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## Christopher Hitchens and ethics without God

### RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*



Christopher Hitchens does get you thinking. In today's contributions to *Eureka Street*, my colleague Herman Roborgh [wrestles](#) with the relevance of his argument for Islam. Here I would like to take up one of the issues which he often raises: whether ethical thinking needs to include God.

Before discussing the reasons for this assertion, I would like to despatch arguments that are untenable. It has long been argued that if people do not believe in a God who will judge and sentence them to hell for bad actions, they will feel free to act outrageously. The large number of people who believe neither in God nor in hell but act ethically argue against this claim.

The same evidence tells against the claim that individuals will not act or think ethically unless they believe in God. Most theists have friends with no religious belief whose delicacy of conscience and integrity we can only admire. Furthermore, the seriousness with which organisations and people from different backgrounds reflect on the ethical dimensions of research and governance argue that worthwhile ethical reflection does not depend on belief in God.

It would also be unjust to dismiss as worthless any ethical system that does not include reference to God. The slogans used to summarise the central claims of most ethical systems offer a good guide to behaviour. If we regularly sought the greatest good of the greatest number, weighed the consequences of different courses of action, did our duty and asked what would make us truly happy, we would be following substantially reliable ethical guides. The question at issue is how well-grounded are the ethical systems that underlie such good ethical advice.

The argument that ethical thinking needs to include God has partly to do with the need for a firm logical grounding of ethics, and partly comes from reflection on culture. It picks up Nietzsche's insights into the climactic character of the death of God in Western society. He saw the disappearance of God from culture as a given, but he associated it with terror and not equanimity. His world without God was a world for heroes, not for the complacent.

The difference made by including God in ethical thinking can best be seen reflecting on the claim that other people and the world make on me. We can answer that question in two broad ways. One is to say that when we respond to others and to our world, we respond to values that are already given in them. We recognise their value and respond to what we recognise. For theists who see things in this way, God is the source of value in our world, and so gives space for the ethical quest. God also gives continuity in our own human journeys. We have a

history of response to value, and not simply a series of disconnected actions.

Without God it is difficult to find space for values that precede our judgment. It is more reasonable to say that individuals choose their own values, and that we make ourselves by the choices we make. We decide to give value to people and the world. This is the second way of dealing with the claim that other people make on me. To an outsider, it has some difficulties. It is hard to see why we should prefer other values when they conflict with our own self interest. It also seems difficult to establish common values except by majority opinion and to impose them except by legislation. Finally, the freedom that is given by the emphasis on individual choice will tend to become a burden if we have no sense of a significant human journey that can give meaning to our choices.

The God whom this argument claims is needed in ethics is not another character within our world. God is seen as the condition of the space necessary for an ethical life to have significance.

What are we to make of this argument? Its strength lies in its description of the character of Christian morality, and its commendation of the space that it offers for depth in recognising value, in finding common moral ground with others, and in allowing a dramatic sense of human life as a moral journey.

But the argument is not conclusive in dismissing the value of ethical frameworks that make no mention of God. It is the first step in a conversation that invites other large views of the ethical life to describe in their own terms how they find the deep human qualities that Christians preserve by grounding ethics in God.

## When Hitchens met Brennan

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

For those seeking a barometer of current thinking on important questions of meaning and values, ABC TV's [Q&A](#) is a good place to start.

Chaired by genial but incisive host Tony Jones, every Thursday at 9.30pm it lines up a panel of five opinion makers, usually including a few politicians. They field questions on current events from ordinary members of the public, both in the studio audience, and from viewers at home. This interactivity is a large part of its appeal.

Last Thursday's edition was a treat. Its panel was a bit different to normal, as it eschewed the usual politicians, and instead featured people representing different perspectives on belief. These included one of the leading new atheists, British author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, [Christopher Hitchens](#).

And he didn't disappoint. As much as I disagree with his point of view, I have to concede he was an able and sharp debater, relentless in nailing the other panelists, pointing out flaws and inconsistencies in their arguments, and he was master of the witty and cutting riposte.

But the other panelists proved to be worthy opponents. They included Jesuit priest and social activist, Fr Frank Brennan; lecturer in politics and former spokesperson for the Islamic Council of Victoria, Waleed Aly; academic, and former editor of *The Monthly*, Sally Warhaft; and deputy director of the Sydney Institute, Anne Henderson.

The overarching theme, atheism versus religion, was timely. The new atheists seem to be riding a wave of popularity. I'm beginning to view them as a religious movement, in that there is a consistency in their message that deals with big questions of meaning and values, they are producing a stream of [literature](#) that is being actively promulgated and promoted, and they are carrying this out with evangelical, if not fundamentalist zeal.

To show I'm not alone in this view, this week the Atheist Foundation of Australia [announced](#) that in March 2010 it will host a Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne whose theme is 'The Rise of Atheism'. The keynote speaker will be [Richard Dawkins](#). *The Age's* [report](#) on the convention carried the headline, 'High-priest of atheism on his way'. Sounds like it will rival the Hillsong Convention held every year in Sydney.

This view was reflected in a question to Hitchens from a member of the Q&A audience: 'You typically stereotype religious people as dogmatic and fundamentalist ... How is this when people who listen to you feel as if you are the one being dogmatic and fundamentalist in your evangelical pursuit to convert the world to atheism?'

In a nutshell, he rejected the view that this is 'what I do, or what I'm like', and he even went on to concede that religion has some worth, that 'religion is ineradicable ... it was our first attempt at philosophy, just as it was our first attempt at health care, cosmology, astronomy and so on'.

Brennan then made the sensible point to Hitchens that 'you do concede that religion is ineradicable, so given that reality ... why not drop the bagging and smearing, and let's say the solution is respectful public discourse? We judge things by their fruits, and if there be arguments which are put which are misconceived, then we talk that out.'

Notwithstanding some grimaces, groans and sharp words, and an entertaining little [spat](#) between Hitchens and Henderson, this edition of *Q&As* is an example of this sort of respectful discourse. I think it's fair to say it shed more light than heat on the subjects it traversed.

The final question from the audience formed a neat conclusion: 'Many non-believers facing death change their minds about religion. Is that fear or comfort?'

All the panelists answered the question, but Hitchens was given the final word, and he held implacably to his atheist position: 'It's a religious falsification that people like myself scream for a priest at the end ... Most of us go to our ends with dignity. If we don't and if it is the wish for fear or comfort, then both of these things are equally delusory, as religion is itself.'

## Catholic dogs and the new sectarianism

MEDIA

*Tim Kroenert*

'Catholic dog, sitting on a log, eating maggots out of a frog.' An ugly rhyme, cruel words whispered with the kind of venom that only a child could muster. But it's an insult that echoes the broader prejudices of a society divided along sectarian lines. Children inherit bigotry from their parents, and naïve taunting can become ingrained as prejudice.



*Marrying Out*, a two-part radio series for ABC Radio National's [Hindsight](#) program, reflects upon the hereditary nature of prejudice. It recalls an Australian society of the early to mid 20th century, where colonial rivalries between the English and Irish manifested as festering mistrust between Protestants and minority Catholics.

As a born Protestant with no strong denominational allegiance, who grew up after the sectarian divide had healed, I found little in the series to connect with. It serves as an intriguing historical document of intolerance in Australian society, but the emphasis on nostalgia (and to be fair, *Hindsight's* focus is on social history) means it will resonate most strongly with the generation that lived it.

The series' producer, writer and self-described 'recalcitrant Irish Catholic' [Siobhan McHugh](#), engages her subjects in conversation to revisit a time where mixed marriages between Protestants and Catholics attracted discrimination at best, the threat of physical violence and disinheritance by disapproving parents at worst.

Part one, *Not In Front of the Altar* (Sunday 11 October, 2pm), recalls the commitment and hardships of couples that married across the sectarian divide. Part 2, *Between Two Worlds* (Sunday 18 October, 2pm) takes up the perspective of children who grew up in the hybrid and often rocky world of such mixed marriage families.

The stories are moving, the monologues laid alongside each other and sewn together with snippets of religious music. Occasionally they are spliced with re-enacted insults (see above) or quotes from job advertisements that stipulate, 'Roman Catholics need not apply'. These exemplify the worst instances of explicit ill-feeling.

McHugh, who spent three years collecting the stories, brings a sense of quiet outrage to her narration. Her mild Irish accent serves as a hint of where her historical sympathies may lie, although if there is blame to be allocated, it is directed towards neither Protestants nor Catholics, but to the human propensity for distrust and hatred.

Wherever there is difference there is fear, and the stories shared in *Marrying Out* remind us that fear devours love and can lead to irreparable fractures within families, within societies,

and within an individual's own faith.

Its theme of acceptance beyond the boundaries of difference resonates in a modern society where people of many and no religions abide side by side. If the series more usefully pointed to the 'new sectarianism' brought about by erecting barriers between Muslims and non-Muslims, it may have more effectively crossed the generational divide.



## Big broods and helicopter parenting

### PARENTING

Sarah Kanowski



Recently my parents attended the funeral of a friend who was the father of ten children. Yes, ten. They were all there, plus grandkids and great-grandkids, filling up the church and paying tribute to the departed patriarch by whistling *Ave Maria*, a feat for which he was famed.

