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Andrew Hamilton's public theology

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

For years I've been a fan of Andrew Hamilton's writing. I admire particularly his ability to bridge the gap between secular and religious realms. He allows a broad readership to enter the world of Catholic theology and practice and church history, and also draws out the spiritual dimension in secular events and issues.

So I was delighted back in June to read an article in *Eureka Street* in which he explained the [rationale](#) behind his writing. It garnered a large and enthusiastic response, with more than 40 comments posted.

Hamilton's address to the [Melbourne College of Divinity](#) centenary conference in July on the subject of public theology provided an opportunity to take this a step further. His videoed talk, and the accompanying interview, allow readers to see and hear him explain his work.

Hamilton is first and foremost a Jesuit priest. He joined the order in 1957, studied Arts at the University of Melbourne, and was among the first Catholic students to graduate with a Bachelor of Divinity from the Melbourne College of Divinity. He undertook post-graduate studies at Oxford, his thesis being on the theology of the great fourth century Doctor and Father of the Church, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria.

He has been teaching theology and church history since 1976 at the [United Faculty of Theology](#) (UFT), one of the member colleges of the Melbourne College of Divinity. The UFT is an ecumenical effort, run jointly by the Jesuits, Uniting Church and Anglican Church.

Besides teaching, his other great love is writing and publishing. He works at Jesuit Communications Australia, and has contributed extensively to its stable of magazines and publications, including *Eureka Street*, *Australian Catholics* and *Madonna*, and to many other theological and religious journals.

As Hamilton stated in his June article, 'My publishing hero is Dorothy Day', the outspoken American social activist who founded the *Catholic Worker*. It's fitting then that Hamilton marked the 30th anniversary of Day's death with an [article](#) on her significance.

At the recent launch of Peter Steele's latest book of poetry, Hamilton [reflected](#) on his longterm urge to write: 'When Peter and I joined the Jesuits together, we were boys really, both with writing in the blood.'

Comparing his own style with Steele's more expansive and poetic sensibility, he said, 'I wanted to strip down words in order to speak as briefly and clearly as possible of what I could

say. I was happy to be silent about what I could not say.'

He has an abiding interest in social justice and refugee issues, and has worked with the Laotian and Cambodian Catholic communities in Melbourne. For years he's been a keen cyclist, riding his bike in inner city Melbourne between his various work places.

What comes across in this video, behind an unassuming exterior, is a man who is quietly forceful, highly intelligent, with deep insight. In this era when communication and understanding among different groups in society is vital, it's important to have people like him who are learned and faithful to the traditions of their tribe, and able to articulate them with clarity, generosity and openness to other points of view.

Levelling the disability hierarchy

COMMUNITY

Moira Byrne Garton



Today is the International Day of People with Disability, which aims to promote a positive image of people with disability. The day is designed to recognise and celebrate the skills, abilities and achievements of people with a disability, and their contributions to community life.

This is a welcome area of endeavour in Australia, where it frequently appears that the community views people with disabilities variously with admiration, surprise, bewilderment and fear.

In a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into a disability care and support scheme, a mother and carer of a profoundly intellectually disabled adult articulated a disability 'hierarchy', which differentiates disability types according to how society perceives and accepts people with those disabilities.

People who are fully intellectually able and articulate are championed. We're amazed by Matt Hallat, a Paralympian downhill skier with one leg; by Nick Vujucic, who was born without limbs but shares his story and hope with others; by the mind and ideas of Stephen Hawking, who has cerebral palsy; and by Hilary Lister, a quadriplegic woman who sailed around the world solo.

We have every reason to be impressed. Many able-bodied people could not achieve these feats.

Similarly, people without intellectual disability but with some physical impairment are respected by the community, particularly if they work in important or high-profile roles.

Australia's Disability Discrimination and Race Discrimination Commissioner, Graeme Innes (who lives with blindness), comedian Adam Hills (who has a prosthetic leg) and broadcaster Wendy Harmer (who had a cleft palate) fit this category. Regular 'Joes' (and 'Josies') with full intellectual capacity are also accepted.

Yet acceptance is not so forthcoming for people with intellectual disabilities. Although some individuals with a mild intellectual impairment have achieved success in sport or the arts, and this is celebrated to a degree, by and large people with intellectual disabilities do not experience the same acceptance.

If a mental impairment is mild, and an individual can care for themselves, converse, form relationships and work, the lack of acceptance is not so pronounced. There are kind-hearted people who regularly engage with people with intellectual disabilities, and even foster

friendships.

Unfortunately, where a mental impairment is more severe or profound, or coupled with physical disability, wider acceptance evaporates. It can be difficult to communicate with a person who does not use speech, to interact with someone who requires high levels of assistance with mobility and personal care, or engage with someone who may not have complete control of their sounds or movements.

As a result, many people with such severe or profound disabilities are avoided, ignored and rejected. They, along with their parents and carers, risk being marginalised.

The 'physical' disability lobby has been extremely successful in raising awareness of the issues faced by having a world catering only to the physically able. In fact, the physical disability lobby has been so successful that the wider community seems to forget that the disability sector includes a very significant number of people with a mental impairment, at times even alongside a physical impairment.

Why are things different for those with intellectual disabilities? Why are people with intellectual disabilities more disconnected? I feel that it is simply mainstream society's fear of the unknown.

For decades, people with intellectual disabilities were denied an education in most schools; governments did not have dedicated specialist schools. For decades, people with intellectual disabilities were institutionalised, often separated from their families. The community has been the poorer for missing out on the participation of those with intellectual disabilities.

Were that not the case, would our society be more appreciative and less competitive? More patient and empathetic? More compassionate and inclusive? I like to think that my own experience with disability has engendered these qualities in me.

The lives, abilities and achievements of individuals living with disability are as many and varied as those individuals themselves. It would be wonderful if, on this International Day of People with Disability, we could reflect on the contribution of those with intellectual disabilities too.

Social inclusion in ailing Ireland

ECONOMICS

Gerry O'Hanlon

A work colleague mentioned the other day that his widowed mother, ailing and elderly, was greatly worried by the state of Irish banks in these days. She wondered about withdrawing her deposits and putting the cash under her mattress. When it was put to her that the Irish government had guaranteed all deposits, she did not seem to be greatly reassured: her attitude was – but can I trust them?



Her worries are widely shared and the breakdown of trust is pervasive. Bankers, property developers, politicians, bishops have all fallen from their pedestals.

As recently as 2007 it was a different story, at least on the economic front. In that year the figures for economic growth, unemployment and inflation were 4.4 per cent, 4.6 per cent and 4.9 per cent respectively. The respective figures for 2009 were -11.3 per cent, 12 per cent and -4.5 per cent.

What has become apparent in retrospect is that, at least since about 2001, the Celtic Tiger phenomenon in Ireland changed from export-led growth to debt-financed capital spending, as cheap credit for housing led to a property and construction bubble. When credit became tight because of the global recession, the extent of Ireland's indebtedness gradually became apparent. Its economy went into recession.

Since then there have been four major attempts to bail out the banks, estimated to cost up to 60 billion euros, with a further 25 billion as a contingency fund. It is part of the loan from the international troika (International Monetary Fund/European Central Bank/European Union special fund).

In addition, as the recession hit harder and the tax take reduced, Ireland found itself running a fiscal deficit of up to 20 billion euros and has been given five years to reduce that debt to the 3 per cent ratio demanded by the Euro zone currency members.

This has led to a number of severe budgets, with more to follow in a 45 year plan. It will reduce the minimum wage and social welfare payments at a time of growing unemployment and emigration.

The international 'bailout', which the government preferred to call a loan, has all kinds of conditionalities and erosion of sovereignty built in. It was necessary because the markets were charging Ireland prohibitive rates for borrowing to meet its fiscal responsibilities.

This whole debacle has raised serious questions for Ireland about the type of economic

model it has been pursuing. The over-reliance on one source of wealth — property in this case — is the obvious.

But there were many other fault-lines as well. They include the failure to tackle inequality: the relatively poor infrastructure, the lack of universal access to health care, insufficient investment in education, under-resourcing of social workers, an inhumane prison system, and a slowness to come to terms with the demands of environmental protection, to name but a few.

What makes many Irish people so furious in these days is that it is the ‘big boys’ (banks, politicians, professionals of all classes) who have suffered least in this crisis, who have in effect been ‘bailed out’, while the poor have taken a disproportionate hit. There is much talk about reducing the minimum wage but little or none about imposing a maximum wage.

In this context it is particularly galling that senior bankers, who have been so reckless in their past behaviour, have tried to resist attempts to cap their salaries and bonuses. It was admitted recently at a Dail (Parliament) sub-committee that they have continued even now to give ‘misleading information’ to public authorities about the true situation of their institutions.

