

## SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE?

### The search for an adequate social theology<sup>1</sup>

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#### **An archbishop speaks**

Dr Peter Jensen, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, called his 2002 Halifax-Portal lecture, ‘Speaking the truth in love’.<sup>2</sup> This, he said, was the role of Australian churches in contemporary society, a role that they had failed effectively to fulfil. Everything stood or fell on the successful implementation of this responsibility. His lecture provoked a considerable response in the press, not all of it well informed. In this paper I propose to discuss whether ‘speaking the truth in love’ is an adequate basis for a Christian social theology. I have waited well beyond the public discussion to enter the debate, partly to allow myself time to consider the question, partly to escape the influence of the immediate reactions.

The archbishop’s lecture considered a most important subject, the relationship between the church and society. This subject is, of course, one that has been discussed at great length over the history of Christianity and more particularly since the end of the nineteenth century, when secularism began to be more apparent. In both the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions, social theology began to take an important place. In Anglicanism Christian Socialism arose as theological and practical response to the development of particularly Marxist social theory and action. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII published the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. The matter is never closed because it involves not only perceptions of doctrine but matters of judgement. Both doctrine and judgement are contested areas. Nothing emphasises this more than the development of Liberation Theology in our own time. In evangelical circles the Lausanne Conferences and their subsequent meetings have addressed the same issues.

The archbishop’s contribution to the debate must be taken seriously, not only because it comes from one occupying his office, but also because it represents a particular viewpoint from which to conduct the debate. Not only that. The archbishop seeks consistently to present a Christian position on public affairs. He does not hesitate to speak out as opportunity presents as he is currently doing on the subject of stem cell research. The underlying social theology he uses is thus important. He seeks to link the Bible directly with contemporary affairs, a position that seems proper at first sight but is actually controversial in its application. This essay is not so much a direct critique of the archbishop’s lecture as my own discussion on the same subject. Readers will perceive, even if they did not anticipate it, that I take a different view from his. I offer this alternative as my contribution to a serious and important debate.

I must confess at the outset that I find the phrase ‘speaking the truth in love’ far from reassuring. On the contrary, it sends a chill down my spine. This is partly because of my experience in the Diocese of Sydney. It appears with some regularity as a prelude to a savage attack, usually on a person. It is such a powerful signal in the synod, for example, that everyone sits up when the phrase occurs, the better to hear what is to come. For this reason I find the phrase a disturbing insertion into a debate about the role of the church in society. If its customary internal use were to be translated into public activity, society might rightly fear the consequences. I do not in any way accuse the archbishop of such intent. He clearly used the phrase in good faith and it is in good faith that I examine it further. Nevertheless, I am suspicious of its use, as are others with whom I speak. It has a history of being a cloak for unrestrained and destructive comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Social theology, sometimes called social ethics, is the systematic study of issues of human welfare from a theological perspective. Christian social theology includes both general principles and their application to specific issues such as racism, relations between nations, economics, poverty and inequality, business and work ethics, environmental ethics, ecumenical co-operation and dialogue on social issues.

<sup>2</sup> The full text of the paper is available at: [http://www.anglicanmediasydney.asn.au/archbishop/halifax\\_portal\\_2002.htm](http://www.anglicanmediasydney.asn.au/archbishop/halifax_portal_2002.htm)



**Ephesians 4:15**

The phrase, 'speaking the truth in love', is part of Ephesians 4:15<sup>3</sup> and is, at first sight, an unlikely motto for the archbishop's purposes. Chapter 4 of the letter to the church at Ephesus, which was most probably not written by St Paul, is a discussion about unity and disunity in the church. It begins with an exhortation to live according to a Christian calling. It goes on to discuss the varying gifts of the members of the church. The purpose of this variety is that, from many contributions, the members of the church will grow into full maturity. The author comments that church members should not be disturbed by doctrinal trends or by the wiles of those who would deceive them. Instead, they must speak the truth to each other in love. In this way the whole body will work well if its various parts are in harmony.

The passage implies a close relationship between the persons involved. They are all members of the church and, necessarily, of a relatively small minority community in whatever location they might have been. This perception is emphasised by the use of *agape* as the word for love. This is the distinctive New Testament word for love and identifies that deep relationship that exists, or should exist, within the Christian community. The concern of the passage is for the health of that community, which is seen to be at risk from several directions. One of them is bad behaviour, so the author asks for humility, gentleness and peace, implying that pride, harshness and discord were frequently to be found. Another threat comes from doctrinal disputes, particularly when there are superficial trends or when doctrinal discussions are used by wily people for their own ends. This is where the truth must be told. The truth in question seems to be that of doctrine. The members must resist strange doctrine and bring others to understand their errors.

