

Australian

Rationalist

Journal of the Rationalist Society of Australia

THE STATE OF SECULARISM

Mixing oil & water

Why asylum seekers escape Sri Lanka

The science funding cul de sac

The Singularity: an end of history?

Past editors reflect on the tradition

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 **Rationalist
Society of
Australia**

Contributors

Keith Ashman is an expert on proteomics and head of Clinical Applications Development at the University of Queensland.

Warren Bonnett is the proprietor of Embiggen Books in Melbourne.

Kevin Childs was a senior writer at The Age and a former editor of Australian Rationalist from 2002–2011. He is author of *Condemned to Die*, from cannibals to cocaine kings for the National Library and co-writing *Blood and Memory*, warriors of the Aboriginal resistance.

Moirá Clarke is a secular humanist with a long-standing interest in human rights. She is a committee member of the Secular Party of Australia (www.secular.org.au), and writes for Online Opinion.

Meredith Doig is the president of the RSA, and has a PhD in organizational design.

Peter Ellerton is doing a PhD in critical thinking at the University of Queensland. He was a former head of Experimental Science at the Queensland Academy of Science, Mathematics and Technology.

Brian Ellis was a former vice president of the RSA and is the author of *Social Humanism*.

Bruce Haigh was the Australian Deputy High Commissioner to Sri Lanka.

Anna Halafoff is a research fellow at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University.

Scott Hedges is a researcher on secularism in Australia and a member of the steering group of Fairness in Religions in School.

Graeme Lindenmayer is author of *Bonds of Belief: The What, The Why, The How, The Truth and The Consequence of All We Believe*.

Mark Manolopoulos is an adjunct research associate at the Monash Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology. He is the author of *Creation is a Gift* (State University of New York Press, 2009) and *With Gifted Thinkers* (Peter Lang, 2009).

Ian Robinson was editor of Australian Rationalist from 1999–2002. He is president emeritus of the RSA and a former editor of *Farrago*. He taught philosophy at Melbourne University and managed the Music and Writing Department at the Chisholm Institute.

Alan Sparx is a scientist.

Ron Walker worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He was head of the Disarmament, Defence and Nuclear Division, the permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva; and ambassador to Austria, Croatia, Bosnia and Slovenia. He is visiting fellow at the Asia Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University and senior international consultant to the United Nations Institute for Training and Research in Geneva. Publications include articles on nuclear disarmament, "Multilateral Conferences" and "Handbook for UN Delegates".

Editorial policy

The aim of Australian Rationalist is to promote rational thought in a spirit of tolerance and reasonableness. To achieve this, a variety of different views have been sought. The writers have all been accorded respect and we thank them for their contributions.

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Editor

David James

Creative Director

Leonardo Carbonara

Layout Design

Mattia Scaranto

Inquiries

info@rationalist.com.au

President

PO Box 1312
Hawksburn 3142
Victoria, Australia.

Letters: dja02739@bigpond.net.au

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Rationalism and the meaning of life

by Ian Robinson

Editor *Australian Rationalist* 1999 - 2002

As Editor of the *Australian Rationalist* and later as President of the Rationalist Society of Australia I was often called upon to justify the rationalist stance on life. It was easy to argue for the importance of only accepting conclusions on the basis of evidence and reasoning, and to extol the merits of those values that make a rational society possible, such as a free, compulsory and secular education system, freedom of speech facilitating unfettered access to information and means of communication, an independent, courageous and accountable media, and an open and secular democracy that strives to provide the fullest extent of individual liberties consistent with social justice.

These were the values that the *Australian Rationalist* strove to advance, and, when violated, it was quick to criticise the perpetrator(s).

We seemed to be on shakier ground, however, when confronted with those who said "That's all very well, but there has to be something more to life than that". It is easy to dismiss such concerns as naïve and unsophisticated but I think they need to be taken seriously. A complete rationalist philosophy must say something meaningful about our place in the world. I have been progressively developing a position on this over the last decade.

If it is true, as it almost certainly is, that, in the words of the English novelist, Julian Barnes: "...life is a matter of cosmic hazard, its fundamental purpose mere self-perpetuation, that it unfolds in emptiness, that our planet will one day drift in frozen silence, and that the human species will completely disappear and not be missed, because there is nobody and nothing out there to miss us", then what is the meaning of it all?

Human life is not intrinsically meaningful. If it is to have meaning, this meaning must be given to it. The atheist or rationalist position is that we each give our own meaning to our lives by an act of will: we decide what the purpose or purposes of our lives will be, we decide its significance. It seems to me that this rationalist answer is far more satisfying than the religious answer, that the meaning of our lives is imposed on us from the outside by a deity, for his or her own purposes. The notion that we are pawns in god's game makes our individual lives less, not more, meaningful.

Nor need the rationalist response be a mere bowing to inevitability. It can be a conscious act of embracing the world --

what Robert Solomon called "the thoughtful love of life". This means consciously and actively embracing one's own life as the fortuitous outcome of 14 billion years of interaction between assorted particles of matter. Accepting death as a natural end to one's life, and not clinging desperately to fantasies about a better life hereafter. Accepting that life can be tragic, that disaster can strike one at any time, and there are no imaginary friends looking after us and protecting us from evil. Seeing oneself as (a small) part of a grand and epic narrative that started with the big bang and progressed down through the formation of the galaxies and stars and planets, to the dawn of self-replicating life, to the blooming of a myriad forms of that life and to the evolution of the human species, celebrating the wonder of our species' survival, and the scientific, artistic and social achievements of human civilisation, without minimising its capacity for destructiveness and the infliction of pain on others. Putting one's trust in the natural world as the only world we have and seeing ourselves as an integral part of it, rather than as a special and favoured case that deserves exceptional treatment. Involving oneself passionately in life and throwing oneself into it with all the mindfulness, and all the enthusiasm, and all the dedication, and all the discrimination, and all the thoughtfulness, and all the joyfulness, and all the care that one can muster.

As Charles Darwin wrote in the concluding sentence of *The Origin of Species*, "[t]here is grandeur in this view of life".

However, no-one is compelled logically to approach life in this way. There are no deductive or inductive arguments why anybody should accept it. But, as the great Cambridge thinker Frank Plumpton Ramsay pointed out in 1925, there may be a good pragmatic reason:

"I find, just now at least, the world a pleasant and exciting place. You may find it depressing; I am sorry for you, and you despise me. But I have reason and you have none; you would only have a reason for despising me if your feeling corresponded to the fact in a way mine didn't. But neither can correspond to the fact. The fact is not in itself good or bad; it is just that it thrills me but depresses you. On the other hand, I pity you with reason, because it is pleasanter to be thrilled than to be depressed, and not merely pleasanter but better for all one's activities."

It's your choice.

The power plays of history

by Kevin Childs

Editor *Australian Rationalist* 2002 - 2011

An intriguing aspect of having the privilege of editing a journal such as the *Australian Rationalist* is that you are able to question the role of the State.

As the looming Federal election plays the part once assigned to the full moon -- that of bringing out the loonies -- we once again hear the banal cry to 'focus on policies not personalities'. As if.

