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PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

Tel +61 3 9427 7311
Fax +61 3 9428 4450
Eureka@eurekastreet.com.au

Power of polemic is self-perpetuating, but not persuasive

COLUMNS

Summa Theologiae

Andrew Hamilton



Reading Christopher Hitchens' much discussed book against religion, I was reminded of the Chaser's *War on Everything* on ABC TV. It has the same good humoured and rather likeable style of presentation, the same manic energy, and the same breadth of scope. It also offers a good check-list of the arguments that can be brought against different forms of religious belief, many of them compelling. But I found it unpersuasive. Not because it was against religion, but because I find the wide-screen polemical style unpersuasive — especially when it is used to defend religion.

Christians have been as good at dishing out as copping criticism. In the early church, Christian writers took apart Pagan beliefs, Jewish practice and heretical theological systems. Subsequently Catholic and Protestant preachers demolished each other's theological frameworks, and representatives of both traditions took with vigour to the post-Enlightenment world. Not all this critical writing was polemical, of course. Polemic characteristically avoids entering enquiringly your opponents' inner world, preferring to present their ideas masterfully in the worst possible light.

The much commented-on recent books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have reintroduced a broad brush anti-religious polemic. It has much in common with religious polemic against the secular world. Christian polemic is more often conducted through sermons, speeches and essays on particular topics than through comprehensive books. But as in the extended works of Dawkins and Hitchens, it characteristically contains two elements: an argument made in very broad terms showing the wrongness and inferiority of the ideas that the writer opposes, and some anecdotes which demonstrate the truth of this large argument.

Religious polemic likes large terms. Culture is analysed through categories like reason, faith, religion, science, democracy, modernity, positivism, secularism, individualism, Marxism, post-modernism etc. These terms are related in a way that tells a story about the origins of the evils being opposed, the nature of those evils, and the remedy for them. In early twentieth century Catholic polemic, the integrated world of medieval Catholicism was ruptured first by the religious self-assertion of the Reformation and then by the rational self-assertion of the Enlightenment. This fragmentation played itself out in the anti-Christian Liberal movements. The way back lay through acceptance of the authority of God and of the Church.

This large story is normally supported by smaller stories that illustrate the argument. Polemic about religious belief might include improving stories about the soldier in the fox hole who did or did not pray, the theist or atheist psychopath, the wise or mad scientist/priest, the open or closed minded representatives of religion and anti-religion. The opponent, laid flat on the anvil of cultural analysis, is smashed with the hammer of discrediting examples.

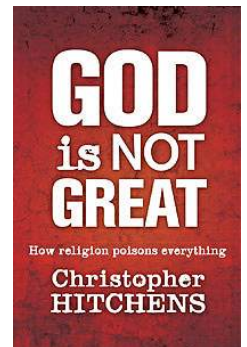
This kind of writing can make enjoyable reading when done with panache, and can rally the faithful, but it convinces only those who wish to be persuaded. The favourably impressed reader does not murmur, "Now I see", but shouts, "Go, go, go!" Others move on. The reason why it does not persuade is that neither the large account of the world nor the panoply of examples represents in sufficient complexity the world that we know.

When a grid of '-isms is laid across the world, it fails to capture the unpredictable mixture of ideas, values, hopes and spontaneity that human beings display. More significantly, it does not capture the variety, the complexity and the delicacy of the way in which people respond intellectually and affectively to the world. Polemical accounts fail to do justice either to the views of the world that they condemn or to the ones that they claim to defend. The castle they defend is straw, and the opposing soldiers they massacre are also straw.

The telling examples also ring untrue. If we appreciate how various is the motivation for our own good and bad actions, and how unpredictable a guide is anyone's belief to the way in which they will act in particular situations, we are unlikely to attribute people's bad behaviour simply to their agnosticism, Catholicism, secularism, Marxism or whatever. Stories of human action become examples only when they are stripped of the personal qualities that make them human actions.

This is why any polemic, whether on behalf of or directed against Christian faith, is unpersuasive. But Christian polemic against other views of the world has another, critical disadvantage. It harms its own cause because it necessarily misrepresents Christian faith. At the heart of Christian faith is a conversational relationship between God and humanity in which God takes seriously the world of the conversation partner. God enters the human world from within and engages with it. To represent Christian faith accurately, then, we must not only speak of its content but embody in our communication its conversational style. When we address those who hold different views from ours, our conversation needs to be question shaped.

Polemic supposes that we can read accurately the large patterns of God's action in the world, and that we can effortlessly place and accurately judge those with whom we differ. Nothing in the Christian account of God's dealings with us substantiates that assurance.



A short note on secrets

COLUMNS

Stateside

Brian Doyle



I'll tell you a secret. One time I made out with a girl in a bus as her best friend, my date, smoking a cigarette, waited for us outside the bus, and when I got off the bus my date took one look at my face and tried to put her cigarette out in my eye. I don't know how she knew what had to be the shortest-lived secret ever and I still don't know. She never spoke to me again, and neither did her friend.

This was not the first time women and secrets led me to murky confusion, where I have lived ever since. The first girl I ever kissed swore me to secrecy, but we were fourteen years old then and I didn't actually have anyone to tell the secret to, since my brothers and friends would have fallen down laughing at the very idea that a girl had kissed me, and besides the whole actual kissing event was a muddle, I had major spectacles and she had complicated braces, and neither of us knew how to breathe while kissing, did you come up for air every thirty seconds like swimming, or take turns breathing, or breathe like walruses through your noses or what, and our shy clinking kisses, in a dank dark basement with peeling paneling and moaning music and moist potato chips in a sad chipped bowl, were more like spaceships docking in the vast silence of deep space than they were heated or romantic or anything like that, and anyway our few tentative kisses were ended abruptly by her roaring father who was supposed to be elsewhere but suddenly and definitively wasn't.

After that it seemed that every girl I met was webbed with secrets, and whenever a girl told me a secret, or we did something that was supposed to be secret, soon there were bad plot devices and furious friends and car keys thrown in creeks and I was an idiot. This happened all the time, even with my cool sister, who liked to smoke and swore me to secrecy and soon there were various smoking implements and implications on the kitchen table and our dad simmering and somehow this was all my fault and my sister threatened to snap my pinkies like twigs but thankfully she didn't, or hasn't yet.

