



Angelic Exchanges: Speaking of God in the public sphere



SOCIAL POLICY AND
PARLIAMENTARY UNIT
Working for the eradication of poverty in NZ

A Think-Piece exploring how our faith can be translated into public debates and public policy

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DISCLAIMER

A Think-Piece is designed to get people talking and thinking together. It is not necessarily the official position of the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit or of The Salvation Army.

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK.
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APERTURE

The concern of this discussion is to explore how The Salvation Army can dialogue with and speak into the public domain.

- Does our engagement in the public sphere mean that we have to learn to speak a new, more publicly-open language?
- Do we have to translate our distinctive Salvationism into a new vocabulary that a de-secularised public might grapple with and potentially (re)value?
- Does this practice of translation involve inherent losses *or* is the process of translation, with its demands of humility and mutual learning, the only position we have left from where we can honestly speak of newness and transformation?

I invite you to think through these issues with me and keep company with the God who sometimes follows a straight line and sometimes squiggles and zigzags. I humbly pray that this discussion might help fuel the continuing “public witness” and “public worship” of The Salvation Army and might potentially lead to what Walter Brueggemann calls more hopeful “re-descriptions” and “re-narrations” of our world.¹

DECHURCHED, DE-PRIVATISED AND DE-SECULARISED

Despite the claims of critics, God is not dead. Even though there is little disagreement that the forces of modernisation have dechurched God,² diminishing the cultural hold of Christianity and the political leverage of church-shaped spaces, there is a growing consciousness that God has not completely disappeared from the public domain and it seems is not likely to in the near-future. Secularisation has not managed to eliminate God from our minds or even evict God from the public sphere; in fact, the evidence seems to suggest that God is making something of a public recovery and public return. David Tacey, Associate Professor of English at La Trobe University, Melbourne, describes the essence of what is our latest collective experience of God and our newest public crisis of faith:

Why can't I kill God in me? Why does He live on in me in a humiliating way - despite my wanting to evict Him from my heart? Why is He, despite all, a mocking reality I can't be rid of?...

A confession of a knight, The Seventh Seal, 1957.

The secularism of modernity has not managed to eliminate God from our minds or even evict God from the public sphere.

“Some of us have been duped into believing that the sacred is dead and that only human design and social engineering govern reality. Others have been duped by lifeless versions of institutional religion into believing that God is so far removed from human affairs that the divine has no determining role to play in our immediate personal and social experience. We are the inheritors of a legacy of disenchantment and loss of spirit. We are the products of an intellectual tradition that has been constitutionally opposed to the sacred and the mysterious, and of a tired religious tradition that has lacked the courage to discover the workings of the divine in the here-and-now...We are witnessing the death of one public story and the birth of another story, and no part of society can be immune from such a transformation. We have outgrown the narrative that used to contain our lives and provide meaning, because it is too narrow and we have matured. We no longer want life to revolve wholly around the rational mind or ego and its wishes and desires... We desperately require a larger story, one which allows us to shed the illusions of the separate ego and join...in celebration of our spiritual unity.”³

Is this your experience of church? Is this how you imagine God? Have you felt your own personal narrative “moving” toward a larger story?

Stemming from this public disenchantment with a controlling “Churchianity” and the global failure of modernity, newer forms of a deinstitutionalised and socially-conscious church have emerged in America, the UK, Europe, Asia, Korea, Latin America, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand.⁴ The intercontinental scattering of these emerging faith communities, coupled with the consumer-driven explosion of Eastern spiritualities,

¹ See Walter Brueggemann, 2006, *The Word that Re-describes the World*; and 2007, *The Word Militant*.

² The latest Census Data (2006) of Religious Affiliation in New Zealand can be gleaned from at <http://www.stats.govt.nz/>; and see Alison Fields and Peter Lineham, *The Current Status of the Church*, p.163-174, in *New Vision* (2008), Vol III, for a more in-depth “snapshot” of the delining New Zealand church.

³ David Tacey, *Re-enchantment - The New Australian Spirituality*, p.241-242.

⁴ See Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson, Cathy Kirkpatrick, 2000, *The Prodigal Project*; and Adam Possamai, 2009, *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*.

the global expansion of Islam, the continued growth of classic Catholicism and Protestantism in developing nations and the internationalisation of faith-fueled politics, has led Jose Casanova, a leading scholar in the Sociology of Religion, to claim that there is now a marked “de-privatization” of faith. Religion has “...abandoned its assigned place in the private sphere and entered the public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing...contest [of] redrawing boundaries.”⁵ Similarly, Peter Berger, a former devotee of the decline of God and a past prophet of secularisation, now sees a prolific “de-secularisation” of the secular.⁶ Today, with more people believing without belonging, the constant din of a public engaging with the deep issues of belonging, faith, love, identity, meaning, mystery and neighbourliness can be heard nearly everywhere. It seems to me that the haunting lot of the lone knight in *The Seventh Seal* is now ours: we can’t kill God or even rid ourselves of God. Somewhat ironically, with the emergence of a dechurched post-Christian, post-modernity, and, in particular, post September 11, 2001, we haven’t managed to stop publicly speaking of God.

After Aushwitz and Hiroshima, the question was ‘How can you speak of God?’ In contrast, 9/11 tears us apart and drives one world against another, and on both sides, in both camps, we do nothing but speak of God.

Gabriel Vahanian, cited in Jeffery W. Robbins (Ed), 2007, *After the Death of God*, p.172.

Have you heard this growing din of public God-talk?

DIVINE EXCHANGES... DONKEYS, STONES AND JURGEN HABERMAS

The continued existence of God in the public domain has caused something of a headache for many social commentators and has evoked a new international commentary that speaks of how we seem to be entering a “para-secular” or “post-secular” era.⁷ Jurgen Habermas, a distinguished German intellect in the fields of philosophy and sociology, and a publicly-confessed “methodological atheist,” is probably the most startling of these new thinkers who is surprising the scholarly community with a growing gratitude for and recognition of the potential “semantic resourcing of religion.” Dialoguing with a collection of heavy-hitting philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and theologians, Habermas concedes:

“Even viewed from the outside, it could turn out that monotheistic traditions have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted, that shows itself to be superior in its power to disclose the world and to form identity, in its capability for renewal, its differentiation, and its range.”⁸

He continues, and even though the language is difficult, I think this is a hopeful concession that we should grapple with:

“The process of a critical appropriation of the essential contents of religious tradition is still underway and the outcome is difficult to predict. I will willingly repeat my position: ‘As long as religious language bears with itself inspiring, indeed, unrelinquishable semantic contents which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reasons for its positions, philosophy, even in its post-metaphysical form, will neither be able to replace or repress religion.’”⁹

See what’s going on?

⁵ Jose Casanova, 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, p.19. A little cheekily, Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick counsel that while: “...God is back on the agenda, ... Christians should not get prematurely excited about the fact. There is no enthusiasm for association with institutional forms of religion, and indeed a great deal of suspicion about them. One of the sad facts is that people alert to the reality of God never even consider that a church would be a place to help them on their journey. Even more tragic is that an increasing number of Christians might be tempted to agree with them” (Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson, Cathy Kirkpatrick, 2000, *ibid*, p.27).

⁶ See Peter Berger, *The De-secularisation of the World: A Global Overview*, in P. Berger, Ed., 1999, *The De-secularisation of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*.

⁷ The concept of “para” means alongside and signifies that there is a coexistence between the mundane and the profane, the sacred and the secular sitting together. For a philosophical discussion of “para-secularism” and “post-secularism” see Jeffery W. Robbins (Ed), 2007, *After the Death of God*.

⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *Transcendence from Within*, *Transcendence in this World*, cited in Don S. Browning et. al., 1992, *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, p.229.

⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *ibid*, p.237.

A self-confessed “non-believer” is openly contending that the distinctiveness of God-packed language, the public semantic potential of our faith, may never be completely replaced or totally silenced.

I can’t help myself. These concessions evoke in me the hopeful and staggering imagery of Numbers 22.28-30, where a headstrong “donkey” becomes a mouthpiece of God; and the equally startling imagery of Luke 19.40, where Jesus claims that the “stones will shout” of God if the faithful face a public rebuking and cannot speak.

I mean no disrespect to Habermas.

Somewhat shaken by the new ethical challenges of human engineering and by the political fundamentalism of September 11, Habermas confesses in October of 2001 that the imagery of faith continues to be publicly important and, even more shockingly, is something that secularist thinkers should engage with seriously and honestly:

“Secular languages that simply eliminate what was once there leave behind only irritation. Something was lost when sin became guilt. The desire for forgiveness is, after all, still closely connected with the unsentimental wish to undo other injuries as well. We are rightfully disturbed by the irreversibility of past suffering, the injustice that has been committed against the innocently mishandled, debased and murdered, injustices that exceed every human power of redemption. The lost hope of resurrection has left behind a palpable emptiness... The unbelieving sons and daughters of the modern age appear in such moments to believe themselves more obliged to each other, and to be in greater need, as if the religious tradition were accessible to them in translation, and thus as if its semantic potential were not yet exhausted...”¹⁰

There is a lot happening in this confession. The critical concept to spot is what I call the “civic duty” of the faithful “going public.” The church hoping to speak in public has to be in a constant conversation between its own history and the present public, listening, interpreting and “translating” the semantic potential of its own treasured convictions into a commonly-shared language that makes (common) sense; what Habermas cleverly calls “a secularisation that does not annihilate.”¹¹

The church’s work for a more just and humane society is a translation of the message of the Gospel into moral principles and an application of those principles to concrete situations.
Cardinal Thomas Williams, 2007, Archbishop Emeritus of Wellington.