When seen in this context, 'speaking the truth in love' is a most unlikely starting place for commencing a discussion about the role of the church in society. Everything about it refers to something other than the church's relationship with society. The assumed close relationship is not present, the specific goal is not present, the commitment to doctrinal truth is not present. Nevertheless, it might be argued that, by analogy, the church should adopt the same approach in its exchanges with society that the epistle's author suggests should occur internally. For this to happen, however, the case must be argued in its own right, not as a direct consequence of the biblical passage. In other words, we cannot rely simply on the proposition that the phrase exists in the Bible. Its actual use in this broader context must be justified.

In this justification it will not be sufficient to assert that speaking, truth and love are important. That might well be accepted without many questions. What must be argued is the archbishop's proposition that this text mandates the role of the church in the public arena. This is a much larger task and one that the archbishop did not undertake in his lecture. Rather, he relied on the importance of the ideas the text suggests. In my view this is not enough.

The phrase contains three central ideas: speech, truth, love. It might be appropriate to characterise these three as denoting a method of communication, speech; a necessary content, truth; a form of relationship, love. I will deal with these three in reverse order.

**Love**

It is doubtful whether love is an appropriate way to characterise relationships in society. Love is an essentially personal thing. It is an act of the will with accompanying emotions and actions. When it is used of non-personal entities, amongst which we must include society or the nation, it is by way of analogy with the personal. There is a tinge of artificiality in suggesting that an aggregation of persons called the church can 'love' another aggregation called the nation or the society.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:14-16 (NRSV) <sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

This problem has been well put by John Henry Newman in a sermon that he wrote in 1835, while still vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, about the love of friends and relations.

[I]t is obviously impossible to love all men in any strict and true sense. What is meant by loving all men, is, to feel well-disposed to all men, to be ready to assist them, and to act towards those who come in our way, as if we loved them. We cannot love those about whom we know nothing; except indeed we view them in Christ, as the objects of his Atonement, that is, rather in faith than in love. And love, besides, is a habit, and cannot be attained without actual practice, which on so large a scale is impossible. We see then how absurd it is, when writers (as in the manner of some who slight the Gospel) talk magnificently about loving the whole human race with a comprehensive affection, of being the friends of all mankind, and the like. Such vaunting professions, what do they come to? ... This is not to love men, it is but to talk about love.—The real love of man must depend on practice, and therefore, must begin by exercising itself on our friends around us, otherwise, it will have no existence.<sup>4</sup>

This is not, however, the only problem in characterising the relationship between the church and society as one of love.<sup>5</sup> There is a serious question as to whether love or justice should take priority in social affairs. A century after Newman (1935), some words of Reinhold Niebuhr have also survived the passage of time extremely well. He said,

Living as we do, in a society in which the economic mechanisms automatically create disproportions of social power and social privilege so great that they are able to defy and evade even the political forces which seek to equalize and restrain them, it is inevitable that they should corrupt the purely moral forces which are meant to correct them. Christian love in a society of great inequality means philanthropy. Philanthropy always compounds the display of power with the expression of pity. Sometimes it is even used as a conscious effort to evade the requirements of justice, as, for instance when charity appeals [are] designed to obviate the necessity of higher taxation for the needs of the unemployed.<sup>6</sup>

Niebuhr wisely points out the inevitable political and social limitations of love. As he suggests, there is an inevitable tension between the concepts of love and justice. An ethic based on love, goodwill and fellowship (faith, hope and charity) relates uneasily to a coercive social order that must meet demonstrable need and enforce basic human rights. This is because, in social affairs, we cannot assume universal good will. Eventually, someone will need to be coerced. Justice, eventually, involves just such coercion. Love is, by contrast, voluntary and cannot be coerced. Niebuhr did not deny the important place of ideals such as love. What he did was to reverse their order in our perception.

Archbishop William Temple expressed a similar view:

The nation, with its organ the State, is a means of securing some measure of that fellowship; but the fact that the State relies, and must always rely, upon penal measure proves that of itself it can never lead men to the goal which by its means they are seeking; for fellowship is the life of free persons bound together in mutual love.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman, 'Love of relations and friends', *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. II, Sermon 5, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1977, p. 261. Newman's works can be found online at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/>.