Rationalists are able to examine policies and programs of governments while remaining aware of the flawed nature of the system and those who work in it. It's a bit like examining speckled fruit to see if there are any edible pieces.

So we pick over the rotten, perverse Federal program of taxpayer funded religious recruiters proselytising among our most vulnerable and innocent young children. Almost in awe we watch as Canberra -- parroting the US, that nation that never stops waging wars -- sends the young to die in military disasters from Vietnam to Afghanistan, while being profoundly incapable of telling the truth.

We see the mealy-mouthed cherry-pickers of climate denial, cheered on by hacks of multi-national commercial media outfits whose lies are a consistent betrayal of what once were the principles of journalism.

We watch as the Victorian government wages a war of attrition, shamelessly ignoring an election promise to make teachers the best-paid in the nation. As a sideline, the failed experiment in offering teachers' performance bonuses, encouraging them to compete against each other in what is supposed to be a collegiate profession, is promoted shamelessly by the likes of Julia Gillard.

Mouths open, we gape at the millions of dollars of corrupt money, the harbourside mansions of the consigliore of the NSW ALP Right and remember when Federal intervention cut down morally and politically bankrupt leaders of the party in Victoria.

Almost as remarkable, in another way, is the Lance Armstrong of politics, leading cyclist T. Abbott whose drug is his manic push for power, a drive that seemingly forces him to say almost anything, to twist the facts until they cannot be recognized.

From the US, too, we get the hand-me-down discredited policy of warring against drugs instead of sensibly harnessing their medical use and controlling supply so people are not harmed. It is worth noting that in *Barack Obama: The Story*, biographer David Maraniss writes that the president spent his youth in Hawaii getting stoned on a paved mountain road, where he took "roof hits" in smoke-filled cars with his friends, the Choom Gang. (To "choom" is Hawaiian slang for smoking marijuana.) Obama loved

it so much, Maraniss writes, he thanked his pot dealer -- and not his mother -- in his high school yearbook.

It is interesting to reflect on some of this in the light of a recent critique in the *London Review of Books* that looked at the great political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. We need to try to ignore his admiration for royalty, inevitable perhaps because he spent most of his life as a tutor and secretary to the powerful Cavendish family, seeing at first hand inherited rule.

Hobbes (1588-1679) was born when a storm saved England from the Spanish Armada. He grew up during European religious wars, was exiled during a long civil war and saw both the abolition of the monarchy and its restoration in the form of the family he served.

Such a background produced a thinker who condemned "the various stripes of religious militancy and activism unleashed by the Reformation, whether Catholic, Calvinist, independent, Episcopalian or sectarian," while attacking the prevailing shibboleths of the Renaissance.

Like Bacon he abhorred the obsession with language and rhetoric encouraged by Renaissance teaching, arguing that not only did it obscure material reality but it also led to a form of relativism by which no opinion or argument could claim and exert authority over another.

He sought a political society in which disruptive forces, such as religious enthusiasm, classical emulation or human ambition were nullified, by imagining the state from the bottom up. Its foundation was human psychology, as well as motivation bedded in the will to power. Above this was the basic contract between governors and the governed, where the state ensured the individual right to life. The "roof" was the arch of an undivided sovereignty, enforcing final and definitive authority in civil and spiritual affairs. We can see the flaw: rotten roof.

But we may agree with his argument that power insinuates and explains everything, from citizenship to marital relations, from becoming literate to public drinking.

His vision includes personal qualities for which we look in vain from today's leaders: "Strength, Form, Prudence, Arts, Eloquence, Liberality, Nobility," as well as accounting for social or "instrumental" powers: riches, reputation, friends, popularity, patriotism, knowledge and, bizarrely, good luck. The point of all these powers was to harvest more power, personal or instrumental.

Perhaps his thoughts are worth pondering by rationalists.

Sturm und Drang

by Meredith Doig

What do the Rationalists have in common with the Melbourne Athenaeum, the United Ancient Order of Druids, the Victorian Spiritualists Union, and The Savage Club? Answer: all are venerable Australian institutions over 100 years old.

The Rationalist Association was founded in 1906 and 20 years later it spawned the Rationalist Society as the campaigning arm of the rationalist movement. Over the last 100 years these two organisations have been through many upheavals, replete with larger-than-life characters and financial ups and downs. The two World Wars severely depleted members, voluntary effort and funds; internal fights over policy direction or financial management have challenged the organisation's survival on a number of occasions. But we have survived and with the publication of this new format of our flagship journal, we're embarking on the next stage in our history.

A hugely popular speaker at his numerous public lectures, John Langley was the driving force of the Rationalist Society in its early life. By the late 1930s however, Langley's autocratic behaviour was alienating many of his previous supporters, and his extravagant use of the Association's funds was causing increasing concern. In 1938 the Directors finally acted, evicting him from the Society and its offices. Langley fought back through the courts trying to regain control of bequests made out to the rationalist movement. He lost the case and the Directors later discovered his erratic behaviour had been caused by a serious and debilitating chronic complaint: syphilis.

By 1940, exhausted by the Langley dispute, only about 40 members hung on. The Society scrambled to reorganise and by 1952 membership was again healthy and growing. Its leader was now Bill Cook, a tireless worker who reinvigorated the *Australian Rationalist* journal and extended the message by regularly appearing on radio to spruik the benefits of a rationalist approach to life. While his health deteriorated during the 1960s, and he retired in 1972, the systems he set up meant the Society continued to flourish.

The Melbourne University Rationalist Society was highly active in the 1970s, with heated lunchtime debates between Rationalists and the Christian Society. The *Australian Rationalist* became

a 'hot' forum for intellectual debates on feminism and sexual morality, drugs and conscription, politics and public policy. The Society was blessed with passionate and talented Presidents like Ian Robinson and Lesley Vick, who wrote copiously, organised effectively and spoke avidly about the value of a scientific approach to public policy. But all was not sweetness and light.

After struggling under a series of editors in the 1980s, the Australian Rationalist found a champion in the guise of prominent economics journalist Ken Davidson. He took over as Editor in the 1990s and the journal flourished, attracting prominent contributors and generating strong membership. But by 1998 Davidson and RSA President Lesley Vick were seriously concerned about the management of the rationalist funds. They convinced the Directors that the then 'active trading' policy should be replaced with a more prudent 'passive investment' policy, and that amounts spent on administration were unreasonable, unnecessary and unsustainable. For a brief time, they won control of the board but after less than a year, the old regime fought back. Davidson and Vick lost in a boardroom coup and soon after left the organisation in disgust.

My involvement with the Rationalists dates from 2006, when I helped organise a national conference on "Separating Church and State". Having been for many years involved with the Women's Electoral Lobby, I had a taste for activism and the spectre of religious extremists increasingly taking to the political stage had me worried. I joined the Committee in 2007 and became President in 2010 when Ian Robinson retired. In keeping with the tradition of Rationalist upheavals, by March 2011 I found myself in the middle of yet another dispute over finances and it was in the course of working through this dispute that I learned about the colourful and dramatic history of the Rationalists.