I hear a distant echo of the Apostle Peter saying something similar:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”¹²

RELIGIOUS RESOURCING

These confessions of Habermas have enabled a new scholarly debate to engage with *how* faith in God can resource the public sphere. Religion is getting a public rehearing and a public revaluing.

Richard Wolin, a Professor of History, Comparative Literature and Political Science at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, claims that a public faith “...offers a much-needed dimension of otherness: the religious values of love, community, and godliness help to offset the global dominance of competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and manipulation that predominate in the vocational sphere. Religious convictions encourage people to treat each other as ends in themselves rather than as mere means.”¹³

Robert Wuthnow, a Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, argues that faith communities as politically-charged protest movements have more to say than a simple “...negation of dominant social system imperatives. They have also been concerned to elaborate, both in theory and in practice, their own visions of

¹⁰ Jurgen Habermas, 2001, *Faith and Knowledge - An Opening*, cited <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0111/msg00100.html>

¹¹ Jurgen Habermas, 2001, *Faith and Knowledge*, *ibid.*

¹² 1 Peter 3.15, The Bible, NIV.

¹³ Richard Wolin, *Jurgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9/3/2005, Vol. 52, Issue 5, cited at <http://library.laidlaw.ac.nz>; See H. Bedford-Storm, *Nurturing Reason: The public role of religion in the liberal state*, Deel 48 Nommers 1 & 2 Maart & Junie, 2007).

cultural alternatives. And, however unrealistic these alternatives may be, they nonetheless - sometimes by virtue of their very lack of conventional realism - supply images of non-rational possibilities to the public sphere. More than anything they may have accomplished as workable models for the entire society, they symbolise possibility: open cultural horizons, a place for keeping imagination and creativity alive, and tangible expressions of...love, hope, forgiveness, and trust.”¹⁴

It is only thanks to God that I'm an atheist.

A confession of Gianni Vattimo, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Turin.

A little closer to home, Tapu Misa, a columnist for the *New Zealand Herald*, in exploring the difficulty of speaking of moral concerns in a pluralistic public domain noted that with the contentious issue of a brothel in front of a school in Henderson, there is something of a political consensus that states the location of brothels should not be discussed on moral grounds “but on the ‘need to address policy considerations...public nuisances, offensive behaviour in public places, public health, public safety and compatibility with existing character and use of surrounding land.’” Tapu Misa counter-claims this de-moralisation of the public debate by citing Michael Sandel, a Professor of Justice and Philosophy at Harvard University, who argues for a “faith-friendlier” public square:

“We can’t make sense of a range of moral and political obligations we recognise, even prize, Sandel writes, unless we think of ourselves ‘as encumbered selves open to moral claims we have not willed.’

‘For many people, talk of virtue in politics brings to mind religious conservatives telling people how to live. But this is not the only way that conceptions of virtue and the common good can inform politics. The challenge is to imagine a politics that takes moral and spiritual questions seriously, but brings them to bear on broad economic and civic concerns, not only sex and abortion.’”¹⁵

Kevin Ward, a Baptist Minister and Dean of Studies at the School of Ministry at Knox College, Dunedin, champions this larger public contribution of faith and thinks that:

“As our fragmented society seeks to redefine some common values and beliefs without which it cannot function, the church can play a significant public role. A positive example of this was the ‘Hiko of Hope.’ Another was the positive role of churches in the ‘Royal Commission on Genetic Modification.’”¹⁶

The list could continue with the public engagement of faith and its “semantic potential” being heard in the protests of the Springbok Tour, the creation of the Families Commission, the introduction of Family Group Conferences in the Youth Court, the establishment of a Faith-Based Unit at Rimutaka Prison, and in the apologies the New Zealand government has made to Maori, the Chinese Community, the people of Samoa and Vietnam War Veterans.

Kevin Ward goes on to cite the research of Jose Casanova and to caution that Christians shouldn’t interpret this newer public engagement with faith to mean that our local churches should invest in more seating. No one in this debate is foreseeing a public going back to church on Sunday:

“This re-emergence of the church and religion to a more significant role in other western countries has been described by Casanova. ‘Religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatised role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularisation have reserved for them’ They ‘[have gone] public.’ It is important to note, however,” continues Ward, “that [Casanova] is clear that this is not a return to the dominance of the church of Christendom... It means for countries like New Zealand that *the church has to accept that it is no longer at the centre of society, and must learn to speak from the margins, as one voice among many.*”¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert Wuthnow, “Rationality and the Limits of Rational Theory: A Sociological Critique”, cited in *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, *ibid*, p.224-225.

¹⁵ Tapu Misa, “Brothel’s location a dilemma for schools,” *The New Zealand Herald*, Monday, May 3, 2010. See Michael Sandel, 2009, *Justice: What’s the Right thing to do?*

¹⁶ Kevin Ward, *Is New Zealand’s future churchless?* *Stimulus* Vol.12, No. 2, May 2004, p.10. See Bernie Townsend, 2009, *A Commentary on Dr Chris Marshall’s article entitle ‘What Language Shall I borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology*, cited at http://www.mastersscribe.co.nz/assets/Uploads/research_essays/Research-Essay-10-Language-Considerations-NZ-Environment.pfd.

¹⁷ Kevin Ward, *ibid*, p.10, *emphasis mine*.

Similarly cautious, though still optimistic, Marion Maddox, a Reader in Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, considers this “public theology” to be something of a “...gift [Christians] can offer to secular society. It is a gift which carries some risks for both giver and receiver, which it is the giver’s responsibility to be aware of and prevent; but it also carries possibilities for filling what many, religiously committed and uncommitted alike, see as a regrettable void in public life.”¹⁸

Even more complimentary is Walter Brueggemann, Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, who contends that among the Christian community there is a treasury of Words that can help the public to have a “second look,” Words that can potentially help the public to “re-describe and re-narrate the world”:

“To speak of ‘the Word that re-describes the world,’ using language appropriated from Paul Ricoeur, is to call attention to the fact that the biblical text functions among us as a ‘second thought,’ coming after the initial description of life in the world according to the dominant metanarrative of our society. One function of [this] re-description is to protest against that initial description and to insist that the initial presentation of reality is not an adequate or trustworthy account.”¹⁹

Simply stated, Major Geoff Ryan of The Salvation Army interprets this to mean that:

“Our task in preaching the Gospel is to remove worn out, inadequate, wrong images and replace them with new images and symbols.”²⁰

Is this how you read the Scriptures?

THE PUBLIC PULPIT... A COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATION OF CONSENSUAL PARTNERS

The challenge of doing this “public theology” is complicated today by a deep “communication crisis,” a deep crisis of disconnect. The language of the church is no longer the language of the community; the everyday language of the public is no longer the language of the platform or the pulpit. David Tacey comments on the importance of this crisis of communication:

“Our Western crisis in religious faith is partly a crisis of language and representation. It is not that we have lost our capacity for spiritual feeling (that, clearly, is not the case), but we have lost our ability to locate this feeling in the old theological forms. The old religious world view no longer resonates with the understandings of the young or of the secularised world in which they live... Secular society is inclined to dismiss theology as mumbo jumbo because theology fails to speak to it. There is not enough emphasis placed on what all the symbols and images might mean to us today or how we might begin to get a personal [and public] connection to theology’s stories and rituals. Western religion will have to recognise that we need to have much of our religion translated into modern terms and linked to everyday situations.”²¹

... Last season’s fruit is eaten
And the fulfilled beast shall kick the empty pail.
For last year’s words belong to last year’s language
And next year’s words await another voice.
T. S. Eliot, 1959, ‘Little Gidding’, in Four Quartets.

Similarly, Steve Taylor, Lecturer in Practical Theology at BCNZ and Senior Pastor of Opawa Baptist Church, Christchurch, comments that:

“...the state of the church in Aotearoa New Zealand is...much more than a simple story of numerical decline. It is also the recognition that within our culture, what were shared understandings concerning grace and sin, judgement and redemption, told both from the pulpit and the newspaper, are now lost.”²²

We can no longer dismiss the implications of this “communication crisis,” can we? *If* the church hopes to “go public” and “fuel” from its own imaginative semantic potential something distinctive, countering or new

¹⁸ Marion Maddox, 2006, A Case For Public Theology, Auckland University School of Theology, Annual Lecture in Public Theology, cited at http://www.theology.auckland.ac.nz/uo/theology/news-and-events/pub_lect_archive.cf..

