

An Australian Anglican public theology approach to the of the *age of responsibility* issue.

Abstract

This paper develops an Australian Anglican approach to public theology and applies it to the *age of responsibility* issue. Some contemporary voices are calling for the age at which a child may be incarcerated for a crime to rise from ten to fourteen years, often noting that the current policy vastly and disproportionately affects Indigenous children. The paper begins by offering an account of the historical development of public theology, from the gospels to the contemporary Australian context. The summary of the history and contemporary landscapes lead us to distil three central purposes for contemporary Christian public theology, namely: to be prophetic, to take Christianity into contemporary situations, and to cleave back a seat at the table for Christian voices in matters of cultural and moral importance. Many Indigenous and socially engaged organisations, as well as the United Nations are already seeking an increase in the age of criminal responsibility from ten to fourteen years old. We note that Indigenous leadership has repeatedly called for an increase in the *age of responsibility* but have not, to date, received whole-hearted support of the wider Australian Anglican Communion. This paper proposes the use of the *Anglican five marks of mission* that were developed by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984, with membership from a range of nations and traditions. These will serve as a structure around which the Australian church might meet the purposes of a contemporary public theology (above): to be prophetic, the speak into contemporary situations, and for Christians to have a place in the national discussion. This paper argues, that while Australian Anglicanism, and indeed even approaches to public theology, show within them elements of fracture and sectarianism, this most critical issue of the treatment of vulnerable children holds an internal logic so strong that it could unite the church in seeking justice. It is hard to imagine an issue that evokes so many of the churches' foundational missional calls: to witness to Christ's reconciling love, to build transforming communities, to stand in solidarity with those in need, to challenge violence and work for reconciliation, and to protect and renew life.

Introduction

This paper is presented in three sections. The first proposes an account of the nature, history, and purpose of public theology, noting its development over time. Discussion of the theology and practice of public theology in Australia is offered, followed by an exploration of its polarised nature and contemporary challenges. To conclude the first section, the problematics of a nuanced contemporary public theology landscape will be examined.

Section two analyses and evaluates the contemporary issue of the *age of responsibility*, highlighting its broader links to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and the difficulty for the church, and Australia, in addressing issues related to Indigenous injustice.

Section three applies the criteria for effective public theology developed in the first section, to the issue of the *age of responsibility*. By linking these criteria, with a specifically Australian Anglican framework—the five marks of mission, the paper offers practical points of intersection between Anglican missiology and the *age of responsibility* concerns. The discussion outlines a position to commend to the public, names why the Australian Anglican church is in a potentially excellent position to offer it, and presents a coherent strategy to address the *age of responsibility* issue practically in the pews, and in civic discourse.

Section 1: **An account of the history, nature and purpose of public theology**

The nature of public theology through its development

Christianity was a religion for the oppressed and occupied, so it needed to provide an account for itself from inception. It suspiciously demanded significant commitment from its adherents, which was problematic for some imperial observers and stoked conflict with Rome, leading to the Christian persecutions of the first centuries. Historically there were different views in how Christianity ought to be observed, which is helpful to remember when reflecting on modern schisms (e.g. [Galatians 5.2](#)).

Therefore, in defence of Christianity's right to exist from its earliest times, adherents have been engaging in political theology in the centre of civic life ([Acts 17.16-24](#)). Their defence of the faith was always contextual and located in their epoch and culture(s) so as to provide intelligible arguments to both the Christian, as well as potential Roman audiences

([Acts 17.22-23](#)). Even portions of scripture are arguably apologetic, to defend Christians against the charges of subversion. The author of Luke-Acts is at pains to demonstrate the innocence of Christians in both (wise) Roman and (vexatious) Jewish courts.

The writings emphasised that Rome found no fault in the innocent accused, such as Jesus before Pilate ([Luke 23:14-15](#)), and Paul before Gallio ([Acts 18.12-17](#)): “This emphasis on the innocence of accused Christians probably has an apologetic purpose. Luke may have wished to defend the Christian movement against charges that it was subversive to the Roman government”¹.

In antiquity, great apologists of the church were shrewd in their appeals and use of contemporary culture to defend Christianity against charges, usually stemming from this perceived dichotomy of loyalty to their faith or the empire. Tertullian turned the tables on the charges against Christians and deftly noted the ineffectiveness of the Roman gods who, far from safeguarding Caesar, required *his* protection of their idols and chattels. He argued that if they had any power whatsoever, they would not need Caesars’ protection. If these gods indeed had power to act, let them show it; “[f]or they really would begin by protecting their own statues and images and temples; which, I take it, are really kept safe by the soldiers of the Caesars on duty”².

Christians were, often by necessity, prominent defenders of their faith and deeply concerned with how that lived-faith worked out internally; through dogmatics and creeds, and externally through apologetic forays. Indeed, in the hands of apologists like Martyr, the great love of logic in the Greco-Roman world was weaponised to insist on attentive judgements that would not paradoxically ensnare the judge in any potential wrongdoing against Christian defendants. Justin Martyr notes:

So, lest in place of those who are habitually ignorant of our affairs we should ourselves become liable for the punishment of whatsoever sins they commit in their blindness, it is our task to let all inspect our life and our teachings; but it is your task (as reason proves) to listen and to show yourselves good judges. For there will be no excuse before God, if once you have learnt these things, you do not do what is right.³

Most public theology took this form in the first centuries, and Tom Frame rightly notes a reluctance of Christians of this era to be directly or publicly engaged in matters of state:

¹ Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 271.

² Tertullian and Felix Minucius, "Chapters XXVII to XXX from Apologeticus," in *Apology (&) de Spectaculis* (London: William Heinemann Publishing, 1966), 140.

³ Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (OUP Oxford, 2009), 85.

The most popular theme in Christian social thinking until the latter part of the third century was the church's obligation to remain at a distance from the government and its instrumentalities because the church was a prophetic community whose own life reflected God's character and divine denunciation of tyranny.⁴

However, this is not necessarily a reflection of some apostolic truth that the modern church has conveniently forgotten, so much as the political reality of a subjugated people. Public theology under a repressive and ruthless rule was only regularly evidenced in the Roman world through the apologetics in defence of Christianity's right to life. For Christians to have offered much more than this, meant death. Influence was limited:

The New Testament is addressed to a politically powerless minority in the Roman Empire. Its overly political material therefore largely concerns the responsibility of citizens and subjects who, though they might occasionally hope to impress the governing authorities by prophetic witness (Matt 10:18), have no ordinary means of political influence⁵.

Christianity did not have to fight for life indefinitely. Emperor Constantine protected Christians during his reign from 324CE and converted to Christianity on his deathbed in 337CE. The public theology that followed was interwoven and imagined through the lens of victorious statecraft as Raymond Plant notes:

The link between the universal and the particular- God/ Christ with the Roman Empire- with a theology of history could hardly be closer. God became incarnate during the Roman Empire and that Empire (which was crucial to the achievement in Christ's atoning work in the crucifixion) then becomes, transcendentally, the instrument whereby the whole world is redeemed by the message of Christ.⁶

Christianity spread and came to become the state religion of most parts of western civilisation by the Middle Ages. The Catholic church was so enmeshed in the rule of law, and international politics, that it is more difficult to pull one emblematic branch of *public theology* from the vast forest of church pronouncements. Almost all theology was public and in the service of the church. The lives of regular subjects of western kingdoms of the Middle Ages were completely dominated by the public theology of the Roman church. Richard Southern explains the scope of the power of the Middle Ages church and pontiff like this:

⁴ Thomas R Frame, *Church and state: Australia's imaginary wall* (UNSW Press, 2006), 20.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, "Reading the Bible Politically," in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology* (Cambridge Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 31.