Fortunately this time there was a successful outcome; rationalist funds are now prudently invested and properly governed. The Committee of Management is younger and more active. We launched our "Manifesto for a Secular Australia" during the widely covered Sean Faircloth Tour of Australia and New Zealand. And as you will read in these pages, the journal has never been more alive and well...

Name games

In a move that would no doubt please George Orwell, the Australian Vaccination Network (AVN), an anti-vaccination body, has been ordered by the New South Wales Department of Fair Trading to change its name or risk being shut down. The case followed complaints from the public and the Australian Medical Association that the name was misleading.

The AVN claims to be pro-choice and a “vaccine safety watchdog”. But after a 12-month investigation by the NSW Health Care Complaints Commission, it was concluded that the AVN website advocates a position that is “solely anti-vaccination, contains information that is incorrect and misleading, and quotes selectively from research to suggest that vaccination may be dangerous.”

The presiding judge, Justice Adamson commented that: “It seems slightly coy that your client is so shy about admitting what it is on about.” T-shirts sold on the AVN website were emblazoned with “Love Them, Protect Them, Never Inject Them”. The AVN are appealing the ruling. A spokesman for the AVN asked: “What’s in a name?”

Brain maps

Rumours are circulating that a mega project called the Brain Activity Map, is to be launched in America. Project participants will study the “wiring” of the brain in all its dimensions: from connections between individual nerve cells to the neuronal superhighways between the lobes and ganglia.

The project, which may rival the Genome Project for mapping DNA, is part of a new area of endeavour called “connectomics”: a mapping of the way the brain works that it is hoped will yield a more complete picture of how the mind and brain function. The brain/mind distinction has long been a concern in philosophy and science has been able to shed little light on the subject. It has been possible to point to activities of the brain that coincide with particular mental activities, but analysis in the other direction: how the matter of the brain leads to certain types of mental activity, has not been so productive. It has not been possible to explain how the material substance of the brain leads to non-material phenomena such as consciousness and thinking.

One approach has been to build three-dimensional maps of how cells connect to each other, usually using the brains of mice. The brain matter is cut into microscopically thin slices (an approach that was undertaken with Stalin’s brain after he died in the hope that it would reveal what was behind a great Marxist brain; little was discovered). The slices are photographed by an

electron microscope, and computer models are used to create an image of how those cells connect to each other. It is hoped that some working hypotheses of how these patterns form will be developed.

Another approach is more global; to look at the overall structure of the brain, more of a top down approach. This is typically done by the use of scanning technology, which is used to track brain activity. The scans follow the passage of water molecules, or examine metabolic activity in different areas of the brain in order to track nerve centre activity.

It is unlikely that the basic philosophical problems of the brain versus the mind will be solved by such scientific endeavour. But the ambitious nature of the project is likely to lead to some informative outcomes.

Raising the stakes

Improvements in knowledge will not result in more or less progress, according to John Gray, author of *The Silence of Animals: On progress and other modern myths*. Rather, it will produce a wider range of possibilities, some better, some worse. Speaking at the Rationalist Society in England, Gray suggested that the span of social possibilities will widen.

“The growth of knowledge simply enters into the conflicts of the world, physical and political, which will produce, I believe, in this new century that we are in now, new civilisations that are in some respects superior to the ones we know, and it will produce new types of barbarism that are worse than the ones that the world currently contains.”

Gray questions the application of Darwinian ideas of evolution to human society. “It suffers from certain fatal difficulties. In the first place, in Darwinian evolution, the whole point about natural selection is that it doesn’t have a goal of any kind. It is not going anywhere in particular. It is non-teleological. If you really applied the idea of evolution to society you would have to apply it consistently in a Darwinian way, you would have to conclude societies are going nowhere, which isn’t in fact the case.” Gray questions the idea that “there is some sort of inexorable, or semi-inexorable, pressure pushing towards global capitalism.”

Regulating the regulator

Criticisms are growing of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). In particular, the recently abandoned class action, brought by over a thousand women against the Australian distributors of Poly Implant Prothese (PIP) breast implants, has attracted scrutiny. Wendy Bonython, assistant professor at the school of law at Canberra University has commented that as the regulator responsible for ensuring that medical devices meet quality, safety and efficacy standards, the TGA “let (the women) down”. She added that it is not the first time the TGA has failed to respond appropriately to reports of problems with medical implants, pointing to concerns about DePuy hip and knee joints.

The governmental response seems more designed to admit failure than seek to improve matters. Newly proposed legislation would allow the health minister to exclude products from coverage by the TGA, and pass them on to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). It is hard to see how the ACCC would have the necessary knowledge of life sciences to be effective. The proposed bill will also lead to the removing of medical devices and complementary medicines that should not have been listed in the first place. This is perhaps more an admission of sloppiness than failure, but it is hardly an initiative for improving regulatory oversight.

Kidney magic

The prospect of artificially created organs has come a step closer with the bioengineering of a functional kidney. A team of researchers in the United States took the kidney of a dead rat, removed cells that might provoke a rejection and injected it with stem cells from the recipient rat. They were able to grow a new kidney that could be transplanted into the recipient.

The initiative, reported in *Nature Medicine* magazine, could have profound health implications. About 100,000 people in the United States are on the list for kidney transplantation, and 400,000 individuals live with end-stage kidney disease requiring hemodialysis. In Australia 1,080 people are awaiting a kidney transplant.

The authors of the study say the “creation of a transplantable graft to permanently replace kidney function would address donor organ shortage and the morbidity associated with immunosuppression. Such a bio-engineered graft must have the kidney’s architecture and function and permit perfusion, filtration, secretion, absorption and drainage of urine.”

The experiment is perhaps more of a glimpse of the future than anything more imminent. Bio-engineered kidneys are thought

to have low filtration capacity. However the authors of the study said there was some capacity to expel urine in the rat and it may eventually offer a better alternative for people with late stage kidney failure, who require dialysis.

The dismal non-science

Economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff released a paper in 2010 called *Growth in a Time of Debt* which showed that “median growth rates for countries with public debt over 90 percent of GDP are roughly one percent lower than otherwise; average (mean) growth rates are several percent lower.” It was claimed that countries with debt-to-GDP ratios above 90 percent have a slightly negative average growth rate.

This study was often cited by those arguing for the imposition of austerity programs in developed economies as a way to deal with the Great Recession. Yet closer examination has revealed a possible lack of scientific rigor, which routinely plagues economic analysis. One problem is that the causation may be backwards: it may be slower growth that leads to higher debt-to-GDP ratios.

Another problem is the lack of peer review. Reinhart and Rogoff did not release the data for their results and other analysts who tried to replicate them could not get a similar result. Eventually, economists Thomas Herndon, Michael Ash, and Robert Pollin of the University of Massachusetts did successfully reproduce the results after getting the spreadsheets from Reinhart and Rogoff. But they became critical of how they were obtained. Reinhart and Rogoff, they claim, selectively excluded years of high debt and average growth and also used a debatable method to weight the countries. It was also claimed that there was a coding error that excluded high-debt and average-growth countries.