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, 2006, *The Word that Re-describes the World*, p.xiii.

²⁰ Geoff Ryan, 2001, *Sowing Dragons: Essays in Neo-Salvationism*, p.121.

²¹ David Tacey, *ibid*, p.195. Similarly, Chris Marshall comically notes that “Speaking in tongues is all very well for believers, but as Paul points out, it is of no benefit to outsiders unless it is interpreted (1 Corinthians 14.20-25)!” *Stimulus*, *ibid*, p.16.

²² Steve Taylor, “A Kiwi Emerging Church? Yeah Right!”, p.312, in *New Vision* (2008), Vol III Vision.

within the public domain, then it will have to (re)learn how to be what Francis Schussler Fiorenza, a Professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies at Harvard University, calls a “community of interpretation.”²³ The communicative disconnect between ourselves and the public demands that the church has to now (re)learn how to be a good “conversational partner,” humbly disclaiming our monolithic hold on what is good and right, disavowing our inclinations toward (linguistic, physical and symbolic) violence and dutifully learning to listen to and learn from what others have to say. *If we hope to be genuinely heard and not merely make more “noise” in the public sphere, then we must embody the difference we speak of ourselves and in the Habermasian edicts of democratic and fair public debate, “...translate [our]...religious convictions into a secular language before [our] arguments have the prospect of being accepted by a majority.”*²⁴

*Its a big “if,” isn’t it? Is this “civic duty” simply courting compromise? Isn’t the “civic duty” of listening, interpretation and translation itself a concession that the Christian faith is in essence immaterial, nonessential to the public?*²⁵

No; not necessarily.

Craig A. Loscalzo, Associate Professor of Preaching at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, claims that the “civic duty” of listening, interpretation and translation is exactly what makes the pulpit truly “public”:

“Only a pulpit that identifies with the milieu of the time will be heard over the babble of other voices demanding people’s attention...identifying with the postmodern world does not mean prima facie

acceptance or rejection of its values or worldview. Creating identification means taking the postmodern world seriously and addressing it from a collaborative rather than adversarial stance. A postmodern world demands a pulpit willing to be a viable conversation partner.”²⁶

Theology is to be done with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.

A comment attributed to Karl Barth.

John Sullivan, in *Religious Speech in the Public Square*, while not exploring directly the interpretative “civic duty” of the church notes that we have a dual duty to honour the heritage and semantic potential of our faith and the cultural hopes and fears of our listeners. He suggests a humble “tempering” of our vocabulary:

“The five essential qualities required to ensure religious speech in public is appropriate, by which I mean combining commitment to the requirements of the faith tradition with commitment to the common good, include *conviction, clarity, courage, humility and compassion*... Serious attention to those we enter into dialogue with requires that we temper our words so that they take account of the ‘particularities’ of each person - in training, commitment, experience, disposition.”²⁷

²³ See Francis Schussler Fiorenza, *The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction*, cited in *Habermas, Modernity and the Public Square*, *ibid*, p.66-91.

²⁴ Jurgen Habermas, October 2001, *ibid*, *emphasis mine*. It is critical to note that the burden of this “civic duty” of interpretation and translation is for Habermas to be collaboratively shared between the church and the public. The public domain has to be configured and reconfigured through a “complementary learning process,” through mutual and reciprocal relationships. Habermas contends: “The requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task in which the non-religious citizens must likewise participate, if their religious fellow citizens are not to be encumbered with an asymmetrical burden. Whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the proviso that these get translated, the secular citizen must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reason might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments” (Jurgen Habermas, 2006, *Religion in the Public Square*, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14.1, p.1-25, p.11).

²⁵ See Christopher D. Marshall, “What Language shall I borrow?: the Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology,” *Stimulus* 13, No. 3, *Gospel, Culture and Public Sphere* (August 2005):11-18 for a critical exploration of what is involved in the process of translation.

²⁶ Craig A. Loscalzo, 2000, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World*, p.20.

²⁷ John Sullivan, 2009, *Religious Speech in the Public Square*, cited in Bernie Townsend, 2009, *A Commentary on Dr Chris Marshall’s article entitled ‘What Language Shall I borrow? The Bilingual Dilemma of Public Theology*, cited at http://www.mastersscribe.co.nz/assets/Uploads/research_essays/Research-Essay-10-Language-Considerations-NZ-Environment.pdf, *emphasis in original*.

The commitment we hold to speaking with *clarity* and *to clarify* is critical. There is a general *lack of clarity* and *a lack of critical thinking* in our public domain. We favour down-to-earth “pragmatism and [the] ability to get on with things with our heads down.”²⁸ Roger Horrocks, Emeritus Professor in Film, Television and Media Studies at the University of Auckland, comments that within the Kiwi public psyche “a little thinking or questioning is good, but too much nerdiness is likely to be seen by peers and parents as contentious, queer, unhealthy.”²⁹ He goes on to cite Andre Siegfried, a French economist and historian who lamented back in 1904 that the New Zealand public has a “...contempt for theories: [but is] often captured by the first theory that turns up, if it is demonstrated to them with an appearance of logic sufficient enough to impose upon them. In most cases they do not seem to see difficulties, and they propose simple solutions for the most complex problems with astonishing audacity.”³⁰ Similarly Brian Easton notes that this history of public vagueness has now left the public sphere “very nervous of having proper debates; we are very nervous of intellectual excellence. It’s not what we say but it’s what we do”³¹ that matters. The commitment we make to *speaking clearly* (openly declaring where we’re coming from) and *speaking to clarify* (humbling prying to disclose what is the conceptual or intellectual framing that is fueling the public discussion) is even more important if we hope to communicate meaningfully and not simply make more “noise” in public. The church “going public,” faced with a media communicating “facts laced with stodgy, self-important non-comment”³² and with a public that is mostly indifferent, unreflective and vague, has to emulate the public speaking of Paul and (re)learn to name the “unknown gods” of the public sphere.³³

Today, I think the greatest hurdle to this public debate and mutual translation is our felt scarcity of time. The public domain (and, if we’re honest, our own organisation) constantly demands “immediacy.” Something is always due and *now*. We feel that we simply don’t have the time, space or energy that is pivotal for engaging in deep dialogue and public debate; and the truth is, we will only ever have this time and space when we deliberately make it a priority and recover it from the incessant dictates of “immediacy.” The “good news” is that there is a growing number of places where this is starting to happen and others where with only a little intentional tinkering, this communal space and time could be developed. The annual launch of the *State of the Nation* from the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit (SPPU) of The Salvation Army with a public breakfast or shared lunch is a deliberate attempt to redeem the necessary space and time that enables people to engage in public listening, interpretation and translation. Similarly, the *Child Action and Poverty Group of New Zealand* (CPAG) annually follow the delivery of the national budget with a post-budget-breakfast that rescues a space and time where people can sit and reflect with others on what is being said and what is being (re)valued. Even more spaces like these could be developed online at sites like www.justcomment.org/ or www.firezone.co.nz/, in gatherings like *Just Action*, *Youth Councils*, *Officers Councils*, *Community Ministry* or *Social Service Conferences*, and, with a little planning and thought, could even be duplicated in the pastoral space and times we fence off for “public worship.”

RELEVANCE AND REVELATION

The “civic duty” of listening, interpretation and translation is not a “...play for ‘relevant’ preaching.” It demands, in the imagery of Alan Harsh and Mike Frost “...a total re-calibration and rethink about the symbols, language, metaphors, vernacular and idioms we employ when presenting [or re-presenting] Christ to the world. The church can no longer make excuses for non-contextualised mission; in fact, the only worthwhile Christian ministry is culturally contextualised mission,”³⁴ mission that is culturally incarnated and translated into a public faith that both challenges and serves the public sphere.

The church “going public” has to grapple with the difference that there is between speaking *relevantly* and speaking *to reveal* the semantic potential of our faith tradition. We have to learn to speak and practice our faith from within both mediums. Speaking *relevantly* enables a connection with what already is; it speaks through the imagery and logic that is already present in the public domain; it speaks of and to what is thought to have always been, to and of what the public thinks is *real*. Speaking *to reveal* goes on from this important beginning and dares “to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is called into

²⁸ Lawrence Simmons, 2007, *Speaking Truth to Power - Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand*, p.6.

²⁹ Roger Horrocks, “A Short History of the New Zealand Intellectual,” cited in *Speaking Truth to Power*, *ibid*, p.33.

³⁰ Roger Horrocks, *ibid*, p.63-64.

³¹ Brian Easton, cited in *Speaking Truth to Power*, *ibid*, p.107-108.

³² Brian Easton, *ibid*, p.109.

³³ See Acts 17.16-34.