⁶ Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Melbourne VIC: Cambridge university press, 2001), 49.

The spiritual sword was wielded directly [by the church], the secular was wielded through the agency of kings and princes. This indirect control however implied no independent power in the agents who wielded it, no weakening in the controlling power of the pope; it was simply a convenience, and expression of inferiority of the secular to spiritual power.⁷

Later in western Christendom, during the reformation(s), questions of central importance to the church were also critical and impactful for the common adherent (read almost all persons in the west). Public theology was distinctively relevant to the worshiping and lived reality of the common person. Take for example the reformation catch cry of *sola scriptura*. As Alister McGrath notes, there were several important facets to the principle of *sola scriptura* including that; "...the reformers insisted that the authority of popes, councils, and theologians is subordinate to that of Scripture".⁸ This effectively precipitated the end of the (above) situation of absolute papal authority, as well as pastorally problematic and theologically dubious practices such as indulgences, which had a significant, and as was understood in that time an *eternal* impact on the lives and souls of everyday Christians. McGrath further illuminates the centrality of the Word over human authority for reformers in the doctrine of *sola scriptura* when he clarified that they "...argued that authority within the churches does not derive from the status of the office bearer, but from the Word of God which the office bearer serves".⁹ No priest, council or bishop was above things that might be proven by scripture, since all was subordinate to it. Jensen explains:

For them [the reformers], interpreting the Scriptures was a communal endeavour of the Church, not only within the scholarly community of a particular time, but of the universal Church of all times and ages.¹⁰

The public theology of the reformation(s) had arguable theological, religious and psychological significance to all members of western Christian societies. During the Enlightenment however, the universality of impact of public theology of the Middle Ages was replaced with a diminishing importance of theological utterances or deliberations. Richard Benne summarises in this way:

The Enlightenment, in part reacting to warring religions and in part motivated by the rise in science and the recovery of classical learning, put forth the argument that humans have finally come of age, that is, they have been

⁷ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Middlesex England: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, 1985), 49.

⁸ Alister E. McGrath, "The Return to the Bible," in *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th edition, (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 99.

⁹ McGrath, "The Return to the Bible," 99.

¹⁰ Alexander Jensen, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 69.

freed from the tutelage of religion and given tools of knowing that are far more reliable than those offered by religion.¹¹

With the rise of reason and science, theology, religion and faith were increasingly envisioned to be on the periphery of intellectual life. Public theology in this atmosphere was (and is) often by stealth, or unarticulated in order to be palatable to a suspicious broader public. Most contemporary societies that are deeply rooted in this enlightenment thinking find faith based public reasoning in the civic or political domains abhorrent, be it to a lesser (e.g. United States of America) or greater (e.g. French: *Cinquième République*) extent. However, to imagine that for Christians there is a possibility to remove their faith when engaging in civic life is a misunderstanding of the breadth of the faith experience and its impact on the moral outlook, as Sarah Bachelard explains;

Moral thought is not a separate department of thought, disassociated from other modes of perception and being, which focuses only on the particular questions we call ethical. It arises rather out of the whole life of discipleship and the formation of one's being in the likeness of Christ. Inside a framework, then, the relationship between transformation of self and moral thought is integral.¹²

Bachelard argues that focused responses are required as an outworking of the responsibility that is deeply connected to the moral life. It is not enough to know there is an issue of moral concern. Instead there is a demand on the Christian to also respond, which, as we will note later, includes a call for genuine repentance.

The successful and much lauded theology at the heart of the civil rights moment in the United States is remembered as a triumph of Church in the public square, with a confident voice for Godly justice. However, the nature of public theology in the middle of the nineteenth century is perhaps only (near) universally acknowledged by Christians in the rear-view mirror, as many churches were in fact complicit with the racist agendas of the day. Benne champions the work of the civil rights movements of the late 50s and 60s, offering the summary:

The black churches, aided by a number of white denominations, and led by a Black Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King Jr., exerted great political pressure to get rid of

¹¹ Robert Benne, *Good ways and bad ways to think about religion and politics* (Cambridge UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 65.

¹² Sarah Bachelard, "Christian ethics in a secular society: moral understanding and conversion of life [Paper in: *Public But Not Official: Anglican Contributions to Australian Life.*]," *St Mark's Review*, no. 203 (2007): 83.

racist laws and practices and to bestow long-denied civil rights to minority blacks.¹³

The clumsiness of Benne's expression aside, he is right to note that diverse backgrounds of activists were probably needed to enact the cultural change aided by public theology. We can imagine that if it were not for Christians from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, churches, and denominations, the civil rights moment would not have been as successful as it was, notwithstanding the continued economic and power imbalance inherent in American society today.

It must be noted at this point, that achieving this consensus of missional purpose around a common public theology is exceedingly difficult since, within and between protestant denominations, the interpretation of what it means to "be" a Christian varies widely. Sandra Joireman explains this through the emblem of the use of scripture:

For example, should the whole Bible be viewed as equally authoritative for the life and theology of the church (Reformed, Lutheran)? Or should the New Testament be the hermeneutic lenses through which the rest of scripture is interpreted (Anabaptist)? Should individuals be encouraged to confidently interpret the Bible on their own (Pentecostal)? No Christian tradition would deny the importance of scripture, but it is treated differently in each.¹⁴

The contemporary and polarised nature of public theology in Australia

Public theology for Australia is contextual by definition, since every location has its own unique set of cultural and political circumstances. Australian public theology, and public theologians, are not homogenous and easily defined, but it is nonetheless desirable to encourage truly local public theology. It is important that public theology as a discipline continues to have a local expression to support, challenge, name, and problematise the landscape of this, and any other, unique culture as it shifts. There is no use for Australian public theologians and people of good conscience to wait for external international voices to invite Australian Christians to respond in an exemplary manner to the public challenges of our times. In fact, there is a challenge to justice—as Clive Pearson notes—when theology is imported, and local theology is sidelined:

For those of us who reside on the margins and are often out of sight and out of hearing of the more powerful theological

¹³ Benne, *Good ways and bad ways to think about religion and politics*, 3.