As I got older the secrets got harder. By the time I was thirty I had been told heartbreaking secrets, rapes and abortions and arrests and addictions and betrayals on a dizzying scale, and I grew seared and salted by secrets, seasoned by them, forced to understand that everyone has wounds and burdens, that everyone has scars slashed on their hearts; and it turns out the most amazing thing about our species isn't that we all have secret pains but that everyone carries their loads with such grace and endurance. That's astonishing. Not a day goes by, not an hour, when I am not knocked out by grace under duress, the greatest secret of all.

Now I am fifty, older than dirt, with children who are sure I voted for Lincoln for president, but I am still nailed by secrets, all of them starting with the same six chilling words, I have something to tell you, the words that flank secrets like cops around a motorcade; and the secrets are more unbearable than ever: wars hatched by lies, children raped by priests, wives who stare out the window at the rain as their husbands make love to them.

And more than ever I am absorbed by women and their secrets, though I no longer find cigarettes aimed at my eye; my mom, for example, a riveting woman with a thousand tales to tell, recently told me that I had two brothers I never knew, Patrick and Christopher, each dying after mere minutes in this world, which makes three brothers I never knew, my brother Seamus dying suddenly when he was five months old, a secret I discovered when I was fifteen years old and found a book of photographs one day in the attic and wondered who the baby was and when I showed the book to my mom her face fell in a way that I still, all these years later, cannot explain very well.



My daughter just turned fifteen years old and she is an ocean of secrets and sometimes I stand in the kitchen ostensibly doing the dishes but really thinking about all the things I don't know about her and never will know. I used to know everything about her, every flicker of her face, every note of every sound that issued from the bud of her lips, I rocked her and bathed her and heard her first words and saw her first staggering steps and wept when she went to kindergarten that first day with her bright dress and brighter smile, and now she is all willowy and sneery and womanish and I don't know anything at all really about what she does all day and late into the night except what she tells me, which is not much, and what her mother tells me, which is a secret, so after nearly four decades of careful study I am more muddled by women than ever before, which sometimes seems like a roaring accomplishment to me, on the theory that whenever you are sure about anything, you are certainly wrong, isn't that so?

Island nation looks inwards after monarch's passing

INTERNATIONAL

Luke James



The recent death of the Samoan Head of State, Malietoa Tanumafili II, has elicited public and private comment noting his good leadership and unique status in Samoa's political history. His death has also thrown into sharp relief some of the ambiguities and tensions between Samoa's traditional and modern political structures. It has been a time for some Samoans to question the identification of the former leader of this predominantly Christian nation with a non-Christian faith.

Malietoa Tanumafili II's passing and subsequent state funeral provided Samoa with a rare mention in the international news pages. The bandwidth shared by Pacific news, like that of much global news, is swollen with coups, instability, public violence and natural disaster. For Samoa, the plaudits for the former Head of State suggest an irony in reportage on this tiny nation. The strong moral guidance provided by the man credited as the father of the first independent Pacific nation has enabled the stability that has kept his country off the radar. It is only his death that has caused it, briefly, to reappear.

The oldest Head of State in the world at the time of his death, and the third-longest serving, Malietoa Tanumafili II was not only the holder of the top constitutional office but also a *Tama-a-Aiga*, or head of clan, of one of Samoa's two so-called royal families; more than occasionally, the people of Samoa alternate between calling Malietoa Tanumafili II the Head of State and King. Under the constitution, the next Head of State will be elected by parliament to an initial five year term. Any person in Samoa entitled to stand for election as a member of parliament is entitled to stand for election as Head of State, although under the Electoral Act this franchise is limited to *Matai*, or chiefs of extended families. However, the media and the local people both appear to assume that his successor will be the current head of the other royal family, the Tupua.

There has been little initial evidence of agitation about the assumed succession path. The current Speaker of the Legislative Assembly was recently reported as saying that "although the constitution is silent about it, we must all respect the *Tama-a-Aiga* and put them in such paramount positions as Head of State". One person I spoke to, a public servant, indicated some doubt as to whether this will become a long-term convention. He believed that whilst most Samoans now have the expectation that there will be a continuing orderly succession between the heads of the two royal families, the election of the Head of State would eventually succumb to politicking, to the detriment of Samoa's political stability.

One of the more quixotic aspects of Malietoa Tanumafili II's rule was that in a country where over 95 per cent of the population are strong followers of a Christian denomination, the former Head of State was identified with the Baha'i faith. Interestingly, as a Head of State, he apparently had this in common only with a Queen of Romania. One of the seven Baha'i Houses of Worship worldwide is situated on the slopes above Samoa's capital, Apia.

The Baha'i faith is well known for accommodating other religious viewpoints. However, my discussions with a small number of people in the days after the former Head of State's funeral indicated a certain reluctance of some Samoans to accept this aspect of his life. Several people I spoke to, including a distant relative of the former Head of State, played down the extent of his Baha'i faith. One claimed that his patronage of the faith was more of a gesture to his daughter, whose interest and involvement in the Baha'i faith preceded the Head of State.



This view suggested to me a degree of discomfort with the notion of a secular leader in Samoa following a non-Christian religion. While in India the current President is a Muslim and the Prime Minister a Sikh, both minority faiths in India, their appointments were seen to be a strategic strength to a government seeking recognition from citizens of both majority and minority faiths.

In Samoa, it may be that the great respect for the former Head of State as a leader in both traditional and modern political spheres cultivated a tolerance for his religious identification with a non-Christian faith. However, in private, in the days following his death, some appear unable to comfortably reconcile their strong allegiance to their former leader with his minority religious beliefs, which they do not share.

Photographs courtesy of Khoi Cao-Lam and Luke James.

Burmese Days and banana leaves

AUSTRALIA

Sarah Nicholls



Nearly twenty years ago, she was a student revolutionary fighting the Burmese Army on the Thai-Burma border. Living in a moving camp, on little supplies and being a medic to the wounded. Today, San San Maw is sitting, relaxed, on her couch in her home in an outer eastern suburb of Melbourne. She seems to be able to recall this time as though it wasn't so long ago.

