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RETHINKING THE COMMON GOOD:
THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF WELFARE[1]

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INTRODUCTION

When Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as British Prime Minister in June 2007, there was widespread speculation that he would call a "snap" General Election for sometime later that year. By early 2008, however, Brown's prevarication over the question, coupled with the onset of recession, saw his early lead in the opinion polls vanish. Labour will have to stage a miraculous electoral comeback to remain in Government, and the question now is whether Brown will be deposed as leader or see out the rest of this parliamentary term, which could extend as late as May 2011. Whatever happens, however, one of the issues likely to preoccupy political debate between now and the next election is the question of welfare reform.

There is currently widespread talk in British politics of a radical overhaul of the public sector and the way welfare is financed and delivered.[2] Over the past years, no fewer than three central government departments have published reports on the role of voluntary and community groups[3] – the so-called "third sector" – in the delivery of mainstream welfare provision, social services and economic and social regeneration.[4] The opposition

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[1] This paper is an amended version of the keynote lecture to the Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools conference, "Global Neighbours and Faithful Citizens: Rethinking Theology in the Public Domain," Charles Sturt University, Canberra, 8–12 July 2007.

[2] James Blitz and Ben Hall, "Brown to Press on with Welfare Reforms," *Financial Times* (2 March 2007): n.p. Cited 27 June 2007. Online: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2ac75c26-c863-11db-9a5e-000b5df10621.html.

[3] HM Treasury, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Department of Communities and Local Government.

[4] See HM Treasury, "The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration: The Final Report. Cm 7189, 2007," n.p. [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk./media/2/B/thirdsectorreview_finalreport.pdf; Department for Work and Pensions, "Welfare Reform," n.p. [cited 27 June 2007]. Online: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform; Department of Communities and Local Government, "Third Sector for Communities and Local Government," June 2007, n.p. [cited 27 June 2007]. Online: http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/324564.pdf.

Conservative party published a 700-page report the same year, entitled *Breakthrough Britain*, which proposes new measures to strengthen the family and foster new forms of voluntary action and social enterprise in order to combat poverty.[5] Both major parties, therefore, look set to go into the next General Election with major new proposals for the delivery of welfare which involve a significant reconfiguration of the relationship between the State and the voluntary sector.

This potential area of policy reform is made all the more important since religion, in the shape of what are often termed "faith-based organizations," is conceived by both parties as having a prominent role to play within this new dispensation. If, as seems likely, the third sector of voluntary and community organizations will be invited to bid for state funding as part of the "outsourcing" of services through competitive tendering to run essential welfare services, then religious groups will comprise a major sector of that emerging tier of service providers. Most relevant for this discussion is that it is to Australia that many of those policy-makers are looking for models and precedents, not only in the increasing role of voluntary agencies alongside the State but in the prominence of churches and other faith-based organizations within that.

But clearly there are many critical questions that need to be asked. Are faith-based organizations adequately equipped to respond to this coming challenge? Do they have the capacity in terms of resources and personnel, particularly at a time when, like many other Western societies, religious affiliation, at least in mainstream Christianity and Judaism, is on the decline? Do faith-based organizations have the public trust to take on such a major role? And have any of the faith groups even begun to think in any systematic fashion about what they might be getting into?

A Christian think tank, the von Hügel Institute, was recently commissioned by the Church of England to investigate some of these questions and in particular to estimate the actual scale of the Church's involvement with welfare reform. Its report concluded that "when it comes to faith communities in general, and aspects of charity law and social policy in particular, the government is planning blind [sic] and failing parts of civil society ... The government has good intentions, but is moral without a compass."[6] These

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[5] Conservative Party Social Justice Policy Group, *Breakthrough Britain: Ending Costs of Social Breakdown* (London: 2007).

[6] Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock (eds), *Moral, But No Compass? Government, Church and the Future of Welfare* (London: Matthew James, 2008), 13.

interim findings suggest that whilst both Government and opposition are looking to churches to play a prominent role in their new proposals for the third sector, there is little reliable evidence on the actual scale of involvement and even less "religious literacy" about such organizations' infrastructure, core values or capacity. The research discovered "profound mismatches and misperceptions" between the Church of England's understanding of its current and potential role and that of policy-makers, and called on Government to build up a more substantial evidence base on the "wide-ranging civic contribution of the Churches."[7] Yet the report also made the point that the Church itself, indeed all the churches, have done little serious thinking of their own, including any "sustained theological reflection" on the issues.[8]

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to review the debate about faith communities as welfare providers; but then, to move to consider what theological models might inform this renewed role for the churches in society, and whether there needs to be some renewed thinking in the area of *public theology* in order to come to terms with the fundamental changes that seem inevitable, whatever the outcome of the next British General Election.

RETHINKING WELFARE

As my introduction indicated, the current debate in the UK forges some interesting links with Australian welfare policy. John Hutton, the then Work and Pensions Secretary,[9] visited in February 2007 and seemed particularly interested in arrangements for the outsourcing of Employment and job-seeking services to voluntary agencies such as churches. Hutton's return to the UK was timed to coincide with a series of seminars and consultations on welfare reform and the publication of another independently-commissioned report by a business entrepreneur, David Freud. The Freud report itself contained an analysis of the Australian situation, and in particular attempts to increase participation rates amongst the 4% or so of the workforce on long-term incapacity benefit or other forms of income support.[10] It notes

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[7] *Moral, But No Compass*, 96.

[8] *Moral But No Compass*, 14.

[9] Until a Cabinet reshuffle in July 2007.

[10] David Freud, *Reducing Dependency, Increasing Opportunity: Options for the future of Welfare to Work* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007), n.p. [cited 27 June 2007]. Online: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2007/welfarereview.pdf.

the element of means-testing within the Newstart scheme for people aged 21 and over, and the linking of youth jobseeker benefit to participation in approved schemes of education and training. Responsibility for these services has been devolved to the private or voluntary sector.