¹⁴ Sandra Joireman, *Church, State and Citizen. Christian Approaches to Political Engagement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

locations of this world, the spectre of what might be is never far removed. The language of a public theology could in turn become the vehicle of exclusion. The right words and sentiments are expressed, but they have been once again shaped almost exclusively in locations and contexts other than our own.¹⁵

While acknowledging this, Australian Anglicans must know that they have the capacity to be effective public theologians for this culture at this time- empowered with the knowledge that only Australians can speak to our local realities with authority. Having said this, the Anglican Church of Australia, at least as much as any other denomination, holds within it tensions of both liberal and conservative viewpoints. Reaching consensus is notoriously difficult as the most recent Primate election has shown.¹⁶ However, when there is sufficient consensus on an issue, the Anglican church may yet have the numerical capacity to speak with some impact into public discourse, as Frame notes:

The 2006 national census revealed that the Anglican proportion of the Australian population was 18.7 per cent, down from 40.3 per cent at the time of federation in 1901. For me, the proportion of decline was not the startling figure. I was astonished to learn that 3.7 million Australians still declared affiliation with the Anglican Church.¹⁷

We have noted that from the very inception and throughout the ages, the nature of Christian public theology has morphed as civic needs have shifted: from apologetics tucked into the coat pockets of scripture, to the state religion of Rome, the Middle Ages and reformation(s), the enlightenment, and more recently the public solidarity with and acknowledgement of, the full humanity of all Americans regardless of their colour in 1960s United States. In contemporary Australia we see a polarised picture of Christian public theology, but it is argued here in the strongest terms that Australians have a moral duty to engage in the matter of our culture(s) and time(s) with integrity and courage, since citizens of no other place or time are wholly equipped to undertake this spiritual and intellectual heavy lifting for us.

The problematic of carefully nuanced public theology in 2020

The nature of any genuinely *public* theology in Australia in 2020 worries some theologians, who like little of what they see when overtly Christian voices contribute to wider social debates and contemporary

¹⁵ Clive Pearson, "The Quest for a Glocal Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* (2007): 151.

¹⁶ John Sandeman, "A sudden Vacancy and the top of the Anglicans," *Eternity*, November 27th 2019.

¹⁷ Tom Frame, "Editorial," *St Mark's Review* (2007): 33.

discourse. Francis Beckwith cautions that "...Christians who uncritically look to Scripture for guidance in politics run the risk of treating the church at one point in its history (usually the first century) as the norm for the church's political involvement for all of history".¹⁸ Scott Cowdell claims both right and left wing, conservative and liberal, are guilty of the same worldliness that sees them trapped into modern culture without offering a truly compelling Christian counterview:

Hence both liberal and conservative wings of Christianity today can be understood to share much of the wider cultural *Zeitgeist*, aping its methods, agendas and even enthusiasm. If none of this is for you, however, then there is a range of more mainstream theological and ecclesial options to the Left and the Right of a centre occupied by the kind of Christianity that 'public theology' tries to name.¹⁹

However, while there is great discomfort with many of the views publicly uttered by contemporary Christians, their right and need to pronounce them will not be diminished by calls for calmer and more theologically nuanced discussion. Instead the moderate and less excitable voices must take their place in the public domain and be both clear and persuasive in their advocacy.

Otherwise we abandon the Australian public theology landscape exclusively to the most extreme fundamentalist views, those that effortlessly generate the most media and cultural attention through outrage-stoking. The somewhat simplistic retelling of the success of civil rights public theology is appealing, not only because the project was successful, but also because it names the need for a breadth of Christian voices to find their faith expressed in a unified theological position. This does not mean avoiding outrage or a dumbing-down of a public theological position, but rather for an absolute clarity of moral purpose which will, highly likely in time, attract more voices to the fray.

We erroneously imagine as Christians who are part of the complexity of contemporary society, that we will naturally see injustice as it is brought to our attention, as though all great victories such as the civil rights movement were self-evidently meritorious to all Christians at all times. The truth places the onus much more squarely on the contemporary Christian in their discernment of the need for engagement in public theology, since issues are latterly brought to our attention more often by algorithms than by other means. Delivered to our inbox or newsfeed not because they are challenging or newsworthy, not because they raise moral questions, but because they look like things we have read before as Kelly McBride explains:

¹⁸ Francis Beckwith, *Politics for Christians. Statecraft as Soulcraft*. (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 34.

¹⁹ Scott Cowdell, "What is Public Theology," *St Mark's Review* (2009): 62.

If you look at the research on how people get their news now: you often hear this phrase: ‘If news is important, news will find me’ – particularly for millennials. But behind that statement is something really important: if news is going to find you, it’s going to find you because of an algorithm.²⁰

While there may be innumerable purposes for public theology, this paper will limit discussion to three key purposes that it has fulfilled at different times: to be prophetic in the contemporary culture, to encourage productive Christian engagement on matters of local and national importance, and to cleave back a space for Christians at the table of civic discussion.

To be prophetic

In prophetic public utterance, occasionally consensus may be forged. For example, it is hard to imagine that a mostly white and affluent Episcopalian congregation had the same level of commitment to the civil rights movement as a majority black Baptist congregation in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. But in the naming of racist injustice in public—with confidence in the supporting theology—Martin Luther King Jr., and other prophets, were able to garner a good level of Christian consensus around the matter; eventually making the status quo spiritually intolerable.

If the wider public still look to Christianity at all on matters of collective concern, it is to hear people of conviction who have integrity in their world view. These are people who are not only willing to reimagine the future, but are willing to face a past that, in Australia’s case, begins with exposing some well-rehearsed forgetting of violence, systematic oppression and racism. Which, as Mark McKenna explains, is some of our earliest work as the Australian nation:

Once the colonies federated on 1 January 1901 and the framework for the writing of the national history was in place, the desire to forget the violence of the frontier, or to at least dismiss it as an inevitable by-product of a far greater good, became stronger.²¹

In the church we seek prophetic voices to amplify our sense of God’s outworking, to name difficult truths or to shake us into new realisations. This is surely the most vital work of public theology in the contemporary context. Lorenzen wisely asks;

²⁰ Kelly McBride, "Strictly algorithm: how news finds people in the Facebook and Twitter age," *The Gaurdian* 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/10/journalism-democracy-algorithms-facebook-google-twitter>.

²¹ Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfella's Point- An Australian History of Place* (Sydney NSW: University of NSW Press, 2002), 63.

Is not this what we long for in a church and in the world- men and women who wisely discern truth, who fearlessly speak truth to power and who courageously call for justice in the church and in the world?²²

To take theology into contemporary situations

There seems little doubt that those concerned with the production of public theology, often imagine this as an end itself. Indeed, to complicate matters further “there is much debate about the character and remit of ‘public theology; as a sub-discipline of theology”.²³ This public theology work is important, precisely because it has outworkings in genuinely ‘public’ expressions of theology. The newness of public theology, as a specific theology sub-discipline occupies the minds of those engaged specifically in ‘beating out the boundaries’ of its academic remit. As Cowdell vociferously explains:

A new constellation has appeared in the theological firmament. Alongside now-familiar galaxies discovered in the last half-century, such as political, feminist and liberation theologies, and the bright stars of more recently catalogued, like post-colonial theology or radical orthodoxy, we now have something called ‘public theology’.²⁴

For the rest of us, the practical application of public theology, is a modern academic extension of a demonstrably older set of Christian work—as we have seen is evidenced even as far back as Luke-Acts’. Tom Frame, when trying to provide some bones for a contemporary definition of public theology notes the similarity in his own view with that of Professor Robin Hill of the University of Kent:

We share a belief that the focus of public theology is quite simply public policy and that the objective of public theology is to inform and influence public policy in the direction of the Kingdom of God. It is, then, a blend of reflection and advocacy.²⁵

Contemporary Australian society imagines there is an adequate instrument to address public policy and advocacy; through exercising our democratic right to vote. However, western democracies overstate the power of the ballot box to deliver governance that speaks for the constituents, and opportunities for change making. When Oliver Lockwood &

²² Thorwald Lorenzen, "Speaking Truth to Power: The Theologian as Prophet," in *Embracing Grace: the theologian's task- essays in honour of Graeme Garrett* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2009), 69.

