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Upgrading ourselves towards obsolescence

MEDIA The Net *Published 02-Apr-2007*

James Massola

"Modern consumer society is structured so that we are constantly unhappy with what we have. Advertisers make us feel dissatisfied so we keep buying new things, which is good for the economy but bad for the environment. Consumers collaborate in this wastefulness by being fooled into thinking that they can fill the inner void by consuming." - Clive Hamilton

About a month ago I got a new mobile phone. I like to imagine that I am not a 'phone person' – I won't answer a phone when in the middle of a conversation, I relish putting it on silent, and I occasionally still leave the house without it. However like most people these days, I'm fairly beholden to it.

This new phone had all the bells, whistles, and things I-never-knew-I-needed-but-now-would-find-changed-my-life. To wit, an address book big enough to hold the population of Panama (3.19million according to the [CIA](#)), colour screen the size of the Jumbotron, 6 air bags, 8 cup holders, flux capacitor…you get the idea.

I was amazed at all of these features. A call to Clive Hamilton at the [Australia Institute](#) revealed I was not the only person wondering "why all the techno-wizardry?"

As Mr Hamilton put it, "Until companies start thinking in terms of what might be a more environmentally sound approach to building new products, I fear we will be stuck with this interminable 'upgrade or be obsolete' mentality."

When it came time to charge the phone, I discovered my old charger did not fit my new phone. Imagine my surprise. Both were made by Nokia, one was two years older than the other. Thankfully there was a new charger in the box.

I examined the point of the new charger. It was around one-one-millionth of a percent smaller than the old charger, thus utterly unusable. Why?

I'm not trying to single out Nokia. The phone could have been a Sony Ericsson, a Motorola or a Samsung. Mobile phone makers have taken a lot of heat in recent years from consumer groups and governments about being environmentally responsible.

A call to Nokia, followed by some browsing on the homepage, revealed a plethora of 'corporate responsibility' type statements, environmental reports, information on how to recycle one's old phone and the like. But what about my charger? In one fell swoop, the ten chargers I had accumulated, inherited, and purchased over the years were rendered useless lumps of plastic.

This got me thinking about other technology companies. Apple is the darling of our new media age. Its iPod, music store, 'digital lifestyle solutions' and computers are the *sine qua non* of chic designers, pedantic publishers and posing pussies everywhere. But are they enviro-friendly?

After a series of phone calls, I received an email from John Marx, a public relations executive at Apple, in response to my questions about recycling older computers, long-term disposal of discontinued products, and how Apple could justify releasing products that were not 'backwards compatible.'

His reply, in part;

"On a global basis Apple has a strong environmental track record and has led the industry in restricting and banning toxic substances such as mercury, cadmium and hexavalent chromium, as well as many BFRs (brominated flame retardants). We have also completely eliminated CRT monitors, which contain lead, from our product line. Apple desktops, notebooks and displays each score best-in-class in the new EPA ranking system EPEAT, which uses international standards set by IEEE. Further details on EPEAT and Apple offerings can be found [here](#)."

This did not really answer my questions. While John, and Apple were making the right noises, I felt they were sidestepping. A follow up email elicited no response. Behind the terminology and the policies John had not told me much. The absence of comment on the 'upgrade cycle', or forced obsolescence by another name, bothered me in particular

When Apple released its fifth generation iPod, it switched the 'plug-in bit' from the top to the bottom. By doing this, just about every aftermarket accessory made for older iPods was pushed into obsolescence.

According to the well-known technology website, CNET.com.au, \$1.05billion was spent on accessories for the iPod last year – and that excludes internet sales.

One-man-and-dog operations have grown exponentially on the back of this expansion.

Accessories are big business. By changing the design, Apple delivered an instant cash cow to the third party manufacturers who support it.

So how is one to break the cycle of forced obsolescence if the financial benefits are so strong for manufactures and retailers? Consumer goods and electronics are no longer made to last. For manufacturers, the ideal consumer is the individual who must have the 'latest-and-greatest' every year or two (or perhaps even sooner). But what if we resist?

If you can, step outside the 'upgrade cycle', think about what you are purchasing, and if you really need it. We as a society need to stop and think about all the landfills and waste dumps which are soon to hold our broken-down electronic paraphernalia.

New laws may force complicity in human rights abuse

AUSTRALIA *Politics Published 02-Apr-2007*

Brian Toohey

It has long been a crime to murder anyone, conspire to do so, or fail to tell the police about foreknowledge of such a crime. Yet the Government has introduced 42 new pieces of legislation to deal with murder committed by people called terrorists. According to the Attorney General, Phillip Ruddock, this is not enough. Ruddock says he intends introducing more legislation before the 2007 federal election.

Oddly, Ruddock does not intend to close the legislative hole exposed by the David Hicks case. He will not make it an offence under Australian law to fight on the side of a despicable government like that of the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan—so long as it's not designated a terrorist organisation. But it will remain an offence to fight on the side of an insurgent group trying to overthrow such a regime.

Apart from dealing with this anomaly, there is a strong case for pruning the existing legislation. In particular, amendments are needed to prevent innocent Australians being forced to provide information which can lead to people being tortured or executed without trial. There should also be a much greater willingness to prosecute Australian officials who are complicit in the torture of the fellow Australian citizens.

Innocent people are by no means exempt from torture, as a Canadian engineer, Maher Arar, discovered in a case relevant to one of the Howard Government's key anti-terrorist laws. Arar was kidnapped by the FBI at New York's JFK airport in 2002 and "rendered" (as the official euphemism puts it) to Syria where he was tortured for a year on behalf of the US government. (Yes, that's the same Syria the Bush Administration publicly lacerates for allegedly helping terrorists.) Last September, a Canadian judge released an 822 page report exonerating Arar of any wrongdoing. In January, the Canadian Government formally apologised to Arar for the supporting role played by the Mounties in his mistreatment and awarded him almost \$12 million in compensation.

A similar scandal could easily result from the anti-terror law which allows the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation to detain and question people who are not suspected of terrorist sympathies. All that's required is a suspicion that they may have information of interest to ASIO or its overseas partners. Despite some safeguards, a little noticed feature of this law is that it smudges the line between ASIO's previously constrained role as an intelligence service in a democracy and that of a secret police organisation.

Unlike terrorists and other violent offenders arrested by the police, non-criminals detained by ASIO have no right to silence. Contrary to the case of hardened criminals, they also have no right to know the names of those detaining or interrogating them, or why they are doing so. Refusal to answer questions can attract a five year jail sentence. Detainees are also subject to five years jail if they reveal that they had been detained. The same applies to journalists who report that someone has been detained, even if a serious miscarriage of justice is involved.