It seems nowadays that to have that number of children is the provenance of movie stars who cherry-pick needy infants from around the globe. On the other hand, for a regular Joe and Josie such fecundity will itself guarantee you a kind of freak celebrity status; witness America's '[Octomom](#)', who is in the process of having a reality TV show made about her and her brood.

But among my parents' generation of Catholics, having a large family was nothing extraordinary. They themselves had seven (of which I am the last), and we knew many others with five, six, eight or more, though it was generally agreed that with 13 the Massinghams were starting to push the envelope.

For those of us challenged by raising one or two children, this seems the achievement of not merely a previous generation, but of another aeon. A time when Colossuses strode the earth, begetting and begatting; a mythological era, earlier and murkier than even that of Zeus and Hera, more akin to the ancient race of Titans who preceded them.

And as the remnant of an almost-vanished breed I feel I owe a debt to history to record something of the experience. Simply put, it was wonderful. A village within four walls, the sheer numbers meant that amidst the shifting alliances of siblings there was always someone on side and someone available.

When I appeared, my eldest brother and sister were dragooned as godparents, and while the joke was that our parents had run out of friends, it was a great gift to have a spread of older siblings able to offer a different kind of advice and sympathy than parents can. As adults we are all good friends, with the happy recognition that we actually like one another beyond the involuntary ties of biology and history.

But it is not just the children; large families also produce a different kind of parent. While the logistics of caring for a small army demanded certain simplicities and severities, there was also a freedom unimaginable to many children today. Vastly outnumbered, there was no chance for adults to practice the kind of helicopter parenting common to my own generation, where we hover over our one or two, soothing and solving.

The shift to a society of 'Little Emperors' (as the phenomenon is termed in China) has

far-reaching consequences. There are certain useful qualities cultivated, I can assure you, by being seventh in line!

Although scientists warn the planet cannot sustain the booming global population, there is environmental sense in many people sharing one home and its resources, rather than a mass of little families each with its own car, clothes-dryer and fridge.

Even more significant, is the assumption of affluence that has grown as we've shrunk. We complain that we can only afford to have one or two children, but these go on overseas holidays and have televisions in their bedrooms. Our families are smaller but the lifestyles are bigger.

Psychologist Steve Biddulph identifies the biggest challenge facing modern parents as 'coming second in your own life. That's not what consumer culture teaches you.' But it was an unavoidable lesson for the parents of large families, and not only in a material sense. The tribe of these mothers I know, now in their 70s and 80s, are remarkable in their selflessness and patience (qualities sometimes developed, it is true, alongside a paternal gruffness).

I am not imagining that parenting so many children was idyllic, and the simple fact is many choose not to now that our consciences and contraceptives permit. One of nine children, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney recalls his mother, 'doomed by biology' to 'nothing but parturition and potato-peeling *in saecula saeculorum*'.

Yet, as I and the other tail ends of these long comets of procreation confess secretly to one another, one or two just doesn't feel like a real family. 'What about Christmas?' the youngest of six and the mother of two anxiously whispered to me recently. And don't even think about the funeral.

## Getting fair, not tough, on immigration

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Kerry Murphy*

‘Complementary protection’ is a new idea in Australian migration law. A Bill to [introduce](#) complementary protection is now before the Parliament. It will extend Australia’s protection obligations to other areas of international human rights law which previously could not be directly accessed.



The changes mean that people who previously did not meet the narrow refugee definition, but for various reasons could not be sent back to their home country, may now be able to get protection in Australia. This includes people who may come under the Torture Convention and International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Some examples of people who fit the complementary definition may include those who are at genuine risk of execution in their home country. In Iran, homosexuals have been executed, while in some countries women are at risk of execution for accusations of ‘adultery’, which in some cultures has a very wide definition. Such cases may or may not meet the refugee definition, but will benefit from complementary protection.

The tests proposed in the new law will improve compliance with Australia’s international human rights law obligations but they do not fully encompass these international obligations. There are limits built into the legislation. This may reflect the political reality of getting such legislation passed, given the opposition has indicated it will vote against these improvements.

Academics and advocates in the field welcome this reform, even though they see gaps in the coverage. Some gaps include how cases under the Statelessness Convention would be dealt with as well as other ICCPR rights such as the right to privacy and family life. The definitions may also be over-restrictive and too narrow to benefit some of the genuine but complex cases that remain in limbo.

Currently the process to access a type of complementary protection is cumbersome and not transparent. It requires an applicant to lose two cases before these complementary protection issues can be considered.

A person who would meet ‘complementary protection’ obligations but not the refugee convention must go through the refugee process with Immigration, then apply to the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT). Then after losing the RRT case they can make a request to the Minister under section 417 for his personal intervention.

It is overly bureaucratic to require such a long and messy process before the Minister has jurisdiction to consider the complementary protection issues. This process is wasteful on

resources as well as stressful for the applicants.

Under the proposed law, a person who, say, fits the Torture Convention, but not the Refugee Convention, can have their case assessed at the primary level by an immigration officer rather than having to wait until the Minister can look at the case. There have been calls to reform the 'ministerial intervention' processes under section 417 for many years but this is the first serious legislative attempt to improve the system.

The reforms will provide some clarity into this complex area. It also brings Australia's domestic law closer to the practices that have existed in Europe and Canada for many years.

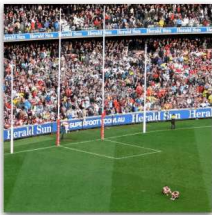
It is not clear how many cases will be affected but from experience, I think the numbers will be relatively small. A person who fits the definitions of complementary protection will get the same 'protection visa' as someone who meets the refugee definition.

This reform has been needed for more than a decade. The changes will hopefully mean there will be sensible and humane improvements in a system that has for too long just been tampered with to make it tighter, not fairer. Maintaining sovereignty and respecting human rights need not be seen as being in conflict.

## The wet sheep: a football eulogy

BY THE WAY

*Brian Matthews*



It is just before 7am on Monday 21 September and I am starting the running week, as usual, amid the customary outraged squawking of circling galahs and under the beady, territorial gaze of magpies on fence posts and high sentinel boughs.

My route — a rural backtrack — is tough and vertiginous, ideal for engendering thought, speculation and ideas. For some people this happens under the morning shower. For me, it takes place out on the 'road', rain, hail or shine: finances, schemes, problems, what to write in the next column — all at some time or another join the passing parade in my imagination.

But on this morning, 21 September, my visionary gaze is uncompromising and focused. Before my mind's eye unfolds the broad green expanse of the MCG surrounded by thousands and thousands of tiered spectators. Round the outer wing speeds the compact figure of Leigh Montagna and racing out to meet the low bullet-like pass he is about to deliver is the brilliant, tireless Nick Riewoldt.

It will be another goal for the Saints and their Grand Final win is assured ...

On Tuesday, about the same time, a paralysing eight-goal first quarter pretty well wraps it up for the Saints and they cruise home despite a late Geelong revival.

On Wednesday morning — trouble. Four goals behind at three-quarter time, the Saints turn on a slogging last ditch effort to squeeze in by three points.

On Thursday morning I probably would have played through the presentation of the cup and the award to Norm Smith Medallist, the Saints' Nick Dal Santo, but I had to be up packing and preparing for our drive to Melbourne. I had one ticket — standing room — won in the club ballot. My wife, joined by our two Melbourne-based sons, would watch it on the big screen.

It rained all the way to Bordertown where we stayed the night and where all the motel staff either barracked for St Kilda or, their own fancy having been eliminated, were preferring the Saints. And it rained all the way from Bordertown to Melbourne. Just before the Ercildoune-Learmonth turn off I noticed a lamb crouched beside a paddock fence, soaked, bedraggled and bewildered. Since there was not a single sheep to be seen between that fence and the distant, storm-swept horizon I sadly realised that this little one was doomed.

In Carlton, at our customary accommodation, the foyer was decorated with St Kilda and

Geelong colours, and the vibrant anticipation of the young woman at the reception desk jarred on my now pathological state of morbid anxiety.

Further afield, the city hummed with excitement and drummed with bursts of rain that did not at all spoil the parade nor sour anyone's enthusiasm. Newspapers, billboards, shop fronts and trams flowered with red-white-and-black and blue-and-white displays. Pubs rang with shouted statistics, arguments, exhortations; waiters in restaurants served their dishes subtitled with various kinds of footy bias and in Lygon Street the chefs twirled their pizzas in the air with impossible panache and shouted 'Go Saints' and 'Go Cats' with a devil-may-care exuberance possible only for the genuinely uncommitted.

Nervous about my standing room ticket, I abandoned the family breakfast and walked to the 'G by 9.30. Under cover and with an excellent view of the whole ground from behind the seats on the outer wing, I struck up immediate friendships with Tony and Peter and Roger and Keith — all stalwarts of the red, white and black — and joined wholeheartedly in a whinge about the weather, the ticketing process which saw members like us pay amounts beyond the dreams of avarice to stand all day, and the television set serving our section which, of course wouldn't you know, wasn't working.

