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A child's 'Christ bus' in America

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Most of all I remember scents and smells: pies of various savours and size, glorious new basketballs, smoke wriggling from the fireplace where birch and beech and pencils and young squirrels and once a baseball cap all burned fitfully; the avuncular smell of wet rubber boots steaming on sprawled newspapers by the door, the dense brown cigar-and-sweater scent of uncles rumbling in their chairs, and the murky cinnamon sea of egg-nog.

There were seas of sound, too, the radio yammering the Knick game, the snickering of cousins, the snarling of clan elders not at all averse to pinning the fingers of children snatching for a slab of turkey before they, the elders, have fully dismembered said mountainous bird, my brothers and I all have knife scars from clan elders who were mighty quick with the blade, being of ancient lines of warriors and knowing full well what they were about weaponwise.

And there was the roaring of the father downstairs where he is fixing yet another godblasted storm window smashed by his sons as wild as wolves, and the slim rustling prayer of the mother sliding gracefully through each scene beaming like an actress, and the bark of a brother barfing in the back yard because he won a bet by eating 20 snickerdoodles made by our cousin the nun and he, the brother, did not think this would affect him overmuch but o it did o god did it o god that is hilarious look at the colors, which thank god for heavy snowfall is all I can say.

The afternoon shuffled along like a quiet road, and I dozed by the fire, buttocks facing the roasting squirrels and pencils, and in the evening we listened to that preening queen Fulton Sheen chanting Mass on the radio, and no one knew where the paper plates were at all one bit, and we snuck a beer from a sleeping uncle, and someone female and mature read Dylan Thomas aloud, trying unsuccessfully for his cracked drunken Welsh lilt, and there were so many pies you could not choose among them but sat stunned amid mounds of mince, until a grandmother, tart and Irish and smelling of stern and unforgiving soap, gave you such a vast slab of each that your plate looked very much like a whole pie its own self.

Sometimes then we were allowed to open a few presents, just because, although the Great Unraveling was always in the morning, and once I remember opening a present on which a very young niece had written MARY CHRIST BUS with all her might, with every iota of her tongue-clenched diligence, and if I was a wise man, which I am not, I would have saved that scrap of extraordinary American literature, and folded it into my battered wallet, so that I could even now, a thousand years later, pull it out ever so gently, and open it up with the utmost care, and see the world as it is, ancient and glorious and fragile and timeless, and

written endlessly by the young. And so then finally to bed.

Carols in the gangland

MULTICULTURALISM

Sarah Ayoub

As they gather in strength and unity, their roaring voices are a perfect match with the beating and pounding that characterises who they are and where they come from. Men of dark hair and olive skin, travelling together in seeming packs and bound by an unbreakable tradition. There is a leader among them, and even if he is not explicitly seen, he is found in their actions and in their pursuits, and in their quest to dominate the task ahead.

They have found a niche for themselves in South-West Sydney, and no matter how they are stereotyped and represented, they will continue to meet, greet and roar as they beat, *Pa-Rum-Pum-Pum-Pum*, on their drums.

You'd be forgiven if you thought I was writing of something criminal and sinister and un-Australian. After all, representations in our press would have you assume that South-Western Sydney is the heartland of gangs, where terror reigns and where Australian ideals are in rapid decline. They'd have you believe it was an Islamic enclave, or a place where you couldn't walk alone for fear of abuse or crime or rape.

But drive in its midst during this Advent season and you'd be surprised. Here reside a people that the press has forgotten. A Lebanese Christian population who, tarnished by the criminal representations that their nationality connotes in the press, has retreated further and further into old ways of living — as outsiders in a country they chose because of its hopes for a better life and a stronger, bigger, prosperous future.

Instead, the past decade, plagued by gang rapes, street crime and race riots, has questioned the value of their presence in Australia and riddled our multicultural policies with big and bold question marks.

Driving in a Punchbowl street this December could erase all those questions of the values of multiculturalism. I am thinking this as I watch the St Charbel's Youth Association Choir sing passionately in preparation for their Church's annual youth Christmas carols concert, while the Christmas lights and decorations of the surrounding homes brighten up the experience. *Oh come all ye faithful*, the lights and carols say, *joyful and triumphant*.

The church, which I am proud to worship at, is a Maronite Catholic institution that has as its core objective the maintenance, in Australia, of the traditions of the Lebanese Maronite Order. Its parishioners, young and old, born down under or in the old country, are encouraged to embrace and love their Australian home as much as the home of their forebears.

I see this tonight as the choir mixes traditional Anglo-Celtic carols with the elements of their cultural heritage. The *derbake* and the *Tubbel*, mixed with 'Jingle Bells' and 'Silent Night' and 'Away in a Manger', in a mix so delightful and exotic it warrants a news report in and of itself.

Hark! the herald angels sing. Men and women of middle-eastern appearance gathered in a manner warranting no concern. As the conductor gives them a two minute break between sets, two girls pipe up that they'd like to sing the Aussie take on 'Jingle Bells': kangaroos instead of reindeer and a rusty Holden Ute instead of a sleigh.

A few days later, as the clock strikes midnight on Christmas Eve, signalling the celebration they have been waiting for, the church will swarm with attendees. They will fill its sprawling courtyards with their prayers, acknowledging what the season represents, while inside, the priests burn incense and pray in Aramaic, the language of their Lord and Saviour, Christ made flesh. *Frankincense to offer have I ...*

The mass will fuse the English and Arabic language, and after Communion, the congregation will join the priest as he prays for the sick and the poor, the travellers and those close by, for the Australian nation and the Lebanese one, for his parishioners and for all the Lord's children. *Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis!*

And on Christmas Day, these same people will gather with their loved ones, eating and drinking and bearing gifts. Chicken and ham, roast vegies and salads, ice-cream and sweets. Beer and bonbons and noise! The Aussie summer sun, and not much else to ask for. *Oh what fun it is to ride ...*

In the end, the reports of the goings on in this part of Sydney are thinly-veiled accusations of difference, further dividing our society along an axis of 'us' and 'them', and fuelling a need for answers to questions of otherness that could have catastrophic consequences. Divisions that could have young boys growing up to be gangsters and criminals because that's what they're already labelled, and that's what they're expected to be.

But in the end, no matter where we hail from or the degree to which we believe, we'll decorate our trees and watch as the Messiah is born in a manger. And by fusing our various cultural takes on Christmas, instead of separating ourselves, we can make our celebrations more exciting, and finally put to rest those questions of multiculturalism and whether or not it belongs. Lessons like these make Christmas all that it's meant to be.

Oh, tidings of comfort and joy!

Ethical solutions to the global moral crisis

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

This is the first in a series of interviews recorded for *Eureka Street*at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne. It features one of the giants of Catholic theology of the 20th century, Hans Kung. He speaks about the need for interreligious dialogue, a global ethic and the state of the Catholic Church.

Kung was born in Switzerland in 1928 and, after studying at the prestigious Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, was ordained to the priesthood in 1954. He is a contemporary of Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, and both were among the expert theological advisors, the *periti*, at the Second Vatican Council.

Both men could be seen as symbols of their time, with each reacting differently to the same momentous events. The present Pope was deeply troubled by the turmoil of the 1960s and '70s, particularly by student unrest and riots, and retreated into Catholic tradition and a conservative mindset.

Kung was excited and energised by the same ferment, and has been a persistent champion of the reforms of Vatican II. He has a troubled history with Church authorities, mainly because of his critique of the papacy, particularly his rejection of the doctrine of papal infallibility. Because of this, his licence to teach as a Catholic theologian was revoked by the Vatican in 1979.

He is a prolific author, having written some 60 books in German, with around 40 available in English. He lectured in ecumenical theology at the University of Tubingen in the south of Germany until he retired from teaching in 1996.

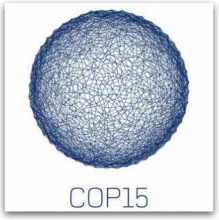
Since the early 1990s Kung has been involved in interreligious dialogue. At the first modern Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993, he presented his Declaration Toward a Global Ethic which was the result of extensive interfaith consultation. At the Melbourne Parliament, in reaction to the global financial crisis, he presented his Ethical Manifesto for the Global Economy .

Now in his early 80s, Kung is still very active travelling, writing and lecturing, and is president of the Global Ethic Foundation based in Tubingen.

Chaotic endgame in Copenhagen

POLITICS

Tony Kevin



The Copenhagen climate change summit has been an extraordinary intergovernmental conference. Its first week largely played out as consciousness-raising global theatre, with dramatic displays of brinkmanship both within and outside the conference.

Even the most hardened and cynical international diplomats would have realised that Copenhagen's agenda and style transcend the usual stereotyped North-South political and economic divisions, and the accompanying developing country post-colonial resentments of the North's wealth and power and condescension.

From the young people who descended *en masse* on the conference came a different, global stewardship message: that this conference is above all about the present leadership generation's shared responsibility to protect, as best it can, the climate security of coming generations everywhere.

This new message of international solidarity got through: I cannot recall any conference where NGO activism is playing such a major constructive role. Unlike in world trade conferences, the young activists in Copenhagen know that this conference has to be encouraged to make progress; derailment is not a desirable outcome.

The conference shrugged off the peripheral challenge of the climate sceptics' counter-conference. 'Climategate', a deliberate criminal hacking into ten years of climate scientists' emails in a desperate last-ditch effort by carbon lobbies to cast doubt on climate science, was quickly sidelined.

An effort to break the traditional North-South mould, mounted by low-lying small island states, foundered. Everyone understood that the final deals, if achievable, would be struck between the US representing the North, and China representing the South. If Tuvalu goes under, so will the heavily populated deltas of mainland Asia.

With broad agreement on a two degrees maximum safe global average temperature increase, the coinage in the main game was threefold: What were fair emissions targets for the North and the South? How much money would be pledged by the North for mitigation and adaptation in the South? And what compliance mechanisms?

China played its strong hand deftly and tactfully. Before the conference, it had pledged to reduce its emissions intensity to 2020 by 40 per cent. The massive scale of China's expanding renewable energy, nuclear energy, and cleaner coal-burning infrastructure lent credibility to this pledge. As a command economy, China was trusted to deliver on its stated targets.