A crowd of over 50,000 marched through the centre of Dublin last Saturday to give vent to their feelings.

A hopeful sign in this bleak landscape has been the emergence of commentators, mainly secular but some religious, advocating the transformation of the economy to a model based on values like the common good, solidarity, environmental concern, equality, active and inclusive citizenship. This kind of vision is familiar to anyone conversant with Catholic Social Teaching.

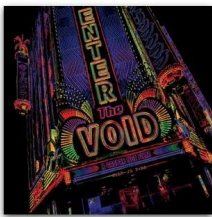
Indeed, one wonders how sustainable the hitherto dominant neo-liberal model is at a global level either. Perhaps we need to learn more about the ‘richness of sufficiency’, as an ecumenical group of Asian Churches meeting in Bangkok in 1999 put it to churches in the North. If the Irish can, with others, bring this concern to the global table, then some good will have come from this debacle.

Drug dealer's life after death

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

Enter the Void (R). Director: Gaspar Noe. Starring: Nathaniel Brown, Paz de la Huerta, Cyril Roy, Olly Alexander. Runtime: 137 minutes



The queue to get into the Melbourne International Film Festival screening ran halfway around the block. When the doors opened we jammed into the outsized theatre. The opening credits hit like neon a stun-gun: words and colours strobing to a heavy beat. Then, the name of the filmmaker, GASPAR NOE, in neon letters two storeys tall.

This was an iconoclast announcing his awaited return, and he was greeted with applause. But no one really knew what he had in store. *Enter the Void* is not like anything we had seen before. Exploitation cinema taken to its arthouse extreme. A debauched masterwork from a controversial genius. That night at MIFF, the mood soured slowly but surely.

The first part of the film portrays a night in the life of fledgling Tokyo-based American drug dealer Oscar (Nathaniel Brown). Noe places us inside Oscar's head, so we watch events unfold from his perspective.

Oscar trips on drugs, is roused by a phone call from client Victor (Alexander), then walks through a hell of grime and neon towards their rendezvous. En route, fellow druggie Alex (Roy) offers him a precis of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*: this monologue lays the film's thematic bed.

At his destination, Oscar is murdered.

The remainder of the film consists of two strands. In one, we follow Oscar through a disjointed series of memories: childhood innocence; the death of his parents; a pact made with his sister that they will never be apart; their anguished separation by welfare officers; their eventual reunion in Tokyo.

These scenes are woven into an exposition of the present-day experiences of those who knew Oscar, viewed by Oscar's disembodied self as he hovers above them. This is the film's most innovative element, a bird's eye view of the action concerning Alex, Victor, and Oscar's sister Linda (de la Huerta), who is working as a stripper and a prostitute.

It transitions between scenes by panning rapidly from one location to the next, streets and buildings blurring; by passing through walls or impossibly small spaces, or in and out of flames and other sources of light. Technically, the film is a magnificent.

But be aware that this is a dream project for the provocateur Noe , built on the back of his brutally nihilistic 2002 arthouse hit *Irreversible*. That film's *bÃ¢te noire* was a nine-minute anal rape scene. In *Enter the Void* Noe takes provocation from dubious to ridiculous, as if he must strive to outdo himself at every turn.

It's not enough to show a teenage girl undergoing an abortion; moments later we return to leer at the discarded foetus. The film's most shocking image, of the aftermath of the car accident that killed Oscar's parents, recurs , with increasing attention to detail. Noe concludes a montage of pornographic images by placing his audience within one woman's loins, in the path of a lunging phallus and a spray of ejaculate.

These are the worst atrocities of Noe 's theatre of cruelty. To an extent, they serve the story. They reflect the preoccupations of a protagonist unrestrained by physical revulsion. They evoke a nightmare world defined by sex and violence, where there is not much difference between the two. The above mentioned (ahem) climax is the catalyst for a bittersweet resolution to Oscar's quest for reunion with Linda.

Still, this is less a film to be enjoyed than an experience to be endured. Noe 's vision is profound but utterly bleak. The gruelling running time means even the innovative camerawork becomes tired and repetitive (note: the Australian theatrical cut is some 20 minutes shorter than the reviewed festival cut).

At the MIFF screening there was, at the conclusion, a second round of applause, this one laced with derisive hollers and sighs of relief. As we staggered out into the evening's relief, I turned to my companion and said the only thing that could be said after a movie like this.

'At least it wasn't in 3-D.'

Finding climate common ground in Cancun

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Art by and for the lost

NON-FICTION

George Estreich

What I noticed, after we arrived in Melbourne from our small Oregon town, was the sheer density of it: how much graffiti there was. It was everywhere, in carparks, railway stations, on bridges and in alleyways, on trucks and trains and park benches and rubbish bins.

It was overwhelming, part of the blinding newness of Australia: an Antipodean light shined in my eyes, or the afterimage of that light, coruscating behind the eyelids.

But in time the vibrating colors faded to particulars, and the particulars became familiar. The spots faded from vision, leaving a landscape that seemed strange and bright and new.

Riding the Cranbourne/Pakenham line to the State Library, I memorised the shadow destinations between the official stops: in the tunnels and retaining walls between Malvern — Armadale — Toorak — Hawksburn — South Yarra — Richmond — Parliament were fanged clown in agony, naked girl reclining, hieroglyph with eyes.

In time, walking around the city, I began to recognise the work of individual artists; and with that, I began to appreciate the vast spectrum enclosed by the word *graffiti*, from undeniable vandalism to undeniable art.

At one end of the spectrum, a black sloop across a dry-cleaner's window, and a sneaker print, where the artist stepped in his own paint: no message, only a mess.

At the other, the Martian-green man on the side of a defunct Richmond warehouse, brooding on a thought as immense as himself and strange as the color of his skin.

In between was a vast middle range of expression, violent, incomprehensible, arcane: words twisted and folded like proteins, icons plucked from an unknown rebus. Crowns, winged hearts, weapons. Hell's emoticons. Frescoes of the profane. Art therapy, by and for the lost. Obscure confessions. Unwritten laws. Splintered codex. Illuminations for the encyclopedia of Babel. Pictures that were words, words that were pictures.

Looking at them, I felt as if the city had bled in an intelligible form, as if the bricks themselves had opened up and told a secret. But I had no idea what the secret was.

The characters depicted in Melbourne graffiti fall, roughly, into four categories:

People in agony.

Aliens with weapons.

Men, laughing at the viewer.

A hot chick named 'Deb'.

The word 'Deb' is written in bubbly letters, the kind you'd expect in a young girl's diary. 'Deb' is ubiquitous in Melbourne, in pastel colors — pinks and ochres — that stand out from the aggressive neon favoured by the painters of aliens.

One day late in the year, walking around Collingwood, I came across a series of lizards rendered in earth tones. They were precise, rendered from above, as if the artist were a predator, an eagle descending. A wedge-shaped head; the living curve of a tail, ornamented with a devilish triangle. The lizards breathed on the wall, a sketch in spray paint.

The painting rendered a thing in the world, and it was a thing in the world unlike most graffiti, which is a thing in the world, but also seems an obsessively rendered map of the interior of the artist's skull.

But there were occasional clarities too. Once, waiting at a bus stop, I saw a plain message in block letters on a concrete wall: THERE IS NO EMOTICON FOR EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR.

As the year went by, the graffiti faded back into the texture of everyday life. Australia was our home, if only temporarily; and being at home entails a certain blindness of habit.

One day, on train platforms around the city, poster-sized warnings appeared: mere possession of a spray can meant a \$500 dollar fine. I knew it would be less than a day before the warning was tagged, and I was right. I smirked and enjoyed the scrawled tags, but I knew that in the end I was on the side of the official signs: the neatly labeled stations in their predictable order, the rails guiding the train in its sparking, certain path.

I was on the train, not in the tunnel. Each day I went to the State Library to write. I sat on the brightly printed fabric of the seat and watched the graffiti go by like a single composite dream, the figures naked and agonised and sullen and smiling with unpleasant secrets, and when I arrived at Parliament a printed sign told me where I was.

Dangers of Indigenous referendum

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

John Warhurst



The debate about the Indigenous constitutional referendum proposed by the Gillard Government is heading in a familiar but dangerous direction. There are potentially alarming parallels with the unsuccessful 1999 republic referendum.

General disagreements have already surfaced about the proposed process and content. The most dangerous of these, with parallels to the republican debate, is the disagreement between so-called minimalists and maximalists (the same terms are even being used).