And so we stood there together in Section M14 as the crowd grew and the pressure of bodies intensified and the rain curtained in grey swathes across the ground and the Saints fell just short. Then I walked back from the 'G and next day we drove off.

It rained all the way home and on the Monday morning — 28 September — with everything back to the usual routine, I ran dolefully down the track. In my mind's eye there was no flag, there were no running leaping swooping figures. There was no sunlit green expanse of the oval with its precise goal squares and the curve of the 50m lines and the centre circle and the white boundaries and a huge crowd like a vast pointillist painting.

Try as I might, I could not summon up those exciting scenes as I had so effortlessly done a week earlier. All I saw, over and over, was the corner of a distant paddock, with the rain streaming down on one small, abandoned and thoroughly defeated lamb.

## **Kisses of life and death**

POETRY

*Ian C. Smith*

### **Kisses**

The kiss of peace in the Eucharist  
blown kisses, others chasing away tears  
Judas' kiss of death, CPR's of life  
Georgie Porgie's, spin the bottle's  
beguiling curls in front of the ears  
Hardy's kiss on Nelson's dying lips  
like Juliet's last, heartbroken kiss.  
Doisneau's lovers in a Paris crowd  
the kiss of a rolling billiard ball  
John Smith's and Pocahontas' cross-cultural kiss  
Rodin's swooning kiss, ditto Klimt's  
a baby's wet kiss tickling your heart  
Satchmo's kiss to build a dream on  
crosses ending letters of love.  
Manuel Puig's spidery woman's kiss  
that kiss in surf from here to eternity  
sad steamed-up kisses through plexiglass  
Gene Simmons' great tongue Kiss  
young cowboys' kisses up a mountain  
the opportune kiss met under mistletoe  
our first feverish crazy in love kisses.

### **Nureyev**

His defection is a breathtaking ballon

from the Soviet empire to Paris  
a leap from the Kirov on bloodied feet  
to jete around the world's capitals  
eclipsing all other male dancers  
except maybe mad Nijinsky's ghost.  
Surely, they gossip, he is Margot's lover  
but such love is for the spotlights.  
Tatar cheekbones and intractability  
those flared nostrils, bouncy entrances  
his urge, need, to prompt applause  
also lights up the brightest A-lists.  
When he is finally allowed home  
by way of a thaw, and Gorbachev's Raisa  
nudging her man to open the Iron Curtain  
to let in a glint of western light  
his knees worse than a footballer's  
he is already dying of the new scourge  
denying it, but his old mum who waited  
his being a quintessential Russian tale  
can't recognise or speak to him.  
Snow muffles his dad's grave, the past.  
Envious KGB agents watch him.  
He ignores them, listening to Scriabin.  
Such light shining on the snow.  
His visa is for forty-eight hours.  
**Collecting old footballers**  
My brother leaves another message.



I hear his keening two rooms away  
the wary gaps like accusations.  
He sounds troubled, the machine his priest.  
He doesn't leave his number, ask me  
to call back with news, my point of view  
just delivers his report, sadly.  
He lists names of former footballers  
he has recognised and spoken to  
of bygone years when these men were known.  
He shares nothing else of his life now.  
If I pick up, though I've lost the knack  
he deflects me, scorns the present day  
his train of thought a reverse straight track.  
Does he prowl the streets scanning faces  
of broad men with awkward limps, lost stars  
then zero in like *This is Your Life*?  
Does his heart beat quicker when he sees  
them run in those days when they were brave  
when grand battles echoed long ago?  
Do they stand between him and the grave?

### **Youth hostel friendship**

The world spins hotter & still they write  
across hemispheres, war zones  
past & present reduced by biro  
letters, lightweight gifts & comments.  
Only death could thwart their turn.  
Foreign stamps' familiarity reassures.

They reach for kettles, glasses  
read prudent ripples of de facto success  
rendered timorous by trivia  
the promise of children as future envoys.  
Their minds' tapes of half-afraid youth  
replay travel's fizz, days of hope.  
They prop letters on mantelpieces  
measure the years' march  
focus on steady, modest, achievement.

## If Facebook died

### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

*Drew Taylor*

What if it stopped working? What if, one day, Facebook suddenly and irrevocably ceased to exist?

Every morning now, when I boot up my computer and begin my ritual of Facebook, email and game culture news blogs, I ask myself that question. And, if it did die, how many people in my office would be immediately overwhelmed by a giant sense of loss and confusion?



Furthermore, how many people on my Friends List would I no longer have contact details for? How many would I continue to see 'outside of the computer'? Or, would I hope to catch them again on Xbox Live, or meet up with them in *SecondLife*, *World of Warcraft*, or in PlayStation's virtual construct, *Home*?

Just how many of my day's meaningful interactions would I lose?

I blame the Digital Distribution Summit: Small Games, Big Market for my recent musings. Held in Melbourne over three days last week, the event brought together game studios, developers and business investors to discuss the big business opportunities presented by the rapidly growing digital game distribution market.

The summit examined recently released statistics that indicate that the Australian game industry will increase from \$1.5 billion to \$2.2 billion over the next five years, and that online and wireless games will constitute 60 per cent of the market by 2013.

The numbers aren't surprising, particularly for avid gamers and music lovers. For years, companies have been training us to accept and embrace digital goods over physical ones. Most notably, Apple turned the music world on its head when downloadable iTunes became the desirable alternative to shop-bought CDs and DVDs.

Then Microsoft unveiled the Xbox 360 and introduced gamers to the notion of 'microtransactions': small online purchases of game content, bought directly from Microsoft. At first it was just avatar pics, dashboard themes and additional DLC (downloadable content) for the game you'd just bought from EB Games. Now, however, all of the major devices and companies are cashing in, selling everything from Tokidoki-branded avatar clothing to video and TV content, experimental apps, premium DLC and entire games.

Of more interest to the Facebook addict is the integration of social networks. Photos taken with a Nintendo DSi can be directly uploaded to Facebook from any wireless hotspot. Xbox Live is soon to include Twitter, Facebook and Last.FM. Soon-to-be-released PS3 game

*Uncharted 2* will have options that allow the game to automatically update a Twitter account whenever a player earns a trophy, connects to a multiplayer game or finishes a level.

Economically and logistically, the trend towards the digital distribution of content is an obvious strategy. Doing away with physical goods drastically lowers production costs, eliminates the retail middleman and provides direct access to consumers. For us, the end users, this translates into a lower price point, an international scope and (hopefully) an improved, faster service.

But the change towards a greater reliance on digital distribution comes with a number of hidden price tags. One of these is the impact on our social networks and interactions.

To embrace the advantages of the digital age, we've had to create proxies of ourselves; virtual constructs, complete with profiles, gamertags, avatars and 'homes'. We've become transients, creating and recreating our likeness with each new technology.

Now, we're living web pages, uploading and downloading our experiences. People don't interact with us, they interact with our digital selves; updated daily with profile status changes and ever-evolving avatars.

Our Friends List is our new sense of community, as open or as closed as we choose it to be. Indeed, many of the digital goods we purchase serve only to recreate and supplicate our virtual identities. We've traded-in our IKEA-furnished brick and mortar homes for IKEA-furnished dwellings in *SecondLife* and *Home*.

In a sense, we've fundamentally shifted the space we occupy, handing over our lives and a large number of our social interactions to the devices and companies that provide them. Our proxies become dependent on a server on the other side of the world; our social networks on the proprietary-driven device we hold in our hand.

Of more portent, though, is the fact that, often, we don't own those identities, and they can be wiped at the whim of the provider. (Don't believe me? Just check that disclaimer you scroll over without reading when you sign up!)

Have we taken the first step towards 'trusting the computer' too much? And once we're adept at living through a proxy, will our flesh-and-blood friends and colleagues one day give way to new relationships with other 'slightly less human' constructs?

Or, is this a brave new arena, with a new set of rules and a new (possibly, exciting) definition for the phrase 'meaningful interaction'?

I suspect the answers lie in the number of ones and zeroes we continue to ingest, what we're willing to trade.

But, wait, give me a moment to post the questions up on my Facebook profile, and I'll let you know what my friends think ...

## Deadly tsunami and dangerous pride

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



On Friday, *The Australian* proudly [ran](#) with its story 'Aussies top world list of national pride'. It was about a survey reported in *The Economist* that revealed Australians have the highest degree of support for their own country out of 33 nationalities polled by the New York based Reputation Institute.

Traditionally pride is one of the seven deadly sins. But it's widely recognised that a positive self-image plays an important role in buoying our spirits and enabling us to achieve our potential. We are all proud of somebody in our midst who does well, and we attend closely to a piece of news that makes us all look good.

The source of Australia's current wave of pride is the assessment by many economists that we are the country that was least affected by the recession.

Pride is often merited. But it's worth asking questions, as it is often derived from hollow or misleading information that has been carefully selected. In the case of Australia being recession-proof, it's largely a matter of the fortuitous circumstances of China's appetite for our primary resources. We all know this is the case, but it easily slips from consciousness.

A glance at the [website](#) of the Reputation Institute reveals that pride has more than a little to do with the health of a company's bottom line.

