

# Christian Nonviolent Direct Action as Public Theology

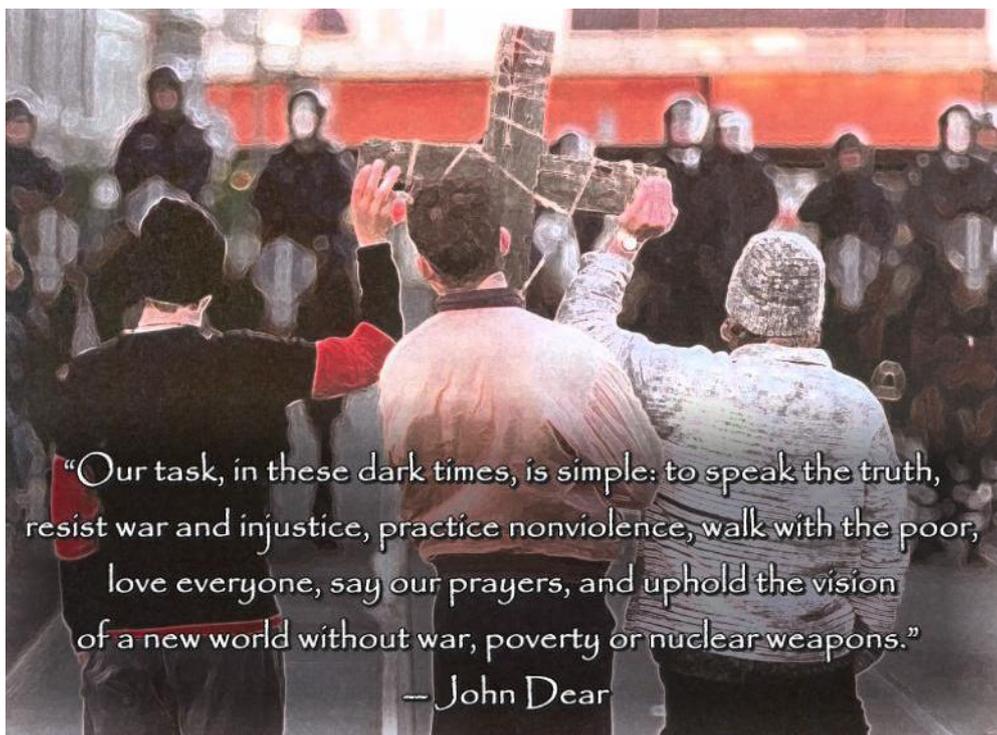
Justin Whelan 2008  
[justin\\_whelan@hotmail.com](mailto:justin_whelan@hotmail.com)

Paper presented to 'The Christian Mission in the Public Square', organised by the Australian Association of Mission Studies and the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre, held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, October 2-5, 2008.

## Abstract:

Public theology is usually conceived as church leaders or academic theologians speaking in the public sphere through formal channels such as mainstream media. In this paper I argue that we need a broader understanding of 'public theology' that includes public action on the part of the church (or members of the church) that speaks directly into the public sphere. I suggest that Christian nonviolent direct action should be seen in this light, and that both the acts themselves and the public statements made by the actors are clearly designed to articulate a Christian message in response to critical problems of their time.

In this paper I look at three recent examples of Christian nonviolent direct action in Australia. Using the 'best practice principles' for public theology identified by John W. de Gruchy, I will explore the way in which these actions make statements to the public about God's judgment of current policies and God's vision for a transformed world.



## 1. Introduction

In August 2005 a group known as Christians Against Greed joined a rowdy protest against a conference of global corporations at the Sydney Opera House, and found themselves sharing the Eucharist with riot police and anarchists. On Human Rights Day that year, four activists calling themselves Christians Against All Terrorism broke into and attempted a “citizens’ inspection” of the Pine Gap spy base. One week after their trial ended in 2007, five people walked into a war games zone at Shoalwater Bay to play frisbee with defence personnel.

These events were all very public and deeply theological. Yet we tend not to consider them, and other actions like them, as examples of *public theology* – a term for the process of the church thinking and speaking to the general public about contemporary issues.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I want to argue that we need a broader understanding of ‘public theology’ that includes public action on the part of the church (or members of the church) that speaks directly into the public sphere. I suggest that Christian nonviolent direct action should be seen in this light, and that both the acts themselves and the public statements made by the actors are clearly designed to articulate a Christian message in response to critical problems of their time.