The ensuing controversy has underlined the difficulty economists have in being genuinely scientific. Mike Konzcal, writing for the blog *The Next New Deal* said: “The debt needs to be thought of as a response to the contingent circumstances we find ourselves in, with mass unemployment, a Federal Reserve desperately trying to gain traction at the zero lower bound, and a gap between what we could be producing and what we are. The past ... tells us that a larger deficit right now would help us greatly.”

Paws for thought

Dear Editor,

At a recent panel discussion on the subject of church state separation, held at Macquarie University, an audience member asked the gathering if the atheist/secularist/humanist/LGBT community could please have one umbrella organization under which to rally, a coordinating body we would all take direction from. I take it he proposed this so that we can all run focused campaigns and start racking up some wins. It makes sense to me. The discussion however, soon flat-lined when someone else piped up the inevitable –it went something like this:

“...but we are all cats and can’t be herded, besides it would lead to us all getting bogged down in a dogma”.

Nonsense.

I’d like to second this gentleman’s proposal and urge The Rationalist Society of Australia to invite comment from every known atheist, secular, humanist, LGBT, skeptic group in the country for their assistance and co-operation in deciding on such a body. I would like to see such a body actively coordinating this movement’s efforts within 2 months, it can be done. Even if such a body were elected from those we already have and their position was made for a limited time, a trial period of say 2 years perhaps, followed by a review.

Our best chance of winning our cause is sooner, not later – we need to get this done NOW.

At the next Federal election, it is utterly pointless voting to hobble either of the big two, by voting for the other. Church/state separation is not the least on their radar. Tony Abbot claims his religion does not influence his politics – yeah right! Neither of the big two has the guts to walk away from making dirty deals that always involve the considerably pesky christian right wing from getting their way, undermining all our liberties.

We invited Sean Faircloth out here for a reason – let’s capitalize on that good decision and make the next move without delay. Let’s stop pussyfooting around and take a coordinated approach to campaigning on targeted issues as a focused community with goals and timelines for achievement.

We can only achieve that with an overseeing body that we will accept leading us.

That means when they ask us to rally on an issue, drop leaflets, man stalls, raise x amount of dollars, stand as candidates, get on committees – we do it.

For my money, I’d be very happy if that body were to be The Secular Party of Australia. Yes, I am a member – but that is not why I say this. I say it because SPA is the political party that best represents us all, is already in position (not need forming), has credibility in separating church and state. SPA has the policies and frameworks we are already mostly (if not completely) in agreement with. It has a constitution, legal standing, a strong organizational structure, committed and knowledgeable leadership and members. And let’s face it – it’s in the right arena to have the most impact in the least time – politics. The only ‘dogma’ I see coming out of SPA is the dogma of freedom and rationality and that’s a dogma we can all live with.

Whatever body we choose to go with or form, let us do so without the slightest delay.

Let’s please pull the thorn of division out of our paw so we can quit limping alone through the church/state jungle impoverished and struggling for survival, and instead truly flourish.

Tony Ansell, Sydney.

Science and sceptics

Dear Editor,

I am becoming increasingly concerned about the abuse of scientific rigour in relation to climate science. It is one thing to express concern about risks. It seems entirely sensible to be worried about the increase in carbon emissions into the atmosphere -- there is certain to be a polluting effect. But bullying people because they are deemed to be “sceptics” is just that: bullying.

Isn’t scepticism supposed to be a cornerstone of the peer review that is held up as the mark of excellence in science? So why is it thought that to be a climate ‘sceptic’ is to be closed minded? This looks suspiciously like a fear of being questioned.

Over the last 15 years global temperatures have been flat while 100 billion tonnes of carbon have been added, about a quarter of the carbon humanity has emitted since 1750. The rigorous and, dare I say it, sceptical, say: “we don’t know why”. That is how it should be.

Robert Colombo, Melbourne.

The betrayal of Sri Lanka

those who want to return Sri Lankan asylum seekers are turning a blind eye to the plight of the Tamils.

by Bruce Haigh



Australian politics is a cartel, a virtual one-party state, guided by the principals laid down by the Dear Leader, John Howard, OM. Both of the major political parties have signed, in the presence of the Dear Leader, the manifesto of core values, which includes a policy of reviling a class of refugees known as Boat People: that is people who arrive by leaky boats as opposed to aeroplane, cruise ship or private yacht. When confronted with people arriving on leaky boats the Dear Leader decreed that: 'We will decide who comes here and when.' This was written in stone and indeed became the guiding principal on Leaky Boat refugee policy for the Cartel (who were the 'we' was never spelt out, but presumably it was the Dear Leader, with disciples Philip Ruddock and Peter Reith).

To maintain an appearance of choice for the consumer of politics both parties within the Cartel play a game called the Limbo Dance, in which participants are awarded points for the lowest they can go under a pole without their body touching the ground.

Recently Julie Bishop and Scott Morrison from the Coalition House of Representatives and Bob Carr from the Labor Senate managed to go very low in a competition held in Sri Lanka. As a result, they were declared joint winners, although several of the judges, including the Dear Leader, thought Bishop and Morrison had gone lower than Carr.

A variant of the dance occurs when the Boat People are required to perform on arrival: to jump over a pole that is progressively raised, sometimes while they are in the middle of a jump. This causes great merriment amongst the Limbo Dancers and judges.

Carr recently went to Sri Lanka with the aim of preventing persecuted Tamils leaving the Island state by boat. To achieve this he entreated the President to accept Australian taxpayer dollars, believed to be \$45 million, to get his tried and true police, public

servants and sailors to use the money to stop the boats. One, or some of them, took the money and organised for boats to come to Australia. Carr said nothing. How could he? He had been deceived and so had we. Some were even unkind and biased enough to suggest that the Sri Lankan boat organisers were close to President Rajapaksa, who, according to those who know him, is close to perfection.

Having done the Limbo Rock all around the north of Sri Lanka, Bishop and Morrison gave the impression that they were going to buy a nice little time share in tranquil Mullaitivu. Writing in 'On Line Opinion', Bishop said that 20,000 kilometres of new high-quality roads and 18,000 kilometres of rural access roads had been constructed in the north since 2009. Not bad for a cash strapped state. What she failed to mention was why the roads have been built. The answer is for security. In case the loathed Tamils should try once again to throw off the yoke of oppression, and to assist members of the Sinhalese military to settle on former Tamil land.

How did she seek to test these figures provided by the Sri Lankan government? She informs us that: "... former Tamil Tigers intend to use their salaries to establish small business" What salaries? They are not allowed to work. We are informed that a school, which once had 38 students, has been rebuilt and now has 2,000 students. Who are they, settler Sinhalese or impoverished Tamil children who have to beg and scabble to try and put food on the table and who certainly do not get the free school lunches to which she refers?

She appears to be regurgitating her brief. "It is essential that former LTTE members and supporters integrate back into society... The relationship has been shattered by the long years of conflict and will take many years to rebuild." Yeah, and the Australians beat the Turks at Gallipoli. She should read an unbiased account of

the history of Sri Lanka. What pushed Sri Lanka into a civil war was the shattering of the relationship by the Sinhalese early after Sri Lanka gained independence from the British. But she won't.