San San, a slight woman of less than five feet, was a fourth year student of Burmese literature in 1988, when there were mass protests by civilians all over Burma. She was a member of the Kayah Student Organisation. "We organised an uprising — we wanted to change the government," she says firmly. "All of the public became involved with us...it was like a whole country movement that came alive."

"When we were meeting we heard they [the military] had taken power and we were too scared to go home." After camping out overnight she returned to her home before dawn. She learnt from her father that the police had been there the night before, looking for her. Concerned for her safety, her father urged her to leave. San San says in bewilderment, "So, I left."

She and twelve other students started a journey, only knowing that other students were gathering somewhere on the Thai-Burma border. They trekked their way through wild jungle, taking a round about route to avoid detection. They travelled up and down mountains, through rivers, without proper clothing or supplies. "After halfway my thongs were broken," she says with a laugh, "we had no idea what we were doing".

They didn't have a map or a compass either. But they navigated their way with the help of rural villagers. At each village a local was chosen to guide the group to the next village. She explains, "They were on our side, they also wanted change." They finally found the large camp of students who had gathered near the border of Thailand, in the Karen province, after nine long days. There were about 400 other students there already.

The camp was constantly under military gunfire and this forced the students to engage in combat. San San Maw and the other women took part in military training alongside the men. The women wanted to fight, she says, but the men wouldn't allow it. She says with annoyance, "We had the same training as the men — they should've let us!"



Instead the women tended to the wounded. Fighting was intermittent but constant. "There would be a fight, then there would be one, maybe two weeks until the next one." They had to move the camp constantly to keep out of their way. She says, "Three of my friends died."

She learnt how to cook with little food. Their food preparation involved piling a large amount of cooked rice on a sheet of plastic. In the middle of the rice a well was made for any food they could gather. It was often bananas, "First we took green bananas. Then when they ran out they had the leaves. Then when they ran out, the roots."

Their bamboo huts were made to be easily taken down and put up. The floor was above the ground on small stilts, with walls that were only about waist height, and no doors. This let the bitter cold in. "Life was very hard. Many students were weak — there wasn't enough food or medicine. They got malaria or suffered from depression."

She discovered an old childhood friend from her home village, Richard Tehray, was in the camp. They became close friends, though "very argumentative", she says humorously. "Then one day", she says with surprise, "it just clicked. We started being boyfriend and girlfriend." Years later they married and had a son, Andrew.



They eventually came to Australia with refugee status. Richard had been in his last years of a veterinary degree when he left Burma, and San San had been in her final year. These years were lost, but Richard completed a new degree in Australia and is now a pathologist. San San plans to return to study also, when Andrew is more independent. In the meantime she is working as a personal carer in a hospital.

She says that they were very lucky; many of their friends who came at the same time have not adjusted as well, experiencing post-traumatic stress and culture shock. "Being a family helps," she says. "We have each other and not everyone else who came over had or has that now. We are very, very lucky."

After dinner, I was farewelled at the door, supplied with containers of food — enough to feed me for the next few days. I realised later this was a bit like the villagers did for her, when she was on the run twenty-odd years ago. Perhaps as if she is still returning the favour.

Saying thank you to an ambivalent society

AUSTRALIA

Saeed Saeed

Recently, in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, Akoch Manheim, coordinator of the Sudanese Lost Boys Association of Australia, organised an Appreciation Day where the newly arrived South Sudanese community engaged in some community work. Despite the jubilant atmosphere and images of the South Sudanese men, woman and children planting trees in the park, the most remarkable aspect of this event was that it happened at all.



The day served two purposes. One was to thank Australia for granting them a new life after the terror and bloodshed of their homeland. The other was to rectify the misleading image perpetrated by some of Australia's media and politicians that the Sudanese community are a bunch of refugee thugs.

The fact that 25-year-old Akoch managed to get the day off the ground, despite the lack of assistance, is indicative of this much maligned community's desire to contribute to Australian society.

The Immigration Minister, Mr Kevin Andrews, recently declared that he will soon be drafting a proposal to drastically reduce the refugee intake from the Horn of Africa Nations, citing the apparent lawlessness of African refugees. "Successful immigration means integrating to the wider community", he said sternly, omitting the fact that integration is a two-way process.

It seemed that the Tamworth City Council was also oblivious to this concept last year when it rejected five Sudanese families' settlement in the community. The council feared that it could "lead to a Cronulla riots-type situation". Tamworth Mayor James Treloar even went as far as stating that Sudanese refugees could cause a tuberculosis outbreak in the community.

In January there was widespread media coverage of around 1500 well organised hoons and spectators gathered for illegal 'burnouts' in Noble Park, in suburban Melbourne. This was followed by rioting, police taunting and concluded with the systematic looting of public and private property. The response from Dandenong Councillor Alan Gordon to the rioting was that "they are just a few kids going out on a Friday night".

Contrast this reaction to that of Dandenong Councillor Peter Brown a week prior, when a local Sudanese youth was arrested after an incident at a private function. In a shrill letter to the *Age*, Councillor Brown lamented how Australia's refugee policy has turned his beloved Dandenong into a 'repository' of all the world's ethnic crises, and that "the problems at Noble Park station were not there before the jumbos flew in".



The education system for Australia's newly arrived refugees is crucial. Upon arrival adult migrants are enrolled in the Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) and are given only 510 hours to learn a new language. The 510 hour figure was derived from a study that sourced only ten percent of AMEP students back in 1993, when the program was first initiated.

African youth are also crippled by the government's current education policy of placing students in classes dependent on age, not by level of knowledge. This is a breeding ground for discontent and frustration. The challenges of learning a new language and being accepted in the classroom force many African youth to drop out of school and head to the streets, where drugs and alcohol are readily accessible.

This is merely a snapshot of the challenges facing war-torn African refugees in Australia. But despite all the hurdles and racist stereotypes, these refugees continue to chorus their appreciation to Australians for our sometime hospitality and for returning to them their basic human rights. To the Sudanese community, being an Australian is a godsend. This is why they spent a chilly afternoon planting trees in the Collingwood Children's Farm and concluded the day with a free concert. They wanted to say thank you to Australians for allowing this small community to also call the lucky country home.