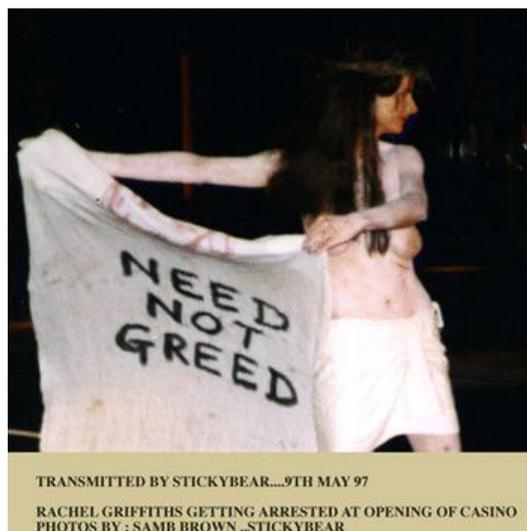
In this paper I look at three recent examples of Christian nonviolent direct action in Australia. Using the ‘best practice principles’ for public theology identified by John W. de Gruchy, I will explore the way in which these actions make statements to the public about God’s judgment of current policies and God’s vision for a transformed world.

## 2. Public Theology, Prophetic Witness and Nonviolence

Before I do that it is necessary to briefly say a few things about public theology, its role as a form of prophetic witness, and Christian nonviolence. My aim here is not to provide a substantive reflection on these, but merely to lay down my cards, as it were; to make it clear where I am coming from.

The editorial of the first issue of the International Journal of Public Theology defined the term as “a deliberate use of common language in a commitment to influence public decision-making, and also to learn from substantive public discourse ... an engagement of living religious traditions with their public environment – the economic, political and cultural spheres of common life.” (Kim 2007).

This is seen, in turn, as a critical component of the church’s mission – part of its calling to speak prophetically in the search for social and economic policies that promote the common good. In an article on ‘public theology as Christian witness’, John W de Gruchy describes this as “a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance” which “arises out of theological reflection and as such expresses convictions and commitments deeply grounded in Christian tradition” (de Gruchy 2007: 40). Later he argues that



<sup>1</sup> As a quick and dirty guide, Google Scholar generates 1710 hits for “public theology”, but only 10 remain once “nonviolent direct action” is added to the search.

Public theology as Christian witness thus implies public engagement; which can take at least two forms, that of action and that of debate. Public theological praxis is a form of Christian witness when it embodies, even if not explicitly, theological conviction (de Gruchy 2007: 40).

The importance of prophetic witness is perhaps best summed up by the foremost public theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther King Jr. In his seminal Letter from Birmingham Jail (and there's a clue there about good public theology!), King writes that

[The] judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century (King 1963).

King's speeches and sermons are well-known, but as time passes his role as a dangerous radical activist who was arrested time and again for acts of civil disobedience is at risk of being sidelined. But King's words would have meant little if not written from a jail cell, spoken at the head of a protest march or preached the day before he was assassinated by his own government. It was his actions (and those of tens of thousands of others) on the frontlines of protest, facing down water cannons and police dogs, that 'dramatised the injustices faced by the Negro' and



forced the federal government to act for justice and freedom. Moreover, it was the disciplined nonviolent nature of this protest that both spoke powerfully of an alternative vision and made the partial realisation of that vision possible in a way violence could not. As Troy Jackson writes,

We remember Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and the 1963 March on Washington not because of a grand event or even a great speech, but because it was an event that galvanized grassroots power built throughout the South and throughout the nation. The 1963 march was not a tactical PR move, but a culmination of a movement that transformed our nation (Jackson 2008).

In describing King "as an exemplar for a public theology", Frederick Downing (1987) notes the tight relationship between reflection and action that characterised King's life, but also provided a space for his philosophy of nonviolence to be articulated in his deeds as much as his words: "King was himself a symbol and a representative of reconciliation" (p22). He argues that

King's emphasis on a "beloved community," along with the metaphors of the "dream" and the "promised land," signify the centrality of the shared values of a public common good in his own thinking, speaking, and symbolic actions. (Downing 1987: 23)

Later, in describing how King saw nonviolent action as the way of redemption for America, he brings the issue of direct action into clear focus:

