New Zealand professional body of counsellors stated that “sexual relationships between registered counsellors and their clients are strictly forbidden - and that includes going out to the cinema together or any degree of romantic relationship.”

2. In the early 1950s, some Anglican seminarians at St John's College in Auckland, addressed the question, What constitutes a sexual relationship? A simple kiss? Or something that years later prompted my four-year-old granddaughter, watching a kids' TV programme, exclaim, “Wow! That was a real lover's kiss?” Or hugging? Or cuddling? Or what we used to call petting or heavy petting? Or if it does not go all the way, something that goes all the way, but stops just short of taking your pants off?

Questions

1. Considering the recent resolution of our General Assembly; and the rule Registered Counsellors must observe; and the dilemma presented to St John's students, what, specifically, in our Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa-New Zealand, constitutes a “sexual relationship outside a faithful marriage between a man and a woman?”

2. The Assembly resolution related only to a very specific narrow category of people, but all over the place in the published contextual material, the category of people named to whom the rule is to be applied extends to “leaders”- presumably ruling elders, deacons, managers, bible class leaders, youth leaders, sunday school teachers, choir masters, presidents of women's organizations and so on - all of whom, for good or bad, may influence greatly the individuals they lead in their several organizations and the culture of our church generally. Does the rule apply to such, or are these people free with St Augustine to love God and live their lives as they please?

We have never in my life had to seek answers to such absurd questions, but now, because of the determined and sometimes militant actions of some who have conned troops, we must. For Pete's sake, I pray that common sense may soon prevail.

Having made the rule, it is prudent that we ourselves should deal with these questions now, before the civil judiciary is asked to consider them - and makes fools of us all.

Keith Sellar
Napier

Editor's note

Letters to the editor are very welcome.

Email them to candour@presbyterian.org.nz.

Knox Presbyterian Church
Bible Based Christ Centered - Mission Minded



Assistant minister

Knox - St Columba Presbyterian Church in Lower Hutt is looking for a dynamic person with strong faith and vision to fill a newly created role of assistant minister.

As an ordained minister your role could involve leadership in one or more of the following areas – discipleship, worship, outreach, fellowship – and/or assisting the senior minister with some aspects of the overall management of our ministry. We are willing to shape the focus of the role according to the passion and gifting of an appropriately qualified candidate.

If you have a strong personal faith, a commitment to preaching the Word and a desire to work in new and exciting ways to reach the unchurched then please contact:

Knox-St Columba Church Office,
Lower Hutt
email: office@knoxstc.org.nz or
phone: (04) 569-9528

School of Ministry Scholarships

POSTGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP 2007

The School of Ministry, Knox College invites applications from suitable candidates for the 2007 Post Graduate Scholarship. The scholarship aims to promote and develop the theological and teaching resources of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. In order to qualify for 2007, you must have graduated from the School of Ministry between 2002 and 2006. The scholarship will contribute to the cost of fees, travel and living expenses for one year, incurred as part of post-graduate study in New Zealand or abroad, as approved by the Senatus of the School. If working towards a two year MTheol or three year PhD, the recipient may apply for a further one or two years funding, subject to Senatus approval. On completion, it is expected that the recipient proceed to service within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. The submission deadline is Tuesday 30 March 2007.

Your application must include:

A letter of application, a statement of study goals and how the study will benefit you and the Church, information on where you want to study and possible supervisors, an estimate of study costs, a curriculum vitae, your academic transcripts, the names of two confidential referees (not currently on the staff of the School).

Please send applications to:

The Registrar, School of Ministry, Knox College, Arden Street, Opoho, Dunedin.

For further information, visit <http://www.schoolofministry.ac.nz/pgscholarship.htm>

MINISTRY STUDY GRANTS

Are you a Presbyterian minister planning on further study? Do you know that you can apply for a study grant from the School of Ministry?

Applications are invited in April and September each year for post-ordination study grants for ministers in good standing of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. These grants are made possible through the generosity of the Mary Ann Morrison and M S Robertson estates and are administered by the Senatus of the School of Ministry.

What are the rules?

1. The proposed course of study will aid the applicant's professional development.
2. There is a potential benefit to the Church and the probability of significant service to the Church.
3. Parish and presbytery approval has been obtained for the study, where appropriate.

In normal circumstances grants do not exceed one-third of the study costs involved and may be held in conjunction with other scholarships and grants other than the Postgraduate Scholarship. Grants are not made retrospectively and relate only to costs to be incurred by the scholarship holder themselves.

How do I apply?

Applicants are asked to address the criteria and set out their expected costs including conference fees, tuition fees, basic accommodation and travel, and to supply any other information that may be relevant.

Enquiries to: the Registrar, School of Ministry, Knox College, Arden Street Opoho, Dunedin.
Due dates 30th April, 30th September.

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