One obvious possibility is that ASIO may use the law to meet a request from the CIA to help track down an alleged terror suspect who has been in contact from overseas with someone in Australia. The suspect can then be rendered for torture. Given that Bush has also authorised the CIA to assassinate suspected terrorists, ASIO could force Australian

citizens to hand over information which could lead to extra-judicial murder. While this process hardly fits the notion of a fair trial before sentencing anyone to death, there is the additional problem that intelligence agencies make mistakes, as Maher Arar can attest.

Even before ASIO's questioning powers were enacted, one Australian citizen, Mamdouh Habib, was rendered for torture but received no protection from the Howard Government. Quite the reverse.

Habib was taken off a bus in Pakistan in October 2001 and questioned by members of ASIO and the Australian Federal Police, as well as Pakistani and CIA officials. He was then rendered to Egypt. There is persuasive evidence that Habib was tortured for almost a year before being transferred to Guantanamo Bay. The then head of ASIO, Dennis Richardson, told a parliamentary committee in 2005 that his organisation knew in mid-November 2001 that Habib had been sent to Egypt. Nevertheless, this did not stop Ruddock, the minister responsible for ASIO, from repeatedly denying that the Government knew of Habib's whereabouts.

Despite authoritative reports about the United States policy of rendering suspects to countries such as Egypt for torture, the Howard Government continues to deny of any knowledge of this happening to Habib. But well placed United States sources maintain that concern about the details being exposed in a trial was the main reason he was released from Guantanamo in 2005 without his previously announced hearing proceeding. Although torture is a clear violation of Australian and international law, the Government refuses to pursue the matter with Egyptian authorities.

Pacific Solution sends wrong moral message

AUSTRALIA Politics Published 02-Apr-2007

Andrew Hamilton

Earlier this year a group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers was picked up and sent to Christmas Island. The Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, then announced the decision to send them to Nauru without hope of resettlement in Australia. He was criticised both for making a morally unjustifiable decision and for not acting in accordance with his religious beliefs. The first criticism was correct; the second, less reasonable.

Mr Andrews had justified his decision on the grounds that it was necessary to send a message to asylum seekers and those who arranged their boat travel. If this is the only justification for the Pacific Solution, it is morally unacceptable because it inflicts suffering on an innocent group of people in order to communicate a harsh message to others. It is like beginning class by beating a couple of boys at random in order to discourage others from playing up. It makes the suffering of the asylum seekers – their isolation, mental disturbance, anxiety and hopelessness – core instruments of policy.

But even if it is not conceived of as a deterrent the Pacific solution is unethical. It flouts the principle of human solidarity which any ethical public policy must satisfy. This principle states that human beings with the capacity to help are obliged to assist the desperate who make a claim on them. It also states that this responsibility is shared. Australia therefore is obliged to protect those who make a justified claim for asylum, and to share the burden of those in distant places who do not arrive on Australia shores. The principle is implicit in the Refugee convention which Australia has signed.

The artifices of excising territory from Australia's immigration zone and of using naval vessels to prevent claims being made, simply attempt to evade a responsibility that Australia must bear.

If a policy is unethical, it is automatically inconsistent with Christian faith. Christian faith does not of itself make practices unethical. It offers grounds for recognising the dignity of each human being. It supports human dignity by appealing to God's love for each human being.

It is reasonable to conclude that Mr Andrews administers a policy that is morally indefensible and is therefore inconsistent with Christian principles. But this conclusion does not justify the claim that when he administers this policy he personally is acting immorally and in a way inconsistent with Christian faith. This charge views too simplistically the responsibility of government ministers in a democracy.

Politicians, and particularly ministers, represent all Australians, and not simply those who share their moral and religious positions. They must act for the good of the whole nation. On particular moral issues on which there is no consensus, they may well have to preside over policies, agreed on in Cabinet, that include elements that they see as morally objectionable. They may, of course, resign. But if ministers with a delicate conscience resigned routinely, the ethical quality of governance would hardly improve.

One might expect Christian politicians to argue within their party for an ethically based policy and to be open about the grounds of their position. Mr Abbott has done this in his administration of the health portfolio. But when deciding on policy and implementing it, they

must take into account the good of the nation in quite concrete terms. These terms include the attitudes of society as a whole and the consequences of legislating measures that do not enjoy popular support.

Critics of the decision to send the asylum seekers to Nauru should not focus on the minister's character or on his sincerity but on the morality of the policy itself. This is not to argue that politicians may regard moral argument as irrelevant to politics, and so may without scruple focus on the business of governing.

St Augustine has something pertinent to say about this. When considering the case of judges who routinely had witnesses tortured in order to establish the truth of competing claims, he took a tragic view of public life. After arguing that torture never establishes the truth, he nevertheless saw it as self-evident that a judge would have to order torture. This was one of the necessities of public order. But Augustine then remarked that judges should never be envied, but pitied for the necessities in which they were caught.

When we think about the necessities which enmesh our political representatives as they administer unjust policy, we will also recognise that such policies corrupt. Those who devise and administer them fail to recognise the way in which they destroy other human beings. Human empathy, on which all morality depends, disappears. The Rau case brought to public notice the extent to which Australian refugee policy had eroded the moral sensitivity of those responsible for it. The policy is wicked; its victims, who include politicians as well as asylum seekers, ultimately invite pity rather than blame.

Our deadly cars and trucks

FEATURES Published 02-Apr-2007

Clare Coburn

I have often been curious about our attitude to deaths caused by motor vehicle accidents. If a shark kills a lone swimmer off North Cottesloe, we call for netting or shooting. If a cancer cluster is suspected in a building, the building is investigated and the site may be closed.

When the images from the Burnley tunnel showed thick plumes of smoke billowing from the outlet chimney I pondered this topic again. Perhaps we should just ban them—these deadly cars and trucks. Though we continue to reduce the road toll through stricter road rules and careful policing, motor vehicles persist in causing tragic deaths at a level not tolerated by disease or industrial accidents. In addition our awareness of their fatal impact on the environment grows apace.

If this smacks of zealotry perhaps it can be explained by the fact that I abandoned my little red car, Lucy, the other day. Paul, the 'auto-parts recycler' was rotund in that tight, shiny way which doesn't seem overweight as much as filling his skin to the maximum. He flashed a gap-toothed smile and offered me \$10 for every year that I had benefited from Lucy's hospitality and hard work and I accepted his offer. I hope other elderly Festivas benefit.

I had driven Lucy over dusty outback tracks and muddy country roads, swung along freeways and meandered through cities. As I am a peripatetic person, she had been a companion as constant and almost as long-lived as the elderly dog who continues in my company.

Despite my grief, the demise of Lucy also offers new opportunities. I had been toying with the idea of giving up my car for some time and now I was faced with making this a reality. I had already committed myself to using public transport regularly, encouraged by my local council's innovative scheme to reward drivers who take less frequent 'drive alone' trips.

Although I will have occasional access to a shared car, I have purchased a yearly ticket which also offers the possibility of discounts from a commercial car sharing company. Their compact cars can be picked up and dropped off around the city.