²³ Tom Frame, "Public theology and public policy," *St Mark's Review*, no. 214 (2010): 33.

²⁴ Cowdell, "What is Public Theology," 59.

²⁵ Frame, "Public theology and public policy," 33.

Joan O'Donovan speak of the humble duty of casting a vote, they clarify some of the issue for Christians as members of the modern citizenry:

The person whose name I marked will not (chances are) get into Parliament; if she does, she will not form part of the government; and to crown it all, I know hardly the first thing about her. The self-deception of democracy is a wholly abstract one, and to bring it into contact with reality we must first read all the key terms 'people', 'choose', 'government'- as terms-of-the-art in need of extensive theological development.²⁶

Casting a vote is a minuscule contribution to our own governance, and not nearly enough response to the full social landscape for Christians, especially as issues change and evolve. For people of conscience to leave the political sphere because liberal democracy has taken care of business is morally indefensible. There will be matters of conscience one could not have anticipated, and that blunt civic instruments are not equipped to address. Theology is needed to inform the Christians who make up and engage in the public spheres. As Thorwald Lorenzen summarises:

To live up to this calling, Christian theologians cannot be lonely academics. They are intentional members of a Christian church and they serve the church, believing that only a church that is true to its being can be a creative and constructive influence in a needy world.²⁷

In order that Christians have a seat at the table

Nobody who has an interest in contemporary church dynamics will imagine that the Church speaks with one voice on *anything* related to public policy. To advocate for a public theology which contributes positively to debate in the public square, is to acknowledge that no single group can do this alone. This is why an appeal to all Christians to engage in political acts is extremely fraught, since there is "theological diversity and sometimes sharp differences of opinion within churches, even the Catholic Church, over the Christian vision of social relations and political life".²⁸ We must acknowledge that while the plurality of Christian voices, and diversity of prophetic voices may *feel* theologically right and inclusive in a Christian sense, the wider society often has no sense that one Christian group does not speak for all. Heather Thompson states her view of a bedrock truth of the Christian faith: "First, Christian theology has a central

²⁶ Joan Lockwood and Oliver O'Donovan, "Political Theology," in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2005), 250.

²⁷ Lorenzen, "Speaking Truth to Power: The Theologian as Prophet," 70.

²⁸ Frame, *Church and state: Australia's imaginary wall*, 79.

doctrine -the doctrine of sin. We know the human heart to be deceitful, corrupt, violent, and self-centred ".²⁹ +Rowan Williams former Archbishop of Canterbury, presents a vastly different narrative of the Christian experience in a public utterance:

The compassion that is shown by Jesus is something that takes us as we are and gives us freedom to ask the hardest questions; freedom to grow up, confident that at every stage of our lives we are welcomed and understood and affirmed.³⁰

It is easy to imagine how confusing Christian public theology may be for contemporary Christians, let alone anyone else. This is not a matter of taste, but a matter of significant theological wrestling. Regardless which potential voice Christians collectively wish to embody, they are now not often invited to offer their input, as Frame notes:

So often economists, political scientist, demographers, lawyers, statisticians and health care specialists are all given a place around the table while theologians are absent, and no one seems to notice or even care.³¹

One of public theology's' purposes then is of seeking a space at the table for Christian theology for those who may, by virtue of their faith and tradition, have significant insights to add to contemporary matters.

Contemporary Australian society may have decided that Christianity is not required as a voice at the Grown ups' table, but there are matters that even the democratic nation alone is entirely ill-equipped to address unmoored from a deep sense of morality. For example, Archbishop +Geoff Smith notes that far from a fallow year of inaction for Christians, this disrupted time of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests is exactly the time to speak up in support of the BLM movement; "In this year of disruptions, what better time to engage with a real and important issue that we can do something about?".³²

The interdependence of faith on politics and vice versa makes a truly 'secular' public debate on any matter impossible unless all the people of faith are restrained from being able to speak at all. Since even in their 'secular' utterings, they are speaking from a faith perspective, with incalculable impacts on their outlook, interests and convictions; "In other words, supposedly 'secular political theory is really theology in disguise'.³³ We cannot exhaustively unpack the complex history of the separation of

²⁹ Heather Thomson, "Speaking Theologically in a Suspicious World," *St Mark's Review* (2007): 91.

³⁰ Archbishop +Rowan Williams, "Dr Rowan Williams reflects on love, religion and new beginnings," *Radio Times*, January 1st, 2013.

³¹ Frame, "Public theology and public policy," 38.

³² +Geoffrey Smith, *Archbishop's Pastoral Letter* (2020), 2.

³³ William T Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Cornwall: T & T Clarke and MPG Books, 2002), 2.

church and state here, but it is worth noting the impulse in contemporary Australia to remove overtly religious discussion from the public sphere, as if that were providing an impartial (read fairer) arena in which to contest ideas. But as William Cavanaugh notes:

The exclusion of Christian theological discourse from the putative public forum is done in the name of a secular neutrality which in fact marginalises the body of Christ in favour of an imagined community, a false public body, centred in the state.³⁴

Lastly, when we talk about a rationale for a seat at the table for the church, we must approach the task with great humility, since at some points in our nation's history, Christians have exerted more influence but been found morally wanting in exercising our privileged voice. For example, what Dominic O'Sullivan names as a failure of the Roman Catholic church in Australia is one that can be widened to include the failure of the Anglican church too:

In the twentieth century it failed to resist comprehensively the break-up of indigenous families, and in the nineteenth century its failures served colonising and imperial ends of the British crown.³⁵

Section 2: An application of the above account of public theology to the contemporary Australian issue of the age of responsibility.

The *age of responsibility* refers to the legally defined age at which a child may be held criminally responsible for their offending. In all States and Territories of Australia the minimum *age of responsibility* is 10 years.³⁶ In September 2019, the United Nations again called for the *age of responsibility* to be raised in Australia³⁷, as have findings of a local Royal Commission into the protection and detention of children (NT Royal Commision, 2019). Tony Bartone names the breadth of the *age of responsibility* issue, which principally sees disadvantaged children excessively involved in the criminal justice system (with devastating consequences for their long-term prospects); effectively punishing children for their own disadvantage:

³⁴ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*, 6.

³⁵ Dominic O'Sullivan, *Faith, Politics and Reconciliation- Catholicism and the politics of ingogeneity* (Hindmarsh SA: ATF Press, 2005), 251.

³⁶ Australian Institute of Criminology, *The age of criminal responsibility. Crime facts info no. 106*, Australian Institute of Criminology (Canberra, 2005), <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/cfi/cfi106>.

³⁷ Joel Clark, "It's Time to Act on United Nations', Experts and Community Calls to Raise the Age," 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org.au/its-time-to-act-on-united-nations-experts-and-community-calls-to-raise-the-age/>.