<sup>5</sup> The following paragraphs have been adapted from my address to the National Forum of the National Council of Churches in 1998. See 'Knowing and doing justice in a new millennium', *Lutheran Theological Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2, August 1999, pp. 86-96.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987, p. 112

<sup>7</sup> William Temple, *Mens Creatrix*, London, Macmillan & Co, 1917, pp. 211-2



By opposing love to the power and essential oppression of the State, Temple raised the question of the relationship between love and justice. As he said in 1941, 'The State stands for justice, the Church for Love.'<sup>8</sup> Justice is the best side of the exercise of power by the State as it seeks to secure fellowship between its members. But it involves the use of power and appears to be opposed to the voluntary and giving nature of love. As Niebuhr comments:

The problem of politics and economics is the problem of justice. The question of politics is how to coerce the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order, offering human beings the greatest possible opportunity for mutual support. ... All these opportunities represent something less than the ideal of love.<sup>9</sup>

Even if we concluded that love was not the best descriptor of the relationship between church and society, we could argue that the church should promote social action based on the ideal of love. Alternatively, we could argue that the ideal to be pursued in social affairs is not love but justice.

Christianity is ambivalent about justice. It is ambivalent because, in principle, Christianity seeks to ground its social program in ideas about God's love for us and the love that we should consequently have for each other. Such a view ultimately places moral ideals over against political realities. In that conflict, the purely moral forces inevitably have a hard time of it.

Ideals and actual policies are also quite different entities. Interposed between our ideas and the policies we espouse are levels of investigation, assessment and decision. There are many opportunities both for error, in the sense of simple mistakes, and for un-wisdom in the sense of making a judgement that turns out to have been ill founded. Michael Knight, a writer about the welfare of children, points out, however, in a sharp paragraph that the problem goes deeper. The implementation of ideals actually changes them.

... attempts to translate [altruism, love and kindness] into terms which have meaning for society via its social systems succeed only in transforming them into something very different. The resonances they produce within the systems of modern society reproduce them in economic terms as unpaid labour or 'budgetary savings', in law as rights and duties, in science as measurable factors to be subjected to scientific truth-testing, and in politics as attributes that have no place in politics.<sup>10</sup>

The art of politics is no different for churches than for anyone else. It will inevitably involve us in choosing something less than we desire and believe. It will involve us in assisting a society to be as just as it can, even when we know that it will not be as just as it should. More importantly, viewing our task as one of love most often will distract us from the actual situation we face.

## Truth

Is truth the content of the relationship or the text for the speaking? In the archbishop's lecture the truth to which he referred was the fundamental truth of the Christian faith. He said:

... the truth of which I speak is not merely truth in the sense of genuine communication, or conformity to reality, or even prophetic criticism of the government; it is first and foremost to be defined as the truth, the truth of God's word, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

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<sup>8</sup> William Temple, *Citizen and Churchman*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Michael King, *A Better World for Children: Explorations in morality and authority*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 107

There is no doubt that the fundamental tenets of Christianity must be promoted by Christians. As the archbishop said, nobody else will do that. The best contemporary formulation of those beliefs and the manner of their communication are real issues, but ones that are not part of this paper. I mention them only to note that they are matters that are far from closed within Christian circles. My purpose here is to discuss their application to society. The principal problem with the most fundamental Christian beliefs, when presented as doctrinal statements or propositions, is that they do not take us very far in responding to current issues in society. They are so general in their implications as to lead to no certain conclusions and thus open the way to supporting whatever the speaker believes on other grounds. Most of our discussion with society is of this kind; it has to do with policy, not fundamental doctrine.

It is here that the difficulty of using the concept of truth to describe the content of the church's discussion with society becomes apparent. There is no debate about truth, once you believe you have discovered it. How can there be? It needs only to be communicated. In contrast, there are many debates about policy. Indeed, the use of the word truth when discussing policy seems rather strange. Policies are neither true nor false. They are well considered or not. They are well implemented or not. They work or they fail. They have consequences, anticipated or not, positive or negative.

Linking policy too closely to perceived truth makes the stakes far too high. It becomes difficult to disagree without being accused of unfaithfulness or heresy. The reality is that Christians have as diverse a range of reactions to policy issues as the population in general. A brief look at the policy suggestions coming from evangelical circles alone can confirm this. Christians, all of whom seem to rely on the same high level principles, often divide observably on national, class or ethnic lines. I do not deplore this. It serves, in the present context, simply to demonstrate the danger of linking such variable results to the concept of truth. If we were here to consider Ephesians 4, we might conclude that Christians will, like most people, be 'blown about by every wind of' policy because truth, in the epistle writer's sense, is not at issue here.