For commuting, I can choose between bus or tram, generally favouring the tram. Public transport provides me with more opportunities to read, and to delight in observing fellow travelers. The day I left my car at the wrecker's, I caught buses across the Northern suburbs with senior Italian women, hair dyed the same rich shade of auburn. On my afternoon tram, a young man opposite was actively listening to a CD. He vigorously strummed his air guitar, swept an air keyboard and thumped air drums while singing in a breathy whisper.

There is also the comfort that I am contributing a little less to greenhouse gas and assisting the cooling of the planet. John Howard recently declared that love of cars was quintessentially Australian. This seems true even though the iconic Kingswood of yesteryear is replaced by a shiny Japanese four wheel drive as the family car of choice. I admit I share this love and will continue to enjoy the open road and an unknown itinerary in a borrowed or hired vehicle. Unfortunately Howard did not go on to suggest that tempering this love and

making our transport decisions more consciously will need to become habitual for us all.

Personally, I realise that I'll need to acquire patience to wait for late trams at windy stops and tolerance for the foibles and personal hygiene of fellow travelers. When these challenges rankle, I remind myself that I see more of the world from a tram seat than from Lucy's cosy capsule or bury myself in my book. I also find that pondering and reflection are easier when you are not gripping a steering wheel in a stream of traffic.

And this is salutary: to slow down seems like a cultural imperative, not just to aim for slow food but slower lives. Less haste and more time for wondering is something many of us yearn for as we are baffled by the ceaseless flow of information in which wisdom is hard to discern.

The lost lives, mangled metal and billowing smoke of the Burnley tunnel accident may offer another signal. I am sure many Melbournians were forced to change their commuting options for at least a day or two and appreciated the benefits and challenges of more collaborative transport. My decision to forsake my car was not strictly voluntary, yet if others can choose such opportunities we may achieve several goals: reducing tragic deaths, offering us time for personal restoration and helping to grant our globe its reprieve.

Debate confuses national curriculum with national standards

FEATURES Education *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Greg O'Kelly SJ

In an election year, education becomes a hot topic. Both Parties attempt to gain the high ground, demonstrating to the voters that Party A is much more committed to the grand endeavour of educating the young of the nation than is Party B. The media then joins in, and journalists become education experts. Administrators of educational sectors and Union chiefs begin to give their opinions. This year it is about a national curriculum. Missing to date are the voices of those who know best, those who actually run schools. The debate might be better-informed were their opinions to be requested.

Perhaps a reason why the School Principals, and their national professional organisations, have been largely silent on this matter is because the chorus of those demanding a national curriculum is singing so badly out of tune, and has confused the terminology greatly, and is arguing mainly with catchy simplifications. One editorialist, a known Cassandra, argues that "the laws of physics do not change in the middle of the Murray", employing nicer alliteration than the PM did when he described "some elements" of an unnamed curriculum as "incomprehensible sludge".

The start for this debate seems to have been aberrations advocated in the English syllabus for WA schools. They have been rightly decried, but one bad apple does not mean the whole case is to be thrown out – in this instance the case is the richness of the diversity of curriculum offerings through the nine systems we have in the Australian States and Territories. Another kick to the debate was the ranking of Australia as 29th in the world as regards the teaching of Maths and Science. To suggest that a national curriculum would raise such a ranking is a non sequitur. Such surveys are restricted in their criteria, and are wobbly in their helpfulness when trying to apply them. Anyway, it would not be difficult to find another survey that gives a much better score!

What muddies the debate is that some of the commentators listed above use the word 'curriculum' and 'national curriculum' when in fact they mean standards of performance. Put simply, curriculum refers to content, and standards assessment refers to measurement. There could well be more agreement if the advocates were to urge some type of national standards test, to check that all the educational sectors in Australia were maintaining sufficient levels of learning.

The headlines often say 'National Curriculum' when in fact the proposal is about a measurement device for National Standards. Some Australian States used to employ the ASAT instrument (Australian Scholastic Aptitude Test). This did not prescribe content. In the United States, admission to tertiary institutions is determined according to results gained by students in the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test). Again, that instrument does not prescribe curriculum content in detail, but manages to grade the performance of tens of thousands of Seniors (final year students) educated in several dozen regional educational systems throughout the 50 States of America. Employed to determine admissions to the tertiary sector, SAT ensures that all schools within those many sectors strive to maintain high standards. At the same time they are able to enjoy a multiplicity of curricula, adapted to local needs. Compared to the multiplicity of United States educational regions, our mere nine such sectors should present little difficulty in devising an appropriate standards assessment instrument.

Who is speaking for whom in this debate? The head of one of the larger Catholic education sectors in Australia was quoted recently as saying that "Catholic schools have for a long supported the idea of a more nationally focused curriculum". As a School Head, I never knew that, and nor did any of my erstwhile colleagues. As far as I am aware, the schools have never been asked such a question, so how can it be said that Catholic schools support a national curriculum?

What would be lost if a national curriculum were to replace our present model? Firstly, the flexibility of adaptation that can come from being in a smaller sector. The President of the Australian Secondary Principals Association has been quoted as "saying that a student in the Tiwi Islands needs to be studying the same curriculum as a student in Melbourne doesn't make sense". At one stage New South Wales was the second largest educational system in the world, outside the Soviet Union. It was correspondingly slow in its ability to move. Teaching in NSW, we envied people in South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania for the flexibility and ease of adaptation they were able to enjoy in devising curricula for subjects such as Computer Studies and Media Studies.

It was a ponderous process to effect change in New South Wales at the time, and could take six years. What on earth would it take in a unitary national system, one attempting to speak for all nine Australian sectors? Parents endorse flexibility. It is part of our culture of choice. Schools offering diverse curricula flourish in all our cities and towns, because the parents want them. Some schools follow the ordinary State prescribed syllabus for the senior years, others might follow the International Baccalaureate, or teach different subjects in different ways, such as Montessori, or have a curriculum specialising in certain aspects such as music or agriculture. Why suppress such diversity?

Proponents for national curriculum speak of the 'curriculum commissars', 'social engineering', and the 'curriculum crimes' that have been inflicted on students in some of the States where standards seem to have dropped. In those cases, the damage was restricted for a relatively short term to a small group of the population, and the reaction of an intelligent public reversed the failings. Imagine if those 'curriculum commissars' were transferred to the national scene, where their power would go well beyond the borders of one State. What is to prevent 'curriculum crimes' being perpetrated by a 'boffin in Canberra', as the South Australian Education Minister describes them. Being national, across all sectors, the damage would be greater.