But church leaders themselves have also been taking an interest in agencies such as UnitingCare and Anglicare, whose extensive portfolio of services spans everything from cradle to grave.[11] Stephen Lowe, the Church of England's Bishop for Urban Life and Faith, also conducted a fact-finding visit to Australia in August 2007, and reported to the von Hügel researchers that Anglicare was the largest non-governmental children's and family welfare agency in Australia, managing a range of services such as fostering, emergency relief for homeless families, aid to families on low incomes, counselling for survivors of abuse and neglect, rehabilitation care for recovering addicts, youth accommodation and mediation and chaplaincy services for young offenders. Anglicare's blend of Federal, State and local government funding is becoming the norm in the Australian system, but would represent a significant shift in the relationship between State and voluntary sector for the delivery of mainstream social services if anything similar were to be adopted in the UK.[12]

The attraction of the "third sector" for Government appears to be a combination of localism, flexibility and value-for-money. It is in keeping with Government's call for "partnerships" between various stakeholders, and envisages that the third sector has a role to play not only in "service delivery" but also in capacity-building within local communities for the direct provision of services as well as generating further funding for supplementary projects through social enterprise. It is believed within Government that some "state" services, such as post offices, public transport and academies (schools in disadvantaged areas) might be better run as neighbourhood businesses since they are more efficient, can reflect local participation and be more flexible (which reduces the need for government subsidies).

[11] Anglicare Home Page [cited 27 June 2007]. Online: http://www.anglicare.asn.au/aboutus/aboutus.shtml.

[12] Nicholas Timmins, "'Bigger Role' for Private Sector in Welfare-to-Work," *Financial Times* (14 February 2007): n.p. Cited 27 June 2007. Online: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/8bf51726-bbd0-11db-afe4-0000779e2340.html.

The Government recognises the value of the diversity of organisations in the sector providing voice for under represented groups, in campaigning for change, in creating strong, active and connected communities, in promoting enterprising solutions to social and environmental challenges and in transforming the design and delivery of public services.[13]

The Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review for 2007 also focused on the role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration, especially at local neighbourhood level. The third sector promises capability of "bridging" social capital, delivering locally-based solutions and services, being flexible in times of change and being effective in linking up with "hard-to-reach" and under-represented groups, especially Black and minority ethnic communities:

The "third sector" comprises non-governmental organisations which are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals. Faith groups also play a very important role. The third sector is large and growing, and plays an increasingly vital role in both society and economy.[14]

For the opposition Conservative party, anxious to shake off its image as "the nasty party" unconcerned with a social justice agenda, the publication of *Breakthrough Britain* has been an important part of its return to electoral credibility. For Conservative thinking on welfare, a strong third sector stands as a viable alternative to a centralised, highly-taxed State, whilst fostering traditional Tory values of voluntarism, personal responsibility and subsidiarity. *Breakthrough Britain* argues that welfare policy must be aimed at addressing the roots of deprivation (interpreted as resting in family breakdown) and strengthening people's moral self-reliance, rather than providing unlimited income support for those who fail. This requires

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[13] Department of Communities and Local Government, "Third Sector Strategy", 2007, n.p. [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://www.communities.gov.uk/index/asp?id=1510989.
[14] HM Treasury/Cabinet Office, "The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration," 2006, n.p. Online:
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/public_spending_reporting/charity_third_sector.html.

partnership between state and voluntary sector, a solution that harnesses the potential of civil society to promote social justice.

Whilst churches and other faith communities have played a major role in welfare, either to alleviate hardship or to provide basic services such as health, education and social care, since the foundation of the Welfare State their position, like other voluntary and charitable bodies, has been ambivalent. Rather than being substitutes for State provision (the tendency of Conservative governments) or threats to the State (the tendency of Labour governments), they are now cast as partners with government. But where has the language of "partnership" come from? This, too, has a context and a history, and is tied up with policy developments under New Labour over a decade.

NEW LABOUR, RELIGION AND THE COMMON GOOD

Since the election of the first Blair administration in 1997, there has been a succession of documents explicitly affirming the participation of faith communities in local regeneration. The centre-left think tank Demos referred to a "new covenant" between government and faith-based agencies, noting that the latter had often been responsible for innovative projects in areas such as primary health care, homelessness, community regeneration and drug-related services, particularly in the way they had been "pioneers in taking account of the full range of human needs when providing care."[15]

The *Urban White Paper*, published in 2000, identified faith communities as a crucial means by which a broad cross-section of a local community might participate in local projects. Similarly, in 2002 the Local Government Association drew up a guide for local authorities on how to include faith-based groups in neighbourhood renewal. Once again, faith-based organizations correspond to the New Labour vision in providing one of the well-springs of social capital on which a flourishing civil society depends. This was a sign, possibly, that those in local government were aware of the presence of substantial religious groups but lacked knowledge and experience of accessing or working with them. Faith-based organizations were also seen as capable of connecting with those "hard-to-reach" groups, especially in relation to minority ethnic and inner city communities. They have local resources and voluntary labour, as well as long-term commitments to neighbourhoods. So this report continues the mood of

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[15] Ben Jupp, "The Persistence of Faiths," *Demos Quarterly* 11 (1997): 3.

earlier documents in stressing the untapped potential of faith communities and the need to integrate them into government strategies, especially for the most marginalised neighbourhoods.

This recovery of the language of faith communities also occurs against the background of the popularity of communitarianism as a political philosophy and its influence on Tony Blair and New Labour. Communitarianism attempts to synthesise the discourse of individualism and personal responsibility with an appeal to localism and subsidiarity as the most effective means of delivering social cohesion.[16] This, and New Labour's acceptance of the power of the market, both legitimated the withdrawal of the State from direct provision of welfare and drove the search for partners who embodied these civic virtues. Once again, religion seemed to fit the bill.