A 2007 *Business Week* article on the 'new science of spin' [argues](#) that a struggling company is more likely to rescue itself by reengineering its reputation than improving its products. The implication is that it is failing its shareholders if it does not engage in this particular form of embellishment (or deception). Like tax minimisation, it's often legal but not moral.

Moreover a *Crikey* [media analysis](#) of the parochial Australian press reaction to last week's Samoan earthquake and tsunami shows that editors can play on people's sense of pride to sell newspapers, at the cost of those who really need our attention.

The *Cairns Post* managed to inject a 'local hero' angle into its coverage of the disaster, giving the impression that the survival of the family of a Cairns man added up to a happy ending for all concerned. The scant reporting of the suffering that remained was relegated to pages 8 and 9.

It's well worth comparing with the information published on the [website](#) of Caritas Australia. Caritas' emphasis is that survivors are not at all relieved. They are suffering

psychological trauma, and preoccupied with fear of another tsunami that could be imminent. They need our help.

We are often amused by the way politicians use their 'spin doctors' to turn bad news into good. We think we can see through it, and don't take it too seriously. But the misuse and manipulation of information can have adverse consequences for third parties. Misplaced pride can be a deadly sin. On the other hand, compassion for the victims of last week's natural disasters would be something Australians could be proud of.

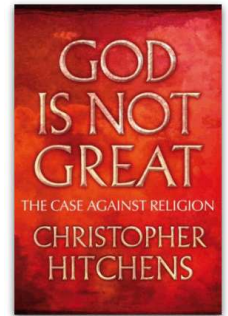
## Christopher Hitchens' illogical atheism

### SPIRITUALITY

Neil Ormerod

The age of muscular evangelical Christianity has passed to be replaced by the age of muscular evangelical atheism. The Christopher Hitchens bandwagon was [in town](#) as part of Sydney's 'Festival of Dangerous Ideas'. On Saturday night the author of *God is Not Great* spoke on the topic of 'religion poisons everything'.

Religion, he claims, makes us serfs of God, an omnipresent father-figure who will not go away and let us all grow up. Time to cast off the shackles of belief and stand as adults without the fear of God looking over our shoulder.



Hitchens' presence caught my attention while driving home, as he was [interviewed](#) on ABC Radio by Richard Glover. I was struck by how quickly he spoke, presumably to cover up the gaps in the logic of his position. However the conversation moved on from God to Hitchens' support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; God once more disappeared from the public airways.

Listener response via SMS included some muddled defences of religion as well strident support for the author, but what caught my attention was one SMS that criticised Hitchens for his arrogance. It was impossible to claim to know that God does or does not exist, so it was arrogant for Hitchens to claim to know that God does not exist.

It seemed to me that this caller captured something of the 'spirit of the age'. For all intents and purposes God's existence, or non-existence, is viewed as beyond the scope of reason to settle. The existence of God is purely a matter of faith, not reason.

It is interesting to note how far we are from an earlier world view in Christianity where it was clear to everyone that it is possible to know God's existence through the use of reason, for example through Aquinas' '[five ways](#)'. Indeed not so long ago Vatican I (1869–70) taught that it is possible to know the existence of God through reason. Vatican II repeated this teaching in the Constitution on Divine Revelation, [Dei Verbum](#).

The nature and causes of this shift have been exhaustively examined in the major work by Charles Taylor, [A Secular Age](#). There are religious, philosophical and political forces at work in a process that took centuries to arrive at our current cultural assumption, that God's existence lies beyond the reach of reason.

And it is just that, an assumption. Who among us have seen a proof that God's existence cannot be reached through the use of reason? We generally just take it as given. In fact we're

embarrassed by the suggestion that God's existence might actually be something one can know through reason.

Religiously, Luther's split between faith and reason were a major factor; philosophically Kant added intellectual respectability to Luther by declaring God's existence to be beyond the reach of reason, though still a necessary postulate for practical reason and moral behaviour. But what interests me are the political forces at work.

The post-reformation wars of religion clearly gave God a bad name in the West. Religious belief had proved itself politically divisive and destructive. A new political *modus vivendi* needed to emerge which would prevent religious rancour from becoming social turmoil.

The Enlightenment solution was to marginalise religion from the public realm, to make it a matter of private choice, not public policy. Whereas the public realm was a realm of reason, the private realm was a matter of individual (and irrational) personal preference.

It was not that God was excluded from the public realm because God could not be known through reason; rather God must be excluded from the public realm, therefore God cannot be known by reason. If in fact God's existence can be known by reason, then the Enlightenment exclusion of religion from public debate cannot be justified. A God that can be known through reason is a dangerous political idea!

Of course all this is a long way from providing what would once be called a 'natural theology'. Taylor is not convinced such a project can be successful. He expends a large amount of energy simply trying to show that the exclusion of God does not necessarily follow from other assumptions that ground our culture. Atheism is not the only possibility. How far we've travelled from Aquinas' 'five ways'!

In the meantime Hitchens and fellow travellers such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) are making a claim for the intellectual high ground. Belief in God is not just viewed intellectually as quaint, but as a sign of intellectual bad will, of clinging to a childish illusion. Perhaps we need to meet them head on at that intellectual level and revisit the teaching of Vatican I (and II).

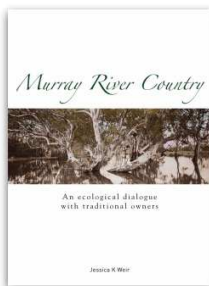


## How Indigenous wisdom can save the Murray Darling Basin

### BOOKS

*Margaret Simons*

**Jessica K. Weir: *Murray River Country — An Ecological Dialogue With Traditional Owners*. Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780855756789. [Online](#)**



The task Weir has set herself in this book is to explain how one of the most pressing ecological crises facing Australia — the decline of the Murray-Darling Basin — might be better understood if we attempt a synthesis between the points of view of the traditional owners and the ‘modern’ engineers for whom the river system is most often conceived as a giant piece of plumbing. Weir includes in her book a fascinating Murray Darling Basin Commission diagram in which the river system is depicted as little more than a set of pipes and valves.

Modernism, in Weir’s lexicon, describes ‘a type of thinking that separates the world into binaries that are placed in oppositional relationships’. Thus, the economic importance of the engineering works along the Murray River is opposed to the ecological and cultural values of the waterway, and understandings of rivers that are to do with more than mega litres and dollars.

What Weir attempts is to convince the reader that the different values we set on a river need not be opposed — that the view of the traditional owners for a healthy river can potentially bring the economics and the ecology into alignment.

Her sources include the bureaucrats and engineers of the Murray Darling Basin Commission on the one side, and on the other the traditional owners who have formed an alliance, the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN) to assert their role in decisions concerning water management.

Weir has set herself a big task. The Murray Darling Basin remains the food basket of the nation, and a big earner of export dollars. Only last week I was in the town of Griffith, a town where, thanks to water brought from the Snowy Mountains scheme, it is still possible to believe in the potent narrative of gardens in the desert. It is no coincidence that the town takes its name from a former NSW Minister for Public works, or that its chief public monument is to the Dethridge wheel — an invention used to meter irrigation water usage. Engineering *is* the dreaming story of so much of white settlement in Australia.

Yet downstream, the narrative of gardens in the desert is, basically, over. In South Australia and western Victoria, fruit trees are dying, grape vines are being ploughed up and a whole constellation of towns are facing the fact that there may be no future for the industries that

have supported them since before the First World War.

Weir does a good job of painting the crisis facing the river — waters that were once clear that are now dangerous to the touch, fish that were once a staple food source that are now dangerous to eat, and a Coorong that is now saltier than the sea.

Against this background it is easy to be convinced that the engineers have failed, and are now, as Weir puts it, 'kept busy devising more and more elaborate ways to address the devastation' while the system is still based on an unsustainable level of extraction of water for irrigation.

But what is to be done? The people who rely on irrigation are real communities, real people. They can't simply depart, even if they wished to do so. As well, we all depend on their ability to grow food. As a Murray Darling Basin farmer of my acquaintance put it recently, 'Once people thought that growing food was a good thing to do. Now it feels as though they think it isn't.'

How can Indigenous people indicate a way forward? Weir describes the ways in which MLDRIN has asserted its different point of view in the context of negotiations with the 'modernists' of water management. A 2007 agreement contained two principles that emphasised both western science and Indigenous knowledge:

'That Indigenous science and Western science each have their own value and role in caring for country. That knowledge and management work together — caring for country creates new knowledge and knowledge helps us better care for country.'

In terms of practical solutions, the result is an advocacy for 'cultural flows' or an allocation of water for the sake of a river system that is conceived as much more than a piece of engineering. The term 'cultural flows' is a compromise by Indigenous people, a term designed to speak to policy makers accustomed to talking about 'environmental flows'. The idea, though, is more than that implied by environmental flows. Cultural water flows would be used for whatever purposes the Indigenous nations saw fit, but in their understanding, any such purpose would necessarily also bring environmental benefits. While the language has been adopted to speak to the 'moderns' in the Indigenous understanding, the purposes are not opposed but connected.

'The cultural flow is not a competition for water,' says Weir. 'It is a philosophical change in water management that respects a living world within which our lives are embedded in ethical relationships of care.'