The US played from a weaker base. The sincerity of the Obama administration's commitment to the negotiation was unquestioned: but his huge problem of securing Congressional approval was equally understood. Obama had to bring home an outcome which he could present to Congress as successful national interest diplomacy, thereby persuading Congress to back his Copenhagen commitments. Thus questions of compliance, and the language of developing countries' commitment to emissions reduction targets, assumed great importance.

The conference stalled in the second week on vexatious procedural issues symbolising a resurgence of the old North-South mutual mistrust. Would last-minute diplomatic solutions be found to these dilemmas? Probably. At conferences like this, an atmosphere of crisis is necessary for the final deals to be achievable. Failure seems impossible because so much is at stake here, yet there are many past examples of failed international trade and disarmament conferences.

Australia has played an uneasy Western supportive leadership role, its credibility damaged by its past record of self-interested trade negotiations-style gamesmanship. Australian green groups assiduously publicised shonky official carbon counting practices in land clearing, and Australia's pursuit of internationally tradeable carbon emissions credits, and carbon capture and storage credits.

Australia was exposed as saying: we are rich enough to buy all the offsetting credits we want, so that we can go on burning as much coal as we want — not an ethically attractive message. But it escaped the odium heaped on Canada's environmental-fossil government, intent on exploiting Canada's fragile tar sands and shales.

The likely outcome at Copenhagen — though I cannot predict its detail — will be pronounced by the US, EU and China as interim progress. This would surely require Rudd to increase Australia's 2020 emissions reduction target from 5 per cent to 15 per cent, the intermediate target level envisaged in the ETS bills.

This will transform the political dynamic at home. Rudd will at last have a real ETS bill to fly with: the 5 per cent ETS 2020 target was a shameful albatross which had lost all public credibility. Yet Abbott will attack a 15 per cent ETS target for costing a lot more. Will Rudd be able to carry allied business groups to support a 15 per cent target?

Rudd will claim — as an active Friend of the Chair — that Australia materially contributed to the degree of success achieved in difficult circumstances in Copenhagen. He will not want to come home defining Copenhagen as a failure: thus, hopefully, the notorious 5 per cent will be left behind.

This likely Copenhagen conference outcome would in all likelihood leave ETS cap-and-trade as the mechanism for global carbon reductions most favoured by Western market economies. James Hansen's blunt criticisms of ETS as a corruption-prone bankers'

casino went unheeded: except that Stern and Gore now grant that ETS will need to be supplemented at some point by carbon taxes, and by forms of direct action or regulation. Slowly, the global debate will inch towards greater realism. And over time, this will impact on Australia's domestic debate.

Copenhagen is not the end of this story: barring an unlikely total breakdown, it will be recognised as a useful early step on the hard road to greater global climate security for our children. Importantly, the US and China will be seen as jointly leading the world towards a safer climate future.

The journey will continue next year, in poor, polluted, overcrowded Mexico City — and what better venue to concentrate delegates' minds?

The morality of population control

ENVIRONMENT

Paul Collins

Talking about population gets you into trouble. Mention it and you're 'anti-human', an 'extreme Green', 'racist', 'anti-immigrant', or dictating to developing countries how they should behave. You're told the real issue isn't over-population, but lack of equity in distribution of resources.

It's hard not to sound misanthropic when discussing population. Conservatives accuse you of favouring abortion, contraception, fertility control and sterilisation in developing countries, and progressives say you're a cultural imperialist diverting attention from social justice.

Discussion of population lost respectability in the mid-1980s following the sterilisation policies of Congress Party governments in India and the one child policy in China. In contrast Thailand, Indonesia and Bangladesh have run successful population programs without draconian measures.

There are also powerful vested interests maintaining high rates of immigration in Western countries which have reached zero population growth. Business wants to maintain consumers for goods and services, regardless of the pressure this puts on local environments. In market-oriented thinking new immigrants add to the pool of consumers rather than impacting a fragile environment.

The result: politicians avoid population issues like the plague (except when, like Kevin Rudd and Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner, they're beating the drum for an even 'bigger Australia').

The consequence is our country has a higher per capita growth rate from immigration (2.1 per cent for the year ending June 2009) than Indonesia. This will have a very large impact on Australia's attempt to cut greenhouse gas emissions because so many of these people are coming from countries with a lower standard of living and a much lower contribution to global warming.

These kinds of disconnects in policy formulation occur because immigration and population have become taboo topics among bureaucrats and politicians who fail to see, or are unwilling to tackle, the mutual contradictions involved. Global warming is lost between the discontinuities.

The great religious traditions have only the most rudimentary views on the morality of population limitation. Because the religious traditions have been largely absent from this debate, it has been mainly carried on in secular and economic terms by biologists,

demographers and economists.

The reason why religious people have avoided this issue is simple: it is a theological and moral minefield. Embedded in it are a whole range of acute ethical issues and challenges to ingrained attitudes.

A basic moral conundrum concerns the ethical issues involved in inter-generational rights: if we consume so many resources now that the quality of life of future generations is compromised, are we acting in a morally responsible way? I think we do have serious and binding moral obligations to those who come after us. They have as much right to a quality of life as us.

Then there's the moral issue of the imbalance between the living standards of developed regions such as North America, Western Europe and Australia and the 20 per cent of people who are starving or under-nourished.

Does this imbalance create an ethical demand that developed countries lower their standard of living and dispose of food surpluses to needy countries at concessionary prices? Is there a basic moral right, overriding the powers of nation states, to allow migration from countries of over-population and chronic shortage to those with apparent space and surplus food?

And what about the right to reproduce: what limits can the community place on the rights of individuals to decide their fertility and family size? Women play a key role in this. We already know that women will use the educational opportunities they receive to improve standards of living for their families; then, with a consequent reduction in child mortality, they are more willing to limit conception.

Whenever women are liberated with guaranteed rights and equality, the birthrate has been reduced. They also need employment and interests beyond the home.

There have been real successes in improving the lot of women. Between the late 1960s and 2000 the total birthrate of developing countries has been reduced from six to three births per woman. While Catholicism is widely criticised for its opposition to contraception and abortion, the contribution of religious orders and Catholic care agencies to education and higher standards of literacy, health care, development aid and the breaking down of social and class barriers have been important contributions to changing the role of women.

While Catholicism and Islam are often blamed for imposing oppressive conditions on women, the actual oppression that they experience is the result of tribal and patriarchical cultural attitudes. Sure, religion is used as a major component in the enforcement of the social mores of male control, lack of female education, and high fertility. Clearly they reinforce each other but it is unfair to blame religion for the whole problem.

So a basic element in a morality of population is education and liberation of women, giving

them control of their fertility. Religious people must be proactive in emphasising women's rights as a moral issue, and prepared to confront unequivocally the abuse of women. And we must recover a proper biological perspective: we aren't the sole reason for the earth's existence, just part of it, perhaps even a minor part. We need to recover humility.

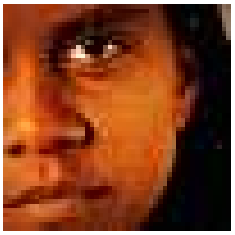
Samson and Delilah and other great Australian stories

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

Top Five lists tend to be reasonably subjective. This list consists of my favourite films of 2009. They have been selected on some combination of quality, resonance, importance and personal taste. Feel free to use the feedback form at the base of the article to nominate your own favourite films from 2009.

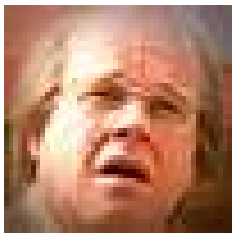
1. Samson and Delilah



Back in March, I strolled the streets of Fitzroy in Melbourne's inner north with Warwick Thornton, trying to find a quiet spot for an interview. Two months prior to the release of his feature debut, Thornton was quietly hopeful his film would be positively received. It would go on to win the Best First Feature award at the Cannes Film Festival, and to claim seven prizes at the 2009 AFI Awards, including best film and best direction.

Review — Lessons in empathy for racist Australia: Samson and Delilah*is an ode to Alice Springs and its extremes. It's an ethereal love story between Aboriginal adolescents, that takes place against a backdrop of addiction, violence and displacement. Racism is not an explicit presence in the characters' lives, but it is there, like a foul breath that muggies the air around them.* Read more

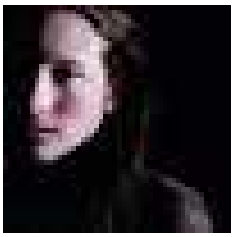
2. Synechdoche New York



An imaginatively conceived and realised meditation on art, God and the fear of death. The directorial debut of scarily weird screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*) survives — virtually requires — repeat viewing.

Review — New York's God of rot: *Theatre director Caden Cotard sets about producing the most ambitious play in history. His cast of characters includes himself and those nearest to him, play-acting the events of his domestic life. Don't think for a second that this is inaccessible muck. Kaufman's sense of humour is dark and absurd but always surprising.* Read more

3. Beautiful Kate



A haunting parable about a rural Australian family that has long since been fragmented along the fault-lines of guilty secrets. Particularly notable for strong and understated performances by Ben Mendelsohn, Rachel Griffiths and newcomer Sophie Lowe.

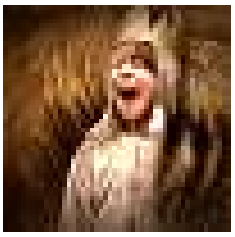
Review — Incest and redemption: *The publicity poster for* Beautiful Kate *is as ambiguous as the controversial Bill Henson photographs it so blatantly references. The film unpacks these ambiguities, not solving but exacerbating them and making them sing with empathy.* Read more

4. Blessed

Consider it a nod to what has been widely described as one of the greatest years ever for Australian films, that my top five contains three local offerings. *Blessed* is an immaculate, sad and, at times, deeply disturbing exploration of working class angst.

Review/interview — When parenthood is a mixed blessing: *Roo makes a quick buck starring in a porn film. Trisha and Katrina are arrested for shoplifting. Orton and Stacey are runaways from an untenable home life. In act two we relive the same day from the mothers' point of view.* Blessed *finds hope in the cracks between mothers and their teenage children.* Read more

5. Where the Wild Things Are



Strange and dark and beautiful: more a film about what it's like to be a child, than an actual children's film. Consider this a nod to my penchant for quirky films — its director, Spike Jonze, directed *Being John Malcovich*, the aforementioned American 'indie-wood' film written by Charlie Kaufman.