And so not surprisingly, as part of this *current* review of policy, faith-based organizations as a part of the third sector has figured prominently in Government consultations, culminating in a seminar in Manchester in February 2007 between Jim Murphy, Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, and a number of faith leaders at which the minister argued, "Just because it is the Government's role to ensure there is service provision for all, it does not necessarily follow that it is also Government's role to deliver that service …"[17] Murphy went on to argue that faith groups embody the localism, flexibility, trust and motivation to achieve that.

So for Government, religion represents a particularly effective agent of social capital (and social cohesion). Yet others sound notes of caution or criticism. First, of course, is the view that religion has no legitimate place in the public domain, and certainly not in the delivery of essential welfare services. The assumption that faith is a reasonable and liberal set of values which engenders good citizenship and social cohesion is repudiated. After 9/11 the spectre of fatally bifurcated towns and cities, segregated on ethnic and religious lines, began to appear. Far from being an agent of social cohesion, religion was seen as exercising a divisive influence in a community. At the very least, as Rob Furbey and Marie Macey argue, government – and faith communities themselves – may need to recognise the negative as well as positive potential of religion: "Like potent secular ideologies, [religion]

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[16] Greg Smith, "Faith in Community and Communities of Faith? Government Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Urban Britain," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19 (2004): 188.

[17] Jim Murphy, "Seminar on Partnership with Employment Focus – What Role for Faith Groups in Today's Welfare State?" n.p. [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/2007/19-02-07.asp.

can unite or divide, include or exclude; it can provide the impetus to struggle for social justice or it can legitimise cruelty and oppression; it can promote social cohesion or conflict."[18]

In contrast to the positive virtues cited earlier, other Government evidence showed up this ambivalence. The Cantle report on urban riots in Northern English cities in 2001, for example, spoke of communities living parallel but separate lives, of religion as a divisive rather than cohesive force. And of course any faith group or interest group may be very effective at delivering services to its own constituency – in what would be termed "bonding" social capital[19] – whilst being indifferent to extending beyond its own boundaries.

Yet do such ambitions on the part of Government even correspond with the aspirations of people of faith? Some have argued that government expectations are simply an outworking of a kind of "functionalist" view of religion, in which its role is to transmit benevolent values of active citizenship and tolerance, and to maximise local communities' social capital only insofar as it is tied into partnership with government schemes of regeneration and welfare delivery. There is anxiety that cost-cutting is the "real" rather than the "presenting" agenda, or that such initiatives are designed to co-opt faith groups into serving the government's political ends for social cohesion.[20]

It has also been argued that local authorities display a lack of what might be termed "religious literacy": that much of the rhetoric about "faith" is actually a cloak for talking about Black and Minority ethnic groups, but that lack of proper information about different communities mean that many authorities confuse race/ethnicity with religion, and fail to take account of cultural and political differences between faith groups.[21]

Faith groups themselves may be suspicious of getting involved, even if they are in sympathy with the stated values of community, welfare and active citizenship. This may be as a matter of principle, a view that too close an identification with the State (especially receipt of funding) represents a betrayal of a radical call for justice or a diversion from other priorities such as caring for their own members. Greg Smith argues on the basis of empirical research in Newham, a borough of London, and Preston, a city in the North-West of England, that many faith groups are simply too overwhelmed by the

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[18] Robert Furbey and Marie Macey, "Religion and Urban Regeneration: A Place for Faith?" *Policy and Politics*, 33 (2005): 115.

[19] Stephen Aldridge, David Halpern and Sarah Fitzpatrick, *Social Capital: A Discussion Paper* (London: Performance and Innovation Unit, 2002).

[20] Smith, "Faith in Community," 118.

[21] See *Moral, But No Compass?* 5.

needs of their own members; and that many fragile groups are deterred by the culture of government funding and find the prospect of writing grant applications and tenders simply too complex and bureaucratic. Evidence suggests that many local groups often lack the information about what opportunities exist, or how funding can be accessed.[22]

At a seminar on religion and the third sector for faith leaders held with the then minister for Work and Pensions, Jim Murphy, in Manchester in February 2007, one speaker in particular sounded several notes of caution. Roland Sewell of the Salvation Army argued that involvement in care and welfare was "in the DNA" of movements such as his.[23] Religious organizations have a long and illustrious history of welfare, and have often pioneered areas subsequently taken over by the State. But the new dispensation of welfare reform carries substantial challenges which could fatally compromise the freedom of the faith-based sector. These Sewell characterized as competition, compliance, corporatisation and commercialism.

Firstly, there are dangers of falling into the ethos of *competitive tendering*, where the success of a bid may depend more on "the narrative skill of the bid writer rather than the competence of the provider."[24] Evidence suggests that many faith-based organizations – indeed much of the voluntary sector altogether – are already finding their essential mission is distorted by the cycle of funding, and of bearing the burden of maintaining excess staff capacity to be deployed into bid-writing. "Do not assume that we are able to absorb the risk or divert valuable resources to operate within a procurement system which makes massive demands upon the provider without assurances of outcomes."[25]

Secondly, Sewell speaks of the risk of *compliance* to narrow outcomes or meeting prescriptive requirements; there has been much talk in the UK about Australia's "star rating" systems, leading to micromanagement and increased administration of reporting, as opposed to delivering value for money to end-users.[26] Thirdly, there is what Sewell calls *corporatisation*, meaning the need to develop large administrative infrastructures to monitor and manage funding and meet quality regulations. Faith-based organizations may lose

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[22] Smith, "Faith in Community."

[23] Roland Sewell, "The Role of Faith-Based Groups in Welfare Provision. 19th February 2007," n.p. [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/seminars/r-sewell-19-02-07.asp.

