

## How much is enough?

### *Are there moral limits to inequality?*

Liberal capitalism needs inequality as one of its essential moral forces. This form of capitalism as you know relies heavily on private property, allocations through markets, prices as signals of value, commodification of a wide range of resources and needs including labour, the generation of profit and accumulation of wealth in the form of capital.

Inequality is an essential element in this mix because it is needed to reward those qualities and behaviours which are seen as virtuous to capitalism - things like effort, enterprise, risk taking, frugality and fortitude. Max Weber<sup>1</sup> would have us believe that such virtues were also fundamental to the Protestant ethic - or at least the Calvinist strain of the Protestant ethic.

Whether we are Calvinist or not, probably none of us here tonight would disagree with the idea that some people in life deserve to be better off than others because they have worked harder or saved harder or been more enterprising or more thrifty. All of us probably also accept that if we had a political economy where everyone ended up with exactly the same despite their effort and initiative there would be much less incentive to work hard and to take risks. We probably would all expect that such society would be poorer materially as a result as seen in dysfunctional states such as Zimbabwe where property rights have been interfered with quite arbitrarily.

Whether or not you are Calvinist, the fact that you are here tonight suggests to me that you share my view that there should be a limit to inequality.

The idea of such a limit is of course a moral one and it is a moral position which the Christian Church in New Zealand and elsewhere has struggled with for some decades. This struggle is not really over the essential idea of some limit to inequality. That idea is well established both in the gospels as well as in historical and contemporary Church teaching.

The struggle I suggest that the Church is having is with convincing the secular world that its concerns for growing inequality are relevant. This struggle may have at least three challenges

- the challenge of engaging a disinterested public on the issue of social equity,
- the related challenge of presenting inequality as a moral question in an increasingly amoral society and finally
- the difficulty of imbruing the Church with some type of valid moral authority.

The demise of the Christian Church as a source of moral authority was well underway by the time Pakeha settlement of New Zealand began in the mid -19<sup>th</sup> century. This meant of course that the New Zealand state was solidly secular from its beginning and that there has always been a clear and widely accepted separation of the Church and State in New Zealand's public life. This being the case it is somewhat interesting then that our national anthem makes explicit reference to God and that oaths and declarations are commonly made with the Bible. This must surely indicate that the notion of God, rather than that of religion had a significant influence on New Zealand's moral compass.

There is some doubt that this is still the case. The 2013 Census reported that for the first time -in the history of Censuses at least, the majority of New Zealanders did not identify

as Christians. In the 2006 Census nearly 56% of those people answering the religious affiliation question identified as Christians<sup>ii</sup> and 34% identified as having no religion. By 2013 the percentage of New Zealanders claiming to be Christians had dropped to 49% while those claiming no religion had risen to 42%.

These changes may simply be a rejection of religion and not of some sort of belief in God. In my opinion there is however little evidence that spiritual life in New Zealand has merely shifted its focus away from organised religion. Granted ANZAC Day is increasingly being seen as a sacred day but this is probably only to those who are descendants of war veterans. On the other hand the Treaty of Waitangi is now seen in more pragmatic ways than it was a decade or so ago.

There is little evidence of any spiritual dimension in New Zealand's public life and few encouraging signs of an emerging or resurging spirituality in the private lives of most New Zealanders. We have as a national community become more amoral and materialistic and increasingly individualistic and less engaged with our neighbours. These are the fruits of the neo-liberal agenda unleashed by Douglas and Richardson. Through a sort of ratchet effect the norms and behaviours encouraged by their priorities have become embedded into our society as the norms and behaviours we should expect and accept. Persistent and perhaps rising inequality and a public indifference to it are the consequences of this shift.

I hope that these claims do not sound like the nostalgic and blinkered protests of an aging churchman lamenting the loss of an era when church pews and collection plates were full. As we all know there were significant failings in national history around justice and inclusion. The Church should accept its share of blame for its contribution to these failings. Thankfully we live in more enlightened times. I think we do need to acknowledge these failings, apologise for them and recalibrate our moral compasses to ensure they are not repeated somehow.

These claims of a New Zealand public life without a spiritual dimension and of private lives that are increasingly amoral, materialistic and individualistic, are made because of a fear I have that we as a country have no moral compass to guide our public policies. We have no way of deciding for example the question of how much inequality is too much because we have no moral basis to measure social change and social progress by.

The Church, perhaps through its moral influence on its members as voters may have provided something of a moral basis for public policy in the past. It is doubtful that the Church has this influence today. Rather it appears to have quite limited means for professing and promoting its moral vision for our society, and in particular its moral position on inequality.

We still have some means however and in my opinion we are called on to exercise these as best we can and to do so courageously and generously.

I would like suggest that there are at least four elements in this duty or mission.

The first is that of prophesy - not in the sense of predicting the future but in the sense of offering a prophetic vision of what New Zealand, and the world for that matter, could be like if we were more generous and loving and built institutions which were more just and inclusive.

The second is that of action. That we need as Christians and as part of the Church to work tangibly toward a more just society. We need to be looking to create heaven on earth through acts of charity and justice. Charity by itself is just not enough in part because it can obscure and even apologise for unjust structures. But neither is a heartless call for justice that is not informed by and demonstrated by practical actions which assist and include the poor.

There is however a potential dilemma in this dichotomy between charity and justice. It appears to me that this Government's stance on the delivery of social assistance programmes is partly based on a reliance on NGO's such as The Salvation Army and Presbyterian Support. For example it seems likely that if re-elected a National led government will begin the transfer of state houses to NGO social housing providers including perhaps The Salvation Army. Such a move I have no doubt will be viewed by those on the left as privatisation and that the NGO agencies involved are complicit in this. Such a move will I expect be presented in terms of the failure of state agencies such as Housing New Zealand to deliver decent social housing outcomes and by the need to tap the energy and on-the-ground skills of NGO housing providers.

The Salvation Army would argue with neither of these perspectives as there is some truth in both. The Army would however argue that any public policy change - in social housing or elsewhere, should be based fundamentally on notions of social justice and not on notions of charity. If our social history tells us only one thing it should be that there is a limit to how much we can rely on charity to relieve poverty and to deliver social justice.

The third element of the Church's response is that of bearing witness.

Following World War II the German peoples' argument against having some moral responsibility for the Holocaust and the concentration camps was that they didn't know it was happening. The truth probably is that they didn't make a great effort to find out and on any account the witnesses had been silenced.

The lesson here in my view is that injustice in this world will continue if people are not prepared to witness it. As Christians we are called on to be such witnesses.

Ideally we should give a voice to the poor and oppressed rather than being their voice. Regardless of who is the witness it remains important that the experiences of the poor are examined and that their stories told so that we as a national community cannot claim ignorance and deny any moral responsibility. Such responsibility should apply to issues of poverty and injustice worldwide and not just here in New Zealand.

Finally there is of course faith. For me this faith has several dimensions. There is the faith behind action - that if we act with good will and with an open heart then our work will be worthwhile and good. There is also that faith involved in our communion. Matthew 18:20 says 'For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them'. Those of you here tonight will know that Christ is amongst **us and** that he is guiding us in our thinking and actions. With Christ with us we cannot fail to make a difference.

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<sup>i</sup> This reference is to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

<sup>ii</sup> This figure includes people claiming affiliation to a Maori Christian church or denomination