Finally, as some sort of clincher, she says that 6,000 Tamils recently returned voluntarily from India. Does she know that Tamils from Sri Lanka in India are treated as second class citizens? Many are in refugee camps that leave much to be desired. They have no chance of gaining Indian citizenship and even were they to do so, the complex social structure, which is still very much in place, would make it hard to rise above poverty.

The visit to Sri Lanka of the three wise Australian politicians was all about stopping the flow of Sri Lankan Boat People, mainly Tamil, who daily suffer physical and psychological harm and humiliation. If they were genuine they might have offered to broker a proper peace with the prospect of real reconciliation.

Yet their visit had all the gravitas of an 1880 Congressional inspection of an Indian Reservation.

I have seen all this before. It is reminiscent of visits to South Africa by Australian politicians at the height of Apartheid. Politicians had an agenda, sometimes purely racist. They didn't want blacks to get majority rule, but they wanted to play sport with South Africa, particularly cricket and rugby, and they wanted to resume trade with South Africa. They would be finessed by Department of Information officials, shown blacks in model housing estates, schools and clinics, winned and dined, told that blacks were not yet ready for responsibility and shown how white South Africa was doing more than any of its critics alleged for the welfare of blacks. Back home, they went to pass on the good message and shout down left wing critics in Parliament.

Morrison has said that Coalition policy will be to turn back boats and send all refugees, including Tamils, back to their homelands. That ignores the fact that there are legitimate reasons for Tamils to flee Sri Lanka.

Lawyers, including the Human Rights Law Centre advise that the policies enunciated by Morrison would be in breach of Australian and International law.

In a recent press release, Michelle Rowland, the Labor Member for Greenway, talks of returned Tamil asylum seekers being exposed to the risk of torture, persecution and arbitrary detention which places Australia in violation of refoulement obligations and in breach of the Convention and laws relating to racial discrimination.

She also notes that the United States is unimpressed with Sri

Lanka's inability to comply with the terms of its own investigation into the murder of Tamils at the end of the war. The US indicated it would bring a procedural resolution against Sri Lanka at the March session of UNHCR.

Ed Husic, the Federal Member for Chifley made similar points to Michelle Rowland in a speech to Parliament at the beginning of February.

In an election year the motivation is 'whatever it takes', to win the election, with all sides of politics entering a bidding war over the bodies of Tamils in order to gain seats. And this against Carr's mealy mouthed words over Australian support for human rights worldwide.

It is not even as if Australia is in good company. The United States, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have all been more constructively critical of continuing human rights abuses in Sri Lanka than Australia.

Sivagnanam Shriritharan, a Tamil leader who met with Bishop and Morrison for several hours in Sri Lanka said the comments made by them both on their return to Australia bore no relation to what had transpired during their conversation on the Island. He advised them of on-going abuse and intimidation which they denied on the ABC.

Trevor Grant of the Tamil Refugee Council says Sritharan advised him that they came with closed minds; that their only focus seemed to be a fixation on turning back boats. Grant said Sritharan had stressed Tamils were fleeing to Australia because of fear for their lives and the future. They do not accept any words uttered on their behalf or about their state of mind by the Sri Lankan government.

Grant said that Sritharan had told them that in India there were over 200,000 refugees still living in refugee camps. Tamil refugees seek to go to countries in Europe, North America and Australia, because of the certainties created by the rule of law -- despite the best endeavours of some we certainly hope that it prevails in Australia.

Sritharan told Grant that the Tamil people in the north were too scared to speak to Bishop and Morrison because intelligence people were scattered about who were monitoring the situation.

Again, this is reminiscent of South Africa. When faced with a black who told it as it was, conservative Australian politicians invariably dismissed the presentation on the basis that their interlocutor was an 'angry radical'. We haven't matured much or moved very far.

"The visit to Sri Lanka of the three wise Australian politicians was all about stopping the flow of Sri Lankan Boat People, mainly Tamil, who daily suffer physical and psychological harm and humiliation."

The evolution of scientific funding

understanding the funding of science may be scientists' greatest challenge.

by Keith Ashman

After a lifetime in Science, my enthusiasm and fascination for biology and biological systems has not diminished, but during that time my understanding of the research funding process has, if anything, declined.

I think, I hope, that the benefit of scientific research is self evident. Many, if not all, of the technologies that we now enjoy have come from the application of scientific discoveries (vaccination, antibiotics, electricity, transistors, for example). I have observed that Darwin's ideas on natural selection -- survival of the fittest, does not necessarily mean survival of the best, ask Alan Turing -- can be very widely applied to whole ecosystems, to organisms, and ultimately at the molecular level. Apply a selective pressure to a system and it will adapt to, reduce, or even negate that pressure. Put excessive antibiotics in the environment and bacteria become more resistant. Spray pesticides and the pests adapt. Treat cancer patients with chemotherapy and the tumour cells evolve.

You get the idea. So what about scientists under funding pressure? Lord Kelvin once pointed out that: "If you can not measure it, you can not improve it." Nor can you understand it; you have to know what and how to measure. Accordingly, the last decade has seen the increasing use of metrics to measure the output and benefits of science.

The science of measuring Science if you will.

The Australian Research Council (ARC) has been much lauded for its Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative (ERA, <http://www.arc.gov.au/era/>) "which aims to identify and promote excellence across the full spectrum of research activity in Australia's higher education institutions. ERA assesses research quality within Australia's 41 higher education providers using a combination of indicators and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally recognised experts."

The ERA defines research as "the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative." A description of the indicators used can be found on the ARC website (the link is above). In a nutshell it assesses the volume and quality of research publications and amount of research funding raised. The reference to creativity is interesting, but I must confess I do not know how that can be measured.

A great deal of scientific research, at least in Academia is funded by grants either from a government agency (in Australia it is mainly the Australian Research Council, ARC or National