³⁴ Alan Harsh and Mike Frost, 2003, *The Shape of Things to Come*, p.82.

question”;³⁵ it speaks of what could be and of what we can trust will be. Revelation speaks from within the deep Scriptural fund of “...alternative... symbols and signs that [have been] stitched [into] a coherence that subverts and keeps us always on edge [with] the newness that keeps welling up.”³⁶ Revelation reveals humbly and provisionally the possibility of newness and transformation in the public sphere; it is what Marion Maddox calls the “gift of public theology,” the pragmatic outworking of the semantic potential of our translation work.

Walter Brueggemann says it even more sharply:

“We have forgotten that the script entrusted to us is really an alternative and not an echo... The claim of [this] alternative script is that there is at work among us a Truth that makes us safe, that makes us free, that makes us joyous in a way that the comfort and ease of the consumer economy cannot even imagine. I say that it is the steady, patient, intentional articulation of this counterscript that is our main chance for disengagement and relinquishment [from the failings of the dominant socioeconomic script]... The offer of [this] alternative script is an invitation to repentance down to the root of the matter.”³⁷

Hope requires a very careful symbolisation. It must not be expressed too fully in the present tense because hope that one can touch and handle is not likely to retain its promissory call to the future. Hope expressed only in the present tense will no doubt be co-opted by the managers of this age.

Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

The only hesitancy that I’d like to add to this countering imagery of Walter Brueggemann is that the church can never forget that we too have at times been complicit in and collusive with the dominant definitions and socioeconomic scripts of the communities who have hosted our edifices and funded our programmes. The church can only ever be a confessing community of “connected-critics,”³⁸ a prophetic movement that is honest enough to say that it is enmeshed in its host community and, at the same time, courageous enough to embody and speak of the possibility of something new, even if that newness is “civilly disobedient” or offends what the public believe has always been and expect will always be.

Shane Claiborne and Chis Haw, in *Jesus For President*, speak of our “civic duty” to “gift newness” like this: “...the postmodern, post-Christian world is once again ready for a people who are peculiar, people who spend their energy creating a culture of contrast rather than a culture of relevancy. *If we are to be relevant in the world we live in, we must be relevant nonconformists.*”³⁹

Relevancy is where we start; revelation is what will tip our communities toward newness.

Major Campbell Roberts and Captain Danielle Strickland of The Salvation Army note that the “cost” of “going public” with the semantic potentials of this “nonconforming” newness can be high:

“In recent times within The Salvation Army, officers who have made statements or challenged an action of the government or a political party have often been criticised. Politics, particularly when it means siding with one side of the political divide, is seen to be messy and risky. There is a fear that to criticise the government means we will threaten our funding, or that we’ll lose their respect and our reputation. The reality is that governments, although they may be angry or annoyed at the criticism, are unlikely to respond by withdrawing funding *if the criticism is well-founded and robust*. But regardless of whether they do or don’t, the guiding principles for people of the Gospel must always be to stand and speak for truth no matter what the cost. After all, the one we follow was crucified because He spoke about the abuses of power and the oppressive practices of the ecclesiastical leadership and politics.”⁴⁰

Speaking publicly is not a chance to point a moralistic finger and “rant and rave.” The postmodern public will only hear that as “noise,” and, as with static on the T.V., simply change the channel or hit the mute button. The “public pulpit” has to be a place where we speak with grounded, empirical evidence. We have to speak measuredly to power, and dare I say it, from within the confidence that there can be in God, we have to speak with a freeing and humourous wit that disarms or debunks the solemnness of *what is* with the hope of

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.65.

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, 2007, *Mandate to Difference - An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, p.196.

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, 2007, *ibid*, p.196.

³⁸ H. Bedford-Strohm, *ibid*, p.40.

³⁹ Shane Claiborne, Chris Haw, 2008, *Jesus For President - Politics For Ordinary Christians*, p.240, *emphasis mine*.

⁴⁰ Campbell Roberts and Danielle Strickland, 2008, *Just Imagine*, p.134, *emphasis mine*.

what could be. Some within the church, in considering the potential costliness of “going public,” the “civil duty” we have to listen, interpret and translate the semantic potential of our faith in public spaces, might still judge it to be too dangerous or too hard and deem it to be something a publicly funded church should not even try. I humbly disagree. I think “going public” is, in fact, what it means to be in conversation with God, and, today, with a public square (and church?) that is continually tempted to be “librarian-like” and silence our differences,⁴¹ I think this is what it means to be a “dynamic” follower of Jesus Christ, a committed Salvationist. The “civic duty” of listening, interpreting and translating holds a critical place in our faith and in the history of our own movement.

JESUS... THE WORD MADE FLESH (AND TRANSLATED INTO PUBLIC WORDS)

The God I believe in is a God of daring conversation, a God of dialogue who deliberately engages *with* and interprets Himself to humanity in familiar forms and knowable localisms. The God of the Scriptures is capable of every form of speech except that of monologue.⁴²

Jesus Christ is, in the imagery of John 1.14, the Word of God incarnated in human flesh. He is the revealed Word who moved into a Galilean neighbourhood and learned to speak the Galilean dialect, the Word embodied, reframed and translated into publicly-intelligible words.

Our God...is mainly a God of dialogue who interacts with us, not simply a God of monologue who makes pronouncements above us.

Charles Kraft, 1979, *Christianity in Culture*, p.24.

The Gospels imagine Jesus starting His “public ministry” with a newer interpretation of the “good news,” a deep faith-filled concept from the heritage of Isaiah and a highly-charged political concept that the Roman Empire had hijacked to speak of its own militarily triumphs.⁴³ He’d go on to critique publicly-held images of God and what or who is socially desirable with newly-crafted imagery of children, creation, “enough,” love, justice, neighborliness, peace, materialism, poverty, power and significance. He debunked customs and publicly-held moral distinctions, calling into question the certitudes, entrenched definitions, justifications and sanctions that legitimated and policed the controlling political and economic divisions.⁴⁴ He spoke of the “Kingdom of God,” the countering freshness of a public space shaped by the upside-down logic of God. The inclusive hospitality of His table-fellowship and His open-ended parables earthed the category-shattering newness of this Kingdom in common everyday experiences.

The Jesus-distinctive phraseology of “You have heard it said, but I say...” spoke to fatigued public configurations and hollow common practices that He’d then load with critical and energising differences that enabled His listeners to hear and see the possibility of something new. The titles of “Son of God,” “Son of Man” and “Lord” were not only confessions of His identity; they were thoroughly political statements that counter-imagined Jesus Christ, and not Caesar, to be “Lord” over everything, the real sovereign who had the last say in the public square. The people who heard Jesus speak and saw the new signs He demonstrated commented on His “authority” of speech and were “amazed” at how He “brought to public expression the newness given by God.” His death and resurrection constituted the “decisive criticism” of the dominant public consciousness, a hopeful criticism that “consists not in standing over against but in standing with; the ultimate criticism is not one of triumphant indignation but one of the passion and compassion that completely and irresistibly undermine the world of competence and competition.” And this category-shattering newness is from within the “numbed” confines of a Pharisaical and Roman-ruled public sphere, “...precisely when none seemed possible.”⁴⁵

Brian McLaren, a leading figure in the emerging church conversation, laments the loss of this politicised and public Jesus:

“I’ve become convinced that although Jesus’ message was personal, it was never private. I’ve been convinced that it has everything to do with public matters in general and politics in particular - including economics and aid, personal empowerment and choice, foreign policy and war... In my religious upbringing, I was not taught the public and political dimensions of Jesus’ message - only the personal, private

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, 2007, *ibid*, p.73-94.

⁴² George Steiner, 1989, *Real Presences*, p.225.

⁴³ See Luke 4; Isaiah 65. See Brian McLaren, 2006, *The Secret Life of Jesus*; and, 2007, *Everything Must Change*.

⁴⁴ Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *ibid*, p. 81-113.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *ibid*, p.95, 101-102.

dimensions. Yes, Jesus loved me and wanted me to be good to my little brother and obedient to my parents. But Jesus' idea that God loves my nation's enemies, and so our foreign policies should reflect that love - that idea never crossed my mind. At some point, though, I began to get a hint that I was missing something."⁴⁶

He goes on with something of what this "public" Jesus might speak to today in our own public spaces:

"I've become convinced that if the good news of Jesus were carried in a newspaper today, it wouldn't be hidden in the religion section (although it would no doubt cause a ruckus there). It would be a major story in every section, from world news (What is the path to peace, and how are we responding to our neighbours in need?) to national and local news (How are we treating children, poor people, minorities, the last, the lost, the least?), in the lifestyle section (Are we loving our neighbours and throwing good parties to bring people together?), the food section (Do our diets reflect concern for God's planet and our poor neighbours, and have we invited any of them over for dinner lately?), the entertainment and sports sections (What is the point of our entertainment, and what values are we strengthening in sports), and even the business section (Are we serving the wrong master: money rather than God?)⁴⁷

The "good news" is that I think we can already see some of this public Jesus and public questioning in the media. At the start of the global financial crisis, in 2008, General Shaw Clifton of The Salvation Army published a "Pastoral Letter" entitled "Money" that engaged with how our faith in Jesus might make sense of the credit crunch.⁴⁸ Andrew Bradstock, Professor of Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, gave a series of public lectures at the University of Auckland, Otago and Wellington exploring how faith could inform the emerging economic debates and has contributed opinion pieces in the *Otago Daily Times* that publicly explore how faith, hope and reason might engage with the global challenges of climate change, justice, poverty and terrorism.⁴⁹ I even attempted to get into the public debate and through SPPU published a little discussion paper⁵⁰ that explored the Scriptural imagery of enough and excess and what they might say to the current economic meltdown. The paper got picked up by Simon Collins who featured some of it in the *New Zealand Herald*.⁵¹

See how the public debate of these questions, fueled from within the semantic potential of our faith, can enable the possibility of a new and fairer public sphere?