That is, between those who advocate recognition only in the Preamble to the Constitution and those who advocate legal recognition in the body of the Constitution itself.

The conflict is between symbolic change and constitutional change with potentially substantial legal consequences.

The Opposition supports change to the Preamble only. But some senior Indigenous activists, like Professor Marcia Langton, insist that there must be substantive change. Others scorn symbolic change as 'all talk no action', while some, like Patrick Dodson, warn against division.

In the absence of agreement among advocates of change, nothing happens. The status quo is the only winner. The logic is that division among constitutional reformers spells defeat.

Professor A. J. Brown of Griffith University has already issued such a warning on the basis of his Australian Constitutional Values Survey 2010.

Conducted by Newspoll, the survey polled attitudes to five potential constitutional reform referendum issues: whether to recognise local government in the Constitution; whether Australia should become a Republic; whether to recognise the history and culture of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution; what levels of government Australia should have; and which level of government is responsible for doing what.

Brown has warned that reformers must work hard to achieve success because support for change is so fragile and ignorance so widespread.

In the case of the Indigenous referendum 75 per cent of Australians consider it either very or somewhat important to hold a referendum over the next few years. On the face of it that is a very encouraging figure. But less than half (43 per cent) consider it very important and the figure in Western Australia and Tasmania is below 40 per cent (compared with a high of 49

per cent in Victoria).

So the passage of the referendum, especially gaining the necessary support in four states, may eventually depend on the support of many people with only a lukewarm interest.

Green voters are very supportive of the referendum's importance (62 per cent) but they are only a small minority. Labor voters are quite strongly supportive too (55 per cent think it very important). But Liberals are not (only 26 per cent consider it very important). The Nationals' opposition (only 24 per cent very important) goes some way to offsetting the Greens.

Those voters with only a lukewarm level of support or interest need a very encouraging environment in order to be convinced to vote Yes at this referendum. They need to believe that they should jump on a bandwagon of widespread community support.

Realistically they need at least an Opposition Leader firmly behind an enthusiastic Prime Minister. To ensure success Tony Abbott will have to encourage his Liberal base to get behind a referendum initiated by a Labor Prime Minister.

The community has so far heard a lot of static and murmuring about dangers and caveats. That is fine initially. Any serious disagreements must be aired and the pros and cons debated.

There also needs to be an accompanying basic education campaign. And it must be a creative education campaign, almost certainly web based, that reaches deep into the community. It would best be an interactive campaign that appeals to young people. Young voters will reject a paternalistic top-down education campaign.

But from the end of next year onwards, when the Expert Panel reports, until the referendum in 2013, the stars will need to be in alignment for this referendum to be successful. There will be naysayers but they will not defeat it. What may defeat it is division among those who are supporters in principle but not supporters of the particular proposal that eventually goes forward.

Two nuns and my second confession

POETRY

Brian Doyle

Sister Anne Marie

It was in second grade that I discovered I could not see.
This thought had never occurred to me in all my years.
When Sister Anne spun suddenly to write on the board,
Her rosary big as a halter desperately trying to catch up
With a clack and clatter like railroad cars, I leaned over
To one or the other of the kids near me to read what we
Were supposed to know. Isn't that why God made rows
Of desks, so you had good sight angles in all directions?
But she noticed, did Sister Anne. She noticed each of us.
She was probably all of twenty. We thought her ancient.
But she knew which boy could not read, not even a little,
And which of us didn't actually forget lunch, and who is
Wearing his older sister's winter coat with the lapels cut.
She sent me to the nurse one time, perhaps I had a fever,
But the note she wrote said check his eyes. Yes, I read it.
The nurse put it on the corner of her desk and I peered at
It later, worried I was being sent to Siberia or something.
But that finished with me getting glasses, which changed
Everything. The universe had edges! I never did recover.
Imagine what it was like to put on spectacles, for the first
Time, after never seeing the clarity and geometry of it all.
Imagine the jolt of absolute stunned delight. Imagine *that*,
Just for a minute. All these years later I can't stop smiling.

Sister Dorita

Or, conversely, consider the nun we had for first grade.
This was Sister Dorita, who had a stevedore's forearms.
On the second day of school she hauled a bubbling boy
Named David into the air by his necktie. He hung there,
Squeaking, as she explained things tersely. We gawked.
He didn't seem much worse for wear when he achieved
This blessed earth again. We were all hugely impressed
With the ease of hoist and suspension. It never occurred
To us that David might have been humiliated and afraid.
It never occurred to us that maybe Sister was frightened
Also, scared of her temper, worried about losing control,
Worried that she could not deliver anything of substance
To these thirty holy creatures who seethed and wept and
Gaped at her, hungry for something they could not name.
It never occurred to us that she was a girl in her twenties,
Rattled and thrilled by her vows, terrified that she would
Never find dear friends among her new sisters, frustrated
By the many overbearing priests like exasperating uncles,
Wondering what would happen to her two old boyfriends,
Trying to attend to the miracle of doing the convent wash.
It never occurred to us to wonder what she thought as she
Brought David gently back to earth. Perhaps she shivered.
I suppose it's possible that the whole thing was deliberate
Theater, a public demonstration about the price of yelling
In class, but I don't think so. I think it was another instant
When matters hung suspended between laughter and fury.

I remember that she smiled as she turned back to her desk.
If ever I wished a poem was a prayer I wish it now for her.

My second confession

The first time you go to confession it's mostly Ritual,
For all the hurry and worry and crinkling new clothes;
There's nothing to actually confess at the age of eight,
And the whole event is about admittance and presents:
The first rosary rising from its shining box like a cobra,
Your own Bible bound in supple pliable white calfskin,
Your aunt wondering who murdered the poor wee calf
And if that bloody git had to go to confession too, yeh?
It's the next confession that's got hair on it, as my aunt
Was also fond of mumbling. You ask your older sisters
If you can borrow some of their more sophisticated sin,
Something heavier than *I dishonoured my mum and dad*,
Everyone uses that one, poor Father behind his wooden
Panel hearing that twenty times a day chirped by babies
Totally unaware of the thousand ways they will later do
Exactly that. You can borrow the sin of self-abuse, says
An older sister which sends all my sisters into hysterics
Before they slam their bedroom door to talk about boys.
And so I ambled into the dense velvet dark of the booth
And knelt, and Father, catching the creak of the kneeler,
Slid the rattling maple panel back behind the iron grille,
And I said Bless me Father for I have sinned previously,
And he made an odd sound in his nose and said Perhaps

You mean grievously, which I most sincerely doubt, and
I warmed him up with dishonouring of mother and father,
And he said something I didn't catch and then I told him
I had beaten up my younger brothers and in my memory
He said cheerfully ah isn't that what kid brothers are for,
And then I went with self-abuse. He made that odd noise
In his nose again but this time it didn't stop. I was afraid
Maybe he was having a Brain Seizure like my aunts said
The Mets players had eleventy times a game every game.
I waited for a while and finally Father came back around.
His voice was a little shaky but he sounded fairly healthy.
I believe I must have a wee priestly chat with your sisters
About leading lambs astray with what seems to be funny,
He said. In the meantime, for your penance I want you to
Enjoy this really lovely day as much as you possibly can,
Will you do that? Yes, Father, I said, and ran off, thrilled.
This confession stuff, it seemed to me, was as easy as pie.

Dorothy Day's gospel with teeth

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

It is 30 years this week since Dorothy Day died. She was a quirky woman who lived on the margins of Church and United States society. But her life bears reflection if we look for directions to take in our different circumstances.



Day was born in 1897 and became a radical socialist during her university years. After dropping out, she went to New York and worked as a journalist. She was active in radical politics, briefly married, had an abortion and was jailed for her political action.

Her interest in the Catholic Church crystallised in her decision to have her child baptised in 1924, despite her knowledge that it would lead to separation from her partner.

After being torn between her faith and solidarity with the poor, she met a travelling French Catholic intellectual, Peter Maurin. Through him she found her life's work in founding the *Catholic Worker* newspaper with a radical commitment to social justice, beginning houses of hospitality where anyone in need could find a home, and in advocating pacifism. She was arrested many times during her life, and died in 1980.

Day's life is significant for many reasons. Like her United States contemporary, Trappist monk Thomas Merton, she held up a mirror to the Church but from an unaccustomed angle. She came to Catholicism as an adult, with memories of the experiences and passions that had first gripped her imagination. So she saw see the Catholic Church from outside and heard the Gospel played in a different key.

One of the most poignant points of her journey was after her conversion. She felt that she could not join Communist marchers in support of strikers. Catholics did not consort with Communists. But the Gospel led her to stand in solidarity between the strikers. That she felt this as a dilemma remains disquieting for later Catholic readers.