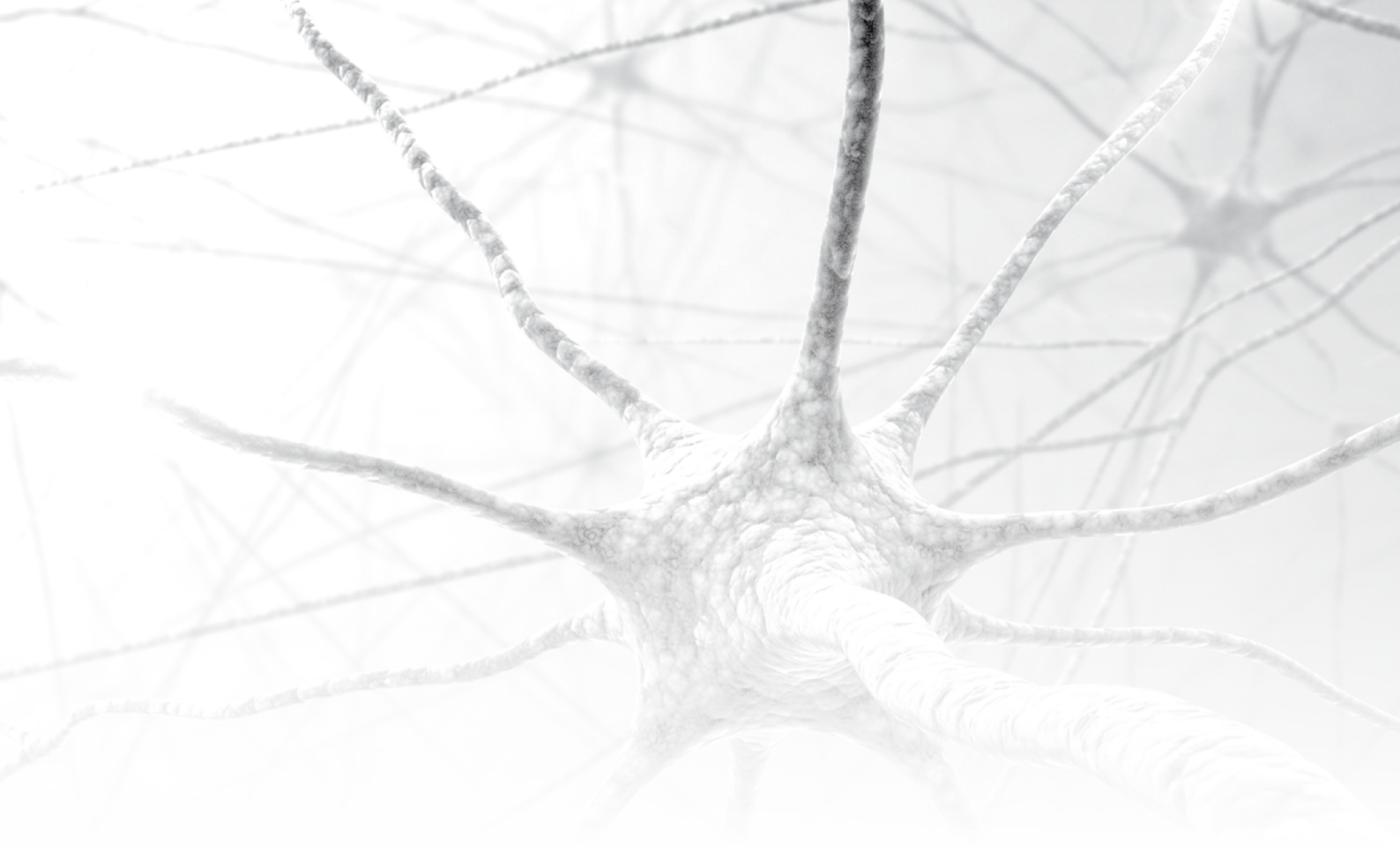
Medical and Health Research Council, NHMRC) or private research foundations such as The Wellcome Trust, The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Much time and effort is spent writing and agonising over the funding applications. Researchers are encouraged to develop "Grantsmanship, the art of acquiring peer-reviewed research funding" (<http://www.hfsp.org/funding/art-grantsmanship>). Universities have departments dedicated to managing the funding application process.

A typical application can run to 40 to 50 pages by the time the project description, methods, track records of the applicants (metrics such as H-factor) and a detailed justified budget are assembled. I should point out that all this effort is required to raise the research funds. It, of itself, does not, as far as I can see, contribute to scientific understanding. It does, however, consume a great deal of time.

I can hear the cries of outrage: 'Hypotheses are discussed, experimental designs refined, peers consulted to debate the ideas'. On the contrary, while scientists are occupied with grant writing, they are not carrying out research, or debating scientific ideas but looking for the best way to market their ideas, to convince the reviewers to give them the money to actually do the research. The reviewers are of course peers, who are very often applying for funding from the same sources.

Reviewers are not paid for their efforts and it is not uncommon that they are not experts in the field of the application. In the interest of fairness the applicants are allowed to comment on the assessments of the reviewers before the final selection process, which generally means a few more weeks poring over the applications. Another, almost mandatory requirement is preliminary data. It has to be shown that the proposed research has results before it is given funding. This whole process is only a paper, or more precisely a Web Based, exercise. There is no direct contact between the reviewers and the reviewed, nor are the institutions in which the research is to be conducted visited.

It can also happen that an application, if it is rejected this year, can be resubmitted and funded next year. Another issue, which has come to the fore recently, is duplication of research: that is, the same research is funded in multiple instances. This not only wastes money but also effort. Since all applications are now submitted digitally, it should be possible to create a database and attempt to bring together like-minded research. To a large extent projects are judged on track record of published output and successful fund raising. So if you have won grant funding you improve your chances of getting more.



The overall success rate from this annual tortuous process is often less than 1 in 4 (see; ARC success rates http://www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/dp/DP12_selrpt.htm#4). A typical project grant will run for 3 years. If the application is unsuccessful then the cycle is repeated and it is another year before a project might receive funding. This not only puts pressure on the researchers with regard to funding their own position it forces short term thinking.

Where is the selection pressure in all this? There are several. Firstly, if funding is for 3 years and it takes 1 or 2 years to secure it, then there is considerable pressure to submit grant applications every year. This leads to a great deal of time not only writing the application but often doing a few experiments that are only designed to obtain preliminary data that will satisfy the reviewers.

The requirement to publish (which incidentally means only publishing positive results) can lead to the splitting of work into multiple papers that gives the impression of greater output. Another common practice is submission to one journal after another until a paper is accepted. This generally means a descent down the impact factor ladder (all journals now have an impact factor which measures the status of the journal; the higher the number the better the journal).

These practices, though perhaps not consciously encouraged by Universities and Research Institutes, do, I believe, result

from official pressure to publish even when you have nothing to say. It is common to applaud a researcher for having hundreds of publications, but let's say a researcher has a productive period of 30 years and amasses 300 publications in that time, that is 10 per year or nearly 1 a month. Seems they do little but write. There is a clear danger in this. Quantity becomes the measure, not quality, and this pressure will lead to more competition than cooperation.

Given the complexity of contemporary science the increase in competitive pressure will lead to a reduction in the quality. Finally, there is increasing pressure to conduct research with one eye on its potential commercialization. CSIRO has been pushed very much in that direction. This tends to lead to secrecy, not open discussion, and the 'spinning' of results so that it appears that a profit is just around the corner.

The media sound bite of a scientific breakthrough is common, often conjuring up the image of Archimedes running down the street shouting 'Eureka'. The reality is very different. It is more akin to Edison's comment that invention is 99% perspiration 1% inspiration. Science only becomes knowledge if the results published by one group are reproducible in-house and by others.

The funding bodies would do well to adhere to that principle and maybe think about Darwinian selection pressure.

"Australian scientists spent more than 500 years' worth of time preparing research funding applications for the country's largest grant scheme in 2012, according to a survey by Queensland researchers."

The More Loving One

by W.H.Auden

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am
Of stars that do not give a damn,
I cannot, now I see them, say
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,
I should learn to look at an empty sky
And feel its total dark sublime,
Though this might take me a little time.

Secularism's balancing act

Achieving the right balance between religious beliefs and the state is not proving easy anywhere in the world.