We're not limited to speaking in public of only *what we stand against*; there is enough semantic potential within Scripture to fuel our own imaginations to speak of *what we stand for* and *who we stand with*. It is though, with a public domain (and church?) prone to silencing difference, "...not something for timid clerks who simply share the inventory,"⁵² is it?

THE LIFE OF BRIAN... WHAT IS LOST (AND RE-FOUND) IN TRANSLATION

There is a cheeky little scene in *The Life of Brian* (1979), a farcical film from Monty Python that captures the dangers inherent in "going public" with our listening, interpretation and translations. The scene is a parody of the Sermon of the Mount and I have simply cited some of it to demonstrate with humour some of the perils of our translation work:

⁴⁶ Brian McLaren, 2006, *ibid*, p.10-11.

⁴⁷ Brian McLaren, 2006, *ibid*, p.10-11. If we had the energy a more thorough inspection of how the "civic duty" of listening, interpretation and translation sits in Scripture might mean we look freshly at the "gift" of the Spirit at Pentecost, a gifting that enabled the early church to speak of God in the native tongues of others gathered in the public sphere (Acts 2.1-21); we might look at the speech of Stephen in front of the Sanhedrim (Acts 7.1-60); the public ministry and translation work of Paul in Iconium (Acts 14), Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), Ephesus (Acts 19) and in Jerusalem (Acts 21-26); we might then explore the different Letters of Paul to the churches, each containing a fresh and public reframing and reinterpretation of who is Jesus and how different is the counter Kingdom of God. And lastly, a look at the translatability of the "good news" of Jesus in the public domain should look at the strange Letter of Revelation, a politically charged letter that subverts the empire with the strangest of metaphors and a counter-translation of who is Lord.

⁴⁸ Available online at <http://www1.salvationarmy.org/thegeneral>.

⁴⁹ See <http://www.saintdavids.org.nz/FergusonLecture.htm> and <http://www.odt.co.nz/opinion/opinion/47222/hope-key-changing-world>.

⁵⁰ See <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-media/social-research/social-policy-and-parliamentary-unit/>.

⁵¹ See Simon Collins, "Forget Despair and let's start sharing," May 26, 2009, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10574519.

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *ibid*, p.64.

“JESUS CHRIST: How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail.
 RANDOM: cough cough
 JESUS: They shall be satisfied. How blest are those whose hearts are pure. They shall see God...
 MANDY: Speak up!
 MAN: Shh.
 BRIAN: Quiet, Mum.
 JESUS: How blest are those of gentle...
 MANDY: Well, I can't hear a thing.
 JESUS: ...spirit...
 GREGORY: Could you be quiet, please?
 JESUS: They shall have the earth...
 GREGORY: What was that?
 JESUS: ...for their possession. How blest are the...
 MR. CHEEKY: I don't know...
 JESUS: ...peace-makers...
 MAN: I think it was 'Blessed are the cheese-makers...'
 JESUS: How blest are those who...
 MAN: You hear that? Blessed are the Greek.
 GREGORY: The Greek?
 MAN: Mmm. Well, apparently, he's going to inherit the earth.
 GREGORY: Did anyone catch his name?
 MRS. BIG NOSE: Oh, it's the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh, that's nice, isn't it? I'm glad they're getting something, 'cause they have a hell of a time.”⁵³

The “civic duty” of our listening, interpretation and translation is never without a costly contest of meaning and is never total. There is always something “lost in translation,” a “kernel or element of meaning that cannot be totally translated.”⁵⁴ Sometimes this “loss” can be simply from the public mishearing or misinterpreting what it is that we’re trying to say (in *The Life of Brian*, Jesus is heard to be saying “blessed are the cheese-makers” at the expense of “peacemakers” and “the Greek” is mistaken for “the meek”). At other times, this “loss” can be exactly where we encounter change and find the possibility of newness in the public domain, the conversion of ourselves and of others. There is, in the imagery of the late Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstructionism and a global leader in the fields of literary theory and philosophy, a “loss in translation” that creates “a marriage and a child,” a “loss” that enables something new, “something different from and other than the sum of its parts.”⁵⁵ The “loss” is, in fact, what empowers something innovative and loaded with fresh potential to emerge. Derrida writes:

“[A] translation espouses the original when the two adjoined fragments, as different as they can be, complete each other so as to form a larger tongue in the course of a survival that changes them both. For the native tongue of the translator, as we have noted, is altered as well. Such, at least, is my interpretation - my translation, my ‘task of the translator.’ It is what I have called the translation contract: hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce a child.”⁵⁶

Lovisa Bergdahl insightfully adds: “What this shows us is that translation is a risky encounter whose outcome cannot be predicted and that it is quite unlikely that (so-called) secular and religious citizens will remain the same in the process.”⁵⁷

See the challenge and the potential cost of “going public”?

There is a lot more to listening, interpretation and translation than the simple communication or exchange of information, isn't there? There is within the contextual, dialogue and honest public speaking that makes (common) sense, a costly “emptying” of ourselves into the language and mindset of the other, a giving of

⁵³ Snippets of the Sermon on the Mount, *The Life of Brian*, cited at http://montypython.50webs.com/Life_of_Brian.htm.

⁵⁴ Lovisa Bergdahl, citing Walter Benjamin, *Lost in Translation: On the Untranslatable and its Ethical Implications for Religious Pluralism*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 43, No.1, 2009, p.35. For a deeper discussion of the philosophical challenges of translation see Tony Carroll, *Secularisation in Recent Social Theory*, cited at www.andmaeve.co.uk and Maeve Cooke, *Salvaging and secularising the semantic contents of religion: the limitations of Habermas's postmetaphysical proposal*, *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion*, 2006, 60:187-207.

⁵⁵ Lovisa Bergdahl, *ibid*, p.40.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, 2002 *Des Tours de Babel*, cited in Lovisa Bergdahl, *ibid*, p.40.

⁵⁷ Lovisa Bergdahl, *ibid*, p.40.

ourselves to the other. It is “*I* who gets interpreted and it is consequently *I* who *I* endanger and face losing in translation.”⁵⁸ Somewhat more positively, we could expand this thinking to mean: ‘It is *we* who gets interpreted (what we believe, the challenge and hope that we have in God, the semantic potential of our faith) and it is correspondingly *we* who *we* humbly sacrifice and surrender for the common good of the public.

Is this too high a price to pay for a shared future?

Even though this is a little complicated, I honestly think that this is incredibly close to what we encounter in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the flipped logic of the Kingdom of God that He left in the public square. The inverted logic that declares “there can only be dominion through the loss of dominion, that the fullness of life can only come by self-emptying,”⁵⁹ that there is God-given power in weakness.

The “loss” of “going public” with this inverted logic of God,⁶⁰ the price and promise of publicly speaking of God in and through self-emptying translations, leaves Brian McLaren with a host of questions that I think The Salvation Army has to grapple with:

“This is the scandal of the message of Jesus [and the scandalous peril of our ‘civic duty’ of translation]. The Kingdom of God does fail. It is weak. It is crushed. When its message of love, peace, justice and truth meets the principalities and powers of government and religion armed with spears and swords and crosses, they unleash their hate, force, manipulation, and propaganda... [and] the resistance movement known as the Kingdom of God is crushed. But what is the alternative? We really must consider this question. Could the Kingdom of God come with bigger weapons, sharper swords, more clever political organising? Could the Kingdom of God be a matter of what is often called redemptive violence? Or would that methodology corrupt the kingdom of God so it would stop being “of God” at all and instead become just another earthly (and perhaps in some sense demonic) principality or power? Perhaps the Kingdom could come with flawless, relentless, irresistible logic - a juggernaut of steamroller counter-arguments to flatten every objection. Or would that mental conquest be as dominating as military conquest, reducing the Kingdom of God to a Kingdom of coercive stridency? What if the only way for the kingdom of God to come in its true form - as a Kingdom ‘not of this world’ - is through weakness and vulnerability, sacrifice and love?”⁶¹

The King reigns from a tree. The reign of God has indeed come upon us, and its sign is not a golden throne but a wooden cross.