[24] Sewell, "The Role of Faith-Based Groups in Welfare Provision."

[25] Sewell, "The Role of Faith-Based Groups in Welfare Provision."

[26] A culture of external scrutiny which many believe has already blighted the public sector.

flexibility as a result. Finally, the imperatives of *commercialism* serve to undermine innovative forms of provision in the form of subsidies to areas that are worthwhile but not cost-effective. The fear is particularly that those on the margins will suffer, and asylum-seekers are the group most often cited; who will attend to the most under-serviced or marginalised, those who currently slip through the safety net?

Overall, therefore, blanket references to "faith" and "faith communities" as heterogeneous, unproblematic and necessarily "on-message" in terms of the objectives of statutory bodies may therefore need to be challenged in favour of a more nuanced and contextual understanding of how faith-based participation actually functions in particular circumstances.[27] It may be that there are a number of different possibilities for faith-based organizations to shape and help implement government policy, and that one of the things that needs to be talked about further is the possibility of there being a whole range of models of engagement between faith and service delivery. But has any sustained theological thinking been taking place around all this?

THE LEGACY OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

When the British Labour government of 1945-1951 passed the legislation that established the various arms of the post-war Welfare State, it did so effectively with the blessing of one of the most prominent Christian social thinkers of his generation. In 1942, on the publication of the Beveridge Report, which set out many of the basic principles of what would become the Welfare State, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, hailed it as "the first time anyone had set out to embody the whole spirit of the Christian ethic in an Act of Parliament." Temple's influence within both church and society was regarded as seminal in generating much of the popular support for Beveridge which undoubtedly contributed to Labour's landslide victory in 1945. Temple remained a towering figure within Anglican social thought for the next half-century, providing a robust theological rationale for much of the Church of England's involvement in social affairs. Yet Temple's assumption that the challenges of providing comprehensive welfare "from cradle to grave" necessitated a centralised system funded by taxation and "scientifically administered" by local and national government, albeit complemented by voluntary action is now looking out-dated.

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[27] Richard Farnell et al. *"Faith" in Urban Regeneration: Engaging Faith Communities in Urban Regeneration* (Bristol: Polity, 2003).

In his defence, Temple's theologically-grounded enthusiasm for the Welfare State according to Labour reflected a strand of Christian social ethics that regarded "secular reason" and the arms of the State as perfectly capable of embodying and fulfilling the deepest values of Gospel. Temple deployed the notion of the "common good" as designating the benchmark of a decent society, the concept towards which a welfare system should aspire.[28] It reflected a view of human nature and society as essentially interconnected, in which the values of mutuality, service and equality are paramount. This vision deeply informed the writing of Temple's *Christianity and Social Order*, also published in 1942,[29] which came to dominate the mainstream churches' thinking on social affairs and informed reports such as *Faith in the City* (1985)[30] and *The Common Good* (1986),[31] as well as the work of theologians such as Ronald Preston and John Atherton.

Although elements of the British welfare system, such as old age pensions and free education, were already in existence, the legislation after 1945 established a State-controlled, centralized infrastructure which set in place a universal welfare system. The demands of the 1939-45 war had created an unprecedented level of government intervention and control over the lives of ordinary people, and it was perhaps that experience which made it acceptable for the State to adopt such a major role. It was about managing the market to achieve social ends via essentially Keynesian methods of taxation and centralized State planning.

The givenness of the Welfare State dominated left-of-centre political thinking from the 1940s, and although the Thatcher government from 1979 reversed some of the legislation, the political stance of the mainstream churches stood in opposition to cuts in public expenditure, via successive reports such as *Faith in the City* (1985) and *Not Just for the Poor* (1987).[32] Yet that intellectual legacy and the iconic position of Temple may have inhibited Christian social ethics of the time from undertaking any serious re-evaluation of the state welfare model, or fully to engage with Conservative (and eventually, New Labour) revisionist thinking which challenged the

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[28] John Atherton, *Public Theology for Changing Times* (London: SPCK, 2000), 79

[29] William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SCM, 1942).

[30] Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City* (London: Church House, 1985).

[31] Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *the Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* (London: Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996).

[32] Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, *Not Just for the Poor: Christian Perspectives on the Welfare State* (London: Church House, 1987).

bureaucracy and elitism of large-scale bureaucracy, and which dared to question the hegemony of the expert. "The need for careful planning and management meant that the execution of political and economic decisions became the preserve of the expert. Consequently churches and other voluntary groups were not the primary agents of welfare … but were to be understood simply as more or less prophetic institutions helping to shape public policy."[33] Mark Chapman has argued that this represented a missed opportunity to engage directly with public policy and resulted in this tradition elevating the State as the sole arbiter of the common good at the expense of other perspectives.

Yet even back in the mid-1980s, various commentators such as Stephen Orchard were saying that the churches had done little serious thinking about "the question of what is Christian about a Welfare State"[34] or indeed whether there might be more "Christian" ways of organizing the provision of such facilities such as education, training, income support and health care.

So what is the way ahead? Before we consider this, we need to give further thought to the way in which consideration of the churches' involvement in social policy is now framed by two key objections, both of which reject the idea of faith-based intervention in public policy or welfare provision: one from a secular, and one from a theological perspective.

1. Secular Objections

Any attempt by government to create a more prominent role for faith-based groups within an expanding third sector is likely to be controversial. As I have been explaining, there is government interest in the contributions of faith communities, but there is also significant public unease, even suspicion. This may in part be an expression of what is sometimes termed "Islamophobia" in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, and there is no doubt that there are racial and religious tensions in many communities in Britain. In 2001, there were serious riots in some Northern towns, and instances of school students lobbying to wear items of religious dress inevitably generate much media coverage. The government recently had to withdraw proposals to require all faith schools to recruit 25% of their students from other faith traditions, and many people regard them as an impediment to social

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[33] Mark Chapman, "Ronald Preston, William Temple, and the Future of Christian Politics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17 (2004): 171.