Weir attempts a great deal, and mostly succeeds. Her book could easily disappear either into academic theorising on the one hand, or feel-good political correctness on the other. Her work is saved from these fates by intellectual rigour combined with good writing and a solid grounding in a real, urgent, and quite possibly insoluble problem.

She offers no easy answers. Clearly, there are none. But Weir's work amounts to a critique of the linear idea of progress. As such, it offers some insights into where we might go from here.

## Roman Polanski and clergy sexual abuse

### RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*

When I see media headlines about child abuse, my response is like that of a family I know, where one of the siblings is a publicly notorious criminal. When his crimes or even similar ones receive publicity, they feel humiliated. They accept the humiliation, as the price you pay even for indirect association with villainy, but they do not welcome it.



That is how I, as a priest and so part of a group that has been identified with the abuse of children, react when there are more headlines about abuse: in weary resignation. If you do the crime, you — and those associated with you — do the time. I simply hope that the news item that reminds me of my humiliation might help someone, somewhere, who has been abused.

So it was in the last few days that I read of the reaction to Roman Polanski's detention and possible extradition to the United States to face an old charge of sexual abuse of a minor.

As the Polanski case was unfolding this week, Vatican United Nations Observer Archbishop Silvano Tomasi was [reported](#) to have claimed that few Catholic priests had abused children, that these were mainly gay, that there was as much abuse in other religious groups as there was among Catholics, that the vast majority of children were abused by relatives, and that there was as much abuse of children in other churches as by Catholic clergy.

Furthermore, he said, the Catholic Church had put its house in order. The implication was that the focus on child abuse in the Catholic Church was disproportionate and discriminatory.

Assuming the Vatican official was rightly reported (something not to be taken for granted), I believe he missed all the things that matter. The consistent spirit of anything we write about sexual abuse must surely be one of compassion for the human beings who are affected by it. Those who are abused, primarily, but then those who are wounded through their relationships with the victims of abuse: their family, friends, wives, husbands, children and — if our compassion stretches so far — the abusers, so often themselves once victims of abuse.

They are the people who matter, and what matters is that they are recognised and that others do not suffer as they did. This must be the focus of those who speak on behalf of groups among whom abuse has taken place.

The focus of Archbishop Tomasi's reported remarks was not on the human reality of abuse, nor on its direct and indirect victims. The comments seemed directed at saving the reputation of the Church as a public institution. And their spirit was less one of compassion than one of judgment. They asked who was to blame for abuse, both within the ranks of Catholic clergy

and in the wider world.

It was an exercise in the transfer of blame, and one potentially damaging to priests who are homosexual. Certainly the remarks did not highlight what matters — the humanity of those affected, and compassion.

Nor are they likely to be effective. I doubt whether Catholics by their own words can redress the damage done to their reputation or establish that they have set their house in order. The only effective words will be spoken by those whose lives have been hurt by abuse. When they speak in gratitude and affection for the way in which they have been heard, compassionately received and healed by representative Catholics, their words will count.

All that said, the arguments made by Archbishop Tomasi are important, provided our focus remains on attending to the victims of abuse, and not on transferring blame. To understand abuse and the experience of those who have been abused we must understand its extent and causes.

Tomasi's own account does not seem internally coherent. If he is right in claiming that abuse is common in many churches and religious groups, and most common in families, it seems highly unlikely that the sexual orientation of abusers is a determining factor. Abuse is likely to have more to do with abusive experience, sexual immaturity and with attitudes to power. But these are all opinions that call for methodical investigation.

His criticism of the focus on the Catholic Church also raises interesting questions. But the central question is not about how fair media coverage has been to the Catholic Church, but how helpful it is to those intimately and indirectly affected by abuse.

In my opinion the public reporting of abuse committed by religious officials has been necessary and helpful in changing attitudes to the abuse of children. I am less convinced, however, that the focus on monsters and punishment, and the repetitive treatment of abuse exposed and dealt with in the courts is helpful. It focuses on blame rather than on compassion, and hinders understanding.

In this respect the story of Polanski is telling. The case for his avoiding extradition has generally received a sympathetic hearing despite the seriousness of his admitted crime. The same sympathy is not generally shown to religious officials who have been tried for less serious acts committed just as many years ago.

I do not say this to complain about double standards, still less to argue that Polanski should be pardoned. What is significant in his case is that there is space to ask difficult questions about whether it is in the public interest to pursue and publicise crimes committed long ago. But the public conversation about sexual abuse in churches has been focused on blame and punishment and had been more resistant to inquiry.

The compassionate are often criticised for being out of touch with reality. In these

questions, as elsewhere, they may actually be more in touch than their critics with what matters.

## Che's revolution without the hype

### FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Che* (M). Running time: 131 minutes (*Part One*), 133 minutes (*Part Two*). Director: Steven Soderbergh. Starring: Benicio Del Toro.**



'Che Christ' has been a popular image among liberal Christians; the face of Christ melded with that of Ernesto Guevara as seen on those ubiquitous Che T-shirts. While it is common for martyrs in literature and popular culture to be cast as Christ figures, in this instance, Christ the radical is cast as a 'Che figure'. It is testament to the virility of Che as a revolutionary symbol that his image is used to augment this understanding of Christ.

In the biopic, *Che*, Steven Soderbergh takes Guevara as far from myth and symbol as possible. Rather than a rousing anthem, *Che* is a forensic account of military action. It shies from the sensational and even the political. It presupposes much historical knowledge as it recounts with clinical detachment two opposing arcs of Che's life: first, the momentous Marxist revolution in Cuba; second, the ill-fated attempt to achieve the same in Bolivia.

Che is portrayed by Del Toro, who, while too old (Guevara is in his late 20s when the film commences; Del Toro was pushing 40 at the time of filming), blends chameleon-like into Che's world. Del Toro's Che is an everyman who has grown into his leadership role in Castro's revolution, after first shaking his insecurities about being an 'outsider' (Che was an Argentine). Che's habit of greeting comrades by name, with an embrace, hints at why he was well loved. Del Toro's intense performance of Che's strangling asthma attacks underline his human frailty.

But this is no *E! True Hollywood Story*. The film neither condemns nor adulates Che and his beliefs, and director Soderbergh asks his audience to invest much. *Che* is four and a half hours, shot with hand-held cameras, and in Spanish with English subtitles. While it is divided into two segments, *Part One* and *Part Two*, it is still heavy going, particularly for those who are not well versed in South and Central American political history. But effort is rewarded; *Che* certainly leaves a lasting impression.

*Part One* is based on Che's memoir *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. It lingers on the minutiae of guerilla warfare, culminating in a tense recreation of the decisive battle at Santa Clara. It has a ramshackle but comprehensive feel, like facts and details scribbled on scraps of paper and scattered across a desktop for academic scrutiny. It has striking features, such as recreations of Che's legendary 1964 UN appearance.

Throughout *Part One*, Che, in a voiceover lifted from his 1964 interview with investigative

journalist Lisa Howard, provides a few narrative signposts and samples of his profound rhetoric. But there is scant information regarding either the activities of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista or those of Fidel Castro after seizing power. In other words the motives of neither the revolutionaries, nor of those that opposed them, are fully explored. The film therefore offers no moral judgment of Che's beloved cause. The viewer is expected to bring this to the table.

*Part Two*, based on Che's *Bolivian Diary*, is more linear than *Part One* and has the relentless intensity of a tragedy. Che arrives in Bolivia to discover that the populace is resistant to an uprising, and that the Communist Party is reluctant to support an armed struggle. The massacre of discontented miners (revealed via radio broadcast) sends an iron-fisted message that undermines Che's revolutionary cause. Government propaganda through the media and the involvement of the US military turn the screws of Che's failure. Both Che and the revolution are doomed.

Soderbergh's commitment to de-politicising his account is both a strength and a weakness. Not only the history but also the present of many South and Central American states are replete with examples of exploitation of the poor, government corruption, and the meddling, for better or worse, of the self-interested United States. Che's story could have been used to condemn this kind of injustice, interrogate the viability of socialism — properly realised — as a solution, or stir up alternative kinds of action. Instead, *Che* is compelling and memorable, but inert.



## ABC's mainstream religion tested, found wanting

MEDIA

*Paul Collins*

I was bemused when I read ABC General Manager Mark Scott's recent comments on the role of religion in the media. Scott allowed Radio National management to axe *The Religion Report*, remove Stephen Crittenden from the religion unit, and declined from December to March to meet a representative group of religious leaders. When he finally met them he made unspecific promises about religion being covered in 'mainstream programs'.



*The Australian* [reported](#) that Scott told a prayer breakfast in Adelaide that the media has trouble covering issues of faith, often framing religion in a political context rather than as personal belief.

He said: 'We train our journalists to be skeptical, to seek out answers, look for documentation and to not accept things on face value ... And part of the challenge about faith is that some of the things we hold to be true ... are not visible, cannot be proven.'

This suggests that Scott defines faith in terms of personal conversion and belief, rather than engagement with the broader community context where faith encounters culture, society, ethics and political reality.

This is a troubling view for the ABC GM to take. Of course belief can't be 'proven', but it certainly can and should be examined. That is what theology is about, faith seeking understanding as Saint Anselm said in the 11th century. But it seems Scott is not conversant with mainstream theology, and this provides a clue as to why he axed *The Religion Report*.