Review — Children and other wild things: *Max has an erratic imagination, and is prone to extremes of emotion. There are hints of mental illness, but, really, he is simply Every Child. Following a ferocious fight with his mother, he flees into fantasy and becomes king to a group of melancholic monsters.* Read more

Honourable mentions:

Balibo — Discerning truth in Balibo's fiction

Disgrace — South Africa's lesson for post-apartheid Australia

Doubt — No cheap shots in clergy abuse drama

Revolutionary Road — How to escape the hell of suburbia

Gran Torino — Redeeming the all-American

Abbott needs to be a better boxer

POLITICS

John Warhurst

Amid the clamour surrounding Tony Abbott as the new Opposition leader one of his utterances stands out as having critical significance. It is his definition of what it means to be Her Majesty's Opposition. In his view the job is to oppose the government.

This apparently straightforward definition of Opposition fits the popular image of Abbott the boxer standing his ground resolutely in the middle of the ring.

But it is actually a simplistic view not just of Opposition but of boxing. It neglects the very many different ways of winning a boxing match.

The textbook view of the role in a Westminster system is that it is multi-faceted. Professor Graham Maddox, the Australian political scientist who specialises in the topic, reckons the functions are fourfold.

Even he misses some. In a bicameral Parliament, where the Opposition holds the cards in the upper house, there is at least one more. The Opposition must work with the Government in the Senate to reach common ground. Without compromise there is gridlock.

Nevertheless Maddox's list directs attention to the complexity of successful Opposition.

The Opposition must first be an alternative government ready and able to govern. The shadow cabinet is the alternative government and must present itself convincingly as such. The prime function is not to undermine the government, but to present its own credentials to govern.

This is the task of Abbott's team. Yet so far the emphasis is on attack alone. Attack comes naturally to Abbott; he doesn't have to pretend in the way previous Opposition leaders like Andrew Peacock and Malcolm Turnbull had to. But to attack is not enough.

The second function follows logically. It is to provide alternative policies. Here Maddox would like Abbott's style, at least in one sense. He is critical of me-too middle way policies and sees great value in real choice being offered to voters by distinctive alternative policies. Abbott is a clear choice from Rudd in a way Turnbull was not.

But policies must be more than just slogans. They must have substance. That will be the hardest task for an Abbott Opposition to undertake successfully. They have little time to frame detailed policies. Abbott has a book full of ideas, but he denies that they are his party's

policies.

Even to present a new policy on climate change is an enormous task if it is to be completed by February. If he doesn't adopt most of Turnbull's policies, he must begin from scratch across the board in a race against time.

The third function is to become the voice of community grievances. The Opposition has the position to act for the community in the Parliament. This is a difficult thing to ask of any Opposition because they are naturally connected to only some of those groups in the community with grievances. It is unrealistic to expect Abbott to speak for left-wing critics of the Rudd Government on matters like asylum seekers and industrial relations.

Yet if the Abbott Opposition can become the voice of the middle ground in the community as well as the conservative Right then it will be immeasurably stronger.

The fourth function suits Abbott. It is to be critical of the Government. But effective criticism must be part of a broader strategy. Criticism hits home when the Opposition is speaking not just for itself but for others. It hits home when the criticism is supported by answers to the question 'Well what would you do?'. It hits home when the shadow cabinet really does look like an alternative government.

Good Oppositions, like good fighters, are not one dimensional. They must approach the incumbent champion in the ring from a number of angles in order to succeed. This is the fighting style that Abbott's Opposition must adopt to win the next federal election.

Christmas cakes in art and war

NON-FICTION

Frank O'Shea

Some time in April or May each year, *The Times*of London publishes a short letter which runs something like this: 'Last Saturday, I heard my first cuckoo. Is this a record? Yours T. C. Coltsbridge (Maj, ret).' It is a sign that the blessed rugger season is coming to its Northern close and the retired major can look forward to pleasant months of gin and cricket.

In late September each year, when all the football excitement has died down in this country, I am tempted to write a similar letter to a prestige chronicle: 'Last night, my wife baked our Christmas cake. Is this a record?' Unfortunately, Australia suffers from a dearth of the kind of journal which might publish such homely musings. Besides, in these sensitive times, a letter of that type could easily be considered sexist.

It is true however that in our house, we are ahead of the post office and the large emporiums in our anticipation of Christmas. There is early shopping for raisins and sultanas, peel and glacÃ© cherries, almonds and exotic spices. Then on a Saturday night, I am shifted to the far end of the dining room table to finish the crossword while a work of art is being prepared.

A dog-eared recipe book is retrieved from hibernation, and pages, stuck together by last year's dough, are laid open. In fact the recipe is largely irrelevant. It is like modern portraiture. If you were to ask five different artists to paint a portrait of one of Australia's eminently paintable politicians — Julia Gillard say, or Wilson Tuckey — you would not expect the same product from any two of them. Likewise with a Christmas cake.

For let there be no mistake, we are here talking about a Work of Art, a statement of the creator's individuality, a window into the soul. If you ever hear a House Manager admit that her neighbour has made a better Christmas cake, write it down immediately, together with the time and place and the names of witnesses, and get it signed by your parish priest or a member of the Greens. It is the kind of thing that might be useful in the early stages of a canonisation process.

I am grateful for the crossword — 'sheep providing tufty wool', five letters, starts with 'f'.' I am not required to speak. An occasional 'Yes dear' is all that is needed. The word 'batter', used as a noun, comes up occasionally and it evokes pleasant thoughts of where I would like to be.

In due course, all the ingredients have been combined and it is necessary to add a little spirits. In vain, I try to pass off some cheap Scotch or local brandy, but there is an insistence on raiding my dwindling stock of single malt. Some further beating and then the soggy mess is

transferred to a baking tin, lined with layers of greaseproof paper.

For four hours a heavenly aroma pervades the house as the cake slowly bakes. I wonder why those companies that invest money selling air fresheners based on spring flowers or pine cones have never tried an aroma of baking Christmas cake.

The Bill keeps being interrupted by statements like 'I mustn't forget the cake' or 'I wonder if I used enough whiskey' and House Manager behaves like an expectant father. There, you see: I'm not sexist.

Finally, the masterpiece is removed and presented for my admiration. Since I have to live in the same house as its creator, I duly admire it and throw in a few comments about how one could not find such a superb creation even in the most haute of cuisineries.

I don't get to sample the cake until the afternoon of Christmas Day. By then, I will have had too much rich food to give an opinion, but will do my best impersonation of a race caller in the final furlong, when they had furlongs.

In the days after Christmas, I will get little of the prized cake. It will be diligently kept for seasonal visitors and I will be lucky to get even the most sacrificial of portions. When we visit friends, I expect to fare better, being given a sufficiently large piece by our hostess to be able to describe it on the way home as either too wet or too dry or too rich or too dark. Other descriptions will not be tolerated.

The inhospitality of Bendigo Anglicans snub

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Christmas is a time for hospitality, sometimes painfully offered, sometimes grudgingly accepted. In that, the season reflects its Christian origins. Hospitality is strongly endorsed in Christian rhetoric which commits its followers to welcome others sensitively and painstakingly.

This year hospitality was invoked in the Catholic decision to make provisions for groups of Anglicans to join the Catholic Church while retaining much of their Anglican heritage. The gesture was described as a hospitable response to a repeated request.

But some suspected that beneath the rhetoric of hospitality might have lain a more imperial reality. They believed that the gesture was designed both to show disapproval of Anglican churches that accepted women and overtly gay candidates for ordination, and to welcome converts who shared that disapproval. Of that, more later.

In the Christian tradition hospitality reflects God's hospitality to human beings. The Old Testament emphasis on hospitality to strangers is rooted in God's welcome to the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. In the New Testament hospitality is made more radical. It applies to our enemies as well. We are to walk the extra mile, to offer our suit when asked for our shirt, to treat our enemies as we would our friends.

This deepening of hospitality reflects a change of focus from the one who offers hospitality to the one who asks for it. In the Christmas story, God does not simply offer hospitality to us, but seeks hospitality from us. As the carols tell us, the Son of God comes as a baby needing shelter and food, totally dependent on others. In asking for hospitality, God enables us to accept it ourselves.

Jesus also reverses the usual pattern of hospitality when he sends out his disciples to preach the Gospel without money, spare clothing or food. They have no option but to seek hospitality from the people to whom they preach. Those who offer them hospitality will be more likely to listen favourably to God's word.

To ask for hospitality from strangers, of course, leaves you naked before the calculating. They can ignore your need and use you to send signals to others. But that is also written into the Gospel story. One of the most poignant stories is of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because the city did not offer hospitality to God's word.

The practice of hospitality is central in the Christian tradition. The unity of the early church was cemented by a network of hospitality. Christian preachers travelled, were welcomed,

shared their insights into the Gospel, and moved on. Later the churches became known for the welcome they gave to strangers and refugees who were repelled by civil institutions.

As the rulers of the Empire became Christian, monasteries became places of hospitality, churches places of sanctuary, and hospitals developed out of the guest houses that sprouted along the pilgrim routes.

Where churches are healthy they are inventive in offering hospitality to those in need. In the Australian Catholic Church, the Simon communities, the Vinnies, soup vans, asylum seeker refuges, Catholic Worker communities, hospices for the dying and radical congregations like St Mary's in Brisbane provide a welcome to those who have no home in society. Other churches have similar initiatives.

Here the rhetoric of hospitality is matched by rough-edged practise. But the reality of church life is often one of exclusion. That has also recently been the case in Catholic relations to Anglicans.

In Bendigo the Anglican Church recently ordained seven deacons, four women and three men. Their Cathedral (pictured) was in need of repair, leaving them without a suitable space for the celebration. The Catholic Bishop, after consultation, offered them the use of a Catholic church in Bendigo.

To his embarrassment he was forced later to withdraw his offer of hospitality, leaving them homeless for the ordination. It was thought that the ordination might send the wrong signals.

Mercifully, the Anglicans were not left to scour the fields and caves to find a place of celebration. They were offered hospitality in the Uniting Church.

On hearing such stories we are tempted to fall back on the Irish saying, 'Jesus wept'. But of course Jesus wept on the first Christmas, too, as do all children who come into the world. Most babies also weep when they are baptised. Perhaps they sense the inhospitable aspects of world and church. Breaches of hospitality are part of our human condition. Christmas is about forgiving the past and being enticed into hospitality.