What, then, is the role of fundamental truths in developing policy positions? The development of social policies involves both deductive and inductive processes. The deductive part uses high level principles and values to guide the general directions that policy might take. It is difficult to formulate policy on this basis alone and such principles are more powerful in excluding possible directions than they are in prescribing them. The inductive part of the process uses data derived from empirical sources to develop an understanding of the issue itself and the possible options for the policy. These two processes meet in the middle in what has often been called 'middle axioms'. This term has a long history and is the most used method of policy formulation amongst Christian commentators from evangelicals to the World Council of Churches.<sup>11</sup> It has been particularly influential amongst Anglicans, having been used by Archbishop William Temple in his seminal work, *Christianity and Social Order*.<sup>12</sup> The important thing about middle axioms for this discussion is that they provide a more contingent set of policy principles than can be obtained from basic core beliefs. They serve to avoid linking policy choices too closely to those beliefs.

A good example of a middle axiom is 'subsidiarity'. This axiom was adopted by the 1998 Lambeth Conference in Resolution III.3

### ***Subsidiarity***

This Conference affirms the principle of "subsidiarity," articulated in Chapter 4, *The Virginia Report*, which provides that "a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level", provided that these tasks can be adequately performed at such levels.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Horsburgh, 'Middle axioms and social policy: an Australian Perspective', *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol.25, No.2, June, 1991, pp.121-135. For a discussion in considerably more depth see Ann Wansbrough, *Speaking Together: a methodology for the National Council of Churches' contribution to public policy debate in Australia*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2000,

<sup>12</sup> William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, London, SPCK/Shepherd-Walwyn, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.lambethconference.org/3/sect3rpt.html>

The principle of subsidiarity was first enunciated in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, and made more explicit by Pope Pius XI in 1931 when he published *Quadragesimo Anno* on *Rerum Novarum*'s fortieth anniversary.

It is indeed true, as history clearly proves, that owing to the change in social conditions, much that was formerly done by small bodies can nowadays be accomplished only by large corporations. None the less, just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to the community at large what private enterprise and industry can accomplish, so, too, it is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order for a larger and higher organisation to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower bodies.<sup>14</sup>

I do not argue that truth has no place in policy discussions. Facts must be true or, more properly, verifiable. Policy processes must be true or, more properly, followed with integrity. Implementation of policy must be true or, more properly, uncorrupted. In all these ways, truth should characterise what we say and do. What we ought not to do is to link such contingent policy 'truths' inexorably with fundamental doctrinal positions. The alternative to truth in this context is judgement or, more properly, wisdom. Judgement must always be tentative and wisdom is an offering. In either case we participate in society as fellow citizens offering what we have to the whole, not as the purveyors of truth who lay claim to absolute and exclusive privilege to our position.

### Speaking

I come finally to the manner of the relationship between church and society. There is no doubt that speaking must be included in the way that that relationship proceeds. Nevertheless, I hesitate to describe the whole as speaking. I am reminded of the words attributed to St Francis of Assisi, 'preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words'. This wise saying reminds us that our relationships depend on more than one form of communication. It also reminds us that our communication of the gospel is particularly vulnerable to subversion when we rely too much on words. Similar sentiments were expressed by John Henry Newman in his 1838 sermon, 'Unreal words'.

It will not then be out of place if ... we consider some of the many ways in which persons, whether in this age or in another, make unreal professions, or seeing see not, and hearing hear not, and speak without mastering, or trying to master their words.<sup>15</sup>

If our words are to ring true there are some other important qualities about which Newman hints and to which I now refer. Chief amongst them is ideological scepticism. By this term I mean the capacity and, indeed, habit, of questioning our own position and perceptions. The church cannot with any integrity imagine itself to be a neutral player in the world's affairs. It may be that the church's influence is waning. We have, however, a long history of involvement in our society. Much of what we now have has been influenced by us. We can, if we wish, make a long list of our positive contributions from laws against child labour to the abolition of slavery. On the other hand, we can also list our negative contributions: our complicity in the Stolen Generations, our unthinking confusion of nation with God. We are also active participants in the politics and economics of our society. Taken together, the Christian churches are a major employer in Australia. Our welfare agencies provide services, many of which are dependent on government financial support. We own considerable property and invest in financial markets. All these activities can influence our perceptions and judgements.

We must be alert to the snares of our own position. We need at all times to examine our own motives and perceptions. We can never assume that we are on the side of the (holy, rather than fallen!) angels. That is a proposition that we must always test. We can only do that if we develop a wise ideological scepticism. We must never fall victim to our own propaganda.