Sometimes I wonder if we deserve it.

What Paris did next

EDITORIAL

James Massola

In a week in which storms have wrought havoc in New South Wales, Bangladesh has been devastated by mudslides, and Hamas has threatened its would-be partners Fatah with a coup in the West Bank and Gaza strip, one item has dominated the news. It has not been climate change, although this issue continues to rightly be on the lips of politicians and citizens everywhere.



The big news has been Paris Hilton, the heiress and celebrity who is famous for being famous. Hilton has been in the news this week because she was sent to jail for drink driving. More specifically, she had already been caught drink-driving and had her licence suspended. When pulled over for a second time and asked why she was driving, she claimed not to know her licence was suspended, even though the document suspending her licence was in the glove box of her car.

Putting aside the rather obvious questions this raises, one cannot help but be drawn to examine and attempt to discern the vagaries of the case. We had, in quick succession, Paris in jail, Paris being excused on medical grounds, Paris on early parole with ankle bracelet (which must be cumbersome in heels), Paris back in jail due to a judge over-ruling a sheriff, and finally, Paris finding God and promising to stop acting 'dumb'.

One wonders what all this has contributed to the sum of human existence.



In 508BC, a man named Cleisthenes came to power in Athens. Cleisthenes was of the nobility of that city, and gifted with rank and privilege, like Hilton. He was also a democrat, in the original sense of the word, in that he believed in the equality of all before the law, and further, that all citizens should also be required to contribute to the society in which they lived.

In ancient Athens, this meant serving on juries, participating in or sponsoring festivals, perhaps serving as a soldier. The point was that one made a contribution. Cleisthenes' reforms led to a direct and empowering form of democracy that has shaped our society to this day.

Year 12 students are at present preparing for and sitting their mid-year exams. The classics students among them, few though they may be, could well have come across Cleisthenes in their studies. Almost all of them will have found it hard to avoid news of the notorious heiress.

Few would deny that teachers are a hard working lot, or that they make a real contribution to our lives. If we fail our teachers, and allow ideology to overtake common sense in the looming dispute over performance-based pay, there may well be fewer people who remember Cleisthenes. There will certainly be more who are eager to know what Paris did next, and not what she contributes to our society.

Redemptive *Romulus* a film for the ages

FILM REVIEW

Drama

Tim Kroenert

***Romulus, My Father.* 100 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Richard Roxburgh. Starring: Eric Bana, Franka Potente, Marton Csokas, Kodi Smit-McPhee**

Romulus, My Father should be remembered as one of the great Australian films of 2007. And while some may still find it hard to shake mental images of his plastic-wigged Ray Martin impersonation, it should also be the film that cements Eric Bana's place as a serious actor of considerable ability.

Romulus, My Father concerns a Romanian migrant family living tough in rural Australia during the early 1960s, but it's not strictly a reflection on the migrant experience. Nor is it a run-of-the-mill domestic drama, although both of these things, and the various hardships and joys they entail, provide important context for the film's central concerns.

Primarily, this is a film about compassion and forgiveness, and how a young boy, Rai (Smit-McPhee), experiences the formation of these two qualities through his observance of those around him; in particular, his Romanian father, Romulus (Bana).

First-time director Roxburgh establishes Romulus as an essentially compassionate character from the first scene, in which a wide-eyed Rai watches his father gently revive a palm full of slumbering bees by swaying a warming light globe above them.

As the film progresses, Romulus's tendency towards compassion is shown to be a weakness as well as a strength. His wife, Christina (Potente), has abandoned Romulus and Rai and is living with Romulus's former best friend; throughout the film, Romulus is seen to repeatedly swallow his rage and sorrow at this dual betrayal.

He instead regards Christina and her partner with a degree of respect and good will he'd surely be within his rights to deny them. While this allows him to maintain a quiet — albeit vaguely pathetic — dignity, it inevitably takes its toll on his mental health and, potentially, on his relationship with his son.

Another friend of Romulus's, Hora (Csokas), represents compassion of a less passive kind. In contrast to Romulus's revival of the bees, Hora's most vivid compassionate act comes in the form of the slaughter of a coop full of sick chickens.



What seems heartless to the horrified Rai is in fact a pragmatic form of mercy, which reflects, in brutal fashion, Hora's more active attempts to heal his friend Romulus's selective blindness towards Christina's selfish behaviour.

As Rai (whose story is based on the childhood of author Raimond Gaita — Gaita's eponymous memoir is the inspiration for the film) observes the actions and reactions of these men, it ultimately shapes his own responses



to his mother's self-centredness. In that respect it's a coming-of-age tale, although of the more tragic variety.

There is an element of hope in the film's ending; however the preceding journey is so tumultuous that, finally, it's one character's decision to not commit suicide — to continue or, more accurately, commence living — that resonates as the film's most selfless act.

But if we are to live according to our true selves, we must first discover who we are. This may not be easy; it could be a long and arduous task. We cannot discover who we are from our CVs or by a sneak preview of our obituaries. We cannot discover who we are by asking other people; they will describe aspects of our personalities and our bodies according to what they like and dislike.

We cannot discover who we are by looking in the mirror; we can only see the surface layer in the glass, and we interpret what we see through our conditioned eyes, which can deceive us. A skilled artist may be able to paint a picture of us that reveals something deep within that we have refused to see, but such shattering experiences are rare.

We can really know who we are only by casting off all external forms and going inwards. We must go in search of the inner self. If we do make this journey, what are we likely to find? The 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer observed that our consciousness is at its brightest as we focus our attention on the external world, the world of things.

As we turn our attention inwards, our consciousness becomes clouded and our vision becomes obscure. If we press on and follow the path to our innermost recesses, darkness envelops us and all knowledge seems to cease. This is where we find the inner centre, the true and unchanging self. On this journey the superficial self is left far behind and we begin to understand that at this "root point of existence" the individuality that we prize so highly is nowhere to be found and seems no more than a chimera. We realise that, at its deepest level, our inner self joins us to all things and is common to us all.