Half-baked takes on the glory of God

POETRY

Michele Madigan Somerville

Peals of light

for the parishioners of St Augustine Roman Catholic Church

in Brooklyn, NY and Dalienne Majors, especially, who inspired this.

... Saturnalibus, optimo dierum ...

—Valerius Gaius Catullus

I heard the bells on Christmas day

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

For as long as we have feared
darkness and frigidity, spires
we erect have nosed upwards
we have stretched to reach to touch
the celestial concert of bodies,
ambulant and fixed, whether
arrayed in borrowed light
or radiating with interior fire.
galaxies dispense the luxury
that light is, borne
on waves as it traverses
space and time that we might be
carried away with ourselves,
our senses all fullness, as we behold
and are moved to return
the favor, courtesy of
the choreography

of fingers on strings, we,

in our colossal ingenuity attach

to sound frameworks of our own

design, as with lips and

larynxes animated by muscle

and soul, we unleash
song all in the service of desire

gifts, reciprocal. We emulate
with half-lame gestures, insufficient

and diffuse, dissolving into

air like smoke

ascending from a goat

on an altar —

as if God were open

to flattery for we know

it's the thought that counts

out the measure, that calls

the tune, the pig-headed divine

within us as we hammer away

like clappers in crowns,

attempting scaled-down versions

of whatever meager quotient of

splendor we might

manage to render out of

love like that

which moved the God of Genesis

to cure his own loneliness.

On the fifth day of Christmas

my true love gave to me:

five golden rings of

truth, five haloes,

the five books of the Torah,

the five feet of the iambs of

bards, the five fingers of

the hand, five short-falling

senses by means of which we

exude, execute ornate

strategies and half-baked takes

on the glory of God — our own

walloping renditions of angels and saints;

whether drafted in ramous pains-

taking reticules of lead and vitrified
emeralds, ambers and burgundies,

or coaxed out of marble,

even the greatest of our puny

efforts do deliver

us out of our skins, move us

from our self-assigned spots.

The bones of our imperfect

artistry glow and a wondrous

argument rumbles within,

which comes to us on waves,

arriving like sound or light. How

proud are we of our ornery

Buonarroti, for example,
working day and night,
tethered like Sisyphus
to scaffolding he erected,
his arthritic piety
a functional machine
strapped to him to him like
a pair of iron wings, and he,
stuck in a dead heat:
longshot in a contest
between him and his better self.
In the end, neither won,
neither captured the perfect
likeness in perfect light.
But we prevailed or were
triumphant, and I like to think
God won too, that
when God looked
upon those completed works,
whether wrestled out of rock
or left in a lavish sprawl
across the broad vaulted
cappella that doubled
as a canvas, that God took
it all in, and sighed and knew
the kind of joy a gift
drafted by the hand of

a child evokes on Christmas
morning which contains a multitude
of sins which are not only forgiven
but which magical flaws
are exalted or go unseen.
in extraordinary light.
On the sixth day of Christmas
my true love gave to me,
six water birds engaged in fruition,
their meat full of knowledge
that warmth itself is a miracle.
On the seventh day of Christmas,
my true love gave to me,
seven swans a-treading water;
genus coscoroba, divine vehicles of
Saraswati, pristine and ferocious,
they devour pearls and mate for life;
and the seven wonders of the world,
the seven forgotten wonders,
the seven natural wonders:
the seven continents, conceived in
love: God's ornament: the cosmos,
in chromaesthetic strains, green
and thrumming: the buttery wash of
the sun in lavender light,
the milky spill of an early moon
its shattered glow, satiny, silver

upon the seven seas,

the loveliness of the human body,

the imagination luscious,
the lilac vapors of the heavens,

night divided from day,

the lyre and the soprano,

the glory of the Jews

unbound by the spontaneous

combustion of a voice coming

from a bush; the seven paths

through which comes

grace —

On the third day of Christmas

my true love gave to me

trois poulets francaises,

seasoned to perfection:

faith, hope and love —

you can sink

your teeth into

for the trip across the tundra

the heart becomes when it elects

to shut down.

On the eighth day of Christmas

my true love gave to me,

eighty pulsating digits

contracting and relaxing,

engorgement and emptying,

their rhythmic cadences

finishing with a squishing

plash, the principle of supply and demand

alive in the flesh of the sacred

cow. On the fourth day of

Christmas my true love gave
to me, four calling songbirds:

Mark, Luke, Matthew and

John's poem of the word

unfurled a world

born of a syllable,

borne on breath,

flesh made airborne —

On the ninth day of Christmas

my true love presented me

with ninety toes in flight

(How lovely their feet in slippers.)

On the tenth day,

a decade of Lords taking leaps

of faith. My true love bestowed

the eleventh day of Christmas

eleven bagpipes

voluptuous as sails

crammed full of anima,

God's oceanic breath

salted with ecstatic tears —

On the twelfth night

of Christmas my true love gave to me

twelve drummers drumming,

apostolic transmission,

a blessing for my plough,

a bean within a cake,

mummers on parade,

Molly dancers run amok,

low tungsten skies luminous with lace,

a velvety darkness fire eats,

the luster of fire-lit flesh

refulgent, a hearth well-stoked

kindled by hope, the rings of

Saturn, its things: Saturnalibus,

optimo dierum, glistening days,

nights coursing with music,

straw men and the god of the grape,

cinnamon, cardamom and clove,
blue fire, white hot heat,

a full-bodied future

with a raspberry nose,

vision and stars of wonder,

a fulminating flame

which pirates the chill in us —

which spirits us away —

the cold, the pendulous

commotion our free-

standing campanilli provide,

carillon music

quickening in towers

courtesy of fists and feet,

combination pistons,

and pedal and swell,

wind chests and reversible

toe studs; 20 ton bourdon bells,

and Angelus strains

that wind through neighborhoods:

the resounding yield

the holy motion

of waisted steel delivers;

the strains of crowns

affixed with pivoted clappers

which dispatch arithmetic

fluctuating warbles and bright tones

and saturate the air with partials,

tierce and quint, sending concentric,

man-made wobbling forth

to issue peals with tails that trail
off in spectral pitches, full

of the energy of

radiating sound which is

the square of its amplitude

as tolls in bells

by which we mark

morning, noon and night,

marriage and death,

and feasts, like Christmas —

with terrific splashes

of bells and well-rounded

rings of truth

by which we chase

our dark away —

The opportunity cost of Rudd-love

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Australia came through the Global Financial Crisis with flying colours. This is attributed to the difficult economic reform begun during the Hawke and Keating era. The Rudd Government is the political beneficiary, and no doubt voters at the next election will thank Labor for saving them from much of the economic pain that afflicted other western economies.

It's fair to ask what reforms Kevin Rudd is putting in place to ensure quality of life for the next generation. Undoubtedly he will say that he has done his best to legislate for the ETS but the obstructionist opposition has been getting in the way. But surely his attempt to do the impossible and design a popular ETS would have rendered it barely effective. The Greens argued that no ETS would be better than being stuck with Labor's weakened ETS.

Last week, the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s economics commentator Ross Gittins addressed the Annual Forecasting Conference of the Australian Business Economists. He spoke of Rudd's lack of commitment to reform. Gittins said it is Rudd's 'preoccupation with political objectives' that makes him reluctant to 'do anything that imposes pain on anyone and thus could threaten his popularity'.

'He's a weak leader, lacking ideology and conviction apart from his unquenchable desire to stay in power.'

Gittins told the economists that Rudd 'has no inherent conception of opportunity cost'.

If Hawke and Keating had failed to act on economic reform, the opportunity cost for our generation would have been devastating unemployment now. It is not difficult to imagine, or even calculate, the opportunity cost of the priority Rudd is giving to his own popularity over reform.

One outside observer effectively did this during a recent visit to Australia. He is Philippines-based Father Pedro Walpole, who is Coordinator for the Environment and Natural Resources with the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific.

Walpole singled out the Murray-Darling river system as an example of environmental mismanagement that has given Australians a false sense of lifetyle security.

'A river needs water, it affects the entire life of the system. Agricultural production shouldn't have priority over Australia's life,' he said. 'Your main river systems that have been ruined — people do seem to be aware of it, but don't seem to have the capacity to change it.

The fundamental commitment doesn't seem to be there.'

Significantly he was not pointing the finger at Rudd or other political leaders, but rather all of us. Collectively, past and present generations of Australians have lacked a sense of stewardship over the Murray-Darling. The point of democracy is that politicians do what the people want them to do. Even the best reformers among them cannot get too far ahead of their popular mandate, or they will get voted out of office with the job half done.

But they do need to lead, strongly, with an eye for the quality of life of future Australians. They are aware of the future consequences of present actions in a way the people are not. A painless ETS and no ETS amount to the same thing, which is a failure to adequately address climate change. An ETS — or any other policy measure designed to respond to a crisis that threatens the lives of future generations — must be unpopular. Unpopularity is almost a measure of a policy's likely effectiveness. Paul Keating remains largely unloved by Australians who remember him. But all of us owe him the majority of our gratitude for Australia's continued economic prosperity during the Global Financial Crisis.

Marketing the Dalai Lama

SPIRITUALITY

Yannick Thoraval

As a measure of our cultural values, it is interesting to consider that the Dalai Lama has become a commodity. When he appeared at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, people flocked to the stage, mobile phone cameras aimed at His Holiness, presumably so they too could own a piece of the Dalai Lama, a snap shot as proof of their participation in the event.

Much as people took fragments of the Berlin Wall as keepsakes — history-as-commodity, concrete remnants of the past through which to personalise the enormity of the present moment — so too did the photographers of the Dalai Lama serve a personal interest. Their zeal to gather mementos feeds an ego that ironically contradicts the basic principle of selflessness that is central to Buddhist philosophy itself.

So what? Well, one wonders to what degree this example represents the self centeredness of western cultural values. What does missing the spiritual point so dramatically say about our capacity for self sacrifice at a time when global challenges appear to require the sublimation of our self interest?