<sup>14</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 15 May 1931, para. 79

<sup>15</sup> Newman, Vol. 5, Sermon 3, p. 980.

Another quality is listening. In an infrequently quoted part of the 1998 Lambeth conference Resolution 1.10 on 'Human sexuality', listening is commended as an essential part of social response.

[This Conference] recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;<sup>16</sup>

It is instructive to note how frequently the more restrictive parts of that resolution are presented almost as directives, even binding law, from the conference while the listening component is ignored. The Diocese of Sydney is a major offender here. It readily draws attention to breaches of the negatives of the resolution but has yet to do anything about listening. Genuine listening is difficult and time consuming. It involves actual meeting with those most closely affected by the matters under discussion. It must rely on trust that is earned, not assumed. It is, however, essential to effective communication.

Then we must exhibit solidarity. If we are concerned about justice, we must align ourselves with those who experience injustice and earn the trust of those without power or influence. Being a distant commentator is not sufficient. Solidarity means a clear commitment not only to speak on behalf of others but also to give their interests a level of priority in our affairs. A good start for the church in its relationship with society at large would be to commend the goodness of our fellow citizens. Comments that suggest only a negative evaluation of the actions of others will certainly fail to demonstrate any solidarity. Of course, to do that we would need to accept their goodness, a difficult theological task for some versions of Christian belief. There are undoubtedly other things that we should also do, but these suggestions will suffice to make the point that speaking is not the first thing that we should do but the last.

### Conclusion

So, if I think that 'speaking the truth in love' is not the most appropriate text to motivate our social position, what would I choose? I think that a better start would be made with the words of the prophet Micah:

'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?<sup>17</sup>

Four themes dominate Micah's words: reality; justice; kindness; spirituality. He first contrasts real with symbolic action. Only that which has effect is ultimately acceptable. Thus he rejects the externals of the traditional religion of his day as being ineffective in themselves. The hyperbolic expressions, 'thousands of rams', 'ten thousand rivers of oil', clearly make this point. Not even the horrifying spectacle of infant sacrifice is a satisfactory ritual act. The church's approach to public policy should be one that helps the society to take effective steps to resolve its most pressing problems. Symbolic utterances and actions, whilst necessary on some occasions, have only a secondary place. For this reason we should avoid any self-indulgent expression of principle for its own sake. If our expression could not have a practical effect we would, in general, do better by being silent.

Effective action requires justice first. Justice is the external or objective quality of effective social action. It is essentially a communal virtue through which people stand together in solidarity, the strong protecting the weak. Justice preserves the society. This part of the text reinforces my earlier comments on the priority of justice in policy affairs.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.lambethconference.org/1/sect1rpt.html>

<sup>17</sup> Micah 6:6-8 (NRSV)

The word translated as kindness is the internal or subjective quality of the person who does justice. Other translations use the word loyalty, stressing the personal commitment that supports the doing of justice.<sup>18</sup> The churches can only speak with effect when their words are not only the words of their leaders. There are times when church leaders should be in front of their flock, helping to form attitudes and values. There are other times when they need to be able to show that they act from well-held and internally supported convictions. At least part of our effort must be the creation of a church culture that loves kindness, that is committed to doing justice.

All of this is to be accompanied by a spirituality that is sufficient to sustain both commitment and action. Thus those who are loyal and do justice need to be sustained by an appropriate spirituality that Micah describes as including the virtue of humility. Such a culture of spiritual humility needs to be present in the church as a whole as well as in the individual Christian and in church leaders. Internally, we are torn between the need for this humility and our perception that we have the truth. Nothing can be less humble than a group that knows the truth. The pretense to such knowledge can disguise many expressions of spiritual pride.

The humility of the walk that Micah commends is a corrective to the abuse of power. As I have already noted, justice, to be effective, requires the exercise of power. Education, compromise or social evolution by themselves will not bring about justice.<sup>19</sup> Thus there is no escape from the temptations associated with the exercise of power. As John Bennett says:

Power is morally neutral in the sense that it is a necessary condition for good as well as for evil but it is a source of special temptation.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, instead of Ephesians, I would opt for Micah.

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this passage see Leslie C Allen, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 369-375.

<sup>19</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, pp. xii-xxv. See also the discussion in chapter 9, 'The preservation of moral values in politics', pp. 231-256.

<sup>20</sup> John C Bennett, *Christians and the State*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 58.