Australia has one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in the world. The criminalisation of children in Australia is a nationwide problem that disproportionately impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Most children in prison come from backgrounds that are disadvantaged. These children often experience violence, abuse, disability, homelessness, and drug or alcohol misuse. Criminalising the behaviour of young and vulnerable children creates a vicious cycle of disadvantage and forces children to become entrenched in the criminal justice system. Children who are forced into contact with the criminal justice system at a young age are also less likely to complete their education or find employment, and are more likely to die an early death.³⁸

The Australian Human Rights Commission is an independent statutory organisation, established by an act of Federal Parliament, to protect and promote human rights in Australia and internationally. In a statement on their website titled ‘Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility’, the National Children’s Commissioner Megan Mitchell said:

Placing children in any kind of detention takes away their childhood and disrupts their healthy development. It also increases the likelihood of them re-offending.³⁹

The Human Rights Law Centre presents three compelling reasons for reforming the current minimum age of criminal responsibility: medical science is not consistent with the current laws on childhood reasoning capacity (that is to say that the ten year old’s brain is not sufficiently developed to comprehend the implication of some actions or predict outcomes), social science affirms the dangers of early contact with the judicial system (criminalising disadvantage produces children who are ensnared in the cycle of incarceration), and human rights law is clear that incarceration of children is damaging (with Australian repeatedly criticised by the UN on this matter).⁴⁰

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the Australian Indigenous population makes up only three per cent of our national population, yet statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that “on an average night in the June quarter 2018, 980 young people were in detention” and 54 per cent of them were Indigenous children.⁴¹

³⁸ Dr Tony Bartone, "President of the Australian Medical Association," news release, 2019.

³⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility* (2019), <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/raising-age-criminal-responsibility>.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Law Centre, *Explainer: Raising the age* (2018), <https://www.hrlc.org.au/factsheets/2018/2/8/explainer-raising-the-age>.

⁴¹ AIHW, "Australian Institute of Health and Welfare," (2018).

Further, the AIHW records that in the Northern Territory over ninety-six per cent of children in youth detention are Indigenous.⁴²

One voice in this national story is that of Indigenous man William Tilmouth, who found himself in a youth detention centre—Essington House—in 1969 having run away from a children's home to stay with a mate. In an interview with the ABC he said "I remember crying in my cell the first night I was there. I cried in my cell; I was just a boy"⁴³. A member of the Stolen Generations, William Tilmouth could hear the traumatic sounds of other children self-harming from his cell. He said of the youth legal system that:

It is still a conveyer belt for mainly poor and disadvantaged First Nations people. A conveyer belt from disadvantage to a draconian system and jail.⁴⁴

Reverend Kime joins Mr Tilmouth's call for change, challenging Australia, which considers itself 'enlightened', while still criminalizing children as young as 10 years old; "It is incomprehensible from all of the reports relating to Black Deaths in Custody, that few of the recommendations have ever been implemented."⁴⁵ In the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, Archbishop +Geoff Smith wrote in a pastoral letter to diocesan clergy in June 2020, that:

I have, as I am sure you have, been watching the protests and riots associated with the BLM movement and the police actions which served as catalysts for that wave of activity. It is a very good thing that the welfare of African Americans and Indigenous Australians has been raised, as is focus on the ongoing human problem of racism.⁴⁶

While the statistics and strong advocacy are compelling, there is by no means universal interest in, or approval of raising the *age of responsibility*. Even inside the church, which has an almost unarguable special call to both seek genuine justice, and to protect children, there is a reticence to face our own systemic, and sometimes, unconscious racism. Indeed, to address this issue of broad Australian cultural factors at play in the detention of children, there must be an implicit acknowledgement that Australia has a problem. Encouragingly, both inside and outside of the church

⁴² AIHW, "Australian Institute of Health and Welfare."

⁴³ Henry Zwart and Joseph Dunstan, "The push to raise Australia's minimum age of criminal responsibility," 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-27/raise-the-age-of-child-criminal-responsibility-in-australia/12483178>.

⁴⁴ Zwart and Dunstan, "The push to raise Australia's minimum age of criminal responsibility."

⁴⁵ Reverend Karen Kime, "'Raise the Age': the Criminalisation of First Nation Children," *Anglicare Australian Cultural Safety Manager* (2020).

⁴⁶ Smith, *Archbishop's Pastoral Letter*.

voices are mounting in support of a change. Included among a significant number of legal, health and social organisations seeking to #raisetheage are: Anglicare Australia and a number of other Christian-founded organisations, Indigenous Rights organisations, the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists.⁴⁷

The *age of responsibility* issue located in the broader context of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement

2020 looked to be an unlikely year for greater traction in the ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) movement, since the COVID-19 pandemic has made civil unrest and mass gatherings more difficult. However, a death in the United States sent shock waves that propelled the issue in Australia, as Bishop +Chris McLeod explains:

‘The Week of Prayer for Reconciliation’ (The National week for Reconciliation) did not go quite as we planned. Not long after it commenced we were all, I am sure, appalled by the death of George Floyd in America. It seemed to me to be so violent, senseless and unjust. This senseless action has triggered off a series of protests and riots around America, and protests here in Australia. It also reminded us that since the findings of the ‘Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’ report (1991) there has been a further 432 deaths in custody. Just in the last few days we have also witnessed the violent arrest of an Aboriginal teenager in New South Wales.⁴⁸

The American context certainly lent gravity to our own Reconciliation remembrances, but as +Chris notes, in Australia the momentum was joined with calls for justice around our shameful history of Indigenous deaths in custody. In her 2020 Thea Astley Address, Professor Marcia Langton, Foundation Chair in Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, catalogued the injuries of a Palm Island resident Mulrunji Doomadgee, that led to his death in a police cell in 2004. She says this of the National and local response to that criminal death:

The Doomadgee case tells us that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark, and leaders from every Australian government are oblivious to the stench. It is an exemplary case of the persistent habit of police forces and criminal justice systems to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At this point in time, the numbers of deaths in

⁴⁷ # RaiseTheAge, "Website Campaign Alliance tab," 2020, <https://www.raisetheage.org.au/about>.

⁴⁸ +Chris McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop," *Eternity*, June 7th 07:03 PM, 2020

custody exceed 400 and they're probably closer to 500 since the royal commission commenced in 1987.⁴⁹

Langton makes the connections, between the deaths of Mr Doomadgee and the local BLM movement, and to the issues of incarceration of children. They are inextricably linked as they impact most greatly on the same minority of the Australian population and are inconvenient for society to address for much the same reasons.

It would be more comfortable for the Christian reader to locate this issue far from our doorsteps and spheres of potential influence, but disturbingly it has only been three years since an Indigenous person in South Australia died on our doorstep while in police custody, as Senator McCarthy outlined to parliament:

On 26 May 2017, PR, male, 50, became unresponsive after being arrested, handcuffed and placed in a prone restraint position by South Australian police outside his house in Parfield Gardens. An ambulance was called, but he was unable to be revived.⁵⁰

Langton lays the blame for systemic failures with the government, who she charges as inadequately responding to Australian community concern for justice on these matters:

The denial of rights of, and natural justice to, the victims in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody saga, the arrest and incarceration of Aboriginal adults and children, have reached the level of a national crisis. This is the view of many Indigenous people, human rights advocates, many in the legal fraternity and thousands of citizens. It is not the view, however, of the political leadership in Australian governments.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Marcia Langton, "2020 Thea Astley Address 'Why the Black Lives Matter Protests Must Continue- an Urgent Call!'" *Byron Writers Festival* (2020).