As this story suggests, Day lived her life with a radical edge. In the house of hospitality she lived with the poor, mentally ill and alcoholic, with their sounds, violent moods and smells. During the Spanish Civil War and World War 2 the *Catholic Worker* espoused a pacifist stance which was anathema to many Catholics. She was frequently arrested and jailed for the causes she adopted. The Gospel she heard had teeth.

But more significant today than her conversion or her causes was the texture of Day's life. The threads that joined her faith, her guiding principles and the people she gave herself to were quite distinctive. Her life was lived in harsh conditions, but the way she put its elements

together was sweet and attractive.

Each thread was radical. The first was a reflective solidarity with the poor. It was expressed in facing jail with marginalised groups, and in the production of the *Catholic Worker* where the ethical demands of Christian faith in hard times could be explored.

The second thread was hospitality. The houses of hospitality were open to all who came. She saw this hospitality as an expression of every Christian's call to welcome the stranger.

The practice of hospitality coloured her commitment to social action and to reflection on the situation of the poor. These were grounded in intimate familiarity with the battered faces and messy lives of people who came to the houses. It was impossible there to idealise the poor or to think abstractly about justice.

The third thread was pacifism. This was a political stance, but also personal. It was demanding at both levels. Open hospitality of the kind involved in the Catholic Worker houses ensured violence was a fact of life. Many people who sought refuge were wounded and knew only violent responses to frustration. So the houses could be communities only if violence was met by a philosophy and practice of non-violence.

It also followed that illegal action in solidarity with the poor or against war must be based on respect for one's opponents.

These threads are all receptive, not aggressive or strategic. The poor are embraced, the homeless made welcome and the violent accepted. This receptivity provides the characteristic sweetness in a harsh reality. For Day, the three threads were woven together by faith lived within the Catholic community.

Modern observers may be struck by the devotional and almost submissive character of Day's faith. She accepted the community of faith in which she found herself, showing great respect for bishops and priests for all their frailties.

But this quality of her faith also came from her unrelenting focus on what mattered. To her the concrete lives of people whom God loved mattered above all. The wounds she took from other Catholics in following her way did not matter much. People mattered very much.

Her life still speaks to our contemporary world. At a time when political and church life are fragmented, and people are easily preoccupied with the frailties of institutions and personalities, she encourages us to go into the streets and to ask what matters.

Could we find a better answer than her mixture of solidarity with the poor, a reflective spirit, radical hospitality and pacifism? And if we could find a better answer, how could it be lived as sweetly and as strongly as she did?

Pope's condom truth for World AIDS Day

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The western media jumped to quick conclusions after Pope Benedict's concessionary remarks about condoms came to light a week ago. He was reported to have said in a book-length interview that it is acceptable to use condoms to prevent HIV-AIDS.

What was being touted as the Pope's 'condom conversion' was quickly clarified by the Vatican. Its spokesperson Father Federico Lombardi insisted it was not what it seemed. He said that nothing had changed, though clearly we had gained an insight into Benedict's creative openness to wayward means of preserving the dignity of those who might contract HIV-AIDS.

In a [commentary](#) for *Eureka Street* last week, the director of the [African Jesuit AIDS Network](#) (AJAN), Father Paterné Mombé, said that for the Pope, condom use is 'not really' the way to promote HIV prevention: 'He acknowledges the relative moral value of the prostitute showing concern for protecting others by using condoms.'

The 'care and concern' context of the male prostitute's attitude is everything, while condoms themselves are relatively incidental.

That said, the Pope is of course hopeful that this attitude will also manifest itself in a form of responsible sexual behaviour that fully appreciates its context of human dignity.

It can only be a good thing if the media attention serves to raise awareness of HIV-AIDS in the lead up to Wednesday's World AIDS Day.

The theme for World AIDS Day 2010 is 'Take Action. No Discrimination'. According to the organising body's Australian [website](#), the day's observance encourages acceptance of those living with or affected by HIV-AIDS, and action to reduce the transmission of HIV by promoting safe sex practices.

The message is universal, though the strategies are different. For AIDS Councils around Australia — and charities such as the [Australian AIDS Fund](#) — condoms is the preferred preventative measure, with abstinence a distant and improbable alternative. For the Pope, it's the reverse.

There is no argument with regard to acceptance of those who are suffering. Neither AIDS Councils nor the Catholic Church condemn people who are HIV-positive. Revelation of HIV-positive status can stigmatise the person and destroy the human relationships that sustain his or her life. But this will not be the case if those affected are affirmed by those around them and general attitudes of the community.

The text of a performance piece, published in a [recent](#) AJAN newsletter, speaks of couples living in a 'discordant' relationship, where one partner is HIV-positive and the other claims to be HIV-negative. It is an honest and understandably confused testimony to the reality that acceptance is difficult but not impossible.

Many times I felt lonely and lost

People living positive don't trust those living negative

People living negative reject you; when they do welcome you they are suspicious.

The constant to strive for, it seems, is the care of one human being for another, whether it is manifest in condom use, sexual abstinence, or acceptance of the other's HIV status.

Overcoming child protection burnout

COMMUNITY

Moira Rayner



I've been writing about children's rights for most of my professional life, and after two damning reports from the Victorian Ombudsman and the premier's announcement of a few score more child protection workers to remedy the problem, I have started to feel very tired.

Advertising for a few score more underpaid posts for one of the worst jobs to be filled by soon-to-be traumatised state government employees will not do anything substantive to prevent or remediate the suffering of the children who are being demoralised, struck, humiliated, ignored, left in pain, kidnapped, sexually assaulted or taught that they are unlovably naughty.

I read without surprise of yet another father who has been charged with killing his toddler because he is very angry with her mother. Of four little Australian girls who went missing, believed and in three cases found dead; only after their absence did neighbours speak up about the pummellings, bruises and misery they noticed in the weeks leading up to the disappearances.

'Child abuse' notifications continue to rise, while debate rages over whether or not more children are actually being abused, or whether mandatory reports are taking up too much of child protection workers' time, leaving little for intervention. Meanwhile asylum-seeking children are being detained with adults and not going to school for months.

A private members' bill seeking the appointment of a Children's Commissioner at federal level is (yet again) being circulated, this time through Facebook and other social networking sites. I do recall the then opposition spokesperson circulating a paper in support of this prior to the 2007 election, but it dropped off the to-do list when she became a real life minister.

In Victoria, Lisa Neville, the responsible minister is looking haggard. I have no doubt she cares, but it is Treasury and the Premier who decide what resources go into the reform of child protection systems and recommendations for reformed child protection laws and processes, to curb the disadvantages of the adversarial approach in the Children's Court and, dare I say it, the Family Court as well.

On Friday 19 November, an eminent emeritus professor of paediatrics and patron of a group committed to work towards the elimination of the right to hit children, Defence for Children International (Australian Section) and End Physical Punishment (Australian section of the international group, EPOCH), gave an International Children's Day oration at Victoria University. About 20 people turned up.

Professor Oates laid out the history of professional awareness of child maltreatment, from the early days of naive belief in 'spontaneous' subdural haematomas in infants with long-bone fractures, to the discovery of child sexual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s, to the current understanding of the severe, long-term effects of maltreatment in the adults who survive neglected or abusive childhoods.

Oates was especially excited by advances in genetics which offer a probability that within 20 years we may be able to identify and treat genetic conditions that predispose an infant to behaviours and conditions that damage their innate resilience.

I will rejoice when we find the gene that allows human beings to be unmoved by the suffering of any human being, or to tolerate child poverty and homelessness which cause destructive clusters of 'risk factors' that tend to drag a child and its parent/s and family down.

Oh, brave new world, indeed.

Meanwhile, after several reviews of the child protection system, those lawyers who are trying to help Victorian child protection workers get through their horrible days in the lions' den of the Children's Court defending their intervention in children's family lives, have served notice on the head of the Department of significant breaches of occupational health and safety laws.

They are burning out. Due to budget constraints, they claim, legal advice and representation can only be provided on a triage model — the legal equivalent of ER when one must decide whether to whack the electric paddles onto the chest of one patient, staunch another's bleeding stomach wound or restrain the psychotic lad with the kitchen knives. Not the best environment in which to make life or death decisions.

As Oates said, nobody pretends child maltreatment is easily prevented, detected or remedied. Yet we are passionate about the social evils of allowing same-sex couples to marry. Would a child in a same-sex family be exposed to proportional rates of neglect, violence, emotional undermining or sexual assault as in the traditionally recognised partnering of one man and one woman?

