

Yours faithfully: Christ, Cronulla and the Common Good.

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Anyone listening?

For the Christian theologian living in Sydney the graphic anger that marked the Cronulla riots of December 2005 should disturb any sense of complacency. The media headlines of ‘bad blood’, hate and revenge coincided with the Boyer Lectures delivered by Peter Jensen on the theme of what role, if any, Jesus had to play to the future of Australia.¹ There was understandably no reference in this series to the antics of the radio shock jocks, the sending of incendiary SMSes, the provocative flag flying, the makeshift weapons, the convoys of cars heading for the Shire, nor the unprecedented level of police presence. What was striking nevertheless was the absence in Jensen’s contemplation of what might be of any hint of the religious other and fears that might strain the prospect of social cohesion. What kind of theological landscape was being presumed? The comparison could be made with Michael Leunig’s cartoon on Christmas Eve in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The Christmas card-like setting was of an angel visiting shepherds proclaiming that a saviour was to be born; he would be found lying in a manger. The caption read: ‘he will be of Middle Eastern appearance’.

The Cronulla riots spawned an industry of interpretation embracing a range of disciplines. What happened and why? How should this ‘shock’ be situated inside Australia’s cultural history and especially the Muslim experience since

¹ Peter Jensen, *The Future of Jesus*, (Sydney: ABC Books, Sydney, 2005).

the 1990s set forth and recounted by Nahid Afrose Kabir.² These questions were not on the radar for Jensen's Boyer Lectures but maybe Christian theologians in this city should have been paying attention to what colleagues elsewhere had been saying for sometimes about what happens when faiths and cultures collide.

In praise of public theology:

The past couple of decades have seen the discipline in the long overdue process of reinventing itself. One example of this gradual metamorphosis is the emergence of what is called a public theology. The term is relatively recent and initially bore the stamp of being 'Made in the USA'. Now the rhetoric of a public faith has become what Robert Schreiter has defined as a global flow; its presence is beginning to be felt in the Australian context. Will Storrar reckons the rise of a public theology is a *kairos* moment for the discipline; it is 'a sign of the times' and signifies a shift in thinking in how the Christian faith relates to the host culture in which it finds itself.³

There is no need here to go into the equivalent of an archaeological dig as to the origins of the term and its precedents in history. Of more importance for the current purpose is a matter of definition and a consideration of consequences. The Cambridge theologian David Ford has spoken of the need for theology to attend to its 'ecology of responsibility'.⁴ For a good part of its modern history theology has been primarily concerned with two audiences: the church and the academy. That ordering of tasks and vocation may well have been appropriate in the twilight of Christendom where there was arguably a

² Nahid Afrose Kabir, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*, (London, New York, Bahrain: Routledge, 2004).

³ William Storrar, '2007: A Kairos Moment for Public Theology', *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:1 [2007], 5.

⁴ David Ford, *A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999), pp. 19-21.

greater degree of coherence between a Christian view of life and an espoused social ethic.

The writings of Gary Bouma clearly demonstrates that this coincidence is no longer the case in a pluralist post-this and -that country like Australia.⁵ The religious resurgence Bouma has identified is not a return to a previous pattern of a formalized denominational Christianity; 'the religious institution' is multifaith. It is suspicious of too much thinking and inclined to be expressed in the often relatively amorphous categories of spirituality. It can possess an almost-do-it yourself quality and this contemporary capacity for improvisation has led Les Murray to speak of the 'paperback pilgrim'.⁶

Ford has never been to Australia. His theological gaze is much more confined to the North Atlantic world of the United Kingdom and the east coast of the United States. His reconfiguring of theology's ecology of responsibility nevertheless resonates. In keeping with a wide range of other theologians he proposes a third audience - the public domain. Ford is under no illusions. The tendency of much theology is to engage with the academy and the church; the public sphere is the one most likely to be left to one side in various guises of indifference and quietism. Daniel Hardy has lamented on how often theology has allowed itself to become little more than 'what consenting adults do in private'.⁷

The task of a public theology can be separated into discrete categories. The most obvious is the securing of the right to contribute in the public arena. Such an objective can fly in the face of secular critique. The hard realities facing a

⁵ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press: 2006).

⁶ Les Murray, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia', *The Shape of Belief: Christianity in Australia Today*, ed. Harris, D, Hind, D, Millikan, D., Lancer Books, Homebush, 1982.

⁷ Daniel Hardy, , 'The Public Nature of Theology', *God's Ways With The World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1996; pp. 206-216.

Christian public theology is that it must earn the right to be heard. It cannot rely on revelation and a dogmatic override. The distinguished South African scholar John de Gruchy echoes the now standard position of a public theology: the Christian faith cannot lay claim in this arena to privileged position. It is one voice among many in the public forum and is itself subject to scrutiny and legitimate criticism.⁸

In his concern for good praxis de Gruchy has devised a set of theses which ought to inform a public theology. The critical test is the desire to recognize and respond to public issues - like Cronulla - as they arise. The practice of a public theology is thus occasional by nature and the agenda, for the want of a better term, is not set by the internal needs of the Christian faith *per se*. Nevertheless there is what is called a bilingual task to be performed. The Himes brothers, Michael and Kenneth, have argued that a public theology seeks to draw upon the symbolic riches of the Christian tradition for the sake of engaging with the public good.⁹ There are two sides to this claim.