Ask most Australians and they will tell you that Australia is a secular state. At first glance they would seem to have an unassailable case. Section 116 of the Australian constitution says: "The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth."

It seems clear cut, but it is not so in practice. Making neat divisions between freedom of religion (the ability to follow or not follow beliefs) and freedom from religion (protection from others' imposing their religious, or non religious, views on you) is rarely straightforward. While few Australians advocate the extremes of outright theocracy or compulsory atheism – there is a general acceptance that people should not interfere in others' beliefs – finding the correct balance can prove problematic. Such tensions are to some extent inevitable. Legal frameworks are relatively fixed, must be universal and tend to change slowly, if at all. Social attitudes and political interests are fluid and can move profoundly.

Max Wallace director of the Australia New Zealand Secular Association argues for neutrality based on clear demarcation lines. "(It requires) a constitutional separation of church and state where the state gives no aid to religion and no aid to alternatives to religion. That should be understood, briefly, as the definition of secularism."

Australia has no such clear division in practice, according to Marion Maddox, associate professor at the Centre for Research on Social Equality at Macquarie University and author of *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*. She comments that section 116 of the Constitution has proved ineffective at preventing state aid to religion and it also offers only limited protection of individuals' religious freedom.

"Under the court's consistently minimalist interpretations, if an individual's right to religious freedom conflicts with the interests of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth wins," she writes. "Moreover, despite section 116 falling in the Constitution's chapter on the powers of the States, it constrains only the Federal government. Alone among the States, Tasmania's Constitution Act protects religious freedom and prohibits the imposition of a religious test."

Wallace describes Australia as a "soft theocracy": a constitutional monarchy in which the head of state is the Queen of Australia and also Supreme Governor of the Church of England in England. He believes the Australian constitution does not create a clear separation of church and state, unlike in America, where the

Supreme Court has applied a stricter interpretation.

"In the 1981 Defence of Government Schools case, which concerned federal funding for religious, mainly Catholic, schools, three judges of the High Court, including the Chief Justice, concluded s.116 does not mean separation of church and state," he says.

There have been similar legal results since. "The point is, if there was a separation of church and state in Australia, government subvention of religion could be more easily contested in the courts," says Wallace. "Church and government interests are using taxpayers' money and resources through exemptions and functionally through grants and privileges. By the time one factors in prayers in parliaments, Christian crosses in the national flag, other overt support for Christian activities such as religious instruction and evangelical chaplains in public schools, it's difficult to see how Australia could be characterised, legally, as a secular nation."

Lev Lafayette, spokesperson for the Victorian Secular Lobby describes Australia's law as "quite weak" believing it is out of step with the wider society. "Where Australia is secular is in its population," says Lafayette. "Most people in the country, including believers of various religious positions, are prepared to have a 'live and let live' approach to the different faiths, whilst at the same time being uncomfortable with the involvement of religious doctrines in political life."

"There are exceptions of course, but the opinion polls, census reports, and studies that I have reviewed indicate that the Australian population is largely and increasingly a secular one. It's just that our political leaders and the political system do not reflect this."

If the lines that separate church and state are smudged, identifying an effective alternative is far from simple. Changes to the Australian constitution, which require a referendum, are almost never achieved in Australia. And conventional political activity can easily lead to unintended consequences. Secularism, which is typically understood as a policy of even handedness and non-interference, sits uneasily with political ideologies.

Scott Hedges, a researcher on secularism in Australia, says the politics of the secular groups can be "deeply corrosive" to the purpose that they aim to achieve. He believes the secular polity in Australia is likely to create different results to those intended, because secularism is adopted as a party position, then blended with other political views.

"These (other views) are not necessarily secular in nature, nor do they follow from support of secular principles," he says. "If this

notion of a 'secular government' is going to be useful it has to be something which has allies on both sides of the political spectrum, and not be a province of the Left."

The dangers of political action in the religious sphere can be witnessed in the fate of secularism's traditional opponent: the religious Right in America. Political scientist Robert Putnam, co-author of *American Grace: How religion divides and unites us, a study of religious belief in America*, described in a recent radio interview the effects of the political campaign. In the 1980s American evangelicals and religious conservatives became more powerful and assertive, especially over the issues of abortion and homosexuality. They became the 'calling card' of religion in America.

The results of the political activity were surprising. According to Putnam: "A new generation of Americans who came of age in the 1990s and then into the 21st century began to say to themselves, 'Well, if religion is just about being conservative and being Republican, being a member of the Republican Party and you know, hostile to homosexuals and so on, that's not me, I'm out of here'".

Far from increasing the power of religion in the state, the result was a rapid growth in the number of people described by sociologists as 'nones': people professing no religious affiliation.

environmental protection, refugees, industrial relations or tax, we are entitled -- indeed, obliged -- to ask what that dimension is: from what doctrinal position does it follow; how the politician traces the connection; what sources informed their doctrinal position; and so on. Then, just as with other topics, we can decide how persuasive we find their replies. And vote accordingly."

The implication is that to achieve a healthy separation of church and state something beyond conventional politics is required. "Religion should be treated as a more normal part of the political discussion," writes Maddox. "All sorts of values feed into a political position, and most are accepted as a legitimate part of political debate. Different economic schools of thought, for example, contribute to different kinds of economic policy. Different beliefs about the nature, causes and consequences of climate change contribute (albeit perhaps less than economic interests or susceptibility to lobbying) to different stances on emissions reduction.

"Different ideological orientations nurture different approaches to international relations. Consequently, we expect to be able to ask about what beliefs leaders hold in each of those areas. When we disagree, we challenge and debate them.

"Why don't we include religion in that process? Partly, because of the fear of where that kind of debate can lead. No sensible

"Most people in the country, including believers of various religious positions, are prepared to have a 'live and let live' approach to the different faiths" – Lev Lafayette.

In the course of two decades the 'nones' went from 5-7 per cent of the younger population to more than a third.

The change in America occurred over only two decades, very different from the slow march of secularism in Western Europe and Australia, which has taken place incrementally for almost a century. It represents a warning about the potential dangers of mixing politics and religion.

Putnam said most of the new 'nones' are not atheists. "These are not people who've been convinced by the new atheism, of Dawkins and others. There's one factor that distinguishes the young nones from the people who have stayed in church, and that is, they are really upset about mixing politics and religion."

The lesson seems to be that avoiding partisan politics and attempting to be even handed and tolerant is the best way to achieve a clear outcome. That is the view of Maddox, who argues that religion should not be kept out of politics, it should be included.

"Far from wanting less religion in politics, I think that, at least in the current climate, we need more," she writes. "If our leaders identify, and still more if they merely hint at, a religious dimension to their stances on such matters as teen pregnancy, abortion,

person could desire the sort of public inquiry into individuals' faith which, in past centuries, has led to religious tests for public office, to torture and executions for heresy and to wars of religion. This is, of course, the basis of the liberal tradition of political secularism. Social secularism also plays a role: the reluctance to enter into public theological debate also reflects a largely secular electorate's squeamishness about what might emerge."