Lesslie Newbigin, 1986, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 127.

I see some of this scandal of servant-like “weakness and vulnerability” in how the newly-formed *International Social Justice Commission* of The Salvation Army is engaging with the United Nations. The Director, Commissioner M. Christine Macmillan stated at the last *Just Action Conference* in Dunedin, 2008, that global politics demands a “surrendering to collaboration without needing to get the credit.”⁶² Home-grown expressions of this “weakness and vulnerability” can be found in the innovative “public worship” spaces of *Recovery Church*. Major Sue Hay of the Christchurch Bridge Programme comments:

“...We offer a continuum of ever-increasing growth, designed to bring the client ever closer to their point of origin, which as Salvationists we unashamedly name as God... This graduated approach appears to facilitate a strengthening of spirituality over the course of treatment for the majority of clients. ...In some circles we might call this approach ‘rolling with resistance’! Our intent is to engage with clients not alienate them. We understand spirituality is essentially about integration and wholeness, as these definitions imply, and for us this is all wrapped up in the ‘God-stuff’. ...We may encounter a little resistance around the requirement that all residential clients attend Recovery Church, and if this is the case we reframe their concern in terms of sobriety sampling – all clients are invited to sample a variety of resources whilst with us – and Recovery Church is just one of the many resources we ask clients to sample whilst in residence.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Lovisa Bergdahl, *ibid*, p. 37. See Maeve Cook, op. cit., for a deeper exploration of the potential loss of ourselves in translation.

⁵⁹ Walter Brueggemann, 2001, *ibid*, p.98.

⁶⁰ See Phillipians 2.1-18.

⁶¹ Brian McLaren, *ibid*, p.69. See Jeffery W. Robbins (Ed), 2007, *After the Death of God* for a deeper discussion of the weakness of God and the possibilities of a weak theology.

⁶² Commissioner M. Christine Macmillan, “*Does The Army have a Future in International Affairs?*”, Transcript from a lecture given at the *Just Action Conference*, Dunedin, 2008.

⁶³ Major Sue Hay, “*Exploring the God Stuff*,” notes from presentation given in Melbourne, April, 2010.

The image Jesus leaves of Himself in the public domain is that of a Servant King, who in place of ruling with a shield and a sword, serves with the hospitality of a table and a towel. Paul Trebilco, Professor of Theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Otago, finds a similar *public weakening* in the cross-centeredness of Paul (1 Corinthians 1.18-25):

“The wisdom of the world operates on one set of principles - valuing the wisdom of the wise and the wisdom of the debater, and demanding signs. By contrast, the Gospel is of an entirely different order and operates from a quite different set of fundamental values; the Gospel is about the weakness of God, seen in the cross, which is yet the power of God for salvation.”

He continues:

“Hence the Gospel as public truth, the Gospel in the public sphere, is not an easy word to speak, for it goes against the grain, and operates from a different wisdom, in the light of which human wisdom is shown to be folly... How then do we speak of this wisdom of the cross in the public sphere?”

There is a deep challenge in this questioning, isn't there? Is it possible to “go public” in the postmodern and “para-secular,” “post-secular” context of Aotearoa New Zealand with the weakening of the cross? Is there a place for powerlessness when encountering and speaking to governing powers? What could that look like? Would it challenge how we engage with and see the public domain? Would it change how we thought of ourselves?

A HOLY JOKE... THE PUBLIC TRANSLATORS OF THE SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army has a long history of public engagement and innovative, missional translation. We were, in the descriptive imagery of Catherine and William Booth, our founders, a movement “born in the open air.”⁶⁴ We were born *on* the streets, a description of our start that causes me to think of the opening credits of *Mr Bean* where a disorientated Rowan Atkinson is literally dropped onto the street from a heavenly shaft of light. *Insane*, a more contemporary history of The Salvation Army, claims that we were born “*of* the back streets,”⁶⁵ a slightly different description of our start that I think speaks more clearly of our commitment to being something “*for*” the people, “*with*” the people and “*of*” the people, a description that speaks of our earliest and enduring commitment to public translation.

The Salvation Army we know in this new millennium stems from a dialectical and historical collision of the semantic potential of faith, the creative and daring actions of early Salvationists, and the social context of the community which hosted them. The name of *The Salvation Army*, its forms of governance, edifices, military dress, language, insignia, music, how it located itself on the streets and not in the sanctuary of a chapel, its social action, social programmes, symbols and triumphant theology evolved from within the existing discourses of colonial imperialism and from its own pioneering commitment to cultural adaptation, innovation and to translating the God of the Scriptures into the public concerns of “soup, soap and salvation,” what William Booth called a “new translation of the Bible into the hearts and conduct of living men and women.” Speaking of a new revision of the Bible, Booth commented to the *War Cry* of 1885: “It is no use making correct translations of words if we cannot get the words translated into life.”⁶⁶

O boundless salvation! Deep ocean of love,
O fullness of mercy, Christ brought from
above,
The whole world redeeming, so rich and so
free,
Now flowing for all men, now flowing for all
men,
Now flowing for all men, come, roll over me!
General William Booth.

Commissioner Phil Needham of The Salvation Army notes that:

“...the entire movement evolved as a church for the poor and working classes, first in England and then in other countries as well, and that it consequently adapted its language, rituals and methods to the understanding and character of that culture.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See Cyril R. Bradwell, 1983, *Fight the Good Fight*, p.39. For an in-depth history of The Salvation Army see Roy Hattersley 1999, *Blood and Fire: William and Catherine Booth and their Salvation Army*.

⁶⁵ See Nelson Munn and David Collinson, 2007, *Insane: the stories of crazy salvos who changed the world*, p.8.

⁶⁶ Cyril Barnes, 1975, *Words of William Booth*, p.9, cited at http://www1.salvationarmy.org.uk/uki/www_uki.nsf/vw-sublinks/ACF1A7112B22597F802574F0005C54FD?openDocument.

⁶⁷ Commissioner Phil Needham, 1987, *Community in Mission - A Salvationist Ecclesiology*, p.71.

Somewhat controversially, Major Geoff Ryan claims that the earliest expressions of our “civic duty” of interpretation and translation looked and sounded like the prophetic joking of a “court jester.” We were the serious “joke of God,” ridiculed *in* and ridiculing *of* a public domain that had limited itself to the constraints of what the public expected had always been and thought had to always be. If we can get past the initial discord of this concept (and some of how Major Ryan frames the jesting in overtly confrontational and military tones), I think there is within this image of the “court jester,” the critical and energising serious “joke of God,” a playful metaphor that has considerable semantic potential and could even help The Salvation Army to (re)engage the postmodern public domain today with the powerful *weakening* of the cross.

A short history lesson of serious jesting from Mike Frost:

“The professional jester was a unique member of the royal court. He was given license to utter the unutterable, to speak the word no court attendant would dare speak. So naturally, [the jester] accrued great power, being able too influence policy and direct the affairs of the kingdom by highlighting the monarch’s folly. It was de facto power, but power, nevertheless. When the king became self-absorbed and out of touch with his own convictions..., it was the fool who invariably was able to reframe his perceptions and find another way of seeing the situation. Of course, the fool managed such a feat by cloaking his message in the warmth of wit and laughter.”⁶⁸

See something of The Salvation Army in that history?

Major Ryan comments:

“The Salvation Army is nothing if not a profound mystery and one of the Lord’s sublimest jokes on a rather humorless world. We make much of the idea that historically The Salvation Army suited the times in which it was created. The British Empire was at its zenith, militarism was in vogue, brass bands were all the rage and war was an integral part of public life... I contend that, in reality, things were nothing like what we imagined they were in the beginning. We were no more ‘relevant’ as a form of Christian Church then than we are today.”

He continues, and I think this is critical to seeing how and where we could incarnate and speak of the semantic potential of our peculiarity in the public sphere:

“We wedded dance hall revelry to scriptural holiness, brought theatre into the pews, soiled the perfumed doilies of Victorian spinsters with the mud of the streets and the stench of the gin palaces, and ordained wide-eyed fanatics as ministers of the Gospel. We made the Church into a circus (we even spoke in tongues and healed people) and fused a Christian worldview onto the blood and gore of the battlefield. All this in Victoria England! We quote great men of the age who commended our work - but how many of them joined us? It was Spurgeon who tongue-lashed Booth for ‘playing soldiers’ and ridiculed this madman and his rag-tag army. We have to face the facts. We were a bad joke for everyone concerned. The difference, however, is that we were - and are - God’s joke... There is truth in every jest, it is said, and at the back of this divine jest known as The Salvation Army, is a truth that transcends culture and era, a steely reality that is terrifying in its design and implications.”⁶⁹

Early Salvationists were, in the *weakening* imagery of the cross, “fools for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4.10), a scandalously *foolish*-looking and sounding movement that dared to speak publicly *with, for, and of* the marginalised voiceless. Speaking at the Crown Hotel in 1883, Catherine Booth - in front of a crowd of men and women in power - openly criticised the state and declared that the “special” public place of Salvationists was with:

You cannot improve the future without disturbing the present.