[34] Stephen Orchard, *A Christian Appreciation of the Welfare State* (London: British Council of Churches, 1985), 1.

cohesion and integration. There has also been resistance on the part of some local authorities to fund faith-based organizations for fear of being accused of giving public funding for proselytization. And quite legitimately in many cases, faith groups are perceived as less than sensitive to certain equal opportunities issues such as the needs of women or lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered clients or workers.

We can also see this political embarrassment about the public nature of faith in many places. When the allies first went into Iraq in 2003 there were several media reports (including *The Telegraph*, BBC News and *The Independent*) regarding the silencing of religious rhetoric. Likewise, at the same time Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's press secretary, is widely reported to have intervened in an interview to prevent Blair answering a question about his religious beliefs; according to the reports Campbell stated, "we don't do God."[35] We might also think of the media frenzy occasioned by Tony Blair's remark that God will judge his decision to go to war with Iraq, when he appeared on the talk show *Parkinson* in March 2006.[36] The media also claimed that Campbell had intervened to prevent Blair from ending his address to the nation on the eve of war with the words "God bless you." Instead, Blair was persuaded to say "thank you," on the grounds that the British people were so unaccustomed to politicians making religious statements that it would alienate public opinion.[37]

This is simply a reflection of the confusion of a nation that perceives itself as more ideologically and culturally divided than ever – fear of terrorism from external and internal perpetrators informs public opinion but perhaps more crucially government talk of national security and British identity – but which is also markedly divided on the issue of whether religious faith is a source of or a threat to social cohesion. So given the widespread anxiety (and misunderstanding) in government about social cohesion and national identity it is unlikely that any proposals for an enlarged role for faith-based organizations will pass without comment.

The question is, however, whether such a secular public domain is possible, let alone desirable. Indeed, writing about the Australian context, Marion Maddox argues that a public secularism, where religious conviction is "edited out" of debate, may be no defence against religiously-motivated

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[35] Colin Brown, "Campbell Interrupted Blair As He Spoke of His Faith: 'We don't do God,'" *The Telegraph* (4 May 2003). Cited 11 May 2007. Online: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main/jhtml?xml=news/2003/05/04/nblair04.xml.

[36] Michael White, "God Will Judge Me, PM tells Parkinson," *The Guardian* (4 March 2006).

[37] Brown, "Campbell Interrupted Blair."

politics. Quite the opposite, in fact, if a minority of conservative explicitly religious pressure groups take it upon themselves to influence the wider political culture in their own image. This she terms a "subterranean dominionist" tendency of the government, and argues that it shows how neither a secular state nor secularist public rhetoric is necessarily any protection against religiously-motivated politics.

> Instead, at least one possible outcome of public religion vacating the public square is that a residue remains of often less publicly visible, but nevertheless influential, religion with anti-democratic tendencies and even theocratic overtones. While Australia has a history of churches operating as independent voices in the public sphere, the space for such participation has been dramatically curtailed in recent years by a government determined to quarantine itself from church criticism. But, over the same period, government actions – from policy shifts such as school funding to more symbolic gestures like senior government figures appearing at conservative megachurch and parachurch events – conveyed the impression of endorsing an alternative, highly privatized model of Christianity in which individual economic aspiration replaces collective concern for social justice, while coded language of "dominion" and Christian supremacy transforms Australia's traditionally tolerant public culture.[38]

A society may refuse to "do God" in the name of a classic liberal segregation of religion and politics, in which all partisan values and principles, especially those theologically-derived, are to be insulated from the public domain. In a "post-secular" world, however, such a distinction could actually militate against any kind of public transparency or accountability on the part of minority religious groups, by disallowing any common space in which religiously-motivated policies could be debated. Neither secular states nor secularist public rhetoric are necessarily a protection against religiously-motivated politics – quite the opposite, in fact – if a residue or minority of religious parties takes on a mission of actively shaping the political or civic agenda.

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[38] Marion Maddox, "Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007): 91.

If religion is denied a public role, people cannot easily address the spiritual and moral dimension of social problems with reference to religiously-based moral values. The result is the continued loss of *res sacra humana* in public life and the ascendancy of "instrumental reason" as the only appropriate language to think through dilemmas in public life.[39]

Rowan Williams, current Archbishop of Canterbury, has recently addressed this dilemma, in part in response to public debate in Britain today about the extent to which religion should be involved in politics and social policy. Williams attacks what he calls "programmatic" secularism, which takes the classical liberal view that religious convictions are illegitimate grounds for public moral reasoning by virtue of their not being universally shared:

The empty public square of programmatic secularism implies in effect that the almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality and the public invisibility of specific commitments is enough to provide sustainable moral energy for a properly self-critical society. But it is not at all self-evident that people can so readily detach their perspectives and policies in social or political discussion from fundamental convictions that are not allowed to be mentioned or manifested in public.[40]

Williams contrasts this characterization with an alternative, "procedural" secularism, which attempts to safeguard the right of all to converge on a space of debate and mutual respect and which neither privileges one particular religious position, nor requires anyone to surrender the theological principles on which such convictions inevitably rest:

Procedural secularism is the acceptance by state authority of a prior and irreducible other or others; it remains secular, because as soon as it systematically privileged one group it would ally its legitimacy with the sacred and so destroy its otherness; but it can move into and out of alliance with the perspectives of faith, depending on the varying and unpredictable outcomes of honest social argument, and can collaborate without anxiety

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[39] Mary Eastham, "The Church and the Public Forum: John Courtney Murray's Method," *Australian EJournal of Theology* 7 (2006): 5 [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/Eastham.htm.