It has happened from time to time in various education departments in the different States, that advocates of a certain school of thought have high-jacked the curriculum and tried to alter it to secure outcomes they believe to be the proper ones. There is nothing per se that would prevent that possibility happening on a national level if there was a national curriculum. There is also an unfortunate tendency among some of the centralisers of curriculum, even in State Departments, to prescribe minutes and hours that a subject is to be taught. This is the case in New South Wales, and suffocates creativity and the possibility to adapt their curriculum to the needs of the students. In New South Wales, the Education Department at one stage heaped much ridicule upon itself for tackling The Kings School and threatening to withdraw registration because the school did not give enough minutes to Dance in Years 9 and 10. Knowing its boys, that school had decided it wanted to devote that time to more productive educational experiences. What if those same "commissars' who prescribed the minutes for dance, were to move to Canberra, where it is the Commonwealth that would become their stage?

Another argument being used with increasing frequency for the imposition of a national curriculum is the annual interstate movement of students, when families transfer from one

State to another. The estimates of these numbers vary. On one day the Prime Minister was quoted saying it was 70,000, and on the next day it was 80,000. Very few school principals see this interstate migration as a problem. In essence, it is no different to a student transferring from one school to another in the same city, where the second school may not teach the same languages. Adaptations are fairly easily made. It certainly would be difficult to produce many serious examples of disadvantage.

The truth is that the present system works well, critics notwithstanding. It is relatively easy to incorporate a student into Year 11 or Year 12 from another State. There may be different novels being studied, or certain parts of the Maths syllabus are treated at other times, but generally it works well. The only way of solving that particular challenge would be to have all the schools in Australia teaching the same syllabus on the same day, throughout the country. That certainly would be social engineering, and evocative of the Brave New World. At the completion of their secondary studies, when a student moves interstate, there usually is little difficulty in the student being granted an *ad eundem statum* by the university to which he or she seeks access. Going further, our primary degrees at our universities are accepted internationally. It all works out. Our present system provides the richness of diversity, high standards and good quality educational experiences, and the possibility of flexibility to accommodate local circumstances.

Educational system administrators and politicians and media commentators can become too divorced from the reality of a school. Imagine the horror with which most school principals would read the advice of the Executive Director of one of largest Catholic schooling sectors in this country, who wrote that governments should work together "to produce a national curriculum and to introduce it progressively, beginning in Kindergarten/ Year 1 in the primary, and in Year 7 in secondary schools". Other advocates for a national curriculum say that it does not mean that every classroom would be teaching the same subject at the same time every day, but the quotation just given sounds ominously as if it does. If we need a centralised educational bureaucracy from the national capital to tell us what to teach, then who has a say in the appointment of such curriculum framers? There would be no pluralism to offset the faddism of the centralised curriculum framer. If a boffin in Canberra can decide what we must teach, then why have teachers and thinkers on the local level? Why not just have books printed from Canberra, or a daily online programme sent by email to all of us each day?

Jesus Guilty! A slice of Roman talkback

HUMOUR *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Peter Fleming

Eight minutes past three, on this very good Friday. Call us on the open line and tell us what you think.

Well, we got him. It's been a long time coming, but, finally: he's confessed. Egg on the face of all his supporters this afternoon, as self-confessed terrorist Jesus Christ gets exactly what he deserved. And some would say crucifixion is too good for the likes of him.

It's my understanding he was arrested at approximately eight thirty last evening, hiding out in a mountain of olives, after government authorities - working with the religious leadership - employed one Judas Iscariot, who had infiltrated his network of supporters, to lead them to him.

Then, in a rapid series of late night sittings and early morning hearings, the Sanhedrin, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate AND King Herod himself ALL came to the same conclusion: this grubby threat to the civilized world had to be dealt with, and promptly.

Swift justice, eh? Why can't the judges always be that quick, that's what I'd like to know. Caller, hello.

Caller: Hello?

Go ahead Longinus. You're on.

Caller: Oh, hi, Recondite, love listening to your show.

That's okay, Longinus. We love hearing what the people think.

Caller: Mate, what did they get this coot on in the end? I mean, he's got – he's got –

He's got a list of offences up to your armpit, hasn't he?

Caller: That's what I mean, mate. What did they do him for?

What didn't they do him for? Do you want to know?

Caller: If it doesn't take the rest of the programme to read the charge sheet.

(Wheezy laugh from Recondite)

I'll try to sum it up. Have a listen to this. At the Sanhedrin – are you listening, Longinus? – At the Sanhedrin testimony was given that he had threatened to tear down the Temple – the Temple! – and build a new one in its place. No denial. No protest. The charge held. He was asked was he the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One. He replied, "I am."

Caller: Shit.

How about that? I mean, the absolute affrontery – claiming to be the Son of God

and then when they accuse him of planning a terrorist attack on the Temple itself – I mean, the Temple, we're talking about the single greatest icon in Jerusalem! - no denial. He let the charge stand. But wait, there's more.

Caller: Mate, I don't think I can handle any more.

Get this, get this. He gets taken to the governor. Now, let's face it, he's friends with the Romans, isn't he? He's been known to quaff a chalice or two with his tax collector mates...

Caller: As long as it's not with his lady friends, you know what I mean?

(Wheezy laugh from Recondite)

Stop it, Longinus! This is serious! He gets taken to the governor. Now, you'd expect the case might have been thrown out at that level if there was nothing in it. The governor asks him three times – three times! – I mean, it's not as if he doesn't get a chance to pack it all in and retire hurt! – Three times, the governor asks him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and he says, "You said it!" "You said it!" he says.

Caller: Mate, he's got no shame.

NO shame! You've got this cheap-jack, upstart from – Gawd help us! – Galilee – Galilee, where they breed these political thugs by the bucketload! – and he plans attacks on the Temple –

Caller: Didn't just plan 'em, he attacked it!

That's it, that's it! Last week he goes round and smashes tables and whips the animals, and says "You've turned my father's house into a den of thieves!" – talk about the pot calling the kettle black! – then he's going to tear it down, and he says he's working for God and he's the King of the Jews. Well, the Sanhedrin didn't believe him, Pilate didn't believe him, and Herod didn't either. Not one, not two, THREE authorities ALL in agreement. And what they're saying is this: You are the worst or the worst, you don't belong in civilized society.

Caller: It's a joke, isn't it?

That's it, it's a joke. Well, who's laughing now? Next caller, hello?

Caller: Oh, good afternoon, Recondite, I just wanted to ask, what IS this man's real name? Somewhere along the way I've lost track –

That's right, Agrippina! The names! The titles!

Caller: Son of God, Son of Man …

Listen, I've got the charge sheet right here, with all the aliases listed. He's been variously known as – are you listening to this? – Jesus bar Joseph – note the "bar", it means he's "son of" Joseph, so I don't know where he gets his other Father from! – Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, Joshua, Yeshua, EMMANUEL, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of the Blessed One, SON OF DAVID!!! I mean, the list just goes on and on!

Caller: Well, Recondite, it just confirms to me, these people do have a personality problem. They don't know who they are, and they don't want us to know, either. But it doesn't stop them from rocking the boat, and let's face it, our society is already afloat on what is a very, very choppy lake.