The first refers back into the life of the Christian community itself. The rise of a public theology is a protest against the common practice of constructing a highly privatized, me and my God kind of faith. Jürgen Moltmann speaks of the 'public signature' of core Christian beliefs, Hardy of their 'public relevance' whereas I prefer the language of the public consequences of what Christians say they believe. The other side to this aspect of a public theology is the translation of a Christian ethic or conviction into the public debate. How is that to be done mindful of how every discipline is inclined to be parochial and use its own in-house language and jargon? How is this bilingual speech to be done with integrity especially in the wake of claims that religious discourse lie outside the scope of what is called public reason?

⁸ John de Gruchy, "Public Theology and Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre", *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:1, (2007), 39-41.

⁹ Michael and Kenneth Himes, ., *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology*, Paulist Press, Mahwah/ New York, 1993; p. 4-5

There is more that could be said here. But now it is time to link this introduction to a public theology back into the theme of this conference on Islamophobia. There are two basic points of connection. The first has to do with the purpose of a public theology. It is not a closet form of evangelism on the prowl for conversions and the restoration of a Christian society. It is committed instead to the nurturing of a civil society and the common good. Ford defines its purpose in terms of seeking the flourishing of all. The underlying intention is to foster lines of trust, networks of 'thin relationships' and social cohesion through the encouragement of civic capital. For a Christian theology to play its part Ford would invoke the biblical motif of wisdom and weave this theme into the doing of Christian theology in the presence of and in dialogue with the religious other. The merit of this line of thinking is that it opens up public theology to the inclusion of an informed theological discussion which moves beyond the strengths and weaknesses of the usual interfaith encounters. Ford has recognized that theology today must take place in a world 'which is simultaneously both religious and secular in complex ways'.¹⁰ The pursuit of the common good, the flourishing of all, must embrace the theological discussion between faiths.

Identifying a theological issue:

Now at face value this claim may seem rather removed from the Cronulla riots and the role they might play in confirming predispositions to Islamophobia. The role of religion in the diverse interpretations of Cronulla has been incidental. It has been mainly expressed through talk of the Middle Eastern Other and Muslim to slip into one another. The focus has been primarily on race and culture / sub-cultures, crime and politics. Now and then Cronulla was referred to as a white Anglo-Celtic Christian heartland; Scott Poynting described those who

¹⁰ David Ford, 'God and Our Public Life', in *Liberating Texts? Sacred Scriptures in Public Life*, ed. Sebastian C.H. Kim and Jonathan Draper (London: SPCK, 2008), 33.

had succumbed to John Howard's dog-whistle politics having become, in effect, the 'outraged self-appointed guardians of white, Christian Australianness'.¹¹ These descriptions should be handled with some care nevertheless: the religious signifier is more like the reflection of a residual cultural background than of actual practice.

Maybe what is of more importance is the extent to which the political leadership Poynting indicted was formed in its ways of looking at the world by the Christian faith. Writing in her *God Under Howard* Marion Maddox has mapped the extent of a conservative Christian faith upon persons and policies and the manner in which this could easily find its way into the discourse on Australian values.¹² Quite a number of political leaders at the time were also professing Christians in private and occasionally linked in public the Judeo-Christian tradition with the core Australian imaginary. This political background begs the question concerning what kind of Christian theology of other faiths is then at work in the civic marketplace of ideas. How is the Christian faith informally presenting its structures of belief in the public domain when this [or any other] type of public issue arises? What kind of default position is being assumed and how might this ethos exclude and maybe sanction fear and suspicion of 'the other'?

The importance of this set of questions cannot be underestimated. Following 9/11 the noted Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, posed a most disturbing question which left him for a while quite unpopular: what part had a triumphant Christology played in the emergence of an Islamic extremism?¹³ Had the manner in which Christ been professed over several centuries enabled a cultural habitus to emerge that aided and abetted the extension of

¹¹ Scott Poynting, "What Caused the Cronulla Riot?", *Race & Class*, 48 (2006): For a more extensive discussion on "dog-whistle politics", see: *Bin Laden in the Suburbs*, (Leichhardt: Federation Press, 2004). Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, editors, 153-178.

¹² Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*, (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin), 2005.