[40] Rowan Williams, "Secularism, Faith and Freedom," (lecture at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 23 November 2006). Cited 8 August 2008. Online: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/654.

with communities of faith in the provision, for example, of education or social regeneration. Further, the critical presence of communities of religious commitment means that it is always possible to challenge accounts of political reasoning that take no account of solidarities beyond those of the state.[41]

This debate about the possibility of religion cohabiting with secular reason in a context of pluralism is important for our consideration of the role of the third sector, and the nature of the values that inform welfare reform, and I will return to this issue at the end.

2. Theological Objections

Yet there are also many theologians who are critical of the "liberal" approach, whereby the church collaborates with secular agencies and with other faiths on the basis of a concordat of "public reason."[42] This may be characterized as a shift from "liberal" to "post-liberal" theology. The tension between the two is well summarised by Kristin Heyer in these terms:

> One of the issues brought to the fore in the process is how theologies "go public" – whether, for example, the inevitability of the particular origin and context of religious symbols and beliefs renders them decipherable and meaningful only within the community of "origin," or whether such particularity *may actually enable* more broadly compelling meaning or a public voice for theology … [T]hese different approaches call into question

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[41] In his lecture on "Civil and Religious Law in England," given in February 2008 at the Inns of Court, Rowan Williams suggested ways of connecting Islamic or Sharia law with civil law, to enormous media outcry. Yet his intervention may be seen simply as an attempt to suggest that freedom of religious conscience is a public matter that requires some acknowledgement in the public realm. In making this argument, the Archbishop was acknowledging a religious dimension to contemporary politics: the polity of UK 2008 is partly based in a heterogeneity of religious traditions that many people – and especially policy makers – find unfamiliar and threatening. Yet, if these religious traditions are here to stay, and if the liberal state is not about to shut up shop, then some public negotiation between religious traditions and the state is *unavoidable* if some measure of social cohesion is to be worked for. Williams' comments were subsequently endorsed by the Lord Chief Justice, a matter which went largely unreported by the media.

[42] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds) *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

whether "taking theology public" constitutes an imperative for theology or instead poses dangers to the theological enterprise.[43]

A number of theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, Oliver O'Donovan, Luke Bretherton, Sam Wells and Michael Northcott, are representative of this view, which repudiates the compromises of public theology or arrangements such as Establishment. They seek "to make the turn away from liberal attempts to seek understandings of value and justice that are communicable between diverse communities and to articulate instead a distinctive Christian [social ethic] which has the capacity to shape the practice of the churches' members."[44] For them, to be yoked to a secular regeneration programme, or the agenda of welfare provision, is a distraction from the essential and primary task of the church, which is simply to "be" church on its own terms. For example, Luke Bretherton argues that whilst many churches have taken up the offer of partnership as a way of better serving their local neighbourhoods and of re-engaging churches with the political process – and see it as a proper outworking of their pastoral and political concern for the well-being of their communities – others are more critical of the co-option of churches into the government's agenda.[45] They challenge the neutrality of the public domain, as a space in which the sacred is inevitably "bracketed out," and argue that it is not a question of the church getting involved in politics but being its own *polis*. The church must not conform to the parameters of acceptable speech and action based on the compromises of secular reason; there is no such commensurate common wisdom, and the church must have the courage to model itself on the exemplary narratives of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

It is right, in one sense, for our theological reflection on such a matter to turn to the nature and calling of the church, as exemplary "communities of trust and love and support," whose distinctive practices of faith show forth the kind of human lives that are possible under God.[46] It values and emphasises the historic tradition of church life as definitively the means by which the

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[43] Kristin E. Heyer, "How Does Theology Go Public?" *Political Theology* 5 (2004): 308 (emphasis original).

[44] Malcolm Brown, "Christian Ethics and Economics after Liberalism," in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations over Political Economy* (eds. John R. Atherton and Hannah Skinner; Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 54.

[45] Luke Bretherton, "A New Establishment? Theological Politics and the Emerging Shape of Church-State Relations." *Political Theology* 7 (2006): 371–92.

[46] Samuel Wells, "An Anglican Critique of Establishment," *Crucible* (April-June 2005): 30.

present witness of that church continues to be shaped – and it is a shaping of dispositions, of virtues, of *habitus*. It is a thoroughly "performative" theology, expressing more than simply the notion that "by their fruits shall ye know them" – always open to a charge of instrumentalism – and more about the words being embedded and embodied in the actions. The public witness of the Church is the essence of its public theology; as Sam Wells argues,

> the central question in Christian ethics … is simply put: does it build up the Church? … does it build up the common life of the body of Christ, fostering conditions in which trust, peace and reconciliation may grow? And: does it appropriately display the common life of the Church in such a way as to demonstrate how that life is made possible by the servant lordship of Christ, and thus commend that life to those who do not yet share it?[47]

Such a theology must not be seen as a form of ecclesial isolationism or triumphalism; social justice is to be striven for, but from a position of counter-cultural engagement rather than compliance with secular powers. Since nothing can and should replicate the sovereignty of Christ, then the last thing the church should do is seek its own version of that in temporal terms, or to "impress upon those who do not share its faith an ersatz version of its life."[48]

These kind of voices remind us of the perennial tension for Christians in relation to public life and politics, how to practise the twin vocations of "citizenship" and "discipleship": of liberalism's concern to be accountable and contribute to the common good on the one hand, versus the call to live out a distinctive public witness based on the corporate practice of the Christian community. Voices from the Australian context show that this is a living question in terms of articulating a relevant public theology, especially in relation to participation in welfare reform. Tony Harkness, writing about the theological foundations of Roman Catholic schools, talks about the tension between "authenticity" and "inclusion": how the Church's education policy and provision can be true to tradition and the core values of the Church ("Have a strong Catholic identity and Give witness to Christian values")[49] yet reach out to wider constituencies ("Be open and accessible to