Wouldn't it be great if we put all that energy into providing what all children need: a family environment of love and understanding where they can achieve their full potential? Yes, it's a fundamental human right, which has no priority in our community, actually.

Shame on us.

Politicians stoke the violence myth

POLITICS

Ellena Savage

I used to carry a knife in my handbag. Like nearly a quarter of Australians, I believe that 80 per cent of all crime is violent crime; I was concerned for my safety. And then I discovered that if my self-defence weapon were used, it would likely be used against me. So, I turned it in during the knife Amnesty month. Which was good, because the police were granted stop-and-search powers, and had I encountered a police officer, I would have been fined.



But the greater police visibility and ability for them to actually do things didn't alleviate my anxieties much — their increased presence only met the increase in street fighting. So I bit the bullet and cut down on spending time outside my home.

For a while, I felt that I was safe there, until I learnt the majority of violent crimes occur within the residential home. So now I spend most of my time inside the municipal library reading the papers and considering just how it got so bad. I'm sure it has a lot to do with youths.

Our society, like every other, has elements of violence. But the public's perception of it is disproportionate: almost one quarter of Australians believe violence is involved in 80 per cent of all crimes committed. The figure is below 10 per cent. The media and politicians have played a role in producing the hysteria.

I can't discern why crime and punishment is such a vital populist concern — perhaps because it plays into the good vs evil binaries that much of our culture is framed in. But frequently we see distasteful campaign of fear mongering, such as that which has characterised the lead-up to Victoria's state elections.

Crime involving violence accounts for fewer than one in ten of all crimes committed in Australia. In the past decade, overall crime rates have decreased significantly. Yet a majority of Australians believe crime rates have risen, and that fewer convicted criminals are given jail sentences than actually are.

A report published by the Australian Institute of Criminology in July indicates that the demographics most likely to over-estimate crime rates are those who are less likely to be victims of crime: the elderly, and females. Young males, who are most commonly its victims, tend to estimate crime rates most accurately.

Political leaders routinely promise to increase police numbers. There are positive aspects to this, but it is not value-free. The past five years has already seen a dramatic increase in police powers. The populist emphasis on 'street crime' will see a greater extension of these powers in public spaces.

It overlooks the reality that the majority of violent crimes occur inside residential buildings, perpetrated by people known to the victim. A heightened police presence in public areas does not promise to challenge cultures of violence in our society, but gives the impression of an aspiring police state.

When random violent assaults do occur, politicians and the media sensationalise them, distorting public perceptions of safety.

Victoria's Director of Public Prosecutions Jeremy Rapke, QC, has, in the past few weeks, incurred criticism from Victoria Legal Aid, the Law Institute of Victoria, and the Criminal Bar Association over his push for harsher sentencing for violent crimes.

Supported by both the State Government and the Opposition, Rapke has opposed lenient sentencing and urged senior judges to apply longer sentences for certain violent crimes. He has consequently been accused of asking judges to step outside of established legal parameters.

Victoria's jail sentences are the most severe in the country, and the reoffending rate is the lowest. If the state is to maintain an autonomous and distinguished justice system, Victorian judges ought to be independent from the manoeuvres of party politicians.

In the lead-up to the Victorian elections, both parties have promoted disproportionate perceptions of social insecurity in our communities for political gain. Their campaign reflects Australia-wide values. It is at best cynical, at worst, a palpable disregard for the civil liberties of those who are racially, economically or otherwise marginalised.

For the rest of us, facial recognition technology in train stations should alleviate our anxieties of imminent attacks. Considering the disparity between hysterical public perceptions of crime and the realities of it, the integrity of Australian courts ought to be left to legal professionals.

Elegy for Cambodia and New Zealand

HUMAN RIGHTS

Catherine Marshall

It is the living who are burdened with responsibility for those who have died. In New Zealand, where a Hollywood ending [redolent](#) of the San Jose Mine in Chile failed to materialise, mine management and redundant rescue teams must now contain the grief and anger of a nation.

‘We need answers to what happened at Pike River, clearly something’s gone terribly wrong and it’s now claimed the lives of 29 people,’ said the country’s Prime Minister, John Key.

Twenty-nine lives that may have been extinguished much earlier, when the original blast ricocheted through the mine on New Zealand’s sparsely-populated west coast last Friday.

But in the absence of evidence either way, institutional post mortems are being ordered even before the bodies of the dead have been recovered or the grief of the living processed. No fewer than three inquests are planned: blame will be assigned, no doubt, and compensation paid, but the families’ excruciating sorrow will never be assuaged.

Something went terribly wrong, too, in Phnom Penh on Monday night, when 347 people were either crushed to death or drowned after falling off a crowded bridge linking the city to an island in the Bassac River.

Compensation is being spoken of here, too: donations from the government, the monarchy, NGOs and the private sector will in all likelihood be used to cover funeral costs in a country whose population lives largely below the poverty line.

Organisations such as Caritas Cambodia and World Vision are providing medicine, food and — poignantly — ‘three bottles of drinking water each day for a total of five days’ to many of the 750 people injured during the stampede.

As they begin to recover from the shock of this unbearable tragedy, bewildered family members are said to be angry at the government for failing to provide adequate crowd control.

But unlike New Zealand, where an educated, self-confident populace will demand explanations and assert its rights, the relatives of those who died in Phnom Penh are unlikely to receive reasonable answers to their sorrow-filled questions.

Cambodians are all too familiar with brutality and loss; this most recent tragedy is just one more blow to a beaten, diminished people. It will be stoically absorbed into their national psyche, alongside all those acts of depravity inflicted by the Khmer Rouge regime, the landmine and cluster bomb injuries that still occur daily, and the other, innumerable hardships

that define these people's lives.

There is nothing like hardship to build resilience.

This characteristic will serve the Cambodians well, for they bear their grief in relative isolation, bereft of an outpouring of attention proportionate to the number of lives lost in Monday night's disaster. While the living hold aloft the memories of the dead, the dead in turn carry within them a value that determines just how readily they will be remembered.

The revellers who had the life sucked from them in Phnom Penh and the miners who now lie buried in a smouldering mountainside near Greymouth suffered equally horrific deaths; their families now buckle beneath the same, exquisite grief.

But a Cambodian life is not as valuable as that of a New Zealander or an Australian, as a cursory observation of our media suggests.

The mining disaster having dominated headlines for the past week, it was with tremendous sorrow that readers uncoiled their copies of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday to find photos of all 29 of the miners staring out from its front page above the headline, 'Hope died swiftly, but the grief will never end'. Another full page was dedicated to the story later on in the newspaper.

In contrast, the Cambodian stampede — labelled the biggest tragedy there since the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the late 1970s — was accorded just two meagre articles by the same newspaper this week, both of them buried deep within.

Our multi-ethnic heritage notwithstanding, many of us in Australia seem inured to the pain of people whose race or economic worth is not equal to our own. But such self-importance is often accompanied by a weakness, an inability to bear loss with dignity the way those in more robust countries are able to do.

New Zealand can take strength at this time from Cambodia, a country to whom tragedy is no stranger, reaching out in communion as each of them comes to terms with the torment of loss and bereavement. And both disasters will remind people the world over to make the most of every moment, for no matter how thoroughly we try to mitigate risk, there is no knowing when tragedy will strike.

Agnostic preachers fight the devil

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Last Exorcism* (MA). Director: Daniel Stamm. Starring: Patrick Fabian, Ashley Bell, Iris Bahr, Louis Herthum, Caleb Landry Jones, Adam Grimes. 87 minutes**



In a 1999 interview with online horror magazine *Dark Planet*, American author William Peter Blatty [described](#) his 1971 demonic possession novel *The Exorcist* as being ‘about the eternal questions ... why are we here? what are we supposed to be doing? why do we die? is there a God?’ *The Exorcist* ‘approached this last question, which is at the heart of all the others, by seeking to confirm the existence of ‘demons’ and the power of religious faith to deal with them’.

It’s true that although this horror novel’s account of the demonic possession of a young girl is disturbing, *The Exorcist* upholds an essentially fundamentalist, even romantic vision of religious (particularly Catholic) experience. Its central character, Fr Damien Karas, is a wearily compassionate, agnostic Jesuit. His encounters with demonic forces during the events portrayed in the novel restore his belief in the metaphysical dimension of his faith. This ultimately reconnects him to the knowledge that selflessness is the cornerstone of grace.

The Last Exorcism is a pseudo-documentary that puts Blatty’s thesis to work in a much greyer context. This a cautionary tale that decries fanaticism and blind cynicism equally.

The filmmakers substitute for the jaded Jesuit a troubled Middle American preacher, Cotton Marcus (Fabian), who is being followed by a two-person film crew including director Iris (Bahr) and cameraman Daniel (Grimes).