Catherine Booth.

Fools do often prove prophets.

William Shakespeare.

Folly is a potent form of prophecy because it allows us to see ourselves in a clearer light and prevents us from giving fallible human institutions the honour they are not due.

Donald Capps, cited in Mike Frost, 2007, Jesus the Fool.

⁶⁸ Michael Frost, 1994, *Jesus the Fool*, p.32. Similarly, in *The Irresistible Revolution* (2006), Shane Claiborne calls for the church to be a community of theological pranksters.

⁶⁹ Geoff Ryan, 2001, *ibid*, p.123-124.

“...the dangerous classes... The inability of the authorities to cope with the ruffianly element even in the metropolis, the proposed addition of 500 to the police force, the attempt to blow up one of the Government offices, and the escape of offenders, together with the continual discovery of plots, and outbursts of ruffianism vented on others, besides members of The Salvation Army, ought to awake everybody to the necessity for something being done.”⁷⁰

The “Army Mother” next shifted the interest and tone of the speech to a jester-like public poke at the self-absorbed genteel, a public chastising of the community “rulers” who were choosing not to relate to or even “see” the poor:

“Oh that we could get our rulers to look on these multitudes - our ministers, our philanthropists, our intelligent Christian gentlemen and merchants! They could not sit still in indifference. They would recognize the necessity for operating upon, and at any rate trying to civilise this outlying mass of heathenism, lawlessness and vices.”⁷¹

William Booth continued this public jesting with *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) and with even more comic-like witticism provoked the public to a new kind of compassionate “seeing” of the poor:

“To very many even of those who live in London it may be news that there are so many hundreds who sleep out of doors every night. There are comparatively few who stir after mid-night, and when we are snugly tucked into our own beds we are apt to forget the multitude outside in the rain and the storm who are shivering the long hours through on the hard stone seats in the open or under the arches of the railway. These homeless, hungry people are, however there, but being broken-spirited folk for the most part they seldom make their voices audible in the ears of their neighbours. Now and again, however, a harsh cry from the depths is heard for a moment, jarring rudely on the ear and then all is still. The articulate classes speak as seldom as Balaam’s ass.”⁷²

He goes on, and with a moving translation of Genesis 1.27, where the image of God is democratised in everyone, William Booth challenges the public to imagine the poor as our “brothers and sisters,” to think of the poverty of our relations (not only the scarcity of resources) and of our relational responsibilities (a prophetic countering that flies in the face of how the concept of the image of God is today commonly translated into personal and individualised rights):

“The social problem presents itself before us whenever a hungry, dirty and ragged man stands at our door asking if we can give him a crust or a job. That is the social question. What are we to do with that man? He has no money in his pocket, all that he can pawn he has pawned long ago, his stomach is as empty as his purse, and the whole of the clothes upon his back would, even if sold on the best of terms, not fetch a shilling. There he stands, your brother, with sixpennyworth of rags to cover his nakedness from his fellow man and not sixpennyworth of victuals within his reach. He asks for work, which he will set to even on his empty stomach and in his ragged uniform, if so be that you will give him something for it, but his hands are idle, for no one employs him. *What are you to do with that man?* That is the great note of interrogation that confronts Society today. Not only in over-crowded England, but in newer countries beyond the sea, where Society has not yet provided the means by which the men can be put upon the land and the land be made to feed the men.”⁷³

The “great note of interrogation” that confronted the public of William Booth is still the looming social question, isn’t it?

⁷⁰ Catherine Booth, 1883, *The Salvation Army and its Relations to the State*, cited in Dennis Garland, 2004, *The Salvation Army and the State of Welfare: An Analysis of Text and Narrative*, University of Western Sydney, p.56. There is of course a danger in claiming to speak for others: our speaking on “behalf of the poor” may simply add to the silencing of their voices.

⁷¹ Catherine Booth, *ibid*, p.56.

⁷² William Booth, 1890, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, p.38.

⁷³ William Booth, 1890, *ibid*, p.99-100, *emphasis mine*. Historian Roger Green notes that William Booth embodied a complex mix of adventure and caution, freedom and limit, humour and somberness. Writing to Bramble Booth on March 16, 1877, William Booth lamented: “I wish we did not do so many silly things. I think I see a great difference between manly, natural, bold, daring action and weak, frivolous, childish comically” (Cited in Roger Green, 2005, *The Life and Ministry of William Booth*, p.132). Cyril Bradwell notes too that as “public jesters” Catherine and William Booth held a place and strong presence in the “royal courts”; they spoke openly to and sought the collaboration of people in power everywhere they went. See Cyril Bradwell, 1983, *Fight the Good Fight*, p.62-66.

Acting like public jesters, early Salvationists weren't simply speaking of the indescribable or the unutterable to governing powers. The semantic potential of our faith, the countering language and imagery of God that functions to prophetically extend *what is* with *what could be*, were deliberately converted into serious public campaigns and social activism that engaged with the drinking industry, the dehumanisation and objectification of women, gender inequity, joblessness, public health, crime, prison policy, education, indebtedness, homelessness, poverty, inhumane labour conditions, the legal age of sexual consent and inequitable trade.⁷⁴ The Salvation Army had discovered from within the "foolishness of the cross" and its jester-like "public witness" and "public worship," a rich treasury of Words with which they could help the public to have a "second look," Words with which they could help the public to "re-describe" others, reframe public issues and "re-narrate" themselves.

There is no sanctimonious long face in the Army. We are happy, and we wish others to share our joy. We know by our own experience that life is a very different thing when we have found the peace of God, and are working together with Him for the salvation of the world.

William Booth, 1890, In Darkest England and the Way Out, p. 100.

Phil Wall, in *Insane*, claims that it is exactly this history of public jesting, political campaigning and innovation that continues to fuel the imagination of emerging Neo-Salvationists:

"The Salvation Army was raised on a diet of faith-filled risk and outrageous innovation... [Stories]...of those early adventures that made such an impact upon the world and endeared the 'Salvos' to the hearts of communities around the globe. Booth's 'war on two fronts' theology and mission philosophy set a platform for Salvationists to assert, with what was almost a form of divine arrogance, that there was not one sphere of life, not a place on this planet, where injustice and ungodliness could or should be tolerated or remain unchallenged. Their tool kit was filled with courage, creativity, rigorous engagement and understanding of the issues of the day, and an insane level of imagination... A new generation of young radicals is emerging within The Salvation Army; they are creating, initiating, challenging the status quo, provoking, annoying, experimenting - demonstrating some distinctly insane behaviors, and they are feeling very much at home with the Salvos, for this is their home. The remarkable challenges of the third millennium require new conversations between men and woman of faith who are infused with the creative genius of the Divine Innovator and have the courage to ignite the ideas with the passion and sacrifice required."⁷⁵

Is this how you see The Salvation Army?

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER...

THE PRESENT DAYLIGHT WITNESS AND NIGHT TIME WORSHIP OF SALVATIONISTS

Today, even though our "strong branding" and public profile of respectability is possibly a greater danger than ridicule, I can see the (re)emergence of two public voices within The Salvation Army. There is what Walter Brueggemann calls the "daylight speaking" of social policy formation,⁷⁶ the formal and public speech-making of robust empirical evidence and social research that we hear from the "public witness" of the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit. And then there is the defiant, jester-like murmuring of what I call "night-time speaking," the *weakening* whispers of a Christ-centered "foolishness," the "public worship" of Salvationists who every day question the unreasonableness that pervades and shapes the public sphere.

The Salvation Army has to learn that in our "civic duty" of "going public" there is a complimentary connection between these two voices, a coupling that we should deliberately marry. As Walter Brueggemann explains, "daylight speaking," the formation and public proposal of new social policy:

"...will not have great staying power unless it is unaccompanied by pastoral attention to the power of unreason that pervades and often shapes our common life. I submit that it is the peculiar work of the Church to address these matters, because the Church has access to these parts of life like no one else in our society.

⁷⁴ See Cyril Bradwell, 1983, *ibid*, for how this history of innovation and public campaigning took on a distinctive New Zealand flavor. And see *Many Voices in Mission - 25 years of The Salvation Army*, 2008, for a contemporary taste of our missional translation work.

⁷⁵ Phil Wall, Forward, cited in Nelson Munn and David Collinson, 2007, *Insane: the stories of crazy salvos who changed the world*, p.xii-xiii.

⁷⁶ Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks and Thomas H. Gromme, 1986, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly, An Agenda for Ministers*, p.1-14. My image of "night-time" speaking comes from a slightly different interpretation of what Brueggemann calls "voices of the night."

That work can be done pastorally, educationally, and liturgically. Indeed, I have come to think that this unreasonable dimension of human agenda is the focus of the prophets... They did not propose policy matters, but they addressed the issues of human speech, human fear, human hope, human perception, all of which lie underneath and are determinative of social policy.”⁷⁷

See the connection?