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[47] Wells, "An Anglican Critique," 30.
[48] Wells, "An Anglican Critique," 30.
[49] Tony Harkness, "Authentic and Inclusive Catholic Schools: Some Challenging Contexts," *Australian EJournal of Theology* 3 (2003): 2. [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://dlibrary.acu.

those who seek its values").[50] This will best be achieved, he argues, through a "God-centred rather than Church centred theology of mission."[51] Mission, or involvement of Church in public policy, is not about "the work of the Church alone, exercised and directed through the powers and structures of the Church," but is driven by an understanding of "the work of the Holy Spirit calling forth all of creation."[52]

Harkness here draws on the work of Peter Phan, who has argued that theology of mission in the Roman Catholic tradition since Vatican II represented a decisive shift away from a church-centred model towards one of God at work in the world, and a focus on the church in the world as an instrument or sacrament of God's mission. The church is not an end in itself but a pointer to the way God acts in the world.[53] Phan criticises pre-conciliar Catholic missiology in which "the center and heart of the missionary project is the church, and church understood primary in the institutional model,"[54] understood as "unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute."[55] Hence the emphasis in post-conciliar Catholic theology (especially theologies of mission and contextual theologies of inculturation) about mission as involving the humanisation of society as much as expansion of the Church; but crucially, also, it asks mission to locate itself from a theological and apologetic vantage-point, rather than an ecclesiological (and ecclesiastical) one. For Phan, post-Vatican II missiology has restored the four elements of mission to their right order: "reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church."[56]

I wonder therefore whether those post-liberal theologies have drifted towards a form of pre-conciliar theology, of privileging the work of the church over the reign of God. Have they allowed their suspicion of secular liberal humanism in the name of authenticity to push them into a latter-day doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*? It is one thing to acknowledge the ideological biases of secular reason (such as social sciences), but another to assert that such disciplines or perspectives lack any legitimacy whatsoever;

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edu/research/theology/ejournal/Issue 3/Harkness.htm.

[50] Harkness, "Authentic and Inclusive Catholic Schools," 2.

[51] Harkness, "Authentic and Inclusive Catholic Schools," 4.

[52] Harkness, "Authentic and Inclusive Catholic Schools," 4.

[53] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 2

[54] Peter Phan, "Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church,"*Australian EJournal of Theology* 2 (2002): 2 [cited 14 June 2007]. Online: http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/theology/Issue2/PeterPhan.htm.

[55] Harkness, "Authentic and Inclusive Catholic Schools," 4.

[56] Phan, "Proclamation of the Reign of God," 2.

or even to argue, as post-liberals sometimes tend to do, that theology or the life of the church themselves never evolved in dialogue with their wider cultures.

Certainly, there is a danger of the church simply being confined to being merely a constituent part of "civil society," and post-liberals such as William Cavanaugh are right to protest against any such move, since it represents a capitulation to a division between sacred and secular that may have been part of a modernist orthodoxy of the separation of Church and State (in the name of a "programmatic" secularism which sees the necessity for a strong "firewall" between religious conviction and public reason), but which is now being challenged in the name of the "resacralisation" or "re-enchantment" of society.[57] It is certainly the case that liberal public theologies that have accommodated themselves to such a compact, and which adopt a strategy of mediation between the specifics of Christian tradition and practice on the one hand and the common speech of the public domain on the other, may find themselves operating from an attenuated theology and ecclesiology. The danger is that the churches can only operate at one remove, as it were, with their effectiveness in influencing public policy always dependent on the liberal State's constructions or understandings of public reason, their influence restricted to an ability for reasoned argument, or by the activism of Christians as part of pluralist civil society, rather than by virtue of the authenticity of its corporate witness as the body of Christ. In this respect, Cavanaugh's vision of the church as public body politic has a compelling simplicity: "The role of the church is not merely to make policy recommendations to the state, but to embody a different sort of politics, so that the world may be able to see a truthful politics and be transformed."[58]

Yet post-liberal public theology has been criticised for attempting to subsume all theology into ecclesiology, and of exhibiting a certain utopianism, if not naivety, in their hopes for the perfectibility of the Church as human and temporal institution.

While many political theologians applaud postliberal theology's defense of an evangelical form of ecclesial resistance to individualistic, bourgeois academic interpretations of Christianity, they also challenge the postliberal inclination to separate the spiritual and the political, lack of attention

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[57] William T. Cavanaugh, "Church," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (eds. Peter M. Scott and William T. Cavanaugh; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 393–406.
[58] Cavanaugh, "Church," 404.

to justice issues, to critiques of ideology, and to action for ecclesial and social reforms.[59]

"Engagement," even dialogue, with institutions beyond the Church does not necessarily have to mean "collusion." Tony Harkness' conclusion is that authenticity and inclusivity are complementary, since inclusiveness without authenticity becomes bland uncritical consensus, yet authenticity without inclusiveness becomes inward-looking, institutional, conformist and conservative. Indeed, such participation in the movement of the Spirit in the realm of reason as well as revelation is not a betrayal but a fulfilment of theological orthodoxy:

> The point is not that Christian virtues should be distinctive in the sense that no one outside the faith can embody them. Rather, the test is whether such virtues are *authentically* derived from specific Christian themes and doctrines – then one may ask whether similar virtues may also be derived from other traditions and narratives. Thus, in dialogic encounter with others, Christians may seek moral agreements which *extend beyond their own faith community* but which do not compromise their authentic theological outlook.[60]

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE COMMON GOOD

I have been talking about a public theology that is tradition-centred (authentic and ecclesial) yet open to the possibility of revelation beyond the tradition (inclusive and dialogical), that brings to a common realm of public debate the gifts of a vision rooted in identifiable theological values. Yet the public domain can neither be insulated from questions of value nor assumed to be immune from the considerations of religious freedom and pluralism. And I want to use these thoughts to develop some further pointers towards a renewed theological consideration of the nature of welfare reform, and the possible role of faith in the third sector.