Good call. Good call. Gee, the people aren't idiots are they? Caller, hello?

Caller: Mate, I heard he cured other people. Why didn't he just take himself down off the cross, if he's who he said he is?

Well, exactly, Genericus. It's all ridiculous, and you, see, his supporters –

Caller: Where are they now?

Cant find' em!

Caller: Not even one?

Not even one. Hiding in a mountain of olives with egg all over their face. I mean, I'd love to hear from one! If you follow this maniac, call in.

Caller: I heard he was a pacifist.

Of course. Of course he'd be against any war, wouldn't he?

Caller: Except the one he wants to wage against us.

Against us. Exactly. Good call. Good call. Caller, hello?

Caller: Brutulus here. Recondite, I heard this guy Jesus rejected his family, and said his only real mother and brother and sister were the people doing God's work.

Crazy, isn't it, Brutulus? I mean, what is left to us if not family values, and yet here's this bloke saying there's somehow something better than your family, and plotting to blow up our national monuments. Well, where are his supporters now, eh? Are they plotting to do more of.. "God's work"?

Caller: My name's Barrabas -.

(Click.)

What's happened there? Line gone dead, has it? We – we've lost him. Oh, well, we'll move on. Caller, hello?

Caller: Recondite, I'm a civil liberties lawyer –

Aw, here we go!

Caller: Naturally I've been following the process with interest.

Are you a supporter?

Caller: I'm a supporter of natural justice and human rights.

Aw, Gawd. What do YOU want?

Caller: Recondite, it's my understanding that this process was rigged to get a conviction from the start. First of all, the prisoner was brutally manhandled from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Sanhedrin. At the Sanhedrin, hearsay evidence was used against him, without any proper procedure in place for testing it; the case was heard in a specially convened court in the dead of night, which doesn't correspond to the normal standards usually adhered to in the very best of the Judaic justice system. The Sanhedrin has no law by which he can be put to death, and so what do they do? By an act of extraordinary rendition, they hand him over to an authority who does.

So they take him, without access to his family or to friends or to a defence counsel, directly to the Governor, who had him beaten, flogged and tortured - they gave him a crown

made entirely out of thorns and ground into his skull until he bled profusely. Even then, I understand the charges had to be reconstituted and watered down to something that would stick, and finally the governor only agreed to crucifixion when political pressure was applied to him by the religious authorities to basically come up with a guilty verdict or risk displeasing the emperor. Any confession under this sort of duress isn't worth the paper it's written on. Sham trials produce sham verdicts. Anyway, that's what I wanted to say.

(Recondite feigns snoring sound)

Is he finished? What was all that about? Caller, hello?

Caller: Mate, I just think we're all giving too much attention to this guy. I mean, we don't want to give him a Messiah complex.

Well, we can't do that now. I've just this second had a note passed in to me, and it says, let me read it: "Jesus Christ, confirmed dead, at twenty minutes past three o'clock, Good Friday, 33 AD." Not a moment too soon. (pause) Who will miss him, eh? (pause) Where are his supporters now?

Egg all around, this Easter.

Don't make the poor pay more to fight climate change

EDITORIAL *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Michael Mullins

After appearing to belatedly embrace the need to fight climate change, the Prime Minister finally admitted last week that he cares more about protecting Australia's economic prosperity.

He sought to discredit the Stern Report, as British economist Sir Nicholas Stern visited Australia to spell out the implications of his landmark report for Australia. Stern is credited with galvanising many developed countries to take urgent action to curb climate change.

John Howard told Parliament that the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions advocated by Stern "would have a devastating effect on the Australian economy".

The focus of his attention is on Australia's competitive position in the world economy. While he mentions the cost in terms of increased unemployment, his main concern is the big business bottom line.

Meanwhile the St Vincent de Paul Society was [arguing last week](#) that it is the poor who will suffer disproportionately if across the board anti-climate change measures are adopted.

Vinnies' Victorian policy analyst Gavin Dufty said the suggestion of a \$10 per tonne carbon levy should be assessed for its impact on pensioners. "This group consumes energy at a rate below average household consumption, but, conversely, as a proportion of their weekly spending, they pay almost double the amount compared with the average household."

He added that a 7% increase in electricity bills will also have an impact on sections of the community "unable to meaningfully substitute electricity consumption with other energy sources such as natural gas".

Other voices in the Church have also noted that the poor will suffer disproportionately. Columban ecologist Fr Sean McDonagh, who visited Australia recently, [has written](#) : "We know that climate change will have a terrible impact on the poor, the very people who did least to cause the problem in the first place."

The Prime Minister made it clear last week that he is a climate change skeptic. He told Parliament: "History is littered with examples of where nations have overreacted to presumed threats."

By contrast, Vinnies accepts the facts as presented by Nicholas Stern and scientific authorities. It merely urges that all Australians share equitably in the financial cost of responding to the challenge.

God has more humour than Helen Clark

COLUMNS Summa Theologiae Published 02-Apr-2007

Peter Matheson

Blessed are the humorists, for they will have the last laugh. We have just witnessed the visit of Helen Clark, New Zealand's anti-nuclear Prime Minister to a US President who appears to be falling precipitately from every sort of pedestal, real or imaginary. David Lange once commented of Helen that she was so dry as to be combustible. No doubt she had a serious agenda for this visit, but such overdone sobriety simply tips one into levity. What on earth, we ask, was going on? What's the possible worth of the silver stars this President awarded her for good conduct? Why cross the oceans to go to lunch with him? Now with Howard we know what's going on…

What is it with humour? Is it a side-show in the theological market-place, or could it be right there near the centre? We instinctively distrust the humourless, and cherish those who disarm us, whether with their belly laughs or hard-won wry wisdom. But why? Is it that humour trips up the self-important, the moralizers and autocrats and logic-choppers who sometimes crowd the ecclesiastical paddocks. I guess we all enjoy a touch of *schadenfreude*? That's taken him/her down a peg or two… !

We think of Erasmus during the Renaissance, tickling the sensitivities of a rather dowdy church. Getting away with murder, so to speak, in his Praise of Folly, giving earnest reformers wriggle room, even as he donned the convenient mask of the Fool. He stuck the stiletto in, but because of his humour lived on to tell the tale. Savonarola in Florence or Servetus in Geneva met stickier fates. Humour as the ecclesiastical can-opener.

Cynicism, the cultivated snigger, helps to keep us sane as we cope with dogmatic cul-de-sacs and institutional inanities. There's limited leverage, though, in the long run, about such indiscriminately deflating humour. We've all met sad folk who meet every issue with the same 'levity'. It may be a cautionary warning that Luke's Beatitudes are rather ambivalent about laughter. Those who weep will laugh, they promise, but it seems the hee-hawers will get their come-uppance as well.