In contrast to the frenetic striving of the everyday world — the world of our exterior selves with its successes and failures — we discover at this root point of existence the ...œprofoundest peace... .

As we learn about our true selves, it slowly dawns on us that our superficial self's pursuit of happiness — satisfying our craving for money, beauty, success and so on — is no more than a trick played on us, a deception in which we collaborate. And we come to see that it is a mistake to devote ourselves to our own happiness; that we are not here to try to live a happy life but a meaningful one.

This may be very difficult to accept because we have a strong attachment to our superficial selves. A meaningful life may appear impossible, scary or even self-indulgent. But it is simply what happens when we make that inner journey. In reality, whether we realise it or not, our lives revolve around the true self, the unchanging essence. Even the pursuit of happiness by the superficial self can be understood as a mistaken attempt to respond to the pull of the true self, an outer journey that serves as a pale substitute for the inner journey.

For some who have found the inner core, it is tempting to stay in its warm embrace; like returning to the womb to escape from the world. After all, who wants to go back to the trials and stresses of everyday life? But we cannot stay there and must return to the mundane world. Yet we return with a new understanding, one in which we recognise that the pursuit of our own happiness is in vain.

This may seem like a paradox, for if the inner journey is not in pursuit of happiness what is its purpose? It is to find purpose itself. Having found it, the task is to express it in everyday life through a vocation or calling that seems right. It may take a long time to discover what that calling is and it may not be much consolation to realise when you have found it that the 'wasted' years were in fact a necessary part of the journey.

It doesn't mean that when you have found your niche then life will be blissful, at least not on the day-to-day plane. All lives are full of struggle and doubt; they are never blissful, except fleetingly. But there is a deeper level at which contentment does flow from finding one's niche; it is the sense that one has found one's place in the world.

This is an edited version of a talk to the 'Happiness and Its Causes' Conference to be given in Sydney on June 15, 2007.

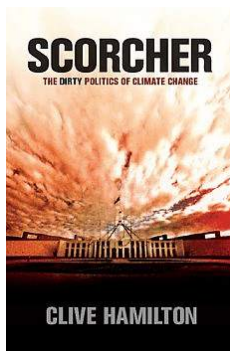
Greenhouse mafia's scorching approach to climate change

FEATURES

Literature

John Button

***Scorcher: The dirty politics of climate change*, by Clive Hamilton. Black Inc., Australia, 2007. ISBN 9780977594900. RRP \$29.95.**



Once I had a discussion about the future with a Minister in the Irish Government. He told me not to worry about it too much. "Posterity," he said, "has never done anything for us." Climate change is about the future; but a future which creeps up on us every day. It threatens living standards, lifestyles, quality of life, all the aspirational clichés of human existence. It's not comfortable to think about.

No wonder people hope for arguments which suggest it will go away. The discussion about climate change has become increasingly feverish, polemical and downright dishonest. So, I should state my own position right at the beginning.

I'm a lay person who believes that the overwhelming consensus of international scientists is correct. Climate change is happening, it is substantially contributed to by human activity and particularly the burning of fossil fuels. If we can, we should do something about it. I think we owe something to posterity.

Clive Hamilton, the author of *Scorcher*, has been pretty consistent on environmental issues over the years and about climate change. In 1999 the Australia Institute, of which he is the Director, published a damning report which alleged that Australia had the highest level of Greenhouse gas emissions per person of any industrialised country in the world.

In *Scorcher*, he follows up the issues worldwide, from the international negotiations leading to the signing of the Kyoto agreement to the various strategies adopted by countries in response to growing awareness of the implications of global warming.

The big question is why Australia, an apparently enthusiastic signatory of the Kyoto agreement (subject to special conditions) not only failed to ratify Kyoto but actively sought to undermine its influence. In the Australian context, the sub-title of Hamilton's book *The dirty politics of climate change* tells us something of the answers to this question.

In fact, this is very much a book about the pollution of Australian democratic processes by a combination of self-interested corporations, an ignorant and apathetic media (with some exceptions) and a spineless government manipulated by a prime minister who failed to comprehend important issues which fell outside the narrow confines of his political imagination.

If Clive Hamilton were only half right, and I believe this well documented book is a lot more than half right, then it is a shameful story.

It is a story of government bureaucrats reacting to the apparent influence of environmentalists and of the formation of a self-styled 'greenhouse mafia' (formed

principally from executives of the mining, coal, aluminium and energy sectors), which became enormously influential in government decision making.

In its period of greatest influence this group sometimes had direct access to cabinet papers, held secret meetings with the prime minister and a few of his close colleagues, and on one occasion in 2003 had a cabinet decision (supported by all government agencies other than Finance) reversed after two members of the 'greenhouse mafia' (Rio Tinto and Alcoa) lobbied the Prime Minister.

A lot of things happened because of the cosy relationship between the 'greenhouse mafia' and the prime minister. Australian delegations to international negotiations on climate change were largely comprised of representatives from the major polluting companies. The renewable energy industry (solar, wind power, etc) became the enemy, to be discouraged as a potential alternative to the fossil fuel industry.

The government showed itself willing to accept flawed modelling from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics so long as it agreed with the government's position. It even used material from this source to try to frighten developing countries about aspects of the Kyoto agreement.

The CSIRO suffered a different fate, with pressure being exerted on scientists not to talk about climate change and one, Dr Graeme Pearman, being effectively sacked. This was all part of government attempts to manipulate public opinion, a task which included the appointment of a tame Chief Scientist who happened to also be Chief Technologist at Rio Tinto.

Hamilton describes the government's strategy on climate change as "do nothing at home and work hard to prevent others taking action". So there was encouragement of apathy here because of a loathing of environmentalism and "feverish activity abroad" to protect the interests of the coal export industry.

In the Australian context, Hamilton writes, "the government was ... enamoured of green consumerism"; green energy, hybrid cars, all that sort of stuff, which laudable though it may be "contributes to the progressive privatisation of responsibility for environmental degradation". The more individuals are made to feel responsible for the problem the less the onus on the government, which should be providing leadership and policy direction on such a significant issue.