By acting together in mass demonstrations (in public, responsible, and nonviolent ways), blacks could participate in assertive appeals to the national self-understanding. Such an effort would allow blacks the autonomy to actualize their rights as citizens (and thus participate in their own liberation). It would also afford the opportunity to confront the larger public and to communicate their message in a personal but profound and lasting way. This approach of massive public action was, for King, more than an effort to manipulate the public consciousness; it was a desire to appeal to the national conscience – to save its very soul. (Downing 1987: 29)

Another understanding of direct action as public theology is provided by Walter Brueggemann in his foreword to *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*, in which he identifies street theatre as an act of public theology: “acting out in public before an unpersuaded constituency a truth about Jesus that is counter to commonly assumed reality”. This, he says, is “neither wacko nuttiness nor exhibitionism; it is the joining of a contest in which the unexamined conventions of dominant society do not go uncontested and prevail by default” (quoted in Stewart 2006).

### 3. Christian NVDA in Australia

This country does not have a tradition of religiously motivated civil disobedience that is found in the United States and to a lesser extent the UK. To the best of my knowledge, in the post-war era there have been no occasions when prominent Christian public figures have been arrested in the way that the likes of King, Bishop Gumbleton and Jim Wallis have so regularly. Nor have mass acts of ‘religious obedience’ occurred along the lines of the annual convergence on the School of the Americas or the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq. Whether this is because the US has more unjust government policies, because there are more Christians in America or some other reason is beyond the scope of this paper. But the truth is that while Christian leaders are to be found at the front and centre of many American civil disobedience actions (especially the mass actions for peace), the Australian church has largely left this scene to anti-war and environmental activists.

Nevertheless, in recent times there has been a small re-emergence of radical Christian protest. Here I intend to outline three actions from the last three years, all of which spoke loudly to the public about the judgement of God and the offer of an alternative vision.

#### Christians Against Greed

On August 30, 2005, CEOs from the world's largest corporations converged in Sydney to attend the Forbes Global CEO Conference. They were met by about a thousand activists protesting the neoliberal economic agenda of the participants.

Among the protestors was a group of about 60 students and young people calling themselves ‘Christians Against Greed’, which was “formed out of a desire to be a reminder to the many self-identifying Christian CEOs attending the conference that greed alienates us from God, from our neighbours, and from our true self”



After marching down George Street to the Opera House, the group took up a position just to the side of the main confrontation between activists and riot police, praying and singing. When the riot police eventually decided to disperse the crowd, something amazing happened. As two participants described it,

There were eventually a few altercations, which persuaded the police to move everyone completely away from the foreshore and, in effect, ending the protest. As the police lines moved slowly forward, we huddled together in a circle and kept on singing.

What a strange sight it would have been, a motley group of Christians sitting on the ground, singing together by candlelight, in the midst of hundreds of people being herded away from the Opera House.

As people left the foreshore, undoubtedly disheartened, some stood around us, a mixture of interested and disinterested faces, and we kept on singing. As our singing continued the police lines halted, directly behind our circle. Although we were few, we kept on singing.

With helicopters overhead beaming down on us, our candlelight became ineffectual and our voices became muffled. With a mass of police at our heels, media, and onlookers surrounding us, we continued our prayer vigil. Led by one of our elders we shared in the Lords Supper.

With the police, media and activists alike, we shared in the body and blood of Christ broken for the poor of the world (Hirt and Hartley 2005).

Christians Against Greed's participation was not ultimately just about protest, but was rather an act of prophecy and prayer. It was a declaration of judgement about the effects of the global economic system on the poor. And it was an example of the church witnessing to the alternative economy of God in a way that drew the public into its embrace, representing in a microcosm the vision of a reconciled people that lay behind their participation.

## Pine Gap 6

Pine Gap is a military spy base for the United States located 20km outside Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Pine Gap gathers military intelligence and uses a satellite tracking system to pinpoint targets in U.S. bombing raids on Iraq and Afghanistan. It is also the command centre for the 'Missile Defence System', an integral part of the US 'Star Wars' system enabling the US to dominate and control space.

At dawn on December 9, 2005 a 'Citizen's Inspection' took place causing Pine Gap to shut down for five hours. A group of four Christian pacifists (with two support people) calling themselves "Christians Against ALL Terrorism" successfully broke into the base despite announcing their plans to security in advance and wearing rather visible white overalls with 'Citizens' Inspection Team' emblazoned in red.