So where do we draw the line? In the past we used to ring the blasphemy alarm with altogether too much alacrity, claiming high-minded concern about God's honour, when all too often it was our own self-esteem that was being pricked. Yet does the recent controversy around the cartoons depicting Mohammed suggest that the pendulum may have swung too far the other way? Where and when (and by whom) should humour be ruled out of court? How do we avoid an epidemic of slick irreverence?

Good humour generally harbours serious intent. The more 'wicked' it is, the more irreverent, the deeper the vein of ultimate concern can be. Erasmus himself is a good example. Lively humour is deadly earnest. It erupts in the yawning gap between our dawn dreams of joy and justice and the noonday reality of cruelty and corruption. It flowers in the dark interstices of life. No totalitarian regime tolerates it for long. The long tradition of Jewish humour reminds us of its subversive, but also redeeming qualities. I laugh, therefore I survive. It can be the flip side of lamentation, an intimation of extremities of pain, while at the same time a pointer to their partial transcendence.

The Christian God is a speaking God, a Deus redens. A facet of the divine 'accommodation' to us (another Erasmian concept, later taken up by Calvin in a big way) is that God is earthed in our language, not least our humour. The Incarnation as one long joke. God in a cradle, for goodness sake! Francis of Assisi saw that in a flash. The parables are perhaps the best example of God leading us up the garden path, but of course long before them the nutty stories of the patriarchs, the bizarre actions of the prophets, the metaphorical stuntmanship of the Psalmist had us reeling. God's earthy humour teasing us out of our stiff-neckedness, our prosaic, clumping, chain-mailed religiosity.

Such divine clowning inhibits us from taking our personal convictions with too much 'animal seriousness', as the Germans say, prods us to climb out onto a precarious branch and give ourselves a detached once-over. Any half-decent liturgy, or thoughtful pastoral counseling, inches us, kicking and screaming, towards cognitive dissonance, alerts us to new constellations of possibilities, nerves us for the tedious business of having to shift around every blessed piece of furniture in our minds. We learn to chuckle at ourselves, whether old Adam or new Eve. What a hoot! We the people of God!!

A good belly laugh (there's much in the Scriptures about entrails) can show up the penultimate nature of so many of our convictions, energies, priorities, but without roughing us up too overtly and cruelly. Humour nudges the frail dinghy of our souls towards the friendly abyss, as the mystics have always known. As a way of reaching out to our contemporary world, which totters between the obsessively serious and the lust for the grotesque, humour, whether overt, wry, or dark, is one of our greatest God-given assets. Though of course, we dare not instrumentalise it. Like Desmond Tutu, we need to be giggling ourselves silly first.

Individuals can offset their own carbon emissions

COLUMNS Archimedes Published 02-Apr-2007

Tim Thwaites

If present trends continue, the aviation industry is en route to becoming a major contributor to global warming.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change the pollution released by high-flying jets directly into the atmosphere is up to four times as damaging as the same amount released at ground level. And, at the current rate of growth, the number of daily passenger flights will double by 2050. It's not just the carbon dioxide generated by burning aviation fuel that is of concern, but also the nitrogen oxides and the water vapour in the contrails

And there doesn't seem to be any solution on the horizon. Any significant cut in pollution is likely to depend on radical changes in design, and aviation is a very conservative industry, for obvious safety reasons and the huge amount of investment involved. Air travel also is one activity people will be loath to give up for the sake of the planet. Interestingly, the industry was specifically excluded from the Kyoto agreement.

The problem of aviation has not been lost upon green entrepreneurs, who are also aware that a growing number of people are prepared to spend significant money to salve their consciences over flying. They have come up with an instant answer—carbon offsets. What you can do after you fly to see Outer Mongolia is plant some trees to soak up the greenhouse gases you generated, or perhaps invest in a renewable energy project.

Hop onto the web, and you'll find any number of companies willing to help you out. Their websites all contain handy-dandy calculators to estimate your greenhouse gas emissions. Then, all you have to do is provide them with sufficient funds to pursue worthy projects and absolve your carbon debt.

Offsetting carbon is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, according to *New Scientist* conservation guru and feature writer, Fred Pearce. But it is also founded on a considerable amount of trust, he argues, because it is unregulated. How do you know, for instance, that with the best will in the world, the company you invested in will be able to nurse your tree plantation through decades of growth? And what will eventually happen to the carbon in the timber? Who is to say that the energy project in which you invested is additional to what would have been done anyway?

Archimedes thinks he might have another answer—along the same lines, but closer to home. It's a solution where you can know for sure that you are making a difference. It's a genuine exercise in Thinking Global, Acting Local.

Cutting down your impact on the Earth not only means changing attitudes and behaviour, it also often means spending money—to buy a solar hot water service, revamp your insulation or install an efficient drip watering system in the garden. And while the spirit is willing, the cash flow can be weak (even if the investment could save you money in the long term).

How about using the software so freely available on the web to calculate the greenhouse cost of that flight from Sydney to Perth and, instead of paying a company to cultivate trees in Borneo, putting that same amount into a special bank account. Then, when you want to green up your life, you will have the money on hand to do so. And if you really get into it, you could add a premium for your car travel to your green savings account as well!

Catholic-inspired Bayrou seeks to break French left-right mould

INTERNATIONAL Politics *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Stefan Gigacz

With the first round of France's presidential election looming, opinion polls credit Catholic father of six and Pyrenees racehorse breeder, Francois Bayrou, with around 22% support, just behind Socialist, Segolene Royal (25%), and presidential favorite, conservative Nicolas Sarkozy (26%).

It's a remarkable effort by the 55 year old former schoolteacher and president of the 'centrist' Union for French Democracy (UDF) party, a relatively small party boasting only 29 deputies in France's 577 seat National Assembly.

What's more, if Bayrou manages to outscore either Sarkozy or (more likely) Royal, then he is likely to emerge as favorite for the run off as socialists and conservatives seek to block their rivals from the Presidency.

It is well worth looking then at the political & and spiritual & heritage that Francois Bayrou represents. Indeed, Bayrou has never hidden neither his Catholic faith nor its importance for his vocation as a politician. "I am a Christian-democrat and fully aware of the significance of the linkage between the two words", he repeated recently.

Bayrou spent much of his youth, he recounts, in the non-violent circles of the Gandhian Christian pacifists and followers of Lanza del Vasto, which is why he feels at home among ecologists, whose "movement draws on the same sources".

And many of Bayrou's positions do in fact correspond to those of the modern environmental movement & moratorium on GM foods, support for bio-fuels, organic farming, a call to "defend the planet".

His positions on these and other issues illustrate why, even though his French critics often attempt to classify Bayrou with the right, he would generally be regarded as centre left on the Australian political spectrum.