This former child preacher is a born showman, skilled at playing the room in order to stoke religious fervour. His sermons are peppered with sleight-of-hand tricks that elicit *oohs* and *ahs* among the halleluiahs. To demonstrate the power of hype over substance, he bets Iris that he can babble his mother’s banana bread recipe amid his frenzied preaching, without anyone noticing. When he does so, it is with a discreet grin at the camera.

In truth, Cotton has lost his faith, although he’s been reluctant to let go of the role he was born and raised to do. Not just sermons, either: this affable shyster has also been performing sham exorcisms. He describes this as a ‘service’ similar to what Karas in *The Exorcist* might call an ‘autosuggestive shock cure’. He claims he is meeting a psychological, not a spiritual, need.

But he’s ready to drop the act, and has invited Iris to document what will be his final exorcism. Like a magician exposing trade secrets, he’ll reveal the tricks and gimmicks that characterise his exorcisms.

The bulk of the film deals with Cotton, Iris and Daniel (present only as a voice behind the camera) and their experiences on the Sweetzer farm in rural Florida. Shy and skittish adolescent girl Nell Sweetzer (Bell) is experiencing what her devout father Louis believes to be textbook symptoms of demonic possession. They have called Cotton in as a last resort after mainstream medical treatments failed.

This is a similar set-up to the *The Exorcist*. But *The Last Exorcism* maintains a greater level of ambiguity than its predecessor. Nell is clearly disturbed, but is the disturbance psychological, or spiritual? Likewise, it becomes apparent that she has indeed been 'defiled', but is the defiler human or demonic?

Certainly there is more going on here than the unsuspecting Cotton could ever have imagined. The film eventually offers a disturbing resolution to these questions, but not before offering plenty of effective horror thrills: creepy atmosphere and visuals, and the occasional shock of gore.

But the real treat is watching Cotton at work. Fabian's portrayal strikes a fine balance between supercilious and affable. Cotton sells himself to Louis like a used car salesman, demonstrating for Iris and Daniel how the powers of charm and persuasion can be used to manipulate the blindly faithful. The initial exorcism is itself a farce employing cheap special effects which Cotton demonstrates privately for the camera before using to dupe the gormless Louis and Nell.

As events become more serious, the parallels between Cotton's and Karas' journeys become more pronounced. Although Cotton's glib cynicism contrasts with Karas' weary agnosticism, like Karas his encounters with the (possibly) supernatural are enough to force him to question his 'unfaith'. This puts him on a similar journey to realising greater truths about his God and himself. For Cotton though, the more shocking discoveries pertain to the evil of which ordinary humans are capable.

Why we should aid 'bizarre' North Korea

HUMAN RIGHTS

Duncan MacLaren

I have two lasting memories of my two trips to North Korea. The first was visiting the obstetrics unit of a hospital near Wonsan on the eastern coast; it looked like a medieval torture chamber. The second was visiting numerous orphanages where 14-year-old children looked as if they were only eight because they were so malnourished.



The latest escalation of tension between North and South Korea can only mean that these impressions will become reality more frequently.

The North Korea aid program of the Catholic agency Caritas Internationalis, now managed on behalf of the Confederation by Caritas Corea of the South, began in the mid-1990s after the harvest was devastated by floods and many tens of thousands died of starvation.

For more than a decade, Caritas Australia contributed significantly to the response, funding more than \$1.15 million worth of grass-roots nutrition and humanitarian projects.

The program was gradually built up to include not just food aid but agricultural inputs, equipment for health centres, and work with the elderly and disabled. The food aid was targeted for the poorest groups such as orphans. Now there is a hepatitis B campaign as part of the package.

North Korea is the most bizarre place I have ever visited. It has been run since 1948 by the Kim dynasty of Communist dictators.

The Kim family is deified. In primary school classes, little chairs surround a plastic model of where the founding father, Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong-Il, were supposed to have been born. It looks like a crib scene from Bethlehem. No criticism of the family is tolerated and the people live in the most controlled state on Earth.

If roads need fixing, factory workers are drummed out of the factory on to the roads. Counties are regularly closed because of military manoeuvres or food shortages. Even the capital, Pyongyang, North Korea's 'showpiece', is largely devoid of traffic except pushbikes, and very few private shops are allowed.

The control extends to religion. There is a Catholic Church in Pyongyang and it holds a liturgical service each week and, when a priest is visiting, a Mass. Most parishioners are members of the government controlled Catholic Association and free speech among the parishioners is forbidden, as is all uncontrolled contact with foreigners.

It looks as if the sending of missiles to the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong — killing

two marines and wounding civilians — was a flexing of the muscles for the dictator-in-waiting Kim Jong-Un, the current ‘Dear Leader’s’ son.

As has been emphasised recently, North Korea is also a nuclear power and would, under the current paranoid leadership, have no compunction in lobbing a nuclear bomb at South Korea, Japan or any other perceived enemy. What is important to the Kims and their generals is not the North Korean people or other people’s lives, but the maintenance of the regime.

Given all this, why should Caritas continue to have a program in North Korea? The Caritas starting point is the dignity of the human person, no matter who that person is or where that person lives. Caritas believes in a solidarity that, like Jesus’ life and actions, tears down boundaries between peoples.

That is why Caritas is still in North Korea. It has not called the state part of the ‘axis of evil’ or any other name. It has instead concentrated on helping some of the poorest of the poor in the country itself, gaining the trust of the government, with whom you must work to have access to the people.

By supporting small, targeted programs, Caritas is working not just for the wellbeing of the poor in North Korea but ultimately for peace in a region of the world that is desperate for it.

More crap about refugees

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Shark encounter

NON-FICTION

Vincent Chadwick

Every year a dozen or so 20-somethings converge at a friend's beach house on the bastard side of Victoria's coastline in Gippsland. Further up the coast towards our real lives at university Phillip Island juts out into Bass Strait, nightly sacrificing itself to the infinite blackness of sea and clouds.



And some nights, when playing cards seems too inconsequential for a place like this, we head out into that darkness too. Holding hands through the tea trees as the narrow beach track curls its way towards the dull roar of the ocean, we are rebonded.

One night last summer the full moon illuminated the silky water and tepid sand like a disco ball. Rounding one corner suddenly we could see a kilometer of open beach and, in the middle distance, two men standing around a fire. Distance and flames distorted their shadows, turning them into phantoms.

There was a moment when we checked our step, but the group mentality did not counsel caution. Six on two; but what were they doing here? Our motives were innocuous but they had established a fire, marked their territory.

At 400 m sparks shot up as the men hurriedly began throwing things on the fire. It was still impossible to make out the aim of their industry but at 300 m they left the fire still burning and began walking towards us. At 200 m fishing rods became discernible in their hands.

At 100 m I remembered the famous scene from Camus' *The Outsider*, which I had read for school on that same beach a few summers earlier: A man approaches two other men across blisteringly hot sand. One of the two produces a knife which glistens in the sun, and so the single man — overcome by sweat and an unnamed oppression — shoots him. Later he cannot justify his actions and is made to hang.

That night, however, the men passed with a laconic wave and self-evident aside: 'There's a fire over there if you guys want it.' Relieved we said thanks and continued on to inherit their camp.

The flames were still licking up off the sand and we made jokes about *Survivor* as we sat in a circle to feel warm. We admired the fire's structure, expertly kindled in the shape of a tee-pee — or a funeral pyre.

We spoke about the same profound, naïve things we usually did, trying to link our small fears and audacious dreams to the enormity which surrounded us. But nature seemed to be

the only one who really knew what it was doing.

I left to go back to the house early and was slumped in a chair reading when the others returned. 'We found something,' a friend reported. 'Just after you left we heard this weird sound coming from the foreshore. Nick went to have a pee and found two sharks. Their fins had been cut off and they were just flapping around. We couldn't help and we didn't know what to do so we just left them.'

Not that we could ever have stopped those poachers, but now our pretty summer sentiments seemed emptier than ever.

The perils of redefining marriage

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan



Last Thursday, the Australian Parliament's 'new paradigm' swung into action with the House of Representatives passing a motion calling 'on all parliamentarians, consistent with their duties as representatives, to gauge their constituents' views on ways to achieve equal treatment for same sex couples including marriage'.

If this keeps up, we will have the High Court publishing a judgment calling on all judges to hear argument from counsel for the parties in taxation matters. Even under the old paradigm, it was the job of parliamentarians in a democracy like ours to gauge their constituents' views on matters likely to be debated in parliament, particularly contested moral issues.