The Pine Gap 6, as they became known, declared that in the context of the War on Terror and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, they "wanted to bring some moral and intellectual consistency into the debate on terrorism" (Dowling, Goldie et al. 2006). In describing their motivation and critique of public policy, they wrote:



The Nuremberg Principles specify the responsibilities of the ordinary citizen/soldier when a state wants to commit crimes against peace. Every citizen's responsibility is to obstruct the commission of such crimes, using whatever moral means are available to us, whenever we have the opportunity. It is in this context that we [inspected] the Pine Gape Joint Defence Facility for evidence of terrorist activity ...

Christians Against ALL Terrorism condemns terrorism in all its forms, including the state terrorism behind the U.S and Australia's illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to be morally consistent, we cannot distinguish between the terrorist acts of a suicide bomber in Baghdad, or of a U.S jet bomber in Fallujah. In both cases innocents are murdered and maimed for a political objective.

We believe in a better way. Christ told us to love our enemies, to seek justice and taught us how to live nonviolently (Dowling, Goldie et al. 2006).

The group did not resist arrest, but did defend themselves in court under what is called the 'necessity defence'. Their testimony, published on their website, carried widely on independent media and partially on mainstream media, moved the jury to tears at several

moments. The judge was so impressed by their conviction and nonviolent consistency that she refused to give them gaol sentences despite prosecution requests.

Despite the tiny size of their group, Christians Against ALL Terrorism successfully put Pine Gap back into the media spotlight and back on the map for the peace movement. In doing so, they opened space for discussion about Australia's complicity in acts of terror.

## Samuel Hill 5

'Talisman Sabre' is the name given to the largest war games exercise in the Southern Hemisphere. It involves 20,000 American and 10,000 Australian troops practising the invasion of small tropical islands and mock Arabic cities at a place called Shoalwater Bay, near Rockhampton.

As part of a wider peace convergence, five Christian activists entered the military training area at Samuel Hill, found the main control centre base and walked openly down the middle of the airstrip. When soldiers approached, the group assured them that they were unarmed and peaceful, and asked them to play frisbee.

To our surprise and delight, they did. I asked to see their generals as we had two letters to give them. They then called their commanding officer who shut down the base, and they invited us inside for coffee and lunch. We spent about an hour and a half talking with both Australian and US soldiers about Iraq, violence and nonviolence, and the exercises themselves before being arrested by Queensland police and taken to Rockhampton (Moyle, Powell et al. 2007).

The following statement was released by the group to explain their action:

We are 5 nonviolent Christian people who like the prophet Isaiah are working towards the day when people will "beat swords into plowshares and study war no more". As followers of the nonviolent Jesus we cannot stand by while our country plans the destruction of our brothers and sisters in other countries and the environment at Shoalwater Bay.

We plan to enter the base to disrupt these military exercises with our presence. We do so openly and honestly without deception and while actively seeking out military personnel with whom to dialogue. We do not take these actions lightly but with an awareness that the gravity of our actions pales in comparison to the crimes of Australian and US militaries this week. The destruction of pristine wilderness with unique and endangered wildlife is unacceptable as is the increased reliance on violent methods of conflict resolution. We take these actions because all other legal attempts to stop the exercise have failed.

People are likely to say that we have no respect for the law: not so. Rather we say with Martin Luther King Jr. and in accordance with the principles of nonviolence. "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law."

We believe that practicing for war only means more war. That is why we must imagine peace, embody peace, practice peace.

Another world is possible – that is why we act (Moyle, Powell et al. 2007).



The 'Samuel Hill 5' were one of two groups to enter the base. The other hid for three days. In remaining in the open and engaging in dialogue with the armed forces, the group gave a

public demonstration not just of commitment to a more peaceful world, but also of an alternate way to engage in protest. As they noted, “protests are often restricted to yelling from behind a fence. We wanted to change the dynamic, to engage face to face with the people behind the uniform, and for them to do the same with us” (Moyle, Powell et al. 2007).