The “day-light” policy formation of the “public witness” of The Salvation Army gets its public legitimacy and stickability from within the “night-time” murmuring of communities, including the “public worship” of Salvationists.

Think of the national drinking debate that the Law Commission is currently rushing through the public sphere.

The Commission has conceded from the start that its “day-time speaking” of policy formation will go nowhere if its not matched by a collective movement of “night-time” speakers denouncing the excessiveness and unreasonableness of our drinking culture:

“We recommend changes to the law but we are under no illusion that this will be sufficient to combat the problems outlined in [our] report. Law changes are a necessary condition for other changes to be achieved and can nudge the community in a different direction by creating an environment more conducive to less risky behavior. To bed in enduring change the need for it has to be reflected in the hearts and minds of the community and that requires an attitudinal shift and a new drinking culture. These shifts in attitude need to be based on community awareness of the risks associated with the abuse of alcohol and a willingness not to take those parts.”⁷⁸

At a Hui with the Law Commission in Otara, May 2010, the Rt. Honourable Sir Geoffrey Palmer openly granted that even though the initial interest of the government seems to be discounting of this once-in-a-generation-opportunity to shift our excessive drinking culture, change *will* come from a “clear and overwhelming”⁷⁹ public voice. The “daylight speaking” of policy formation has to hear from the “night-time speaking” of the community.

The Salvation Army is conscious of this connection and has entered the drinking debate from within its two public voices. The Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit (SPPU), in conjunction with Major Lynette Hutson, the National Manager of The Salvation Army’s Addiction Services, has committed 2009-2010 to gathering evidence on the excessiveness of our drinking culture with the intent of fueling a public debate that might shift public attitudes about harmful drinking in New Zealand. We know “social justice does not come from good intentions or noble theology but from the development of social policy which will change the distribution of power and goods, as well as access to political decision-making.”⁸⁰ We have correspondingly engaged in this formation of social policy, the aggregated-macro politicking of lobby and petition, by making a submission to the Review Committee of the Law Commission and through the research of *Excising Excess*, a specialist and technical policy paper looking at how tax can mitigate the harm of excessive drinking, *A Contest of Spirits*, a historical look at the debates that have framed how The Salvation Army sees alcohol, the alcoholic and the alcohol industry, and *Under the Influence*, a narrative record of the experiences and stories of people on our nationwide treatment programmes.⁸¹ These pieces of “daylight speaking” have attempted to translate the semantic potential of “common good,” “enough,” “freedom,” “recovery” and the “relational responsibilities of rights” into the public domain and into a new national drinking policy that the State might enact into harm-reducing and culture-shifting statutes.

Simultaneously, while SPPU has been engaging in the “day-light” speaking of policy formation, the offices of the “War Cry” and the Moral and Social Issues (Ethics) Council (MASIC), a publication and forum

⁷⁷ Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks and Thomas H. Gromme, 1986, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly, An Agenda for Ministers*, p.9.

⁷⁸ *ALCOHOL IN OUR LIVES: CURBING THE HARM*, A Report on the Review of the Regulatory Framework for the Sale and Supply of Liquor, Law Commission, April 2010, REPORT 114, p.10.

⁷⁹ The Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Palmer, speaking at a release of the Law Commission’s Report in Otara, South Auckland, May 5th, 2010.

⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks and Thomas H. Gromme, 1986, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly, An Agenda for Ministers*, p.14.

⁸¹ Publications of SPPU can be downloaded from www.salvationarmy.org.nz.

charged with fueling the countercultural imagination of Salvationists, were busy scripting alcohol-related pieces in the “War Cry” and publishing a MASIC “Talk Sheet”⁸² that have explored the contemporary semantic potential of our distinctive positioning toward drink, the problematic drinker and the drinking industry. Both the “Talk Sheet” and the “War Cry” communicated some of our own history, where the current public debates might go and how Salvationists could themselves be activists of creative alcohol-free alternatives and a “positive influence where [they] live through engagement with: MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, LOCAL RETAILERS, LICENSING TRUSTS, BROADCASTING AUTHORITIES, ADVERTISING REGULATORS.”⁸³ There is no mistaking the intent of these publications; they were both designed to help Salvationists start new conversations at the dinner table, on the internet, with neighbours, in places of recreation, study, work and worship, the debunking murmurs of “night-time” speaking that publicly call into question the power of “unreasonableness” that lies behind the excessiveness of our drinking culture and the commonly held (mis)understandings that might impede a shift in the national direction of our alcohol policy. If these conversations, the individuated politicking of “fighting talk”⁸⁴, continue to expand into schools, corps/churches, businesses, community boards, offices, town halls, iwi, factories, neighbourhoods, and sports clubs, then the “day-time” speech-making of policy formation advocating a new national alcohol policy will get the legitimation and moral propping it needs to be adopted in the public sphere.

Warm and passionate words are not enough. Strategies, visions, programmes and policies are not enough, however well articulated and prepared. We live in a torrent of words and a mountain of reports. Our times cry out for a renewed and revitalised political will, integrating personal and social responsibility in order to build a just and fair society for all. I believe we need a fundamental change of mindset in the way we value people, and in the way we see our individual responsibilities toward them

Lyn Campbell QSM, cited in Ruth Porter ED., 2007, Pursuing Social Justice in New Zealand, p. 12.

See the connection now? See the possibilities?

The public drinking debate continues, and in the imagery of the Law Commission is fast becoming a “...proxy for a broad debate about the moral and physical well-being of the nation.”⁸⁵

I’m a hopeless optimist. I see something of deep significance for The Salvation Army in this “marriage” of our voices. I sense that we’re (re)learning to be a public movement, a countercultural movement of “day-time” and “night-time” speakers, formal “specialists” of alternative policy formation and “foolish, *weakening* jesters” of a counter-script that can help re-describe ourselves and re-narrate something of the neighbourhoods we share with others. The slogan of “We’re in this together” is not only a clever “branding” ploy to increase the level of our donor support; it is exactly how The Salvation Army must today “go public” with its “public witness” and “public worship.”

THE (NOT-SO) LAST WORD

The Salvation Army faces a new public with even newer questions. If we hope to engage with the emerging “para-secular”, “post-secular” public, we will have to (re)learn to listen, and then from within our heritage of creativity and jester-like humour, humbly and courageously “gift” some of the semantic treasury of our faith to a language that can critically connect with *what already is* in the public domain, while at the same time energising, nursing and resourcing the possibility of newness. The challenge and hope of speaking a self-emptying translation of the “foolish wisdom” of Christ-crucified into the public square.

⁸² The “Talk Sheet” on the drinking debate is entitled “Abstinence from Alcohol: WHAT ABOUT AN OCCASIONAL DRINK?”, April, 2010, and is downloadable from www.salvationarmy.org.nz, search for keyword ‘Talk Sheet.’

⁸³ MASIC “Talk Sheet”, *ibid*, CAPITALS in original.

⁸⁴ See Nock Crossley, 2002, *Making Sense of Social Movements* and Scott, James, 1985, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

⁸⁵ The Law Commission, *ibid*, p.37.

TAKEAWAYS TO TRAVEL FURTHER WITH...

1. Do you see God in the public domain? Where? Who is speaking of God and how? What do you make of the scholarly turn toward religion? How and where do you think faith can resource the public sphere today? What do you make of Walter Brueggemann's imagery of Scripture as enabling a "second look"?
2. What do you make of Walter Brueggemann's imagery of Scripture as enabling a "second look"?
3. Do you think the church has a "civic duty" to listen, interpret, and translation? Do you see the difference between relevancy and revelation?
4. Have you ever considered that what we "lose" in translation could, in fact, be where we find the possibility of innovation and newness?
5. Do you experience God as a God of dialogue or monologue? How is the public sphere prone to silencing difference? Have you ever experienced the church being "library-like" and silencing difference?
6. Do you see the challenge that there is in being "fools for Christ" in the public domain? Is that something that energises you, scares you or simply turns you off? What do you make of Major Geoff Ryan's metaphor of The Salvation Army as the "bad joke of God"? What do you think of the practice of a self-emptying and *weakening* theology?
7. The following is a short glossary of words that I think have continuity with the semantic potential of our faith and at the same time continue to have imaginative and political currency in the public domain. I invite you to explore these words (Google them online if you're not sure of what they mean), play with them in your flat, at church, from the pulpit, in small groups, at the dinner table, at university, at work, in worship, and see how these bridge-building words might help re-narrate where you're at:

Advantage/Disadvantage

Benefit/Dividend

Common Good/Entitlement/Self-interest

Community/Communitas

Distribution/Economic Growth

Embrace/Exclusion

Enough/Excess

Good/Right

Injustice/Justice/Just-us

Love

Independence/Interdependence

Poverty of Relationships/Poverty of Wealth

Reciprocity/Welfare

Relational Responsibilities/Individual Rights

Rest/Sabbath/Scarcity

Vocation/Service/Work.