Ours is a culture of self centeredness, characterised by pervasive greed as symbolised by the global financial crisis. Contemporary western culture has disposed of ideology, mass movements and mass culture. Singularity of national purpose seems to have been replaced by an active self interest that plays out in various ways:

In culture by the continuing process of fractioning mass culture into splinter cells of sub-cultural dialogue (of which blogging and internet chat rooms are the supreme example); in religion by the growing power of denominations resistant to centralised religious authority; in academia by the persistence of the postmodern experiment which seeks to empower the individual over the collective, to favour the personal over the meta-narrative; even in science, where the elusiveness of a cohesive, unified model of the universe leaves us to favour, by necessity, the elemental particles and individual processes which we can observe in the natural world.

In contemporary society, the individual, the small, the separate, the personal is sacrosanct.

And why not de-emphasise the collective? Are we not better off as sympathetic tribes bound by a language, an ethnicity or a sub-culture? Is it not better that we find safety in the smaller cultural enclaves from which we can be wary of anything or anyone who threatens to assume the mantle of authority, or be the status quo?

After all, our sub-cultures provide the self empowerment needed to meaningfully challenge formalised authority so that we can avoid repeating the catastrophic legacies of popular ideology that have stained human history: Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, the 'righteous' genocide of indigenous peoples the world over.

Well, yes and no. Our tendency to identify with and exalt sub-cultures means we risk preaching to the converted. We risk not challenging our beliefs. We risk legitimating our views, no matter how questionable, and reinforcing our cultural mores, no matter how disagreeable. Identity through sub-culture means we risk becoming insular.

Some ideas need to be big. Some movements need to be mass. Or else they'll never achieve their objective.

And so with the climate summit in Copenhagen we may well ask to what extent our cultural insulation inhibits our collective action in the face of what may yet prove to be the world's greatest challenge.

At the end of his presentation, the Dalai Lama impressed on the audience that talk is cheap. That inaction in the face of serious global concerns was unacceptable.

I wonder what he thought about the swarm of onlookers who now had grainy, distant snapshots of His Holiness stored in their laptops and phones. Did he doubt their emotional capacity to face the challenges he described?

And despite his call to action I was personally left with a sense of impotence, of insignificance, a lack of agency that would not be quelled by fitting my house with solar panels and a water tank.

And therein lies our cultural disadvantage. Our tendency to doubt, our reluctance to sublimate ourselves to an idea or a cause is both the gift of democratic freedoms as well as the philosophy's shortcoming. The significance of the individual that is recognised by the democratic ideal is also that style of government's central restraint on defining and achieving national ambitions.

And yet there really is no alternative. As Winston Churchill observed 'democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried'.

So perhaps therein we can appreciate the utility of faith over politics in helping us to confront global issues. For faith is a profoundly human belief that we are bound by something greater than ourselves. Faith, by design, compels us to consider the resonance of our actions, the impact of our decisions, the legacy of our selves.

Let's redistribute hope

POLITICS

John Falzon

The way I looked at the world changed forever when I first read Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and great theorist of the confluence between the colonisation of land and the crushing of the spirit. Colonial Algeria, a site of incredible violence, seems like a world away from industrialised Australia in the 21st century. But it is not.

Not when we are living with laws that have been forced upon sections of our population on the basis of race and 'for their own good'. The Federal Government's shameful attempt to extend compulsory income management in an effort to get around the Racial Discrimination Act is nothing more than a cynical manoeuvre, a deliberate commitment to the American path of close supervision of people who are doing it tough.

This is insulting to the people we stand in solidarity with. This paltry effort to conceal racial discrimination leads the government into the equally dangerous waters of class discrimination.

Colonial Algeria is not a world away when the First Nations of Australia continue to live with the toxic fruits of historical colonisation and the perpetuation of the structures of internal colonisation.

It is not a world away when, in the language of the beatitudes — which, as Oscar Romero pointed out before his own violent death, have turned everything upside down — the people who hunger for justice here and now are really joined at the hip with those who hungered for justice there and then. When here and now we can make our own that poignant prayer on Fanon's lips: 'Oh my body, make of me a human who always questions!'

Good policy needs not only to arise from critical questions; it should itself provide a relentless critique of reality.

When, for example, we embarked in Australia on a road of universal free health care we were posing a question to the existing reality. The policy itself cried out: 'Who has been missing out? Why is healthcare not best left to the mechanisms of the marketplace? Why are people going to prison for failure to pay their medical debts?'

And yet, today we are burdened with a burgeoning system of private health insurance which is not only inefficient, as pointed out by such analysts as Ian McCauley, but is grossly expensive and unfair.

Recent proposals by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, which more

deeply embed the role of private health insurance will, as John Menadue says, lay the ground 'for the eventual demise of Medicare'. Menadue argues: 'The end result would be a two-tiered health service: a public tier for the poor and a private tier for the wealthy. Equity would go. Efficiency would go. And social solidarity would be a thing of the past.'

Good policy, of course, sees a diversity of issues as being whole cloth, as being interconnected.

Oh, and about Algeria, Professor Larissa Behrendt has noted this following alarming comparison:

'The data indicates anaemia rates in children under the age of five in the Sunrise Health Service region have jumped significantly since the Intervention. From a low in the six months to December 2006 of 20 per cent — an unacceptably high level, but one which had been reducing from levels of 33 per cent in October 2003 — the figure had gone up to 36 per cent by December 2007.

'By June 2008 this level had reached 55 per cent, a level that was maintained in the six months to December 2008. In two years, 18 months of which has been under the Intervention, the anaemia rate has nearly trebled ... It is nearly double the level it was before the Sunrise Health Service was established, and more than twice the rate measured across the rest of the Northern Territory.

'According to the World Health Organisation, levels of anaemia above 40 per cent represent a severe public health problem. At 55 per cent, the Sunrise Health Service results can be equated to early childhood anaemia levels in Brazil, Burundi, Iraq and Zambia; and are worse than Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Pakistan, Peru, Jamaica, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Algeria.'

With the exception of a couple of fanatical poverty-deniers who are taken seriously by nobody there is a broad consensus in Australian social science that we do have a serious problem with poverty and disadvantage, that this problem affects the lives of at least 11 per cent of the population, that the causes of poverty are primarily structural rather than behavioural, and that we can, as a society, address these causes.

Frantz Fanon reminded us nearly 50 years ago:

'What counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it.'

We have been shaken to pieces by this question.

If wealth is correctly understood here as access to appropriate housing, health, education, transport, childcare, employment, social security and wholeness I would simply add that, in order to achieve this, there must be a massive redistribution of hope along with the redistribution of wealth.

I will never forget the first time I read the poem by TomÃ¡s Borge, a former Minister of Justice in the Nicaraguan Government. His wife had been raped and murdered before his eyes by the military regime he had fought against. In *Christianity and Revolution* he tells us:

'After having been brutally tortured as a prisoner, after having a hood placed over my head for nine months, after having been handcuffed for seven months, I remember that when we captured these torturers I told them: "The hour of my revenge has come: we will not do you even the slightest harm. You did not believe us beforehand; now you will believe us." That is our philosophy, our way of being.'

He then produced what I think are some of the most memorable lines of poetry in human history. A poem called 'Mi Venganza' personal ('My personal revenge'), addressed to his torturers. He wrote:

'I will be revenged upon your children when they've the right to schooling and to flowers ...

On that day I'll greet you with "Good morning!" and the streets will have no beggars left to haunt us ...

I will be revenged upon you, brother, when I give you these hands, which once you tore and tortured, without the strength to rob them of their tenderness'

A redistribution of hope is not happening quickly enough as we begin the 21st century. We are, however, witnessing the emergence of a new reality in which people are beginning to be united in their experience of exclusion along with those who stand in solidarity with them. In the prophetic words of the Nobel Prize-winning poet and advocate, Pablo Neruda:

'We will win.

Although you don't believe it,

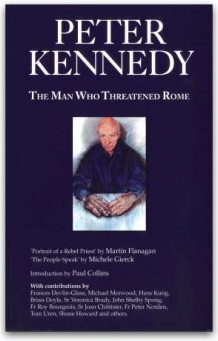
we will win.'

Illuminating the St Mary's conflict

BOOKS

Andrew Hamilton

Flanagan, Martin et al: *Peter Kennedy: The Man Who Threatened Rome*. One Day Hill, Melbourne, 2009. ISBN 978 0 9805643 6 5. Online



The conflict between Archbishop John Bathersby and Fr Peter Kennedy's St Mary's congregation was passionate and public. This valuable book illuminates the dispute, setting it into a human context that is both much smaller and larger than that offered by the media coverage.

The most instructive and moving contributions to the book are studies of people involved. Two interviews of Kennedy by Martin Flanagan serve as book ends. Flanagan catches the contemplative and detached character of Kennedy's personality. These make his understated religious leadership so formidable and so attractive.

Michele Gierck's profiles of a range of people involved in the life of the congregation are also deeply insightful. She allows them to speak for themselves, perhaps more eloquently than they knew they could speak. The stories of people help you see the depth of what is involved in the building and pulling down of communities, the precarious lives that find some mending, the desired connections made, the broken people who find nurturing.

These pieces, together with the autobiographical reflections by people who have known St Mary's, suggest why and how the St Mary's congregation will survive its separation from the Brisbane Catholic church.

The large themes of the story bear wider reflection. Most contributors emphasise the importance of the congregation, expressing disappointment and surprise that it was not consulted during the conflict. This suggests disconnection between the inclusive and self-effacing leadership offered to the community by its two priests, and the place in the Catholic Tradition of the priest as teacher and as responsible to the Bishop for his community.

There may also be a larger tension between the Australian preference for association between equals and the hierarchical structures of the Catholic church. This tension expresses itself occasionally in conflict of the kind experienced at St Mary's but more often in the quiet withdrawal from the Catholic Church by people who identify it with authoritarian ways of relating.

Many contributors also express outrage that blow-ins who came to St Mary's to tape sermons, photograph ceremonies, and denounce it to the Archbishop and to the Vatican were given credit by Church authorities. They see this as noxious as welcoming blowflies to

Christmas dinner. Certainly, it is hard to imagine anything more alienating to its members than a school, a society or a church that encourages tell-tales and snitches.

But the contributors return to the break between the St Mary's community and the Brisbane Catholic Church. Much of the comment deals with the underlying tension between the inclusiveness of the community worship and its symbols and the insistence by the Archbishop on the universal symbols of the Catholic Church. I found myself most exercised personally by this question.