### **Nonviolent Direct Action as Good Public Theological Praxis**

In his article “Public Theology as Christian Witness”, De Gruchy outlines seven theses of ‘good public theological praxis’ which I believe are both extremely helpful and also pertinent to my discussion of nonviolent action. In summary form, these theses are that good praxis:

1. does not seek to preference Christianity but to witness to values that Christians believe are important for the common good;
2. requires the development of a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition, and is convincing in its own right; but it also needs to address Christian congregations in a language whereby public debates are related to the traditions of faith;
3. requires an informed knowledge of public policy and issues, grasping the implications of what is at stake, and subjecting this to sharp analytical evaluation and theological critique;
4. requires doing theology in a way that is interdisciplinary in character and uses a methodology in which content and process are intertwined;
5. gives priority to the perspectives of victims and survivors, and to the restoration of justice; it sides with the powerless against the powerful, and seeks to speak truth to power drawing its inspiration from the prophetic trajectory in the Bible;
6. requires congregations that are consciously nurtured and informed by biblical and theological reflection and a rich life of worship in relation to the context within which they are situated, both locally and more widely; and
7. requires a spirituality which enables a lived experience of God, with people and with creation, fed by a longing for justice and wholeness and a resistance to all that thwarts wellbeing (de Gruchy 2007: 39-40).

When we look at this list, the resonance with nonviolent direct action like those described here is clear. Such action, at its best, witnesses in a powerful way to an alternate set of values in a way that does not privilege Christianity or require adherence to make sense, but does draw on Christian resources and weaves together theological as well as political critique. It emphasises the idea of communities of praxis that embody the kingdom vision in both their internal relations and their approach to their task. And it opens up new spaces for communicating a prophetic critique of the ways things are and a vision of how things could be.

Christian nonviolent direct action speaks, in slightly different ways, to four different audiences: the government, the wider public, the movement for peace and justice, and the church. To the government it offers a deep critique of injustice in a form that is hard to ignore. To the public it speaks of an alternate vision in which public policies uphold the common good. To activists it speaks of the relevance of Christian faith (most activists are quite antipathetic to the church) and also a better way of resisting the domination system. To the church it invites a participatory and active spirituality that will not be content with platitudes or privatised, suburban introspection.

## 4. Conclusion

When academics talk and write about public theology, most often they mean talking and writing. What I hope I have done here is to show that Christian nonviolent direct action is another form of public theology, consistent with good praxis, which opens up new fields for prophetic Christian witness.

The three actions I have highlighted are not the only examples of recent Christian prophetic witness. But nor have such actions been supported by the Australian church. The Pine Gap 6, for example, asked for letters of support but received none from people in authority.

They were, on the other hand, influential within the movements for peace and justice, most of whom are not Christian. All three not only provided an alternative way of seeing the root problem, they also embodied an alternate response to those problems. Their prophetic critique of both the domination system and the usual way of protesting against it lies at the centre of good public theology: finding a powerful, Christian, way of entering the debate on public issues of critical importance. Although they were accompanied by statements of motivation, it was the actions themselves that generated attention, respect and political impact. Like King, their words were only resonant because of the risky, prophetic and above all nonviolent actions they described.

If the mission of the church is to follow God out into the streets and live in such a way as to embody the kingdom, nonviolent action is an important component of such a life. After all, Jesus was not killed just for what he said, but also for what he did. He did not ask us to 'talk up our cross' but to 'pick up our cross'.

Christian nonviolent direct action offers one way to embody the central message of Jesus as articulated so well by Shane Claiborne: "Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. *Another world is already here*" (Claiborne 2006: 188).



## References

- Claiborne, S. 2006, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan
- de Gruchy, J. W. 2007, "Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre", *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (1), pp. 26-41
- Dowling, J., Goldie, A., Law, B. and Mulhearn, D. 2006. "Pine Gap 6: Transforming Pine Gap", Accessed from <http://www.pinegap6.org> on 10 September 2008
- Downing, F. 1987, "Martin Luther King, Jr. as Public Theologian", *Theology Today* 44 (1), pp. 15-31
- Hirt, J. and Hartley, C. 2005, "Protest and prophesy", *Insights*, November,
- Jackson, T. 2008. "Speeches are Fine, but Real Change Takes a Movement", Accessed from <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2008/09/a-speech-or-a-movement-by-troy.html> on 30 September 2008
- Kim, S. 2007, "Editorial", *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (1), pp. 1-4
- King, M. L. 1963, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*,
- Moyle, S., Powell, C., Reeves, S., Spencer, K. and Williams, S. 2007. "Samuel Hill 5 Blog", Accessed from <http://samuelhill5.blogspot.com/> on 10 September 2008
- Stewart, W. 2006, "Crown of thorns: Ancient prophecy and the (post)modern spectacle", *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2 (1), pp. 1-24