⁵⁰ Senator McCarthy, Statement by Senators: Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, (Hansard: Parliament of Australia, 2020).

⁵¹ Langton, "2020 Thea Astley Address 'Why the Black Lives Matter Protests Must Continue- an Urgent Call!'"

Section 3: An Australian Anglican approach to public theology which addresses the *age of responsibility* issue outlined above.

Introduction to section three

In this section we will discuss the issue of the *age of responsibility* using the public theology criteria from the first section of the paper; namely to be prophetic, to express theology in contemporary situations, and to undertake these in order that Christian voices may be heard in the contemporary civic debates.

However, we will also marry these to a particularly Anglican and contextual framework for the discussion, to facilitate a coherent strategy for public theological engagement. Frame claims that:

Since the 1960s, the Anglican Church has struggled to formulate a comprehensive vision of a distinctly Anglican contribution to Australian public affairs quite apart from a Christian vision of Australian social life".⁵²

However, the Anglican Church *does* have both a distinctive and practical contribution to the outworking of Christian theology in action in the modern world through the five marks of Mission. The five marks of mission were first developed by a gathering of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984. This statement of commonly held aspirational missiology was developed cross-culturally and is largely unifying across ecclesiological boundaries. The marks are: one, to witness to Christ's saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people; two, to build welcoming, transforming communities of faith; three, to stand in solidarity with the poor and those in need; four, to challenge violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation; five, to protect, care for and renew life on our planet.⁵³ While arguably some of the marks are more easily pressed into the service of a holistic framework for a public theology around the age of responsibility, all five are relevant to our enquiry.

One- to witness to Christ's saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people

If the Anglican church in Australia is to offer something distinctive and speak with honesty about Christ's saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people through the *age of responsibility* issue, it will need to take a step into the prophetic space. While other agencies and institutions may have arrived earlier to the fray,⁵⁴ the church may be uniquely equipped to have the conversations that are uncomfortable, precisely because there is a mission-purpose to bringing the theology of

⁵² Frame, "Public theology and public policy," 34.

⁵³ Anglican Consultative Council, *Marks of Mission* (2020), <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

⁵⁴ #RaiseTheAge, "Website Campaign Allince tab."

reconciliation to bear on even the most shameful parts of our national character. As Chris Budden notes:

Conversations in Australia about our national identity are difficult ones. There is a fear of open discussion, a refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of Indigenous concerns, and a willingness by governments to use their power to avoid difficult and embarrassing issues.⁵⁵

A strategic step for the Anglican church in Australia could be to build some internal consensus around the mission opportunity of amplifying and supporting Australia's Indigenous voices and seeking justice for children in this debate. In the Australian context, we might wrongly assume that the liberal voices would be open to this work, and conservative voices would be those least interested in theology of mission around the age of responsibility issue. However, since the marks of mission and their attendant theology were heavily influenced by conservative evangelic voices in the communion, Zink notes there is a potentially unifying and cross-culture power encoded in the five marks:

The strong influence of evangelical mission thinking on this definition is demonstrated, as is the contributions from African Anglican bishops. Anglican mission thinking has shifted from emphasizing pragmatism and coordination to providing a vision for the Communion to live into. Mission thinking has been a site of genuine cross-cultural interchange among Anglicans from diverse backgrounds.⁵⁶

Within the Australian context, a willingness to examine our own prejudice, and to refuse to imagine our own position as normative may be an act toward reconciliation. It is through existence in this body and under our own circumstances that we have developed our analytical natures and as Michael McIntosh notes; "...in order to discriminate in a healthy way between what is true and what is false, or to understand what is good or right, one has first to become suspicious about one's own critical instincts".⁵⁷ Accordingly, Christians must be self-aware and self-suspicious to witness to Christ's love and to be agents of reconciliation. Bishop +Chris names the delicate problem of ubiquitous Australian racism in this way:

Most people I know would not accept that they are racist, and many take deep offence if you suggest that they might be. Systemic racism operates at the deepest levels of our society. Systemic racism, or institutional

⁵⁵ Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Eugene, OR 97401: Pickwick Publications 2009), 167.

⁵⁶ J Zink, "Five Marks of Mission: History, Theology, Critique," *Journal of Anglican Studies* (2017): 144.

⁵⁷ M. McIntosh, "Discernment and the Paschal Mystery: St Paul and desert spirituality," in *Discernment and truth: the spirituality and theology of knowledge* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2004), 128.

racism, by another name, refers to how ‘white superiority’ functions as the norm. It is the lens by which we see all things. It shapes the political system, police force, the educational system, legal system, employment practices, and, yes, even our church. It shapes both you and me. All our social contexts are dominated by the, often unspoken and unrecognized, premise that being ‘white’, with all its associations, is inherently normative. This is why ‘Black Lives Matter’!⁵⁸

Where there is systemic racism, there is a need for acknowledgment and repentance. Sarah Bachelard encourages Anglican voices to offer responses to the contemporary hotbed issues of the state, including advocating a call to repentance even where it may be inconvenient to do so:

I would suggest that, in the case of the stolen generation debate. It is one thing to want Aboriginal Australians not to continue to suffer ill-effects as a result of past policy. It is another thing actually to allow ourselves to be fully present to the meaning of what white Australia has done and who we have become in doing it.⁵⁹

Two- to build welcoming, transforming communities of faith.

A welcoming and transforming community of faith that is engaged with the *age of responsibility* issue may include, but not be limited to strategic parish, deanery, archdeaconry, and diocesan discussion around the issue of young Indigenous children in detention. There may be prayers, liturgy, sermons or teachings on the connecting theology. As Benne notes:

When the church really exists as a living tradition, it shapes people- their outlook, their virtues and their moral values. When the church is really the church, its preaching, teaching, worship, and discipline form and sometimes transform persons so that their innermost being is powerfully shaped.⁶⁰

There is undeniable diversity within the Anglican church, however, as we have noted above in the joint expression of missiology in the five marks of mission, there is still commonality of purpose yet that may be well harnessed to build consensus as well as extend the missiological hopes of the church. Broad church public theological engagement focused on

⁵⁸ McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop."

⁵⁹ Bachelard, "Christian ethics in a secular society: moral understanding and conversion of life [Paper in: Public But Not Official: Anglican Contributions to Australian Life.]," 83.

⁶⁰ Benne, *Good ways and bad ways to think about religion and politics*, 83.

the second mark will be welcoming and provide people the space to challenge perceptions and potentially build consensus. The triumphal march of the capitalist agenda falsely asserts community through the ‘globalised’ economy. However, Anglican Christianity is not beholden to that world view and can demonstrate that “Globalization is a false catholicity that tries to smooth over the complex refraction of local and universal in the Christian complex of a truly catholic body”.⁶¹ The church at its best can offer a much richer picture of human connectivity than globalisation, which is proving to be a fig leaf for corporate financial leverage over *all* other interests.