Should my local member seek to gauge my views on same sex marriage during the summer recess, I would assure him that paradigms, norms, and symbolism do matter. The distinction between same sex marriage and legal recognition of same sex unions is not just a matter of symbolism. They create different realities regarding children's human rights. Because of that, I support the latter, not the former.

'Marriage' means different things to different people. For me, the paradigm of marriage is an exclusive, indissoluble covenant between a man and a woman entering a partnership for life, ordered to their good and open to the procreation and education of their children.

Not every marriage matches all the features of this paradigm. Some couples are infertile or too old to have children. But such marriages do not overtly breach it, so the paradigm still makes sense. In contrast, same-sex marriage overtly breaches the paradigm that marriage is an institution for the good of the children of the couple.

Australian civil law on marriage varies from my paradigm. Under Australian law, marriage is not indissoluble. Either party can terminate a civil marriage on one year's separation. There is no requirement that the parties be open to the bearing and nurturing of each other's children. There are many married couples who choose not to have children.

There are many couples in Australia who choose not to marry. There are many children born out of wedlock. There is an increasing number of children being raised by same sex couples. If same-sex marriage is legalised, because marriage carries the right to found a family, it may not be too long before a significant number of these children share the genetic inheritance of two same sex parents.

For the moment, every child has one biological father and one biological mother. In the best of circumstances, the child will know and be nurtured by them.

Especially with an ageing society, the state has an interest in recognising and affirming relationships between persons committed to supporting each other, regardless of their sexual orientation. Discrimination against same sex couples should be removed in the public domain.

In the UK, this has been achieved by legislating for civil unions. Archbishop Vincent Nichols, President of their Catholic Bishops Conference, recently said, 'We were very nuanced. We did not oppose gay civil partnerships. We recognised that in English law there might be a case for those.'

I would tell my local member that it is time Australia went the same way. And I would hope our bishops would see it that way too, though I concede that the present Pope did not when he was prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Many same sex couples tell us their relationship is identical with marriage. Until the majority of married couples are convinced this is so, politicians would be wise not to consider undoing the distinction between marriage and civil unions. Our parliamentarians could legislate to recognise civil unions, though there is some constitutional doubt whether this would best be done by the Commonwealth or State parliaments.

In considering whether to advocate a change to the definition of marriage, citizens need to consider not only the right of same sex couples to equality but even more so the rights of future children.

The State has an interest in privileging group units in society which are likely to enhance the prospects that future children will continue to be born with a known biological father and a known biological mother who in the best of circumstances will be able to nurture and educate them.

That is why there is a relevant distinction to draw between a commitment between a same sex couple to establish a group unit in society and a commitment of a man and a woman to marry and found a family.

An infertile married couple might expect State assistance in providing them with children who are genetically theirs. In the name of equality of adults, future children should not be deprived the opportunity to be born of a man and of a woman.

I rather like having a Mum and a Dad, and I suspect in future that will remain the case for most children. Often, orphans too are consoled to know they have a biological father and a biological mother. And most countries are now legally recognising they have a right to know who they are.

Decisions about adoption and assisted reproduction should always be informed by the best

interests of the child. If we go down the track of same sex marriage, we are acknowledging that same sex couples will have an entitlement to utilise technology to produce children with the genetic inheritance of each of them, and that same sex couples will be equally situated with a husband and wife team to adopt children to whom they bear no relationship.

As a matter of social policy, we will be affirming that the State has no interest in privileging a social institution which ensures that children have a genetic inheritance from one biological father and one biological mother, and that, all things being equal, they have the possibility of being adopted by a father and mother.

I think we can ensure non-discrimination against same sex couples while at the same time maintaining a commitment to children of future generations being born of and being reared by a father and a mother. To date, international human rights law has appreciated this rational distinction.

Instead of stating 'All persons have the right to marry', the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides: 'The right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and to found a family shall be recognised.' The Covenant asserts: 'The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.'

I believe our parliamentarians should maintain this distinction, for the good of future children, while ensuring equal treatment for same sex couples through the legal recognition of civil unions.

If our parliaments were to legislate, redefining marriage as a relationship centred on the couple regardless of the concerns of children, religious groups should be free to maintain their paradigm of marriage for their own members. After all, we Catholics classify marriage as a sacrament, and even now most civil marriages in Australia are not capable of sacramental recognition in our Church.

After the summer recess, I do hope our parliament can get on with its real work for the good of present and future generations of Australians.

What Eve really thought

POETRY

Various

Bible poems

Liturgical response

Creation thrums with Being
And peals the Word — 'I am'.
We sometimes remember
To whisper the antiphon, 'We are'.

Vivien Arnold

Food of love

'I don't give a fig', says Adam to Eve.
She is silent thinking
of the small orifice on the fruit
a narrow passage for the fig wasp to enter;
set down eggs; pollinate the flowery fig.
Bloom and ripen.
She reveals none of this to Adam
who shields his manhood with a leaf from the fig;
seething at his ejection from the Garden.
Eve isn't sorry that she bit
into the temptation of the fruit;
found its secret self.
She never forgot that first taste
of paradise; brought the knowledge with her
beyond the garden into the world of weeds and thorns.
Of course Adam put it about —

it was the snake's clever lies that had beguiled her.

She was deceived (he said). Eve knew better.

She had bloomed. Ripened; tasted truth.

Moya Pacey

Jacob and Esau

Those twins

wrestling inside me —

faith and doubt

twins

so alike

so opposite

Is there a point

of equilibrium —

a place where
the sea becomes

calm

at the bidding

of an Other?

Janette Fernando

Song of a deaf poet

When you see me all alone,

I hope you understand

that though my ears don't hear a thing

the spirit rules the man,

and the harp of David dwells in me,

his strum is my command,

though ostracised from crowded rooms,
I dance on desert sands.

Damian Balassone

An exodus of crosses

They line our country roads
triggering a fleeting pity
in a blur of wood and flowers
as we speed by —
the crosses meant to mourn loved ones
killed by machines like the ones we're sitting in.
Isn't their number increasing
to a similar degree as the number
of prayers is decreasing
and the exodus from our churches continues?
Even though the faith in the crucified
and resurrected Christ is diminishing
the waves of crosses to mourn
so many broken bodies, broken dreams
are towering higher and higher
as if the Red Sea of our helplessness
was swelling and never parting
to let a ray of hope shine through.

Frank Jousen

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild

Watch me rise!
Snickering cowards.
Obese priests.
Manicured politicians.
Oil-stained soldiers.

Watch me rise.
You who crushed me.
You who danced
while my feet were nailed.
You who drank to my health.
Watch me rise.
Watch me walk from the tomb
like a vengeful angel.
Watch my eyes.
I have come for you.
I have come for you.

Stephen Daughtry

He calls her name

he calls her name
among the twisted olives
shadowing the tomb
sealed within grief she hears
only a stranger's kindness

Anne Benjamin

Pope models condom conversation

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Any church statement to do with sexuality will lead commentators to pick through its entrails for signs. Pope Benedict's remarks on condoms have offered particularly rich pickings. Speculation immediately arose whether his statement might apply to married couples where one partner has AIDS, and whether indeed it heralds the collapse of Catholic condemnation of contraception.



In my view the Pope's words were less significant for their content than for their style. He engaged in a conversation about moral values that did not confine itself to principles, but entered the circumstances of human lives. This style of conversation has been lacking in the public statements of the contemporary Catholic Church.

In Catholic reflection on what matters in human life and how it is to be lived, there have been two kinds of conversation.

The first is an abstract conversation about values. In Catholic teaching on sexuality, sexual expression speaks the language of love, and sexual intercourse is tied to marriage. It should also be open to the possibility of passing on life. In that understanding of sexuality and its association with love and respect, condoms have no place.

This is an extraordinarily high ideal. It demands and generates a parallel conversation. This pastoral conversation engages with people who wish to live well, but whose weaknesses, situation or understanding hold them from embodying fully the values commended by Catholic teaching.

This conversation has been typically conducted in Confession and in spiritual direction. People could relate the large principles of Catholic moral teaching to the reality of their lives and to their individual spiritual journeys. It kept their faith in play.

The challenge has always been to bridge these conversations and to ensure that there is consistency between Christian values and the advice that was given to people, and that God's work in the lives of sinful people received proper respect.

This was done in part by looking carefully at the situations in which people found themselves, and partly by recognising that in human lives the less bad was often a step towards the good. For a meths drinker the decision to choose to wipe himself out on port instead can represent a huge growth in self respect.

In recent years, many sections of the Catholic world, including the Vatican, have felt that

the moral values upheld in Catholic teaching, particularly those to do with sexuality and with the value of human life, are under threat in Western cultures. They believe that any accommodation to difficult situations will be seized on in order to attack the values.