¹³ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 3-4

empire and effectively left Islam humiliated and shamed? Had a sense of the superiority of a Christian 'us' over and against 'them' been established? Hall warned that the 'foundational beliefs of a religious faith will find expression, one way or another, in the deeds and deportment of its membership' - and we might add, by way of extension, in the emotive templates of cultures that Michel de Certeau has described as 'once used to be Christian'.¹⁴

Is there a theological issue here, then, that needs to be addressed for the sake of social cohesion and the common good? Is there a discourse that is either absent or inadequately represented in this mix? The past several decades has not only born witness to the gradual emergence of a public theology; there has also been a rather lively debate on what has been self-referentially named as a Christian theology of other faiths. It is becoming quite refined. It addresses issues whether faiths have similar ends and aims and how they view the human condition; it is conscious of issues like special pleading, cultural inheritance and the relationship of revelation to truth-claims. The three-fold typology comprising the exclusivist, inclusivist and universalist interpretations devised by Alan Race has become much more nuanced and variegated.¹⁵ Daniel Migliore now cites seven distinct models.¹⁶

The awkward dilemma is that this kind of work is not widely known within the churches or in the public sphere. There is not an expectation of a complex debate and a raft of possible options. It is the kind of situation which can generate attention-seeking headlines in the media and which can release signals of justified alarm. The problem in a multifaith city like Sydney is that the public façade of a Christian theology is more often than not inclined towards an option best located inside an exclusivist model. Here the distance

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), 177-179.

¹⁵ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983); *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press), 2001.

¹⁶ Daniel Migliore, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism', *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 301-329.

between the Christian faith and Islam, in this case, is dogmatically established and there is little need for encounter or the practice of hospitality.

The most striking example of this model at work in recent times was a lecture delivered by Cardinal Pell in Florida in February, 2006 but subsequently reported back in Australia.¹⁷ Through a reading of the Qu'ran, and being conversant with the Islamic doctrine of abrogation, Pell expressed a deep-seated skepticism as to whether Islam could shed its violence. Here he was calling into question those Muslims who interpret *jihad* as a spiritual striving and who are quick to privilege *sura* which emphasize peace and non-retaliation. Not surprisingly this lecture immediately raised questions about how Christians might use their own sacred texts which have a similar capacity for a selective usage and the sanctifying of violence. But that was a matter which Pell left unaddressed. There was no real need inasmuch as exclusivist model was presumed.

Now this critique is not designed to subvert the right for Pell to express his theological opinion. Within the typologies available the case he makes has a well-connected pedigree. The dilemma lies in the manner in which a lecture like this one is treated in isolation and can be viewed as normative. There is an absence of checks and balances. The exclusivist model here can then become the default position for those who know nothing else; it can be put to use in a way that stretches the integrity of a Christian theology of other faiths and how this genre might serve the business of living alongside one's neighbour who is different. This risk is evident in the response made by the journalist Paul Kelly.¹⁸ For him Pell's 'muscular Christianity' furnished a theological engagement with Islam which the usual discourses of a secular western democracy cannot do. Pell's lecture opened up the prospect of a

¹⁷ Linda Morris, 'Pell challenges Islam ... o ye of little tolerant faith', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May, 2006.

¹⁸ Paul Kelly, "Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword", *The Australian*, September 23, 2006.

‘genuine dialogue’ conducted on religious grounds. Kelly’s conclusion would struggle to gain acceptance among those who have a good grasp of the typologies available.

The pursuit of wisdom Ford advocated in the case he makes for a public theology is not so confined. Here there is still an abiding commitment to the particularity of the Christian faith but a greater openness to consider the consequences of what is claimed. The concern for social cohesion and a common life where all might flourish must consider what kind of emotive spaces faith creates and what shape of character it releases. There is a wide range of fertile themes hidden away in the typologies of a Christian theology of other faiths that can be drawn upon to counter fear and play a part in the building a praxis of civic trust and social capital.

The task is daunting. The American theologian, Scott Bader Saye, has written about how the contemporary disciple is called to follow Christ in a climate of fear that takes many forms.¹⁹ Robert and Karin Sternberg have described the anatomy of fear and how it can so easily, if the conditions are right, degenerate into hatred and spirals of violence.²⁰ It can seem almost facile at this point to hark back to the Himes’ brothers consider what riches, what hidden wisdom, might lie within the Christian tradition. Jensen privileged freedom in his Boyer Lectures; Pell read the *Qu’ran* with a critical eye noting its lack of peace and violence. What is left to one side in these hermeneutical strategies is the pivotal role of a biblical ethic and Christology of hospitality and Jesus’ distinctive teaching on the love of neighbour where the neighbour is whoever encounters us. It is not the like-minded; it is not the one who is the same as us. It is the other.

¹⁹ Scott Bader-Saye *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

²⁰ Robert and Karin Sternberg, *The Nature of Hate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2008).

The natural location for these kind of themes is not the exclusivist type. For the sake of a public theology responding to an underlying suspicion, these symbols can become organizing or threading principles informing a Christology grounded in the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. They offer an alternative to that triumphalist Christology Hall believes has shamed and humiliated Islam. They make use of a rhetoric of welcome, guest and hosts, strangers and companions instead of flashpoints, caricatures and stereotypes.

It is arguably the case that the current theme of how Islam fits within the theme of social cohesion can benefit from a Christian public theology. There are a wider range of options available for one faith to relate to another than is often on show in Sydney. The dilemma facing the Christian faith is how might these more eirenic and hospitable models take sufficient root and release a cultural habitus of inclusion.²¹

²¹ Clive Pearson, 'Alienated Neighbours: Interpreting the Cronulla Race Riots for Christ's Sake', *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, Summer 2008, <http://www.forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer08papers/reisum08.html>