I take it as axiomatic that Christian communities should offer hospitality to the hesitant, doubtful, searching and disconcerted. That is a Christian ideal, and also reflects life in any congregation and seasons in the life of most Christians. Congregations that claim to be models of untroubled faith and Christian living simply suffer from lack of self-knowledge.

The merit of St Mary's is that the diversity of the congregation is evident, and that its welcome to those on the margins of the Catholic Church is explicit and is honoured in its practice as well as in its rhetoric. That is why the separation is such a loss for the Brisbane Catholic Church. If one of the traditional identifying qualities of the Catholic Church is holiness, and if energetic and visible reaching out to marginalised people is an essential expression of holiness, to lose people who offer such a conspicuous example of it is to lose much.

The question the book leaves me with is not about the inclusiveness of the community, but about what people are included into. In my understanding, at the heart of Catholic faith has been the conviction that God has acted decisively for all human beings in the life, death and rising of Jesus Christ. The implications of this faith have been spelled out in summary form in the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that God is trinity.

This fundamental belief shapes relationships in the Church and its teaching. It is expressed through symbols of faith in the church. The language of liturgy and the ways of praying provide a matrix within which doubt, hesitation, wonderment and disconcertment can be held. The shared symbols allow a proper tension between what is received and what is individually believed, lived and struggled with.

The reflections in this book generally focus on the tension between these symbols and creeds, and the belief of individuals or the demands of modernity. That in itself is unproblematic. Peter Kennedy himself wants to preserve a proper silence about God and to insist on the limitations of words and language.

But in the reflections that insist on the need for new words, for respect for the mystery of God, it was not clear whether the decisive investment of God in the life of Jesus Christ was an event for which new words needed to be found, or was part of the old words that needed to be superseded. I did not find any clear assertion that in Jesus Christ God has spoken a decisive word into silence, and that this is the heart of Christian faith.

A large question to be left with. And that is the significance of the dispute and the merit of this book.

Children and other wild things

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Where the Wild Things Are* (PG). Running time: 101 minutes. Director: Spike Jonze. Starring: Max Records, Katherine Keener, James Gandolfini**

If the children don't grow up

Our bodies get bigger but our hearts get torn up
We're just a million little gods causing rainstorms, turning every good thing to rust

I guess we'll just have to adjust.

Growing up can be hard. In these lines from their song 'Wake Up', Canadian indie rock band Arcade Fire seem to envision the move from innocence to experience as the process of being wrenched from the gleeful terror of childhood. The grower, in the process of growing, both experiences and causes pain. Finally, he 'adjusts' to the responsibilities of adulthood. Here, adjustment could easily be taken to mean resignation.

The song is featured in the trailer for *Where the Wild Things Are*, and provides a useful lens. The film is inspired by an unconventional children's picture book, and is itself an unconventional children's film. It reflects the idea that while in many ways, childhood is a terrifying place to be, it is not as terrifying as what comes next.

There are monsters in *Where the Wild Things Are* — hulking, toothsome, hairy beasts that belong to a fantasy realm. But 'wild things' also exist within the film's portrayal of ordinary reality. During the opening scene, a boy dressed in a matted wolf costume chases and wrestles his pet dog on the floor of his living room. The vigour of his attack and his animalistic snarling is genuinely unsettling.

The boy, Max (Records), we learn, is a charismatic and troubled child. He is animated by a strong and erratic imagination, and prone to extremes of emotion. During a single sequence we see him move from the joy of a childhood game, to sorrow when the game goes wrong, to rage as he takes revenge, to remorse for his actions. There are hints of a mental illness, but, really, Max is simply Every Child, in exaggerated form.

Max is isolated. His beloved older sister Clair (Emmerichs) is disappearing into the self-centredness of adolescence. His mother (Keener) is both nurturing and somehow distant. She looks upon Max as if he is alien: with love, wonder, bewilderment and fear.

A sudden, ferocious conflict between mother and son causes Max to flee from his home, and into a fantasy world. He boards a tiny sailboat and crosses the troubled waters of a dark and uncharted ocean, until he reaches an island. This is where the wild things are.

When he first encounters these melancholic beasts it is to witness one of them is in the midst of a deep rage. Max identifies a kindred spirit in this brooding outsider. He befriends this creature, Carol (Gandolfini), and, thanks to a deft bit of storytelling, declares himself king of these animals.

The beasts may look as though they have walked in off *Sesame Street,*but there is a bleakness to their existence. They are happy to have someone to guide them, and their first request to their new king is that he find a way to 'keep the sadness away'. Max embraces the task by instigating a series of boyish games.

Max shares an uneasy existence with his monstrous subjects. These are 'wild things', after all. They can be thoughtlessly, sometimes willfully cruel (like children?). Carol himself is insecure, possessive, and prone to dangerous mood swings. None of the creatures seems comfortable in its own hirsute skin.

Max's grand adventure turns out to be his first taste of responsibility. By declaring himself king, he has made himself accountable for the creatures' wellbeing. Once the games end and events take a dark turn, the task proves to be beyond him.

The film's massive merchandising potential (Jim Henson's Creature Shop has done an amazing job recreating on a massive scale the beasts from Maurice Sendak's book) has seen it marketed squarely at children. But it is much darker than your typical kids films, and it could be that adults will better appreciate the thematic nuances.

It offers little light against the darkness. Max leaves the beasts in emotional chaos — it is debatable whether they are better or worse off for having known him. Max returns home with greater awareness of the dangers of existing, a greater appreciation of his mother, and of the love, effort and sacrifice required to be responsible for another. But the distance that gapes between mother and son remains untraversed.

That's life. There aren't always resolutions. Even in discovering that, it's fair to say, Max has grown up a little.

South Africa's black and white minstrels

HUMAN RIGHTS

David Holdcroft

In South Africa we live near a busy intersection. During the week thousands of cars, trucks, taxis (mini buses) and people-laden *bakkies*(the local name for utes) scream through on their way to their work destinations. At weekends the ambiance changes completely as an army of vendors, street performers and beggars in wheelchairs descends on this small expanse of asphalt, turning it into a kind of fairground.

There is one group of performers that I have been particularly taken with. These young men dress in white face make-up and baggy trousers reminiscent of the African American Black and White Minstrel acts of mid last century. They have about 120 seconds to catch a driver's attention and elicit a few rands. Soft shoe shuffles or rap are the order of the day. The skill is as remarkable as the cultural and racial ironies of their performance.

This Saturday tableau forms for me a window into the complexity of the fascinating country that is South Africa.

The parallels between my own country and my present adopted one are likewise fascinating. Australia in recent months has continued its angst-ridden debate regarding the arrival of onshore asylum seekers. South Africa, which has around 700,000 registered asylum seekers on its soil, has seen a violent protest against 'foreigners' taking up seasonal work allegedly accepting less money than would normally be paid to nationals.

Australia lately has been arguing the toss for a bill of rights while South Africa, whose history has ensured that rights are never taken for granted, struggles with the difficulties of ensuring access to those rights and values enshrined in what is arguably the most advanced, rights-based national constitution anywhere.

South Africans are enormously and justly proud of their recent history, in overcoming apartheid and introducing a true democratic system of government. The more I see the more I realise the enormity of this achievement.

But the legacy of apartheid remains and manifests itself in huge geographically centred entrenched social disadvantage, the largest income differential anywhere, a 23 per cent official unemployment rate and a lack of basic services such as electricity and water in many isolated communities.

The legacy also manifests itself in the continual battles around corruption and a pervasive, endemic level of violence. High rates of violent crime couple with a mistrust of police and an ambivalent attitude to the rule of law in many sections of the community, born of decades of

law enforcement synonymous with political oppression.

The asylum 'issue' lies at the intersection of all these currents. Unlike Australia, people at the borders are given reasonably unfettered access to exercise their legal right to claim asylum. There are no South African funded detention centres in other countries. Asylum seekers, once here, are entitled to freedom of movement, full work rights and access to a full range of government services.

The capacity of the system and the economic and social fabric is put to the test by these policies. Rights are not always realised. Asylum seekers can face exploitation in the work place. They often are denied access to primary health care, as medical personnel see foreigners as unfairly competing with nationals for limited resources.

Asylum seekers face huge hurdles in renewing documentation and can face a hostile police force whose members do not always understand the documentation presented to them. Their children are not always accepted into schools whose resource allocation is based on the population of nationals in the local area.

Moreover it is more likely to be the poor of South Africa, already living under the burdens of poor education, service delivery and chronic unemployment, who are left to host and integrate the new arrivals.

Ironically, asylum seekers in South Africa are more likely to be better educated, have better skills and work prospects and are more likely to end up employed and employers than nationals. This in itself is a huge issue as the direction of resources to such people quickly breeds resentment.

The treatment of asylum seekers thus cannot be divorced from the wider problems of South African society. Again this represents a departure from the Australian experience where the asylum issue tends to be treated alone as if it is a single problem that has nothing to do with the Australian community.

In South Africa groups like Jesuit Refugee Service, mandated to work with displaced people, must 'read' the local context of their projects and respond appropriately.

The xenophobic attacks of 2008 placed countless ex-refugees and asylum seekers firmly back into dependence on charitable and church institutions. It is clear we must learn that this was a failure of groups helping refugees and asylum seekers as well as that of state institutions.

I am told there is neither word nor concept for xenophobia in any South African language. There are many people in this country doing extraordinarily creative work to overcome its problems — it seems no coincidence that Soweto's Orlando West is the only neighbourhood on earth to host two Nobel Peace prize winners.

Australia can learn much from its trans-oceanic 'neighbour' with which it has so much in common. I just trust that it can have the humility to realise this.

Guerilla president cements Uruguay's left

POLITICS

Antonio Castillo

Four decades ago JosÃ© 'Pepe' Mujica was one of the most ferocious Latin American guerrilla leaders — a central figure in the legendary Uruguayan left wing guerrilla movement Los Tupamaros.

On 29 November 2009 Mujica became the new president of Uruguay. He will rule this country of 3.5 million people, the second smallest in Latin America, for the next five years.

A solid built, moustached politician — despectively characterised by his right wing opponents as a vulgar 'fruit shop seller' — Mujica defeated, in a second electoral round, the former president and right wing candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990—1995). Mujica obtained 51.6 per cent of the votes, Lacalle 44 per cent.