So the pastoral conversation has been neglected in favour of a strong assertion of moral principle, whether the principle bear on the use of condoms in dealing with AIDS or on the prolongation of life. This relative neglect of the pastoral conversation has given the impression that the Church cares for abstract morality more than for people. It has also made it more difficult to commend the Christian vision of life.

The interview with Pope Benedict was significant because in it he modelled a pastoral conversation that dealt creatively with the situation and the personal journey of ordinary human beings.

He engaged with the case of a male prostitute affected by AIDS who chooses to use a condom. He said, it 'can be a first step in the direction of moralisation, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants'.

He recognised that in the intention of reducing infection there can be 'a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality'.

The Pope here recognised the importance of the prostitute's intention in evaluating his action. He also recognised that this action needed to be set in the context of a moral journey in which even an ambiguous action can have a positive significance.

From this perspective, the Pope's words certainly do not adumbrate a general approval of condoms. They reinforce the priority of the moral dimension in human life. Their real significance is to recognise the reality that God calls each person on a unique moral journey which will include weakness and sinfulness, and which will sometimes face them with difficult moral situations.

They reveal the importance of recovering a pastoral as well as a theoretical moral language to speak encouragingly of this journey.

Gay marriage not a trivial pursuit

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



Gay marriage has polarised the Australian community.

For many, it's a no-brainer. If you're serious about human rights and anti-discrimination, you can't allow heterosexuals to marry the person they love while denying the same right to homosexuals. For many others, such a radical redefinition of marriage would destroy the institution that has underpinned human relations in most cultures since time immemorial.

In what is fast becoming a witch hunt, public attention is focused on whether politicians and community leaders support gay marriage. Media interviewers are cornering public figures to ask if they support gay marriage, in manner reminiscent of the 'Are you a Communist?' taunts of the 1950s.

Political expediency is driving both sides of the debate. On Friday, union boss Joe de Bruyn [told](#) *The Australian* a change in Labor's party platform to accommodate gay marriage would be an act of 'electoral suicide'. Given the minority Labor Government's need to appease the Greens, it had been looking similarly difficult electorally for Labor to hold to its established position of opposition to gay marriage.

Labor will tear itself apart unless it realises that a 'yes' or 'no' on gay marriage is less important than the process of reaching a position. It can choose to go down the path of political expedience, or it can adopt an approach of moral integrity.

Of course both sides of the debate will claim that their position is one of moral integrity. The problem is that we can make such concepts mean whatever we want them to mean, as long as the opinion polls and focus groups will let us get away with it. Perversely a principle such as moral integrity is used to serve our purposes, not the other way around.

Australian Catholic University theology lecturer Joel Hodge [wrote](#) in a blog for *CathNews* on Friday that 'postmodern ... human rights discourse has become skewed, especially because of the sentimental individualism that now defines what it means to be a human'.

We have lost a fundamental understanding of our natural, human rights, which undergirds our democracy and its laws. Instead, the ground has shifted to an ill-defined notion of individualism where the feelings and choices of individuals *with power* predominate.

Meanwhile political commentator George Megalogenis [reflects](#) on Labor's poll-driven 'power without purpose' in the December *Quarterly Essay* that is titled 'Trivial Pursuit'.

He says Labor's chequered fortunes demonstrate the folly of following the polls: 'A good

poll or two from now on can't be taken seriously because Rudd had them for two years before losing his job.'

Megalogenis argues that the logical consequence of the failure of poll-driven government is 'the revival of policy-driven government'.

For issues such as gay marriage, this means a moratorium on a quick yes or no. Instead there must be time for a rigorous philosophical enquiry into the purported goods that underlie the understanding of human rights on both sides of the debate.

Rain can't drown climate truth

ENVIRONMENT

Tony Kevin

Two creeks that were bone-dry for years are flowing again across my hilly bush block. The dams on properties upstream have filled to overflowing, and natural springs in the hillsides have opened again. After so much recent rain, the land feels like a big wet sponge.



Down the hill in the Burra Valley, fat merinos graze in lush pastures. I haven't seen the valley look so green since the 1970s. Canberra's nearby city water dams, which were 30 per cent full three years ago, are now 90 per cent full. With ample water has come a new sense of peace and security across our region.

I wish I could say this is an end to drought and water scarcity in the Murray-Darling Basin, where I live. But the science tells otherwise.

Southern Australia is an area of high natural rainfall variability, irrespective of climate change. These variations are caused by the El Nino/La Nina southern ocean oscillation, and the Indian Ocean dipole. Similar temperate-zone regions of high rainfall variability over irregular periods of a few years are in southern Africa, southwest USA, the Mediterranean rim, and northern China.

All these areas require water storage systems (dams, wells, bores, irrigation systems) for safe agriculture that can help protect farmers from the variability.

As a result of the past two good 'La Nina' years of better rainfall, the Murray-Darling system has started flowing again all the way to the Coorong Lakes at its mouth. Wetlands are refilling and the basin's subsurface reservoirs are being replenished.

But climate change has not gone away. Rising greenhouse gas concentrations continue to heat the atmosphere, causing increased weather extremes, and changes to climate zones: the tropical zone expands, the polar zone shrinks, and the temperate zone in between moves polewards.

We see this in Australia: less rain is falling in southwest Australia and the southern parts of the Murray-Darling basin, less snow is falling in the highlands, but there is more tropical cyclone-influenced rain in the far north of the basin and even in the Lake Eyre catchment in southwest Queensland.

It takes expert statistical analysis to disentangle southern Australia's highly variable rainfall oscillation from the secular climate change trend of increased heat energy leading to changed weather patterns. But the existence of such a climate change trend is clear to expert

statisticians who study the weather.

The trend is being masked at the moment by the physical manifestations of a few good years of better rainfall. There is more scope for wishful thinking and misreading of statistics by climate change deniers.

But I prefer to trust the recent publications of the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology on climate change. We know from these reliable sources that the bad El Nino years of drought will necessarily return, and that they will be worse than before when they do because of the climate change trend.

There are also rising demands for limited supplies of water. Due to economic development and larger, more affluent populations, Australian society is now pushing up against water supply risk thresholds in ways that we were not doing in the great postwar era of dam-building.

Nowadays, in years of water scarcity, the large irrigation storage dams in the Murray-Darling basin must be drawn down much further than they were designed for. When these dams were being built, the reasonable expectation was that once filled, they could stay pretty much near full. Tourism and recreation facilities sprung up around their shores based on this assumption.

Yet by the end of the last drought cycle, these huge irrigation reservoirs were approaching empty, because of the years of drought, the declining rainfall and increased evaporation due to climate change, the much greater demands being put on stored capacity by expanded irrigated agriculture, and significant reductions in catchment area runoff.

Expanded irrigated feedlots and water-hungry crops like cotton and rice increase demand for the basin's water. Runoff from catchment areas declines as these areas become more densely settled. More small-to-medium farms means more dams, water conservation earthworks, bores, cropping — all reducing runoff into major dams. More newly planted forestry plantations means less water runoff.

Some of our major irrigation dams are still a long way from refilled. Some may never refill completely. From now on, they are going to have to be managed at a higher risk level, allowing them to run right down again in El Nino years.

Outside the basin, our big coastal cities are using more water too. Even before factoring in climate change, the water stored in good years in dams like Eildon and Warragamba now gets used up a lot faster in dry years than it used to.

There is much less margin of safety in city water supply dams now, which is why desalination plants have to be commissioned in Sydney and Melbourne despite their high cost. Melbourne is even planning to draw water out of the Murray-Darling basin when needed.

There is more rain falling for now, but we cannot be lulled into complacency over water supply.

Australians rightly rejoice in the good years our farmers are having after so many bad years. We can pray they get a few more good years, to strengthen their financial security before the next El Nino phase hits. But farming in southern Australia continues to be a high-risk business and lifestyle. The main constraint on its economic viability and environmental sustainability is the scarce and unreliable supply of water.

Climate change is inevitably going to make it harder to sustain all kinds of agriculture-based human settlement in inland southern Australia. There will have to be more efficiency in water reticulation from storages to farm gates (our farmers are already pretty efficient in the ways they use water), and movement away from heavy water-demanding crops to more water-frugal farming.

As I have argued [previously](#) , such reforms in irrigation water use should be managed according to principles of social justice and the public responsibility to sustain vulnerable human communities.

If this means building more dams and water transfer engineering works to bring more water into the basin, Australia should not flinch from this. We are going to need these extra water storage and transfer capacities when climate change starts to hit hard in two or three decades in any case.