It would be a false dichotomy to suggest that the two objectives are mutually incompatible. Whilst post-liberal theologians are frequently critical of "mainstream" liberals such as Temple and Reinhold Niebuhr for neglecting any doctrine of the church in their public theology, Temple was

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[59] Heyer, "How Does Theology Go Public?" 324.
[60] Brown, "Christian Ethics and Economics after Liberalism," 52.

concerned to put the church at the service of the social problems of his day.[61] This for him was not a distraction from worship and ecclesiology but one public expression of its identity, rooted in the realities of Creation and Incarnation. "The church is holy, but holiness is not separation from the world. Instead, the church's holiness is that of Jesus Christ himself, in its risky interaction with that world."[62] We might see this as Temple's affirmation of the church's calling to participation in the world, as God's world. Such a public theology is built on the reality of common grace and our shared humanity by virtue of bearing the *imago Dei*, the possibility of reason as well as revelation as revealing the truth, and redemption being about transformation and renewal of creation rather than its being totally remade from scratch.

There is always a tension, however, and this is where the principle of Christian Realism can help us. Some critics of Temple have indeed argued that his optimism about the capacity of the State reflects a naivety or excessive trust in the power of human institutions alone to deliver the common good. The Temple of *Christianity and Social Order* may have placed too much trust in the capacity of State bureaucracy and the expertise of political elites to deliver effective systems of welfare. Such deference to centralized power and the authority of the "expert," as Mark Chapman points out, leaves Temple's social ethics incapable of challenging trends such as the managerialism of New Labour. This results in "a virtually complete separation of the realm of political morality from the sphere of practical expertise. At the same time … the autonomy of the social sciences and economics as disciplines undertaken and understood only by experts … means that the scope for political morality is increasingly reduced."[63]

However, a revised "Christian Realism" acknowledges both the necessity of political institutions but also their subjection to the limitations of sin.[64] This may actually entail adopting a closer engagement with those very institutions and processes of governance, rather than trusting – as Temple's theology tended to do – in the inherent benevolence of the secular State. Indeed, it is arguable that Temple's notion of intermediate associations serves as an antidote to this, as affirming the significance of independent,

[61] Cavanaugh, "Church," 393–406.
[62] Wendy Dackson, "Archbishop William Temple and Public Theology in Post-Christian Context," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 4 (2006): 246.
[63] Chapman, "Ronald Preston, William Temple, and the Future of Christian Politics," 169–70.
[64] Chris Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking* (London: Ashgate, 2007), 67–110.

value-based, pluralist civil society between the operations of the State and the market.[65]

This takes me, finally, back to the issue of the integrity of the "third sector" as occupying that crucial space. Essentially, Roland Sewell's objections to faith-based organizations signing up to deliver welfare services rest, it seems to me, on the dangers of the third sector being colonized or squeezed by government-driven agenda on the one hand, or the profit motive on the other. Remember his concerns about commercialism and corporatization, for example: "The incorporation of faith groups into state policy, on conditions set by the state, and justified in instrumental terms, risks closing down the free, non-instrumental space that religious belief and practice holds open and which … is central for the formation of civil society as a space of free deliberation."[66]

So this is about protecting the integrity of this space, which is precisely how Marion Maddox conceives of the terminology "public," meaning everything to do with the world beyond the home, the familial and the domestic (noting along the way its gendered implications); we can think of it as the "third space" between the state and the market, "where people can meet independently of all those other sources of pressures and interests."[67] Maddox develops the distinction between public and private as the difference between welfare provision offered by the state, funded through public money and taxation, versus services provided by private insurance or commercial means. The former means public goods available to all, the latter those subject to market or profit-motives. Maddox talks about "public" as free from state or market intrusion, signifying a theological stance based on grace rather than profit or self-interest. In ways that echo Temple's notion of "intermediate organizations" as an essential part of healthy civil society, therefore, this third space, as that neither colonized by instrumentalism or the secular reason of the State, nor the logic of profit or managerialism posed by the market, seems therefore a good place, strategically, for the churches and public theology to locate their action and reflection on matters of welfare and the common good.

Maddox asks, "What legitimacy can a theologically-based contribution claim where Christianity commands no automatic attention?"[68] Is it still

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[65] Atherton, *Public Theology*, 96.
[66] Bretherton, "A New Establishment?" 6.
[67] Maddox, "Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology," 92.
[68] Maddox, "Religion, Secularism and the Promise of Public Theology," 82.

possible to believe that theology can speak and act effectively in public? I have been arguing that the hallmarks of authenticity – rootedness in but not captivity to tradition – and participation – an apprehension of a public theology that proclaims the presence of God-in-the-world, to the world – are defining characteristics for a way ahead. The church draws its function and purpose from the world and a doctrine of creation, rather than from a primary concern with the identity and integrity of the church. Fundamentally, it testifies to "the idea that God's truth – which of course, is absolute truth – is approachable by all human beings," as well as suggesting "that Christians should be looking for their God to be discovered in other people."[69]

I am calling for some kind of Christian Realism that trusts in the necessity of human institutions (civil, secular and ecclesial) and political processes, yet exercises necessary caution over their limitations, in order to maintain that balance between authenticity and participation. The church is not to be wholly identified with the spirit of any one particular age or political system, even though to withhold participation goes against the imperatives of creation and incarnation. Yet this should not diminish the right to exercise critical solidarity, made easier by the occupation of an autonomous space between State and market, in the shape of a renewed commitment to the third sector. A renewed Christian Realism in relation to the limitations and the virtues of such constructive engagement may be one of the most significant contributions of such a "public theology" of welfare.

[69] Brown, "Christian Ethics and Economics after Liberalism," 63.