Mujica, who spent years in jail as a political prisoner, has become only the second left wing president ever in Uruguay. He has also become successor to the very popular left wing president TabarÃ© VÃ¡squez from the Frente Amplio (Wide Front) — a coalition of left wing parties that gained power in 2003 after decades of military rule and right wing conservative governments.

In his first address, Mujica promised to continue the work of VÃ¡squez, whose government transformed Uruguay into a relatively prosperous and consolidated democracy. 'We prevailed due to the work of his government,' Mujica said. Not much will change under the administration of Mujica. 'The Frente Amplio is very well structured and its political program is not linked to the change in leadership', said political analyst Gustavo Leal.

Mujica's victory is a robust rejection of the neoliberal model that after decades left Uruguay immersed in profound social division, poverty and a financial mess. This model was introduced during the military dictatorship and was continued by a series of right wing governments, including the government of the vanquished Lacalle. This era was put to an end when VÃ¡squez and Frente Amplio won the 2003 elections.

'Uruguay was a country completely destroyed where half of the population was forced to go abroad', Oscar FernÃ¡ndez, a shopkeeper in the historic heart of Montevideo, told *Eureka Street*. 'I really hope Mujica will continue the good government of TabarÃ© VÃ¡zquez and the Frente Amplio.'

The 'good government' that Mujica inherited from TabarÃ© VÃ¡squez included a number of major reforms. Key to achieving these reforms has been the stability of the Frente Amplio — a 30 year long political coalition of several left wing parties and groups, considered the longest

lasting political alliance in the world.

The Frente Amplio's central program — that Mujica has promised to maintain unchanged — has been the establishment of a post-neoliberal society based on deepening the country's democratic institutions, economic diversification, with better income distribution, and — not a minor thing — freedom of the press.

According to its 'Index of Democracy' *The Economist*considered Uruguay — next to Costa Rica — as the only country with 'complete democracy' (this is in contrast to countries such as Chile, Peru and others where undemocratic practices still persist).

Also important has been the country's reinvention from a mainly agricultural economy to a technological society. Uruguay is today the largest exporter of software in Latin America.

The economic plan implemented by the Frente Amplio has not only improved the standard of living in the country but has also helped stop one of the gravest problems for Uruguay — emigration. In a haemorrhage of the youngest and most talented, it is estimated that in the last 20 years more than 500,000 Uruguayans have been forced to leave the country in search of better opportunities. This is a massive number for a small country.

Under the Frente Amplio, freedom of expression and a free press have become a priority. According to Reporters Without Borders, this country has the highest index of press freedom in a region that keeps on going backwards in this aspect.

With glasses full of *medio y medio* (half and half), a traditional Uruguayan drink, people celebrated in the streets of Montevideo a political victory that was equally applauded by the likes of Venezuela's president Hugo ChÃ¡vez and Brazil's Luiz InÃ¡cio 'Lula' da Silva.

The US — the hegemonic power in the region — has also saluted Mujica who — to the relief of Washington — is regarded ideologically much closer to da Silva than ChÃ¡vez.

The election of JosÃ© 'Pepe' Mujica has unfolded in the context of several upcoming political elections in the region. Boliva had its on 6 December, with Chile's to follow on 13 December. Soon they will be followed by Brazil and Argentina.

All these elections will define a key issue in Latin America: whether the left wing progressive governments in the region elected in the last few years are a mere parenthesis to the long decades of conservative government, or whether they will be able to consolidate and deepen the profound post-neoliberal alternative system they have tried to implement in this vast region.

The election of Mujica in Uruguay seems to show that Latin American people will continue rejecting the neoliberal experiment that has brought so much poverty and injustice to the region and have opted for a more economically just and democratic system.

Close encounters with cricket history

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Another season, another agonised spate of worrying about the state, fate and weight of the game of test cricket. (By 'weight' I mean its importance in the sporting scheme of things, but I'll admit that the lure of neat rhyming was irresistible.)

It is, paradoxically, a sign of the health of test cricket that it invariably triggers detailed, distant and affectionate memories of other years, other famous encounters between the flannelled fools.

One Day Internationals have been too numerous, too swift and ephemeral, often — but not always — too inconsequential to be remembered one from another. Whereas test cricket is a distinct culture. It has engendered a substantial literature and inspires the kind of religious fervour, the profound sense of cricket as part of the flow of existence, that led legendary commentator John Arlott, for example, to refer to the Second World War as the 'Second Great Interruption'.

Remembering the particular details of individual test matches is like knowing where you were and what you were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated: these are events that are part of life, not simply discrete moments. Which reminds me ...

In January 1961 I became part of that phalanx of Australian students who took off for Europe at the end of their undergraduate university days and in July of that year my three friends and I thrashed our Kombivan — bought brand new six months earlier in Munich but now decrepit and tired — in a mad dash that began in Marrakesh and ended at historic Old Trafford.

Arriving in Manchester late on Wednesday 26 July, the eve of the fourth test, we drove straight to the ground expecting to find queues and perhaps even all-night campers poised to claim the best spots when the gates opened the following morning. We were probably influenced by our many experiences of AFL Grand Finals and the rigours of trying to get a ticket on the last Saturday in September. No problem at Old Trafford though. There was not a soul to be seen.

Just as we were about to leave, however, to hunt for some cheap accommodation, a bloke emerged from one of the gates and came over for a chat. Fascinated to discover that we were Australian, had made an exotic journey to get there in time, and were running out of cash, he offered some help.

'There's a pile of cricket matting in there,' he said, pointing to a large pavilion in the nearby

parklands. 'The shed's open; you could sleep there till someone twigs.'

So we took up residence in the equipment shed of the Old Mancunians Cricket Club, slept each night on the matting and used the change rooms to achieve a semblance of daily hygiene and cleanliness. No one 'twigged' and from this base we walked the few hundred yards to the cricket ground gates each morning and saw every ball bowled in what turned out to be one of the most famous and dramatic test matches in cricketing history.

We sat in the same seats each day and soon struck up an acquaintance with the rather grizzled, pipe-smoking, tweed-wrapped Lancastrians around us.

By and large, we didn't have a great deal to cheer about as the game developed. When Australia went in to bat for a second time, they were 177 behind, a critical situation which greatly amused our Lancashire friends. A century by Bill Lawry and a last wicket partnership of 98 between Allan Davidson — who hit 20 off one over from Englishman David Allen — and the youthful Graeme McKenzie, had us extravagantly cheering at last.

'Be quiet lads and watch t'cricket,' said one of the North Country seniors as the tension tightened.

On the eve of the final day, with Australia's plight looking grim, we went to a Chinese restaurant near the ground. We'd just given our orders when Richie Benaud, Neil Harvey, Allan Davidson and Ken 'Slasher' Mackay walked in and, once settled, began reviewing the state of play and what might be done.

We could hear just about everything. When we left, we gave them a muted round of applause and, to our delight and surprise, we shook hands all round.

Next day, England's cruise to certain victory was interrupted then sunk when Australian captain, Richie Benaud (pictured), famously decided to bowl round the wicket and attempt to land the ball in the footmarks left by England fast bowler Fred Trueman. He took five wickets for 12 in 25 balls.

Seemingly dropping off the pace in an era of speed and instant gratification, test cricket, like chess — a board game in the computer age! — remains fascinating precisely because it weds deliberation with fierce tension, because it is unselfconsciously gradual amid reverence for the headlong, because while ageless and always recognisable it is paradoxically mercurial.

Fresh female face of fatigued NSW politics

POLITICS

Tony Smith

Upon the defeat last week of NSW Premier Nathan Rees, Kristina Keneally became NSW Labor's first female leader and the first female premier for NSW.

NSW has had few female MPs: there are 1933 former male MPs but only 52 females. NSW has trailed other states and the commonwealth on almost every measure of women's achievement. The Northern Territory has had a female First Minister and the ACT has had two. WA, Victoria and Queensland have had female premiers. In NSW, only Rosemary Foot, who became Liberal Deputy in 1983, set an Australian record for women in politics.

In the States, only Anna Bligh in Queensland has retained government at an election. Perhaps this explains why some observers think women tend to be handed the leadership when no-one else wants it.

Another cynical explanation for women being installed as leaders is that men have made a mess and the housewives and mothers of politics are expected to clean up after them. Well, male premiers have been shaping NSW for over 150 years, so Keneally must clean up after 41 predecessors.

What is certain is that it would be unfair to expect any woman to decline a position, especially when women seldom get a second chance. In her memoir *Chika*, Kerry Chikarovski described the exhilaration and terror of having an opportunity to lead the party. She believed that women must take chances. If nothing else, it should make the way easier for those who come after.

Keneally's Catholic faith has been noted, but her relative youth and inexperience seem more significant. She is two weeks short of her 41st birthday. Only Nick Greiner (Liberal premier 1988—1992) was younger on attaining office, and he had won an election. According to David Clune and Ken Turner in their book on 20th century NSW premiers, the average age was 51.

Clune and Turner note that the time of waiting as an MP averaged 15 years, but has been falling. Since Neville Wran, who attained office in 1976, the average time of waiting for premiers was just eight years. Keneally has been in parliament for six years and a minister for one. She has not been a member in opposition.

Indeed, it might be lack of experience outside government that makes so many Labor MPs

in 2009 seem unappreciative of the privilege they seem determined to lose at the 2011 election.

The new premier and her supporters have begun emphasising the need to rebuild trust in government. Since Prime Minister Howard campaigned in 2004 on trust, Raimond Gaita in *Breach of Trust* and John Uhr in *Terms of Trust* have explored this concept in some depth.

Gaita distinguishes between a politician claiming to be trustworthy in the sense of being predictable or reliable, and the moral connotations in claiming that you can believe what she says. Uhr distinguishes 'trust-as-consistency' from 'trust-as-integrity'. The first member of the pairs focuses on delivering responsible outcomes, whereas the second is about honest means. Ideally the two are inseparable.

Defeated premier Nathan Rees had attempted to make a clean start without the negative influence of right wing powerbrokers. But when he secured State Conference approval to choose his own Cabinet and demoted Joe Tripodi in particular, one delegate described Rees as 'dead meat'.

Keneally did not reinstate Tripodi and is continuing with the legislation designed to address corruption or perceptions of undue influence by taking developers' donations out of election campaigns. These are important steps in establishing consistency and independence from factions, but they suggest that Rees was already on the right path and cast doubt on the need to replace him.