The transforming communities of faith work is not the glamourous face of public theology, since it is less public, but it is one place to begin difficult discussions and it allows churches the opportunity to engage in important missional activity. Work at parish, community and family level can be transformative and richly support broader cultural conversations that could impact positively on the Australian societies’ view of the *age of responsibility* debate. Grass roots discussions of this kind may impact on smaller numbers, but “[a]ffecting people this way is arguably the most important, fundamental, and potentially most effective way that the church influences political life”.⁶² The Anglican National Aboriginal Bishop, +Chris McLeod, challenged the church when he said that:

We can see quite clearly that reconciliation means far more than saying the right words and uttering the right prayers for one week of the year. Something is very, very wrong with racial equality in both America and Australia, and needs to be changed.⁶³

This invitation and rebuke, implies that we should, at a minimum, be remembering National Reconciliation Week, engaging with issues of reconciliation and praying prayers for the whole people of Australia, while not imagining that this is nearly adequate on its own.

Three- to stand in solidarity with the poor and those in need.

The call on Christians, is not merely to point to injustice, but to stand with the oppressed; “If Christians want to be found where Jesus Christ is active in the world, then they must show healing and liberating solidarity with those whose human dignity is injured or threatened”.⁶⁴ This means attentiveness to the dynamics of privilege and disadvantage, and truly treating one’s neighbour as one’s self. We can see, for example, the solidarity described in the third mark of mission reflected in the best of

⁶¹ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism*, 6.

⁶² Benne, *Good ways and bad ways to think about religion and politics*, 83.

⁶³ McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop."

⁶⁴ Lorenzen, "Speaking Truth to Power: The Theologian as Prophet," 76.

the work of the civil rights movement in the United States. For contemporary Australians, it is hard to imagine a clearer case of a need for Christian solidarity than to stand against the incarceration of young children, who are often young Indigenous Australians from significantly disadvantaged backgrounds, and are mostly in contact with the justice system for offences such as theft, burglary and property-related crime.⁶⁵

It must be noted at this point that the capacity of the Anglican Church to stand in solidarity on issues of Indigenous justice have been damaged by the colonising role of the church, and its complicity in the neo-liberal economic agenda, which has disproportionately subjugated Indigenous Australians for centuries. Lockwood and O'Donovan name some of the uncomfortable complicity of Christians in support of an immoral and imported economic agenda:

While too many Christians over the generations has been found either actively promoting and passively acquiescing in capitalist economic vice and its scientific rationalisations in the modern pseudo-science of economics (can there be a human science that eschews moral judgments?), there has always been Christian proclamation and practice of a more demanding economic ethic, ruled by principles and models of love and justice and drawn from the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁶

For Anglicans to stand in genuine solidarity with the poor, and those in need, as per O'Donovan & Lockwood's 'more demanding economic ethic', there is a need both to acknowledge the role the church has played in creating the conditions for inequitable distribution of Australia's wealth, and the role the church continues to play through its acquiescence to capitalist storytelling. The contemporary church fails to mount a significant public theological challenge to the widely accepted fiction of meritocracy. Sometimes, perhaps unwittingly, conspiring with dominant national myths around the universality of access to advantage. The outworking of that narrative imagines that Indigenous children are somehow responsible for their own disadvantage since worthiness is rewarded. To challenge some of our own assumptions, Thompson invites us to adopt a personal hermeneutic of suspicion: "this is meant to enable theologians to see their ideologies so that they may repent of them for the sake of the one true God".⁶⁷ Further, the honest remembrance of our own churches' shame may provide the humility required to offer true solidarity with those who have been left behind on almost every measure western democracy holds dear. We know that: the life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is around a decade less; that Indigenous children have a mortality rate double the non-Indigenous rate; that seven times as many Indigenous children referred to child protective services, such

⁶⁵ #RaiseTheAge, "Website Campaign Allince tab."

⁶⁶ Lockwood and O'Donovan, "Political Theology," 259.

⁶⁷ Thomson, "Speaking Theologically in a Suspicious World," 91.

outcomes are indicative of a raft of economic and social disadvantage.⁶⁸ Indigenous children who end up involved in detention are there primarily due to numerous significant social disadvantages, and are worthy of the churches' most ardent solidarity. And, while it is true that the churches' influence is certainly in decline, as Neville notes; “[t]he Anglican Church of Australia has been part of the establishment, even if not officially established since the 1830s, it will likely continue to be one of the more visible ecclesial presences in Australia's public space”⁶⁹.

This waning influence is nonetheless still influence, and looks set to remain in some form for some time to come. Both by virtue of our complicity in the establishment of the instruments of disadvantage, and because we—for the time being—still have some voice to lend, the Anglican Church of Australia ought to be vociferously advocating in solidarity with the poor and those in need on the issue of the *age of responsibility*. That advocacy will need to be political, but not party political since “[b]eing a Anglican does not imply electoral support for one political party over and above another”.⁷⁰ Successive Labor and Liberal governments have failed miserably, and it will take Anglicans of all political persuasions to join together in order to coherently advocate the solidarity needed on this issue, and the BLM movement more broadly. Brad Chapman, Reconciliation Missioner for the Anglican Board of Mission – Australia, rightly notes that, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglicans have repeatedly called for more action to address the criminalisation and punishment of children and young people”.⁷¹ It is also salient for Australian Anglicans to remember that we are not mono-cultural, and that Indigenous Anglicans have been calling for our solidarity on BLM issues without adequate reply. As +Chris explains:

We in the church have a blindness to our own racism in the church. So I wanted to say as well, if the church is really going to speak with integrity about black lives matter and speak with any issues around social justice then we actually have to look at ourselves and we actually have to confront our own racism.⁷²

Four- to challenge violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation

⁶⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Mortality and life expectancy of Indigenous Australians: 2008 to 2012*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015), <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0a6bd57-0ecb-45c6-9830-cf0c0c9ef059/16953.pdf.aspx?inline=true>.

⁶⁹ David Neville, "The Bible as a Public Document," *St Mark's Review* (2007): 36.

⁷⁰ Frame, "Editorial," 33.

⁷¹ Brad Chapman, *Regarding the age of responsibility*, Austrlian Board of Mission-Reconciliation Missioner (Via email in preparation for this paper., August 2020).

⁷² +Chris McLeod, "Black Voices Matter - Bishop Chris McLeod," (2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqvACgaFb5s>.

In prophetically challenging violence, injustice, oppression, and working for peace and reconciliation, some Christians feel discomfort about how politicised they may be perceived to have become. However, engagement in public-political spheres is no modern perversion of Church business, as Bauckham notes:

Many Christians have recently been rediscovering the political dimension of the message of the Bible. This is really a return to normal, since the notion that biblical Christianity was nothing to do with politics is little more than a modern Western Christian aberration, which would not have been entertained by the Church in past periods, and places in history".⁷³

Bishop +Chris names the particular problem of injustice toward, and oppression of Indigenous Australians, in all levels of our society:

People of colour are just not seen as being on the same level of those who are not. The basic institutions of our society were established to serve and protect the dominant 'white' culture. 'Black Lives Matter' because we need to focus our thoughts and actions on those who suffer the most. People will be quick to say 'but all lives matter'; and, of course they do. However, it is far too easy to gloss over the particular when we focus on the general. This is why we also focus on violence against women, but we all know violence against anyone is wrong; we focus on the protection of the children, but we all know that all people need protection from any form of abuse. Focusing on the particular helps us to address the universal. Jesus said '*... just as you did it to one of the least these who are members of my family you did it to me*' (Matt 25: 40).⁷⁴

As we have already seen, Christian beliefs will have political impact and, the need to stand against the prevailing norms of society is at times, theologically sound and prophetically necessary. We must bring the public theology of nuanced discussion into the mainstream to question our roles as citizens; "[e]ven in a post-Christendom, multi-religious culture there has been little attention paid to any possible tensions between being a citizen and being a disciple".⁷⁵ There is, though, much hand-wringing in public theology—in both liberal and conservative camps—about the loss of place of the Christian church in civil conversation, as Cowdell typifies: "Church leaders now find themselves competing in a gaggle of voices, and sidelined in keeping with the numerical decline and social marginalisation of Western Christianity".⁷⁶ While true, a focus on a decline in

⁷³ Bauckham, "Reading the Bible Politically," 29.