Even on litmus-test 'faith' issues, Bayrou has managed to carve out political positions that seek to respect Catholic teaching without necessarily alienating other groups. He backs legal recognition of 'civil unions' among homosexuals, for example, while insisting that such unions remain legally distinct from marriage between a man and woman. He also supports the right of homosexuals to adopt children as individuals & as heterosexual singles may also do & but not as couples.

He also opposed the Iraq war because it was "not a just war" and was "contrary

to the wishes of the international community and the UN". However, he also criticised Europe's role in the crisis, saying that if the continent had managed to unite, it could have perhaps prevented the alliance of the UK with the US on the issue.

This concern for a strong federal Europe is another Bayrou characteristic as well as a further indication of his political-spiritual heritage, which can be traced directly to the Catholic-inspired Popular Republican Movement (MRP) party of the 1940s.

Bayrou's own father had belonged to the MRP, which was founded largely by 'resisters' of the German occupation and included such luminaries as Robert Schuman, later recognised as "Father of Europe" for his role in the launch of what is now the European Union.

It was also no accident that the MRP in 1947 chose as its honorary president the ageing Marc Sangnier, who fifty years previously had founded the Sillon or Furrow democratic movement. This became the prototype of the later Catholic lay movements, such as the Young Catholic Students, Young Catholic Workers and JAC (Rural YCW), to which Bayrou's father also belonged.

What the Sillon had done was to pioneer a form of participatory democracy – a "method of democratic education" - based on the creation of 'study circles' that sought to take action on current social issues in the light of the Gospel and Church teaching. But a 1910 letter from Pope Pius X to the French bishops condemning the Sillon's methods as "dangerous" put paid to the movement.

It would take another 35 years – including the emergence of communism and Nazism – before Pope Pius XII would reverse this decision in his 1944 Christmas message on "Democracy and a Lasting Peace". Pius XII now praised democracy for fostering the people's "consciousness of their own responsibility", in effect rehabilitating the Sillon's concept of democracy just as the movement's inheritors were about to take power in government.

Significantly, the Sillon understanding of democracy as the form of "organisation that tends to maximise the consciousness and responsibility of everyone" is today still cited almost word for word by Bayrou's UDF.

This is clearly part of a longstanding effort by Bayrou to link his political movement with a century old tradition of Catholic-inspired lay-led (not clerical) social democracy.

As Bayrou has gradually distanced his party from its earlier alliances on the right it has begun to claim the whole political centre. Bayrou's strategy thus depends on isolating what he sees as a shrinking and outdated left and right. "The world isn't black and white – it's in colour," Bayrou now says, denouncing the two-hundred-year old left-right divide which he believes has left France

trapped in “immobilism” and “stagnation”.

What’s more, if Bayrou succeeds, he intends to use his presidential mandate to introduce a 6th Republic succeeding DeGaulle’s 5th Republic model that he criticises for having regressed into a “republican monarchy.”

Again, Bayrou doesn’t hesitate to promote his new republic under the double banner of consciousness and responsibility.

France’s institutions need “to advance a consciousness in its citizens of the country’s reality”, he says, “so as to enable them to share and to assume the choices made in their name”.

Thus Bayrou’s 6th republic is to be founded on the principles of responsibility and its corollary, legitimacy (or representativeness).

In practice, he sees this happening by the French president playing a greater role in forming a multi-colour government free from the restrictions of the left-right divide.

It is an ambitious program but one for which he also draws support from those who are still close to the Sillon tradition. Anicette Sangnier, president of a new Sillon Circle, backs Bayrou’s effort and says his views correspond closely to those of her grandfather. “Marc Sangnier often used to say ‘I’m used to planting the seeds without reaping the harvest’. Perhaps harvest time has finally arrived,” she says.

The myth of belonging masks our insecurity

OPINION Published 02-Apr-2007

Coling Long

Earlier this year the organisers of the rock music festival, the Big Day Out announced a ban on national flags being brought into the venue. In the wake of a small, transplanted Balkan war at the Australian Open, it seemed like a reasonable idea. Soon, though, a 'popular' outcry erupted. How dare anyone ban the carrying of the Australian national flag – especially on Australia Day?

The usual populists chimed in on the matter, and before long the poor organisers were back pedalling faster than a politician who discovers a room occupied by Brian Burke.

When the big day finally arrived, a substantial number of young concert goers decided to take their flags and to wear them, perhaps as a sign of both pride and disobedience.

It would be easy to mock those who think this was a rebellious act, the approval of a conservative PM seemingly having escaped their notice. But that is not the point here. I wondered why young people would even want to take national flags to a rock concert. There was no boxing match between the Violent Femmes and the Killers, no basketball game between Tool and Eskimo Joe. This was not a sporting event.

In the days after the Big Day Out, it was pointed out that the Australian flag had become a symbol akin to gang colours – something used aggressively to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, us and them, 'proud Aussies' and other, dubious, untrustworthy types. The flag had become a potent symbol of belonging.

There is much to ridicule and despise about the aggressive flag-waving of the Cronulla riot and Big Day Out kind. There is also a sense of belonging being sought, beneath this aggression, that is most interesting. Many young Australians are seeking something more than the shallow consumerism presented as the meaning and purpose of life.

There are only so many needs that can be satisfied through the market. There are other, deeper, needs that people are now beginning to see cannot be met by the cold, utopian vision of the free marketeers: needs for love, respect, acceptance and tolerance.

Like so many other aspects of contemporary life, the realm of social interaction is undergoing profound changes. Older forms of belonging are weakening, while others—often negative—are strengthening. New manifestations of

belonging—such as on-line communities—are fitfully and tentatively being born. Identities are in a state of flux.

Sources of belonging are now undergoing profound change. Class identities are weaker, and are challenged by new identities defined by gender, sexuality, ethnicity and even consumption patterns. Changes to work patterns, the underlying structure of the economy, and the present political ascendancy of capital have reduced the importance of unions. The main political parties ceased long ago to offer opportunities for active involvement that fostered political allegiances. A meaningful sense of belonging is vulnerable to the dominant ideological tenet of the day—that market relationships should determine all human relationships, and that individualism should in all cases dominate over communal solidarity.

This absence of belonging is sensed as a significant reason for the rise of the evangelical churches, for instance, which provide a sense of shared community. It also helps to explain the rise of what we might call 'disproportionate emotion' which has emerged when, for example, a 'celebrity' dies or some sort of 'tragedy' occurs—witness the deaths of Princess Diana and Steve Irwin. Public reaction in these cases revealed a desire to share emotion in a way that our atomised society does not normally encourage. Unfortunately, in these cases the power of this desire seemed to break down a sense of proportion, and this is in turn fed, and was fed by, a media schooled in exaggeration and cliché.

John Howard has benefited from the politics of exclusion and belonging. His manipulation of the myths of Australian history, in particular the myths surrounding Gallipoli, of racial politics, the discourse of 'elites' and 'battlers', has tapped into this barely understood craving for belonging. A society in which belonging and a sense of community are tenuous is an insecure society. In such a society people are susceptible to the kind of fear campaigns that have dominated Australian politics over the last decade.