The speech reveals other aspects of Scott's perspective. It reflects an explicitly evangelical Protestant approach which sees media in terms of propaganda rather than analysis. This is the antithesis of the role laid down for the ABC in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983. The Corporation's mandate unequivocally demands that a strong critical, journalistic approach be applied to religion, just as it is to everything else.

And if Christians are seen by media as 'judgmental, simplistic, passionless or narrow-minded', as Scott claims, perhaps it's their own fault because that is how they present themselves.

Prayer breakfasts are not just about consuming food; they're intrinsically political. Evangelicals are not necessarily gentle, naive souls. They can be aggressively political when it comes to pushing their agenda. It didn't take the Australian Christian Lobby, a political pressure group if ever there was one, long to get on to Scott's speech. Perhaps unknowingly,

he is playing into their hands.

Scott says a Christian in the workplace needs to be ‘someone who can be trusted’. Well, I’m afraid I’m losing trust in Scott’s ability to maintain religion as a viable reality on the ABC. In light of his promise to the religious leaders to ‘mainstream’ religious issues, let’s look at the stories mainstream news/current affairs missed that *The Religion Report* would have covered.

Starting with deaths: there was nothing on the deaths of [Thomas Berry](#) (world famous Catholic cosmologist — yes, there is a [piece](#) on the religion webpage), Samuel Huntington (clash of cultures historian involving Christianity versus Islam), Irving Kristol (the Jewish-American godfather of neo-conservatism), Cardinal Avery Dulles (son of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and important Catholic theologian), and Richard John Neuhaus (convert to Catholicism and leading neo-conservative theologian). It seemed like the entire US religious right died and the ‘mainstream’ ABC appeared to miss it completely.

Then there was Benedict XVI’s encyclical letter [Charity in Truth](#), which was [covered](#) by *Sunday Nights* with John Cleary but was missed in the mainstream. And when will we get an analysis by the mainstream ABC of Barak Obama, Gordon Brown and Kevin Rudd’s very public church going?

Can we expect the *7:30 Report* to explain the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on Obama (‘one of my favorite philosophers’) and Rudd and Brown’s strong Christian socialist backgrounds? Back in April in London both Rudd and Brown spoke in St Paul’s Cathedral decrying the ‘false god’ of ‘unfettered free markets’. ABC Board member Janet Albrechtsen was [apoplectic](#) in *The Australian*, but there was no explanation anywhere else on the ABC.

And that’s not even taking into account the red-faced US Catholic bishops’ support for the Republicans against Obama only to find 65 per cent of US lay Catholics voting for him, or shrill episcopal opposition to Obama speaking at a Catholic university, or the bishops’ attack on his health care policy when the Vatican supports him.

*The Religion Report* would not have missed a single one of these issues, but these are understandably too specialist for most editors to spot, let alone cover. I don’t blame the ABC mainstream or news/current affairs. I blame the managers who, under Mark Scott’s leadership, took *The Religion Report* off air.

## Stairway to international student security

### EDUCATION

*Ben Coleridge*



It often happens these days that around 12.20am I find myself sitting inside a concrete stairwell. The electric light is harsh and the paint is peeling off the walls. It is not a pretty place but it is break time at work and this is where the casual workers take respite. We have been scurrying incessantly around the function room; now we sit exhausted on the steps, eating whatever leftover food the kitchen can supply.

Here, food takes on a blessed quality. Once appetites are satisfied the reigning silence lifts; the shabby stairwell is transformed into a meeting place. On the bottom step, two young men talk quickly in Nepalese. One step up, Bangla is the favoured language. Step higher and there are conversations in English, Indonesian, Hindi and French. Among the young people sprawled on each step, the energy at that time of night is extraordinary.

Although a tad shabby, the stairwell is one of Melbourne's best academies of learning, a place where real insights can be gained. Conversation topics range from the daily life of an Indian village to the politics of uranium exports. In this stairwell I have heard quoted Byron, Shakespeare, and the New Testament and I've been lectured on the differences between Catholicism and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

Here someone has told about their village in Rajasthan, where the bore water upon which farming livelihoods depend is steadily running out. The storyteller is the first of his family to leave India. Another has marvelled at the way Australians throw a party: 'In India, we all get up and dance and nobody has drunk any alcohol at all!'

The conversations we have in that stairwell unveil our varied identities. These contrast with the one dimensional identity presented to guests out on the function room floor: the anonymous smiling waiter with the black apron and the little golden name tag. In such a diverse group, the only shared story is our experience of working as waiters — we all clean dirty dishes and smile as if to say that serving guests beer brings us deep satisfaction.

Instead, behind the facade donned for the function room floor, lies all the drama and stress of the lives of many foreign students in Australia. In the stairwell the myriad stories are accompanied by a narrative that I am not part of: that is, the insecurity of living and working as a foreign student with only temporary residency.

The other night one confrere described the time spent working and studying in Australia as 'a bridge between two lives', a time when 'life is put on hold' and his whole being is directed towards securing permanent residency.

After working from 7am all through the day, some students take an hour off before starting the night shift in this, their second job. And when they aren't working, they're studying. So of course, it is difficult for them to make friends and to build social networks with almost no time on their hands.

By law, my stairwell companions are not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week. Being paid less than \$20 hour means that, in order to keep to the law, foreign students must live bare and strained lives. And when a course at one of the inner city Melbourne 'institutes' costs up to \$8000 a semester, working only 20hours is a difficult promise to keep.

For some it proves so impossible to live within such scant means that they resort to working illegally and are paid in cash to avoid detection. This is risky; discovery means expulsion and the end of any hopes of attaining the holy grail of permanent residency. And if foreign students are working late night shifts in odd jobs and getting paid with wads of cash, what does that mean for their security on the last train home?

All this should make us question Victorian Premier John Brumby's recent statement in India that Melbourne is one of the most secure places in the world for foreign students. Perhaps Melbourne and other Australian cities are relatively safe, but insecurity is made of more than physical peril. Another problem voiced in the stairwell, this time by a Nepalese student, was the impossibility of finding housing.

He had applied many times for a room in a share house and each time had been rejected. He has been here for three years. He can't afford to go home and he won't go anyway until he has achieved permanent residency status. He is my age. I wonder how he copes without the personal support of a family.

Insecurity pervades the lives of foreign students. Often forced to work illegally, tired from late night work and study, deprived of family and social networks, and in some cases stressed by the uncertainty of temporary residency status, their lives, we should assume, must be difficult.

Yet, as a community, we are so often unaware of these difficulties. The people my companions and I serve at work may observe only a foreign face and a tray of drinks; they may see the Indian and Nepalese and African students who work with me as the generic 'foreign' student. But behind the facade there are complex realities which we need to understand.

After returning from India, John Brumby could contribute towards securing the lives of students like my stairwell companions. A good start would be to persuade Australian governments to extend the number of hours per week they can work.

## Money doesn't make babies happy

EUREKA STREET/ READER'S FEAST AWARD

*Stephen Wright*

If we were the kind of people who considered coincidences worth investigating or retrieving we could use the idea of coincidence to look more closely at any thoughts we might have about causality and our experience of it. After all a crisis is, if nothing else, a way of showing us that whatever kind of people we thought we were we're not, and however we got to where we are is not how we thought we got there. In other words there is something in the nature of causality that we have ridden over the top of. It is crisis and coincidence that disrupt our narratives of the world, give us pause, give us breath, give us anything other than what we have been taking.



The cusp of irreversible climate change and the precipitous global collapse of supposedly steadfast financial institutions are some way to being versions of each other. They are not two disparate but somehow coincidental events colliding like asteroids that have lost their orbit or their sense of home.

One could be forgiven for thinking that a financial 'crisis' needs a more immediate response than mere climate 'change', as though of two patients, one needs immediate surgery while the other can be safely left on a drip for a while. Our response to crisis is very much about how we mask crisis, manage it out and so on, and our ways of masking crisis are very much part of the problem, if not the problem itself.

It could be said that the global disintegration on the financial markets gives a voice to the increasing terror lurking behind the thought of tomorrow, as the planetary climate upon which we depend far more than on the Dow Jones begins to go haywire on an apocalyptic scale. This displacement of terror works precisely because we know that these events are linked. It promises that we might come back to some kind of financial equilibrium, calm our frayed nerves, create at least a semblance of an illusion of a predictable future of happy consumerism and material prosperity.

We are so wired, in these times, into viewing the process of living as an act of utilitarian consumption, that even profound ruptures in the very fabric of reality are converted into economic anxiety.

It is this confluence of crises that might — that could only — give us some intimation of the immense shift of the human imagination which lies before us, the realisation that the way we think is not sustainable. This is another way of saying that our state of mind is self-destructive. It's not possible to come to grips with the climate change/financial crisis nexus and at the same time to remain the same people, any more than it is possible that working through personal

trauma can leave someone unmarked.