Some left wing trade unions have threatened to withdraw support from the ALP because of the treatment of Rees. Keneally will also know that should Rees leave parliament, a by-election in Toongabbie would be such a disaster that her support within the party could disappear overnight.

Keneally could be correct in claiming that she has lots of policy ideas that will benefit the people of NSW. She is certainly a fresh face for a fatigued party. It remains to be seen whether she can meet expectations.

With an election due in March 2011 she has little time to secure the sorts of policy achievements that might make Labor re-electable.

Guttered brotherhood

POETRY

B. N. Oakman

Meeting my analyst

back then
when we were new to each other
there was something
beyond coal-black hair
long legs and ripe red lips
that caused men to hesitate
as if anticipating questions
or perhaps sensing
even without interrogation
you'd hear sighs
whispers
from creatures cobwebbed
in rooms long unvisited
curtains drawn
intricate locks corroded
keys lost
or artfully concealed
and now
though you might be smothered
in a shapeless tracksuit
still men calculate if to speak
and risk exposing something
that breathes in the dark

fearful what it may say

if coaxed stumbling

sun-blind into daylight

and dignified with a name

so they hesitate
maybe desiring to be known

though not quite so well

in truth

not wanting to be me

Waiting for the trolley

That ridiculous white cotton gown

supposed to tie at the back

but three sizes too big,

so you wrap yourself like a parcel

and fasten the tapes at the front,

then we wait for the rattle and squish,

the song of the trolley that bears you

away to a theatre without entertainment,

to be lifted carefully onto a steel table,

drugged senseless and stripped

naked for the attentions of masked strangers,

keen knives poised in gloved fingers,

while I wait alone in this bare room

reading words I won't remember,

staring from high windows at rectangles

of roofs, grey asphalt moats swarming

with cars and trams and scurrying dots,

while I try to still my leaping thoughts
and pine to hear that trolley's song
above this eager pounding heart.

A nuisance

Our town nuisance, eyes bulging
from a hollowed head,
trousers like tattered flags
half-mast on broomstick legs,
a pest to the tourists
when he tells them where to go.
Linger, and he'll bot your small change
or cigarettes. CafÃ© owners claim
he scares away their dollars.
Vestrymen want him banned
for bellowing directly to God,
suddenly, violently, frightening
kneelers at earnest supplications.
He's fond of directing traffic
in the main street —
a handy arrest for the police
when their stats are down.
You can find him most evenings
on a bench outside the law courts,
puffing on a ragged cigarette
stuffed not solely with tobacco,
rolled so loosely in paper so flimsy
it showers sparks like a roman candle,

illuminating him while we rush past

keeping to the shadows, hoping

no ember of guttered brotherhood

rekindles with his sputtered light.

Electric rider

Borsari's Corner, Carlton, Victoria

On the chamfered wall above his old bike shop

he flickers to light at sunset, pedalling

towards Lygon Street, head down, tail up,

trailing coloured ribbons of neon

and a banner of bright blinking words:

Nino Borsari Ex-Olympic Champion;

a modest enough title for a gold medallist,

as if he'd won his title in LA in '32
and surrendered it to Berlin four years later.

Not for him *Olympian*; immortality too steep

a climb for this electric rider, spinning out

of memory, freewheeling into myth,

when the gods ruled on Mount Olympus,

and only heroes rode upon Elysium's fields.

The silent narrative of trees

ENVIRONMENT

Thor Beowulf

At 3.00pm on 13 December 2009, the World Council of Churches has called upon Christians around the world to ring their bells, blow their horns or beat their drums 350 times to alert world decision makers, meeting in Copenhagen, of the need to reduce CO2 levels. This 'bell ringing for climate justice' might signify the beginning of a more vocal, moral and even spiritual re-engagement of churches with the silent voice of nature.

As organic entities, trees remind us of the cyclical nature of existence, the seasons, renewal and growth. With their roots deep in the earth, their trunks reaching for the sky, and their branches brushing the heavens, trees are also natural enduring symbols linking physical and spiritual layers of awareness.

Whether as a Tree of Life, Sacred Tree or *axis mundi*representing a cosmic centre, trees in one form or another have often been recognised as powerful cosmological agents in many of the earth's myths, art, ritual and religious beliefs. From Celtic fertility maypoles to Lakota Indian sundance pillars; from the World Tree Yggdrasil (from which the Norse god Odin hung) to the very crucifix of Jesus Christ, trees have symbolic resonance and power.

Trees and forests can also define the borders of civilised and moral life. In both western and eastern cultures, from Scandinavian trolls and German forest witches to Japanese kami, elemental things live in forests, and wild, dangerous forces can lurk there.

Trees and forests have agency because they can create cognitive and subliminal landscapes in our minds which speak to our imagination and creativity as well as to our emotional and spiritual dimensions. But whether we perceive nature as a savage garden or as utopian Arcadian paradise really depends on what we have been conditioned to understand.

So, while forest dwelling peoples might perceive their forests as rich sources of sustenance and spiritual comfort, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, there is always 'risk' in nature. After all, even Satan's serpent managed to enter the Garden of Eden and threaten the perfection of paradise.

The point here is that in both biblical and other religious and mythological landscapes, trees have agency because their presence makes things happen or enables events to occur.

Many indigenous cultures, from the Shawi of the Peruvian Amazon to the Yarralin people of Australia's Northern Territory, don't differentiate between the natural world and themselves. For these animist societies, trees and other natural phenomena are not silent or mute, but are fully engaged as participants in the cultural and spiritual life of their

communities, communicating directly or through a ritual specialist or shaman.

I argue that in 21st century industrial materialist economies such as our own, natural and human interactions have become disconnected and sanitised. Natural resources are exploited and any spiritual, dynamic or emotional empathy with trees and nature is trivialised and commodified. Being 'green' is largely reduced to marketing opportunities for 'green' petrol and unbleached toilet paper rather than leading to substantive responsible action.

If trees have lost some of their anthropomorphic and spiritual significance in the modern world, they have now taken on possibly even greater symbolic power as icons for the environment and the need to address issues of ecology and survival. As nature's emissaries, trees communicate to us existentially and symbolically, through what many hope is our growing appreciation and even fear of what it might mean should they all be lost.

Recently, the World Council of Churches announced an 'Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change' which recognises 'the science of climate change', and that it 'is not merely an economic or technical problem, but ... a moral, spiritual and cultural one'.

Religious institutions are beginning to realise that in order to stay relevant and contribute to a moral dynamic in environmental discourse, they need to become more reconciled with and engaged in issues of the natural world.

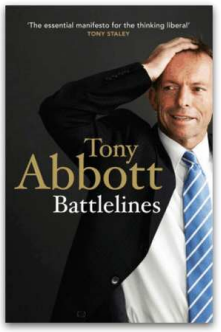
For those who hold a spiritual or religious faith, nature can provide authenticity to the spiritual life and to God. There is also a long tradition in the Abrahamic religions of perceiving the evidence of God's work and invisible hand in the natural world around us. So, from a religious point of view, it might be morally contingent upon us to do something proactively about respecting it.

However, it has taken the secularism of modern science and the contemporary environmental movement to re-awaken our consciousness, culpability and responsibility for the natural world in the current crisis. Hopefully, if secular, spiritual and religious forces can together learn to listen to the silent narrative of nature in general, and trees in particular, we might just be redeemed.

Abbott's vision for a better Australia

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



It's often said that the job of oppositions is to oppose. But that's not strictly true. More fundamentally it is to propose alternative policy and, in so doing, demonstrate the credentials to govern. An opposition focused exclusively on thwarting the government is unlikely to convince the electorate that it is itself worthy of government.

At this stage, many commentators are cynical about the possibility that new opposition leader Tony Abbott might make a constructive contribution to public life in Australia. With good reason they see that he is more determined to stand in the way of Rudd's legislative program than build the foundations for his own.

The results of the weekend's Higgins and Bradfield bielections suggest the electorate could be willing to trust Abbott to lead the Liberals towards being a viable alternative. Australians are prepared to look at the positives of what he has to offer.

Last year he surprised many by spending three weeks in the remote Aboriginal community of Coen in far north Queensland. He has since made a further visit to an indigenous community. Father Brian McCoy, a Jesuit who has spent a lifetime attempting to understand indigenous Australians, was full of praise for Abbott's ability to appreciate the complexity of their lives when he wrote about Abbott's stay for *Eureka Street.*

'What I liked about Tony Abbott going to Coen was that he gave himself a chance to learn... I sense he has a genuine interest in the lives of the people. His reflections left me with a hope and a response.'

Abbott himself said in his blog: 'It is possible to change some things quickly but substantially improving the key indicators of Aboriginal disadvantage is more likely to take a few decades than a few years. The key is getting Aboriginal people into real jobs.'

It remains to be seen if such openness is the exception or the rule for Abbott, and whether he can incorporate insights he gained, into constructive policy that points to better health, education and justice for indigenous Australians. Now is the moment for us to hope that he can.

It's also worth recalling the contrarian perspective of Brisbane Uniting Church theologian Scott Stephens, who wrote in *Eureka Street*in August that 'replacing Turnbull with Abbott as Leader of the Opposition is the only way forward for the Liberal Party, and yet it is an act which would itself require a great deal of courage'.

The chaotic circumstances of Abbott's unexpected rise to the top belie any contention that what happened last week was part of an ordered or strategic implementation of a vision. Such a vision was articulated in Abbott's *Battlelines* book, which was published mid-year.

Stephens dismissed the electorate's low regard for Abbott as 'unenlightened electoral bigotry' that is a throwback to the anti-Catholic prejudice that bedevilled John F. Kennedy in the 1960s.

He suggested Abbott was battling the libertarian and individualist tendencies within his own Party more than he was anything within the ALP's philosophy. He spoke of Abbott's 'determination to restore charity, belief and courage to their rightful place as the greatest of political virtues' as distinguishing him from Turnbull and Rudd.

Stephens views this as a 'willingness to wage war against the people's baser instincts, to expand the public's moral imagination rather than simply pander to avarice'.

It is difficult to see Abbott's characterisation of the ETS as a giant 'tax grab' as other than a pandering to avarice. But the details of how Abbott will implement his vision are yet to be revealed, and now is the time to give him the benefit of the doubt.