⁷⁴ McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop."

⁷⁵ Pearson, "The Quest for a Glocal Public Theology," 163.

⁷⁶ Cowdell, "What is Public Theology," 60.

influence is a focus on the churches' own institutional needs above the needs of God's people.

The church ought not to seek its worth from, or measure it's own work according to a place in the *Zeitgeist*. Further, the church may in fact acquire more of the aspired-to cultural capital when it demonstrates more integrity. When its words match its actions. When it is more authentically and honestly Christian, by not imitating a scientific answer to questions that are in fact questions of belief and morality. The church need not, for example, pretend to answer the great questions of contemporary Australian society exclusively using the language of economic modelling, or compelling science. Rather the church ought to provide moral challenges clearly and unashamedly to violence, injustice, and oppression. As Thomson notes, Christian reason is a not sub-par reason if it is uniquely gifted, gifting and authoritative; “[t]hat is, faith is not necessarily unreasonable or irrational (meaning pre-rational and childish) but rather in its mature form is beyond reason (that is, including reason but more than that).⁷⁷

When the church can articulate its own unique and authoritative gifting, it will be a better advocate for peace and reconciliation. The challenge, that might be brought by the church, to the violence and oppression in the detention of ten year old children (which is always oppressive and often involves exposure and subjugation to violence) is not as a reactive decision because the United Nations deems it so (although they repeatedly have). It is not only in response to the appalling statistics around systemic disadvantage for Indigenous children, even though they exist and are well published. Instead, the church must resist this violence and oppression because it is against Christ's own teaching, and against the tradition and discernment of the church in response to God's love and desire for peace. Although there is a reticence for us to 'proof text' this issue here, it is hard to imagine a more clear cut Christian call for prophetic resistance given what we know from the scriptures, from church tradition, and from the prior complicity and failings of the church in regard to both the welfare of Children and Indigenous Australians.

Five- to protect, care for and renew life on our planet

While the fifth mark of mission is ecologically orientated, a proper theology of the created world will also have prophetic power in the Indigenous justice space. Tom Frame tasks the church by saying, "Surely the Anglican Church has something to say about how the consumption patterns of our society could and should be challenged and corrected in terms of environmental sustainability".⁷⁸ We know that Indigenous voices are routinely diminished regarding ecological decision making, despite significant native title land holdings. The Northern Land Council (NLC) and a

⁷⁷ Thomson, "Speaking Theologically in a Suspicious World," 89.

⁷⁸ Frame, "Public theology and public policy," 38.

considerable number of Indigenous voices have expressed concerns that basic services grants are slated to be cut when Indigenous communities do not want to take up mining proposals on their land. John Christianson of the NLC asks;

What other community in Australia is asked to mine their country to purchase what is their basic human right? There is no other community in Australia except the Aboriginal community who are being asked to mine their country to improve their health, housing and education.⁷⁹

These matters directly impact upon the health, welfare, and advantages of Indigenous children who, as we have seen are routinely punished, essentially for their social-economic circumstances through the judicial system. Furthermore, even a passing church interest in the ecological sustainability, and renewal of natural resources in our country must include reckoning with the methods of government and business in dealing with Indigenous land holdings. Christians have a special call to stand with the poor and to protect life in the face of gross economic systems of indifference and neglect. Bishop +Chris illustrates what the outworking of that protection and solidarity might look like in Australia in 2020:

Jesus showed solidarity with the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, and rejected (Luke 4: 18 – 21). Surely, in our context, that is the First Nations peoples, and other people of colour. As Christians we should be some of the strongest advocates for justice for First Nations peoples, and work tirelessly and prayerfully to see the end of the senseless deaths in custody. Write to your state and federal parliamentary member and ask them what they are doing about it. I am! We also need to ask the hard questions of ourselves. As a church when it comes to systemic racism we also have some ‘logs to take out of our own eyes’ (Matt 7: 5). We have significant changes to make in our own church. As people of the light we can begin to walk in the light, and drive out the darkness (John 1: 4).⁸⁰

Conclusion

In summary, we have proposed an account of both the nature and purpose of Christian public theology, tracking its development over time, noting its contemporary form as both a vaguely defined emerging theological sub-discipline, and as a broader Christian engagement with

⁷⁹ J Christophersen, "Mr J Christophersen. Committee hansard, 3 September 1996. p507.," *Hansard*, September 3, 1996.

⁸⁰ McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop."

matters of public concern. As Beckwith notes, this is work that requires constant revision since:

[e]ach generation of Christians has to rethink the church's role in the political realm, with reliance on Scripture coupled with an appropriate, although not slavish, deference to the insights of our predecessors. This is because each generation faces new and different challenges that its ancestors could not have anticipated.⁸¹

This paper has provided analysis and evaluated the contemporary social issue of the *age of responsibility*, which we have found to be one deeply connected to Indigenous Australian rights, since policies of childhood detention disproportionately effect Indigenous children. We have seen that as Australians, let alone as Christians, there is a need for prophetic resistance to the tyranny of childhood incarceration, as Kime challenges:

Remaining silent, while witnessing racism and discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, makes one complicit. Indeed, remaining silent in the criminalisation of our children, erodes the humanity of us all – and the integrity of our nation.⁸²

Finally, this paper has proposed a coherent strategy for public theological engagement around the *age of responsibility*.

Discussion was framed around the summary of political theological purposes from section one, namely for Christians: to be prophetic, to take theology to contemporary debates, and to be part of modern discussions.

Contemporary prophetic witness, like its ancient forebears, needs to be rooted in the earthy challenges of our time. Prophets after all "... were messengers, speaking what they had heard in their conscience into concrete historical situations".⁸³

In order that we could provide a more engaged and practically orientated discussion, these three purposes were discussed in concert with the Anglican five marks of mission, which provided a range of practical and theological outworking; positions to be commended and strategies to effect that influence. The principle message both for the church, and for contemporary Australia, is that of listening, standing in solidarity with, and amplifying the voices of Indigenous Australians. +Chris summarises it this way: "[s]o that really is my message to the church, listen to what Aboriginal people have to say".⁸⁴

⁸¹ Beckwith, *Politics for Christians. Statecraft as Soulcraft.*, 35.

⁸² Kime, "'Raise the Age': the Criminalisation of First Nation Children."

⁸³ Lorenzen, "Speaking Truth to Power: The Theologian as Prophet," 74.

⁸⁴ McLeod, "BLACK LIVES MATTER! A message from Chris McLeod, National Aboriginal Bishop."

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