Still, in all of this, there's something missing or something unsaid. It's not easy to think of a viable future as one of a changed imagination. If it were we'd have already done it. Neither is it easy to draw something down to the individual, nor is it popular — and neither do we have the vocabulary anymore — to speak in terms of human virtue and what that might be. If climate catastrophe and global financial ruin are a salutary lesson in anything, they are a lesson in the politics and psychology of greed, the ideology of filling ourselves endlessly over and over, the sanctioned ideology of me first, me second, and perchance, if there's anything left over, me third.

We are terrible at caring for the planet because we are terrible at caring for each other. And we are lousy at caring for each other because we don't seem to have any idea of where the roots of human emotional sustenance lie. Money, as Freud once more or less remarked, doesn't make babies happy. We might begin to look at our obsessive love of money and power as something to be questioned, not just because an entire ocean of material goods cannot make or guarantee happiness, but also because there might be a causal link between that obsession and the poverty of our notions of care.

The global nature of the imminent environmental catastrophe and the speed of the financial meltdown do us a service in revealing to us what we have hitherto effectively denied: the alarming fact of our intimate and irrevocable interdependence.

We are not just in the world, or even on it, but we are of it. The planet's wellbeing, our wellbeing, and the wellbeing of other species are ineluctably intertwined. Not only is this now blindingly obvious, but such an acknowledgement has to force us to reposition our goals of personal happiness and our understanding of each other.

The chaotic consequences of unimagined greed on the world's financial markets and the resultant suffering to millions of ordinary people can give us a moral compass that might point to the wellbeing of others as a priority that overtakes all else. The single-minded pursuit of personal profit has created an unworkable, exploitative and fantastically greedy economic system that literally eats the biological structure of the planet and transforms it into poisonous waste. The amount of energy that is put into such a system of destruction beggars belief, and the re-routing of that energy into something that approximates care of the other is our task.

A few hours before he died, Thomas Merton, who was often prescient in these and so many other matters, said, 'The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living things, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.'

Compassion, in this sense, is not merely an emotion. Fused to, and contiguous with, the fundamental nature of our mutual interdependence, there is a different understanding here, not just of what we could do, or what we might feel, but of what human beings are for. Care of

the other, something which the philosopher Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins* described as 'infinite obligation', is not just an acknowledgement of the practical workings of the interdependence of wellbeing, but also implies a grasp of the idea of causality as itself endless. That is, we just do not know precisely with any determinacy what the full consequences of our acts will be.

This is not to say that results cannot be known for events, but that the effects of any cause are endless, and reverberate in places and times and minds of which we cannot be aware. Our choices of care matter and do not vanish into the void. They have impact, consequences for ourselves and others, and take shape and form of which we cannot conceive. For us, care is the only thing that can matter, the only thing that can give meaning, shape, and resonance to the world.

And the very fact that this is possible says something very powerful about the nature of the world, the reality we inhabit, a reality that perhaps we have not yet begun to grasp with any coherence or subtlety. It should be a fact of astounding significance to us that the world can be cared for at all, that we ourselves respond to and are dependent on care, that the world responds to care and that world is in a sense, a manifestation of our care.

Whatever further existential significance we wish to draw from this, it is not anywhere near enough a common knowledge. Perhaps it hasn't even risen to the level of 'knowledge' at all, but remains as an unconsciousness uneasiness, a kind of fathomless anxiety, that all is somehow not well, and there may not be any way to make it well. 'Ho, ho. Think again, buster,' wrote Hunter S. Thompson. 'Look around you. There is an eerie sense of Panic in the air, a silent Fear and Uncertainty that comes with once-reliable faiths and truths and solid institutions that are no longer safe to believe in ...'

Still, caring and being cared for is not easy. And on a profound level it's our narratives of care that are now being disrupted in the shape of a great ethical and spiritual crisis, repeating itself over and over every day with increasing force and tension. Dealing with the climate crisis, and consonantly with the great suffering inflicted on humanity by the habitual actions of greed, is not a utilitarian act. Of course it's axiomatic that we need to rethink our dependence on fossil fuels, examine why a few are so rich and why so many are so poor, reconfigure our relationships with other species. It's a no-brainer that if we are not using a light we should switch it off. We have to learn some ethical everyday mindfulness about our actions.

But it's that toxic little line of flight that takes us from institutional greed to climate catastrophe that seems so beyond our reach, so removed from our mundane concerns.

A kind of groundswell of care goes beyond what we have so far been able to imagine, and our quickness to condemn the inanity of such an idea could give us a clue to its danger. As Octavio Paz wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 'love has always been a dangerous activity, but

now it is even beginning to be revolutionary’.

The institutions we have unthinkingly placed our trust in, banks, political parties and so forth, are not going to save us, nor even do us any favours. We rely on them to our greater peril. They are after all demonstrably uninterested in anything but varieties of a principle of self-expansion, of regimes of control and power and subservience that acknowledge very little of the urgent times which face us, right now. The political promise of the ‘return to growth’ is a kind of coded signal for the return to greed, to the immensely destructive habits of thought and action that have given us unprecedented species extinction and ecological devastation and point to a kind of misery we have not even begun to contemplate.

This is not to say that group or institutional action isn’t possible. But personal understanding and personal action has an effect, it has power and it matters. It matters because nothing can function in isolation to anything else. In particular nobody can survive without being to some degree held in a network of care, and what care is and what it might be in the future and how it might look on a global scale, on a neighbourhood scale, and to each individual is where we need to put every atom of our thought, our imagination and whatever intelligence we can muster.



## Antique religious education policy needs reform

### EDUCATION

*Teresa Russell*



Unless you have sent a child to a public school in New South Wales, you won't have come face-to-face with the madness that is known as 'non-scripture'.

For one hour each week, usually first thing in the morning during prime learning time, every public primary school in the state must divide its students into different faiths to receive 'special religious education' (SRE) from a wide assortment of adults, known collectively as 'scripture teachers'.

If a parent wants their child to opt out of SRE, that child is not entitled, under existing education policy, to any instruction during this period. The policy specifically states that learning in the areas of 'ethics, values, civics or general religious education' must not occur.

These non-scripture children are supervised in classrooms, school halls, and corridors. In many schools, even access to the library is prevented in order to ensure these children don't learn anything that their SRE counterparts might miss out on.

The policy relating to scripture classes dates back to a century-old agreement between the churches and the state of NSW. When the state made a bid to assume the primary responsibility for education, the churches agreed, on the condition that one hour each week be reserved exclusively for scripture education.

While there is little doubt that this agreement would have reflected community sentiment at the time, it is not relevant today in NSW where an estimated 25 per cent of students sit idle each week. In some schools, the opt out rate is as high as 80 per cent and teachers must stop their classes while just a few students leave to attend scripture.

In Australia's 2001 Census of Population and Housing, 20.7 per cent of people described their religious affiliation as Anglican, 26.6 per cent as Catholic, 20.7 per cent as other Christian, 4.9 per cent as other religions, 15.5 per cent as having no religion and 11.7 per cent as not stated or inadequately described.

Schools that have very high opt out rates usually have a parent body that is unhappy with the quality of religious instruction in their affiliated faiths or else there is no access to education from their own faiths.

In 2003, [St James Ethics Centre](#) in Sydney was approached by individual parents and the [Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations](#) in NSW to create a secular, ethics-based course to serve as an alternative to scripture. Andrew Refshauge, the then Minister for

Education, rejected its introduction on the grounds that there was ‘neither scope for implementation, nor was there a community-wide call’.

In 2004, a resubmission, which included evidence of strong community support, was again rejected, this time by Carmel Tebbet.

Today’s NSW Minister for Education, Verity Firth, has just received a joint submission from St James Ethics Centre and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations in NSW. It asks the minister to amend the policy that requires non-scripture students to remain idle, and proposes a pilot of an ethics-based option to scripture in interested public schools.

On what grounds could a rational person oppose the teaching of ethics to a group of idle primary school children? Surely religious education of children aged five—11 is faith-based ethics education, lots of great stories and a bit of selective history teaching.

Denying these children access to ethics education is a social injustice. Every child is entitled to ethical instruction, regardless of religious affiliation. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that many children who opt out already feel excluded during this hour, thanks to treatment by their peers and more surprisingly, by the interpretation of the policy by individual principals.

In one Sydney primary school last year, access to chess, knitting and other craft was removed from non-scripture class. It was replaced by sitting still and having to read quietly for the hour, after religious parents complained to the principal that non-scripture was more fun and their children were pushing to go to that class instead.

Recently, parents at Bungendore Public School created and taught a curriculum of comparative religions and societal beliefs to the non-scripture attendees, which was half the school. The NSW Department of Education closed down the course after several years — once it found out about it.

At the very least, ethics education will do no harm, and recent research shows it is likely to do a lot of good. A research review undertaken by St James Ethics Centre indicates a link between a child’s sense of purpose or meaning, benevolent behaviour and vital mental health.

‘By denying children the right to explore fundamental themes and virtues, we are essentially denying them the right to contribute to their own wellbeing and, by extension, to that of the community,’ states the centre’s ‘Rationale for an Ethics-based Complement to Scripture’.

The people of NSW anxiously await Minister Firth’s decision about finally removing this redundant and discriminatory policy from her department’s books. How could she possibly refuse?