For a long time the public was relatively apathetic about global warming: neither alert nor particularly alarmed. The tide turned during 2006, probably as a result of a long drought, very hot summers and the Al Gore film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Now, suddenly it's an election issue, a frantic struggle for credibility. In the meantime, Australia has lost ten years and our political system has been guided into further disrepute. It's this part of the story which makes me particularly angry: the evidence of a government sinking to new lows in honesty and openness in its administration.

Clive Hamilton tells it well and his book should be widely read by people concerned about Australian democracy.

Muddy ovals under threat from climate change

FEATURES

Community

Colin Long

I was at my local football club recently, watching my son's under-13 side play. It was a warm Sunday afternoon, almost too warm for footy. I stood with a couple of other parents and at half time our chat turned inevitably to the weather.



All long-term football followers, and especially those of us who played school or local footy in our youth, remember bitterly cold days, ankle-deep mud and finding it difficult to tell team mates from opposition through the layers of mud caked on jumpers. My twelve-year-old has already played for more than five years but has not experienced one of those afternoons.

Our discussion turned from the weather, as it inevitably does these days, to the climate, and from there to how we can contribute to the effort to save water and reduce our environmental impact. We talked about water tanks and solar power systems.

Can anyone imagine, even two or three years ago, the discussion between three dads at a suburban football game turning to the sorts of issues once thought only the preserve of 'loony greenies'? Could anyone have predicted that John Howard himself would acknowledge, however grudgingly and superficially, the reality of climate change?

As a reasonably long-standing 'loony greenie', I find this new environmental awareness very pleasing. The fact that the awareness of the issues among the general population is outrunning the policy responses of the major parties doesn't surprise me. So thorough is the conservatism now built in to our political system, and so profoundly corrosive of the formal political process has been the influence of corporations and neo-liberalism, that it is looking increasingly likely that only a crisis of epic proportions is likely to elicit an appropriate response to the problems that we face. Either that, or people will simply have to demand that governments act in a serious and determined way to deal with climate change.

Let us not, however, exaggerate the level of environmental awareness among the general population either. The understanding of the problems that face the nation and the world remains superficial. John Howard maintains that he will defend jobs and economic prosperity before the environment because he knows a substantial proportion of the population also think that way.



The argument, of course, doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Defending jobs in the Australian coal industry is a bit like defending the jobs of night soil collectors when the Board of Works was building sewers. The problem is a lack of vision. Australia's major party politicians cannot envisage a different world to the one we inhabit. They cannot conceive that tackling the environmental crisis by fundamentally changing the way our society currently functions might actually improve our quality of life.

What is truly remarkable about the present discourse on climate change is the almost universal acceptance of the idea that continued economic growth is not only possible but necessary. Even the Stern Review claimed that dealing with climate change would not prevent healthy rates of economic growth. Stern may, of course, just be playing good politics, with an awareness that economic growth has reached the status of religious belief in contemporary capitalist societies, and that for his environmental message to get through he couldn't call religio-economic belief into question.

If that is what Stern is up to, it's not actually doing anyone a favour. Never-ending, exponential growth in a closed system such as the earth is just not possible. We should already know this from recent history. Despite very real improvements to energy efficiency in recent decades, the world's greenhouse emissions have continued to rise. This is because of an increase in economic activity. Does anyone (other than Australian coal exporters and John Howard) seriously think that China's economy can continue to grow at 8-10 percent a year without destroying China's own environment and the global atmospheric system?

Imagine if the world were able to reduce its CO₂ emissions per unit of GDP by 70 percent tomorrow, so that we only emitted 30 per cent of the CO₂ that we currently do to get the same GDP output. If the global economy continued to grow at three percent per annum, it would take roughly 42 years to get us back to producing the same amount of CO₂ as we did before the cuts. In other words, emphasizing continued economic growth — unless it can be completely decoupled from carbon emissions, which is unlikely — will make it impossible to prevent catastrophic climate change.

In the struggle to prevent destructive climate change, one of the most important tasks is to shatter the myth of never-ending economic growth. What is needed is a real discussion about different futures and different forms of economic organisation. Assuming that the current system is the best that we can get betrays a lack of vision that will ultimately be terminal. It also means that my son will never have the chance to get his football jumper muddy.

Oath demands what many would give

THEOLOGY

Geoffrey King

In 1989 the Holy See issued a new version of the “profession of faith” required to be made before taking on various official positions in the Catholic Church. In an interview on ABC radio at the time, I was asked whether I would be willing to make the profession. My reply was that I would, provided I could take it in Latin.

This was no piece of archaism on my part. I simply wished to make a point about one word in the profession, the Latin *obsequium* (translated as ‘submission’ in the published English text). This term specifies the kind of loyalty that one gives to authoritative but not infallible church teaching.



Obsequium can be translated as submission, but it can also be translated as obedience, loyalty, or respect. My point was, and is, that I am ready to promise respect for church teaching of this kind, but not unquestioning obedience. Respect can actually mean ‘submitting’ your mind and desire to the teaching. Your desire is to be guided by the church, indeed to follow the teaching if you possibly can. You submit your mind to teaching by making every effort to appreciate it and the reasons that underlie it, by having the humility to admit that the church may be a lot wiser than you are. But such respect or submission is ultimately compatible with not fully accepting the teaching.

My point was also about the nature of an oath (a solemn promise). We are dealing here with a legal instrument, and it is a long tradition of the church (embodied in canon 18 of the Code of Canon Law) that such instruments are to be narrowly interpreted. That means interpreted in such a way as to keep to a reasonable minimum any limitation on your “free exercise of rights”. My interpretation of *obsequium* and submission is minimalist in that entirely appropriate sense.

All this is relevant to the controversy surrounding the current proposal in the Archdiocese of Sydney to require the profession of faith of people in executive positions in Catholic schools.

The aim of this proposal is an admirable one — to ensure that the Catholic tradition of faith remains central to Catholic schools. This is a matter of genuine concern and the Australian church is already addressing it through a variety of formation programs.