Nationalism is one of the oldest sources of 'large group' belonging. It is also one of the most dangerous, as the history of the 20th century should remind us. Even the young are not immune, as the Big Day Out flag controversy revealed. The challenge for the progressive side of Australian politics is to look beyond flag-waving populism for belonging that is inclusive and not divisive.

Recovering Jesus through poetry

BOOK REVIEW Non-Fiction *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Philip Harvey

In Dogged Loyalty : the Religion of Poetry, the Poetry of Religion, by John F. Deane. Columba Press, 2006. ISBN 1 85607 534 6, RRP \$25.00
[website](#)

John Deane grew up in an Ireland where his life "began with a Jesus of morne misery, a severe minister of don'ts and do's, of pain and sorrow, of eyes that squinted at you as they followed you everywhere." This same Catholicism has for some time now been questioned and rejected in Ireland, but unlike those who have walked away, Deane claims, "I have turned to poetry to recover a Jesus of more relevance and truth." He goes to poetry to help pick up the pieces of a broken religion and to find in poetry what Seamus Heaney calls the "unexpected and unedited communications" that poetry gives to religious tradition.

This is a collection of essays about poets' work that is fixed unequivocally in the early 21st century, a time when poetry is easy to ignore, easy to dismiss – a matter of indifference to most people. Deane intends here to draw attention to the real poetry that survives change. For him, "the poet invents the metaphor, and the Christian lives it." This searching out of religious truth through poetry has particular resonance in an Ireland that has become estranged from its religious inheritance. At the end of his life Enda McDonagh insisted that one solution to the Irish religious impasse was to explore poetry and here is one effective enactment of that philosophy.

Henry Vaughan is appreciated because of his distaste for the age, "the religious bickering and the doubts about practice and ritual," and his poetic "shifts from a pleading or a complaining mode into quick cry of personal distress or longing." "The couth and gracious couplets" of the Puritan Anne Bradstreet are given special treatment. He admires her "honesty and self-knowledge", her struggles with desire. Revolutionary thinkers like William Blake are emblems of possibility. John Clare's God is "not the God of theologians, of pastors or mystics, but the God of the countryside." Deane's Donne is perhaps his central model, a man of concerns.

One concern is his vacillation between "God and his mistresses … between east and west," and how the poet reasons with dichotomy. Another is the bafflement of the innocent before dogma. But it is Donne who shows Deane, for example in the sonnet 'Batter my heart, three person'd God', that religion requires total commitment. The poetry urged him to an acceptance of God's love. Donne's concerns are contemporary and have special significance for an Irishman like Deane. Like the other poets here, he encapsulates intellectual and emotional

dilemmas; he acts as an extra revelation, in many ways free of the doctrinal emphases of the church. "His entrances and exits have a wily elegance."

There are weaknesses in this book. On page 193 Deane says the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas envied him "what he saw as Ireland's freedom from all things English." This is richly ironic when we consider that seventeen of the 25 poets he extols are English, and only two are Irish. Over half the poets are Anglicans. Of the two Irishmen, Thomas Kinsella is a lapsed Manichean and an admirable lifelong explorer of the unconscious, while Pdraig Daly is the one meritorious unknown in the whole group and an example of special pleading. How could Deane completely ignore the awesome heritage of Irish poetry? Why would you even need to read outside Ireland to find remedies for the current circumstances?

Another difficulty is Deane's fluctuating appreciation of the Catholic Church. Brought up in Achill Island, he has a firm but in some ways limiting experience of the church. When he comes to the mainland in the sixties it is for him "the end of the Middle Ages." (How long were those particular Middle Ages?) He lost his faith but kept thinking, "Christ ought to be brought in from the cold of Catholic dogma and made to permeate the whole of everyday living." Gradually though his attitudes change. Rebellion and rejection are replaced by a form of apologia for his own involvement, until we find that latter-day reconciliation not only then inspires Deane to denounce those in the church who aren't doing the job right, but permits him to say what should be done.

By the end he has become a gloomster, about Ireland, the Church, the world in general, and about the lack of interest in poetry readings in his own country. Put simply, it is a book of his own life. Deane represents a present-day type of Irish that lives in a lost place. Beyond asking questions like "What happened?" he asks, "What do we do now?" in what he sees as the decadence of a worldly Ireland, that neither poetry nor religion can reach.

Putting that aside, four unusual essays reside inside this book also: a manifesto on poetic composition, a powerful memoir of childhood Achill, a passionate praise of the Eucharist, and a declamation on that favourite topic of poets, the parlous state of poetry. These increase the book's value considerably, acting as a ground for his personal anthology. They show that Deane is a man testing his faith, whose faith has been tested before, and who finds in English poetry words that are to be valued and not ignored. He says, "I look up in recognition of a presence in absence." Deane makes himself vulnerable, his conventionality and differences equally on display. This is appealing. His gentleness of expression, his soft readings of the poets live side by side with a troubled exposition of former hopes and firm criticisms of current change. He is not unusual in that.

Walking through a human zoo

FILM REVIEW Arthouse *Published 02-Apr-2007*

Richard Leonard SJ

***Running With Scissors*. Starring Annette Bening, Gwyneth Paltrow, Joseph Cross, Brian Cox, Alec Baldwin and Joseph Fiennes. Directed by Ryan Murphy. 116 mins. Rated MA 15+. [website](#)**

In 2002 Augusten Burroghs published his autobiography, *Running with Scissors: A Memoir*. It purports to tell the story of his very disturbed childhood.

Augusten (Cross) is born into a highly dysfunctional family where his father (Baldwin) is an alcoholic and his mother, Deidre, (Bening) is a mediocre poet with great ambition and a mental illness. She is soon to be a barbiturate addict as well.

When her life and marriage fall apart, Deidre sends Augustine to live with Dr Finch (Cox), her psychiatrist. The Finch house is a case-study in how the mad can take over the asylum. There is the controlling patriarch, the repressed mother, an obsessive compulsive sister, another sister is a typically angry adolescent, and the adopted son is a predatory homosexual and a psychotic.

With his mother coming and going from the house and his life, Augustine has to find his way to adulthood.

This very dark tale will appeal to only a few, but a review here is warranted because others may be attracted by the star-studded cast. True to their calibre, the acting is sometimes fine indeed, but they all work so hard on such a bleak story which goes nowhere.

Running With Scissors feels like walking through a human zoo where we observe the insane antics of one caged character after another.

The only redeeming feature of this tale of abusive dysfunction is that Augustine survived it, and wrote it up. Or so he claims. The authenticity of the story behind the book is now contested, and the film opens with the disconcerting line that, "no one will believe it, but it happened." Maybe. But even as a fictional story it makes for disturbing cinema and questionable entertainment.