## **Love is the absence of reasons to hate**

POETRY

*Michael Sariban*

### **You never saw yourself**

You never saw yourself asleep —  
as far as you let on. You'd read stories  
about near-death events, books  
on lucid dreaming —  
intrigued by a spirit looking down on its body  
from just below the ceiling, or circling its house  
like a hawk.

Never saw yourself through my eyes,  
invincible without your defences,  
drained of fear and hostility, forgiven  
there & then.

You never saw yourself, asleep,  
totally out of the loop, basic as an infant —  
an equation so readily solved, all  
my matching hostilities would evaporate  
on the spot.

Only to form again the next day,  
the fine human rain of mistrust.

### **Cooling down**

We've been fighting, you've been beating  
your fists against my intractable wall —  
your version, of course, flawed as mine.  
It's taken us years to give up on logic,

to realise neither will bleed to death.

It's exhausting, even so, and you opt  
for an early night.

You won't be aware of this rain, its muffled,  
irregular heartbeat borrowing from ours.

Cool air starts to settle on your skin,  
your sleepwalking fingers tug at the sheet.

I pull it up over your shoulder, my alien fingers  
blend seamlessly with those in your virtual world.

Outside, a massive eucalypt trunk now looks  
like a fat man in a sauna,  
its red hide sweating a pearly fever  
that will be gone by morning.

Sleep can be our referee, holding up  
a score card tomorrow, if we still  
want to know.

### **Whatever you asked**

Whatever you asked, either of you: take  
this medicine, take this food. Shape your lips  
around this prayer. Close your eyes:  
goodnight, goodnight.

For the years that are counted on fingers,  
you had me in the palms of your hands,  
cherished, watched over, controlled —  
so clearly in focus, I might have been heirloom:  
all care not to drop it, ever.

Care written into the contract. Before it is

anything, love is precisely the absence  
of reasons to hate.

Bending over me at bedtime — blankets  
up to my chin, waiting to kiss and be kissed —  
you would have thought it odd to inquire  
if I loved you in return, connected to you  
as I was by words, at home  
in your time and space.

Everything seems a given, until time  
drives a wedge. It must all be intended —  
misunderstandings, resentments, the jumble  
of rights and wrongs.

Neither side quite forgiving the other  
for feeling a need to move on.

## Empathy for paedophiles is not sympathy for the devil

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Paedophiles are among the most hated individuals in the community. It's tempting to suggest that this is for good reason. After all, children and young people are at once society's most cherished assets and its most vulnerable. Paedophiles exploit this vulnerability, and children must be protected from them.

But hate is a negative emotion that can be all-consuming. Inevitably it is directed towards people who have done wrong, rather than bad circumstances. It can lead to further negatives, such as vigilantism in the style of the Ku Klux Klan, or misguided military action such as the War on Terror, which was essentially an act of vengeance on the Muslim world in response to the actions of extremists.

Hate also nurtures a more subtle and pernicious mindset that assumes some people have rights and others do not.

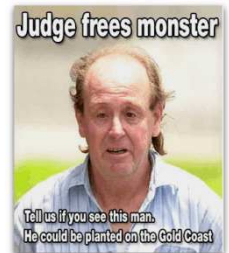
The NSW Government has effectively enshrined hate in legislation, thanks to its ham-fisted attempt to deal with the reaction of residents of Ryde, a suburb of Sydney, who did not want released paedophile Dennis Ferguson living in their neighbourhood. The Housing Amendments (Registrable Persons) Act 2009 was hastily passed last week, specifically to force Ferguson out of his home.

*Eureka Street* has [published an article](#) on this by barrister Georgina Wright, who believes the community should expect a better performance from the Government in the face of whatever level of threat Ferguson poses.

'Does a conviction as a paedophile mean someone forfeits any and all rights for the rest of his life?' she writes. 'Were there not alternatives to this option? None of these questions were debated because of the way the legislation was passed.'

There are indeed alternatives, and governments have the resources to assemble appropriately qualified professionals to formulate proposals. Similarly insurmountable challenges have been met by making use of the best creative minds we have available.

Think, for example, of the heroin injecting room run by the Uniting Church's UnitingCare in Sydney's Kings Cross. The so-called shooting gallery was a much-debated concept prior to its establishment, and still has its detractors. But Dr Alex Wodak of the Alcohol and Drug Service at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, [said last week](#) that overseas and local experience has proved the strategy an effective component of the effort to tackle drug abuse.



‘We don’t need a debate about heroin-assisted treatment,’ Wodak said. ‘We should be providing this now to the small minority with very severe problems who have not benefited from repeated episodes of other treatments.’

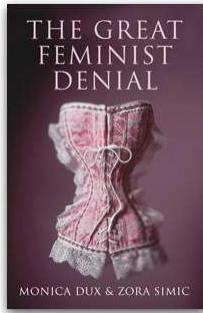
The philosophy that underlies the injecting room is that drug addiction is an illness more than a crime, and that community empathy, rather than ostracism, is required to overcome it. Note that there is a distinction here between empathy, which acknowledges and respects the humanity of all individuals, and sympathy, which might be seen as tacit approval of individuals’ actions.

Empathy for paedophiles is a big ask, but without it paedophilia will remain a problem. It is important to recognise that it is a problem that afflicts the community as a whole, and not just the human beings who are its agents.

## What real feminists want

MEDIA

Ruby Murray



*[Feminism is] a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians. — Pat Robertson*

During the last week, a fight broke out in the media over the place of feminism in Australian society. It's not a new fight. It's an old fight. A fight that's been going on ever since women broke out of their bloomers and demanded the vote.

What's the deal, feminism?

Last year, Australia was ranked 21st out of 130 countries in the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Report](#), apparently making us one of the world's most equal societies in terms of gender relations. As a nation, we were awarded a score of 0.724, with 1.00 being totally equal relations between women and men.

Not bad, right? Only .276 away from equality?

What's all this constant complaining about domestic violence and elderly female poverty, then? And can't you just take a breather from whining about women in other countries being stoned to death or forcibly sterilised or whatever? When is near enough good enough for you people?

The starter siren for this latest public stoush over the real meaning of feminism was let off by Jill Singer in her article 'Don't Take it Lying Down' in Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, where she [ranted](#) in full tabloidy glory about how women still face discrimination.

The article provoked a mass of vitriolic responses online, and not from the young women such as myself whom she accused of being 'brain dead, underpaid, over-waxed hookers'. The vitriol came mainly from men.

This backlash prodded Adele Horin to pen an appalled [call for civility](#) in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. An article which was quickly followed by a widely read blog from Janet Albrechtsen at *The Australian* [accusing](#) feminists of ruining the debate over gender in Australian society.

Albrechtsen used the recent stand-off between Labor and Coalition women in parliament, and the articles of the preceding week, as a launching point for her attack. 'Feminists are screwing up feminism', wrote Albrechtsen.



The feedback to all the columns seemed to agree with her, as if feminism has been the problem for the span of human history, rather than our first and oh-so-fragile attempt at a solution.

In their 2008 book *[The Great Feminist Denial](#)*, Monica Dux and Zora Simic deal in-depth with the way in which the media portrays feminism as 'over'. But it seems that no amount of reasoned investigation will stop the continual belittling of feminism's work in some circles.

Albrechtsen says the fundamental mistake most feminists make is in wasting their time in hoping that the world will turn into a utopia where women are treated as equals by men.

Which, of course, is not feminism's fundamental mistake, but feminism's fundamental strength, the vision which all feminists hold in their hearts and which keeps them going.

You have to have a remarkable lack of imagination to look at the world and not see the possibility for something much better. And if you can imagine a better, more just world, then not to act on that vision is unforgivable.

The unimaginative are simply stupid. But the cynical are criminal.

The hope that our daughters, and our daughter's daughters, will one day live in a world where they can stand as equals before the law in any court on the globe, utopian or not, is what keeps feminism relevant and fighting. A world where men love them for their strength and their laughter and not for their silence and their giggles.

Where they are not stoned for adultery by their families, where they are not aborted in favour of boys, where their life is counted as worth equally as much as that of their peers.

Where they are not judged by their genitalia, but by their ability. This is what feminism is about.

And this is what real feminists are working towards. Real feminists are out there getting their hands dirty. I hate to think that anyone could be fooled by the recurrent slanging matches in the press over feminism into thinking that these sorts of debates represent the glorious complexity of what feminism has done in the past and the things it is trying to achieve for our future.

Feminism is about improving people's lives, about helping people. Helping people and changing the world is a complex business, and there will inevitably be disagreements. That feminists have in the past fought over the right paths to take is natural. Not all women need the same freedoms, just as not all men do. As humans, we're not bronze figurines cast into gender binaries, but atoms flung across a vast gender spectrum.

And every day, in every corner of the world, feminists young and old, male and female, are shaving their legs or letting their leg hair grow as they go about their business in domestic violence shelters, court reform projects, counter-trafficking programs, health clinics,

universities, NGOs, governments, kitchens, clubs, classrooms, taxis, homes, halls of worship, on basketball courts and in tropical jungles, hoping and working and looking into the future for the day when that utopia arrives, and when we are all treated equally, regardless of our gender.

And that is what feminism is about.