Whether the imposition of an oath will further its aim is, on the other hand, extremely doubtful. An oath is, as I have argued, a legal instrument of a rather blunt kind, of its nature demanding only minimal compliance, whereas what is needed is a positive atmosphere in which traditions and values can be learned and appreciated.



Respect for church teaching can be fostered through such positive formation. Requiring the taking of an oath is more likely to provoke unnecessarily negative reactions, especially if one gets the false impression that what is being demanded is unthinking obedience.

The ‘submission’ clause is one of the controversial parts of the

profession of faith. Another controversial clause involves a promise to protect the communion of the church by one's words and ways of acting. Some have wondered whether this would exclude from executive positions in Catholic schools someone who, in good conscience, practises contraception, even though they have never publicly questioned the church's position on the matter.

If we apply the principle of narrow interpretation, it is clear that such a person would not be excluded, that they could in good faith make the profession of faith. The behaviour that one is promising to avoid is behaviour that would involve a breach in the communion of the church, the sort of behaviour that would lead to the excommunication of a person. Such 'crimes' are listed in canons 1364 to 1398 of the Code. Many concern very serious breaches of professional standards. Others concern heresy in the strict sense or very serious crimes against human life. Any of them can lead to excommunication only if it involves grave moral culpability.

It is not only the case that a person holding a senior position in a Catholic school would be unlikely to be guilty of such crimes. There are already policies in place that are more stringent in their requirements of the behaviour of Catholic school staff. A further oath is unnecessary, and once again likely to provoke unnecessarily negative reactions.

Is New Zealand a Christian country?

INTERNATIONAL

Peter Matheson

The last three days of May saw an international gathering of different religions at Waitangi, a New Zealand holy place if ever there was one. Representatives of the Maori tribes covenanted there with the British Queen in 1840, acknowledging her sovereignty in exchange for recognition of their rights, including that to land.

Its call for more religious education in schools to increase understanding of other faiths has gained widespread support here. A group of Destiny Church members, however, some 2000 in number, protested loudly against any questioning of New Zealand's status as a Christian country. Destiny Church is a Pentecostalist group with support especially among urban Maori.

Simultaneously the Speaker of the House has circulated a questionnaire to members of the House of Representatives, asking for their views on the continuance of the opening prayers for Parliament, which have a Christian content. Like Australia, New Zealand has low church attendances and considerable hostility to the churches, especially amongst intellectuals and the media. Yet this is balanced by an upturn in interest in spirituality, and recognition of the importance of faith for newer immigrants, not least the Pacific Islanders, but also for the small Islamic population. Distinctive to New Zealand, too, is the growing role of Maori prayers and rituals in important civic and national events, although their content and language are largely Christian.

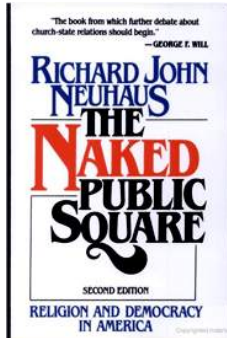
The question of whether New Zealand should see itself as a Christian country has bubbled up in an unexpected way. The word 'Christian' itself has become almost unusable, associated in the public mind with fundamentalist bookshops and the like, or with short lived political parties which tout moralistic codes, and then shoot themselves in the foot when their leaders scandalously flout them. So-called 'Christian schools' have recently been at the forefront of resistance to a sensible piece of legislation, now thankfully passed with support from the major parties, which removed the defence of the use of reasonable force in child assault cases.

The bigger issue, however, is the whole idea of a Christian society. In New Zealand, a campaign for Christian Order, as it was called, was launched shortly after the Second World War, and despite considerable church expansion at the time it never even looked like catching on. I vividly remember an ardent Labour Party supporter in Scotland, and a Christian, : "Our role in politics is to humanise society, not Christianise it". Frank Brennan's *Acting on Conscience* doesn't explicitly take up this issue, but would probably be in broad agreement with that approach. We take a secular framework for granted and operate within it.

The ambiguities and indeed shameful aspects of Christendom, after all, sit near the top of our consciousness. Our whole ecclesiology, we sense, must start elsewhere. We look uneasily at the alliance of the neocons and theocons in the States, and their denunciation of the 'Naked Public Square', as argued by Novak, Neuhaus, Weigel, Carl Henry, and others: conservative Catholics and Protestants passionately advocating a crusade mentality in



foreign policy, and a rationalistic moral absolutism at home. The fruits of this, to mix a metaphor, are coming home to roost with a vengeance.



But is the only response to such theocratic recipes to beat a retreat to the periphery? Must any radical Christian stance assume these days that the circumambient culture is a hostile or indifferent one, and that our mission is to offer, as cogently as possible, our contribution for public debate in the secular sphere, as one among many. It does seem a realistic and more modest approach.

Should the dream of a Christian society to be jettisoned? If (and it's a big 'if', I know) we can no longer be seen as the bastion of 'traditional' values; if we are now sailing under a future-oriented flag, sniffing around again at the apocalyptic rootage of our faith; if there is something to what even Marxist philosophers are saying about the uniquely universalist flair of a St Paul, then doesn't the niche we're settling into look just a shade too comfortable?

Can Christianity really work within this sort of self-limiting ordinance? If we really believe in truth and justice and peace as transcendental values, won't we want them applied to civic and national programs for the care of the young and the aged, to our education and foreign policy et al. Don't we need to offer a comprehensive alternative to the almighty, omniscient, all-gracious market?

Sure, our dyspeptic eyes have seen far too much Christian imperialism. Thank God our pride has taken such a tumble. On a day-to-day basis it's infinitely refreshing to work and live alongside folk of other faiths and none. And if a secular society means an open, pluralist one, then three cheers for that! But, faced, with the heartbreak of our world, a faith confined to the realm of private piety just won't hack it.

Playing again, from a radical perspective, with what a Christian society might look like could spurn us into really rethinking our priorities, and tackling the ongoing disgrace of our current disunity. Itself, perhaps, a justification for some counter-intuitive thinking.

Grubby oil grab that left a tiny country gasping

BOOK REVIEW

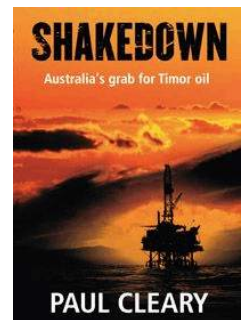
Non-Fiction

Christine Kearney

***Shakedown: Australia's grab for Timor Oil*, by Paul Cleary. Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2007. ISBN 9781741149265. RRP \$29.95**

Ugly. Rapacious. Bruising and governed by the narrowest definitions of national interest. These are a few of the descriptions that spring to mind after reading this devastating portrait of Australia's negotiations over oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea.

A thorough account of foreign policy thinking in the 1970s demonstrates how, early on in the piece, the Timor Sea influenced Australia's overall position on Timor. Indeed, just days after a 1974 coup in Portugal, officials in Canberra were arguing that Australia would get a better deal on a maritime boundary if Indonesia controlled Timor, rather than an independent Timor or its colonial power, Portugal.



Similarly, in 1978, then foreign minister Andrew Peacock announced that Australia was formally accepting East Timor as part of Indonesia. This paved the way for a formal recognition of Indonesia's occupation. In the words of the author of this book, "the only reason for this speedy decision, was the seabed and boundary, which of course meant oil".

The well-researched first third of the book shows Australia's Timor tragedy, and the part oil and gas resources played in it, to be a substantial foreign policy edifice built up over decades. But the real cut and thrust of the story comes post-1999.

In January 2000 the retreating Indonesians had levelled Timor's capital Dili so comprehensively that a team of visiting Australia diplomats had to book a negotiating room on a cruise ship in Dili harbour. Accommodation aside, they lost no time trying to convince the Timorese that they should accept the Timor Gap Treaty. This Treaty, which Australia had spent 10 years pursuing with Indonesia, would have given Timor just 20 per cent share of the known resources on its side of the Timor Sea.

At this point in the book and at many others, it beggars belief that none of the Australian diplomats and foreign affairs officials sent to negotiate with Timor were troubled by Australia's stance.

One notable exception is former DFAT staffer Bruce Haigh, whose analysis of the Australia-Indonesia-Timor nexus is particularly insightful. The 'big lie', that nothing untoward was happening in Timor during Indonesia's occupation poisoned us, he says. "It had an effect on the ethics of this country. You see it being played out in the daily deniability games of Howard, and the federal public service".



While this is overall a compelling read, the technical detail about what was on the table at different stages of the negotiations can be difficult to digest.

This was, after all, a complicated and protracted dispute and its very nature played into Australia's hands. The detail was difficult for the Australian public to digest and Australia's team, too, was vastly more qualified at this sort of negotiations.

Certainly in the early stages, Timor had to rely heavily on foreign consultants. Some of these hired guns were incredibly committed, others bewilderingly ignorant of Timor.

High-profile negotiator Peter Galbraith, the son of economist John Kenneth Galbraith, was both a blessing and a curse for Timor. While his stature and force of personality initially made a good battering ram for Timor, he was notably absent from later negotiations. One gets the sense that he rallied to the fight at first, but then as the negotiations wore on, he tired of them.

If Galbraith was a sprinter, then the former Timorese Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri comes across as pure, disciplined, distance runner.

On the Timor Sea, Alkatiri was a dogged and formidable foe for the Australians and for his trouble, he earned some extraordinarily hostile treatment. Cleary says the Australian government so disliked him that when the treaty was finally ready in 2006, Australia suggested that the foreign ministers of each country sign the deal, in the presence of their prime ministers, in order to avoid having Alkatiri sign it with Howard

This final agreement — the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea — was a success for Timor, in that it was able to claw back a better share of resources. Timor's resource share rose from 22 per cent to 60 per cent and revenue increased from 8.4 billion dollars to 24 billion dollars over the lifetime of the resources.

But from the disputed BCL fields, Timor gained nothing. These are the same fields from which Australia, since 1999, had been reaping \$1 million per day.

And this Treaty did not close the Timor Gap. Timor still does not have a permanent maritime boundary with Australia. The agreement "as far as maritime rights were concerned, succeeded in going back to the time when Indonesia occupied Timor," says Cleary.

There are two things in this admirable account I would take issue with. Cleary argues that post-independence, the Timorese ruling elite visited a type of *Animal Farm* upon their people. This is a harsh assessment. I would argue that the failures of the first independence government were predominantly born of inexperience and a lack of good accountability mechanisms, rather than greed and pure self-interest.

The other is that, in conclusion, Cleary says it is "not too long a bow to draw to say that the deal that has been struck is instrumental in fomenting the current situation in Timor-Leste".

I think it is too long a bow to draw. The most appalling thing about these negotiations is not that they fomented the 2006 civil unrest in Timor, but that they amounted to daylight robbery, pure and simple, of a poor neighbour.

In the Dreams of Whales & The Muses

POETRY

In the Dreams of Whales

Grant Fraser

In the dreams of whales we are the sons of Ishmael,
Fleet of limb,
Sheened with droplets of water, droplets of air,
Crammed with kindnesses.
In the dreams of whales
We are the half-heard song
That makes harmonies of storms,
The gentle line that joins eyelids into sleep.
On the lips of anger
We are the syllables of assent,
In fallen hearts
The rising wind.
In solitude, we are the watchers-by,
In war, the word named peace.
In the dreams of whales
We are the sons,
We are the sons of Ishmael.

To listen to this poem being read by the author, [click here](#).

The Muses

L. K. Holt

Man spills oil O Petriana.
O Al Qurain, upon the meniscus it goes,
ten-thousand feet of Jesus.
It sways at the current's suggestion, blindly
the teleologies of the tide.
It beaches itself O Sygna. O Era it holds
feather to feather to skin,

locking out the ingredient for flight.

The tarry birds on white sand,
they are simplified, as holes, an inverted
starry night O Kirki.

O Laura D'Amato, the mangrove's fingers
are useless now. A seal pup's
flippers stick to its sides, a sink-stone O Nella Dan.

O Sylvan Arrow, fish rest
under the slick's shadow, an oasis of reference
in the blankness of sea,
like death in the blankness of time.

But O Ezzo Gippsland,
the blackness is worse.

To listen to this poem being read by the author, [click here](#) .