Another potential justification for the separation of church and state is the changing ethnic character of many states due to global migration flows. This is especially pronounced in Australia, which has had the second highest post-Second World War migration in the world (relative to the size of the population). It has resulted in the population becoming more diverse in both religious and cultural terms.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 1991 about a quarter of Australians were Anglican and another quarter was Catholic. Another fifth were Christians from other denominations and thirteen per cent had no religion.

By 2011, the picture had become more complex. There had been increases in both the numbers of non-Christian religious adherents and people professing to have no religion. Buddhism

(2.5%) Islam (2.2%) and Hinduism (1.3%) accounted for 6 per cent of the total, about double the level in 1991 and those professing no religion rose from 13 per cent to 22 per cent.

Such diversity suggests secularism is becoming the only workable option for social cohesion. But this does not necessarily amount to a legal argument. The fluidity of social trends does not translate into a reason to change relatively invariant legal structures.

“In principle (multiculturalism) shouldn’t matter,” says Lafayette. “Secularism should, and can be, a universal principle that applies to any and all people regardless of their metaphysical beliefs.”

Wallace agrees there are no legal implications, adding that it is only important politically when the “ethnic vote matters”. “Through multiculturalism, when we all respect each others’ human rights, when what you believe, the colour of your skin, your gender, your sexuality, is irrelevant, that’s a positive. Liberty, fraternity, equality is the aim, as the French figured out back in 1789.”

Australia is not alone in having an uneasy relationship between the laws that define the relationship of the church and state, and the general attitude of the population. Lafayette says the United States, despite having a comparatively religious population, has robust secular legal protections. Although there have been numerous attempts to change this he says they have been largely prevented by the strength of the constitutional protections, historical precedent in the courts, and “interestingly a defence of secularism by a large number of religious people”.

Such clear divisions run counter to the political and social character of America, however. Wallace says that although America has a stronger legal separation of church and state than Australia, it would be “unthinkable” to have an atheist president (the current prime minister Julia Gillard professes to be an atheist). “Constitutionally, Australia is well behind the US federal government and some of its states. For example, some US states allow gay marriage and voluntary euthanasia, although, a woman’s right to choose is under threat again.”

The European states have a variety of ways of balancing legal and social positions on religion and the state. At one end of the spectrum, some countries have a strict legal divide. An example is the French policy of *laïcité* (absence of religious involvement), although France also has examples of the prevention of symbolic religious expression. At the other end of the spectrum, there are several European states with state religions such as the various

Nordic Lutheran churches. Yet often these societies are strongly secular in practice.

Wallace argues that it is difficult to generalise about Europe, which has both republics and constitutional monarchies. But he notes that the secular state was born in France. “The turmoil of its birth has affected most European nations in a positive, secular sense. Their populations are also drifting away from religious affiliation while the churches remain legally entrenched and politically well-connected.

“For example, Germany and other nations still collect ‘church taxes’ from citizens on behalf of the churches. The removal of any mention of religion from the European Constitution was a major development but a rider favouring the Catholic Church was soon added. The relevant decisions of the European Court of Human Rights have been a mixed bag with some decisions favouring secularism and others religion.”

Viewed through this international perspective, Australia’s situation appears to be a typical instance of how Western democracies find it hard to resolve tensions between the law and public attitudes about religion.

Neither is the issue likely to go away. Wallace believes the major political parties “fawn” over the perceived religious vote. “Christian political parties can achieve enough votes in state and federal elections for their preferences to matter in tight contests in marginal electorates. They could determine which party may rule. Only the Secular Party and the Sex Party argue for separation of church and state.

“Nevertheless, Australia is quite secular socially with a significant, ongoing decline in religious affiliation. This lack of religiosity, counterbalances, to some extent, the influence of the churches and the Australian Christian Lobby. The historical process of secularisation, the decline of religious influence in a majority of citizens’ everyday lives, thanks largely to public education and materialistic styles of life, erodes religion slowly but surely in Australia, as elsewhere.”

Political parties do not necessarily use religion just to enlist specific constituencies. Maddox says the Howard government’s outsourcing of government welfare activities to church agencies and encouragement of religious schools was not simply an appeal to the largest number of voters. She believes the approach was more subtle.

“In Australia’s relatively non-religious political climate, such moves were not intended to appeal to a large religious right voter base; no such base exists. Instead, they bestowed an aura

“If there was a separation of church and state in Australia, government subvention of religion could be more easily contested in the courts” – Max Wallace.

of religious and moral legitimacy upon policies whose effects -- such as increasing social inequality, reducing women's and other workers' rights, and brutal treatment of asylum-seekers -- could otherwise seem merely self-interested, cynical or racist.

"Although around eighty per cent of Australians seldom or

never attend church, many responded not to specific theological ideas but to a general, nostalgic sense of religion as character building and conducive to social order. Many voters perceived these qualities as necessary not for themselves, but for other people."

The parliamentary oath and parliamentary prayers

A favourite topic of those who argue for stronger secularism in Australia is parliamentary oaths and parliamentary prayers. Yet even amongst those who want to change current practices there are a range of views. Achieving an acceptable legal balance is not self evident.

Lyn Allison, former leader of the Australian Democrats wants any mention of religion removed. "Why should religion have anything to do with people making a public commitment?" she asks. "You could argue that this unreasonably forces people to publicly declare whether they are religious and Christian or not and that this is divisive. For consistency, I think we should oppose a role for religion in parliament and in pledges that have some legal or quasi legal status on the basis that religious observances should be private or conducted in places other than those that are associated with the state -- parliament, legal institutions -- because they should be secular."

Rod Bower, a committee member of the Rationalist Society of Australia, argues for a "purely" secular oath, which he says serves as a reminder that the parliamentarian is making a serious commitment.

"Plurality is invalid here - it would ultimately lead to silly things like a different oath for every religion, or someone wanting to swear on a packet of spaghetti. The only supposed value of adding a dose of religion to the oath is that, in theory, it frightens the swearer with a threat of divine retribution if they don't do what they said they would. As I see it, if someone is a

true believer they will know that the Divine is watching them whether they make a religious oath or not, but of course history has shown that threat is ineffective."

Anthony Englund, a committee member of the RSA has a different emphasis. He says a religious oath is not a problem if someone considers that their religious belief system helps them to serve the public. "All I care about is whether or not that set of beliefs leads them to harm or restrict others. There are lots of religious people who in fact share pretty much the same views on secular issues as non-religious people.

"I also think that passing a law that someone can't refer to something important to them is somehow going to stop them from taking that thing into account when carrying out the job is a bit of stretch. You can't stop people's actions being driven by their beliefs (religious or otherwise). But we can, and should, stop those actions when they cause harm to or restrict others."

Paul Tonson, a Uniting Church minister, favours a non-aligned approach. He says he would prefer that parliamentarians be invited to consider their privileges and obligations in a reflective moment prior to business. "I would hope that an agreed non-sectarian process be found through which this opportunity would be provided, but it need not be for every session of parliament. By the same token, I would be happy and glad to see the opening church service of a new parliament replaced by some kind of reflective gathering in which expressions of obligation and commitment are publicly made."

Question: Should Australian schools be teaching about religions rather than teaching religion?

Anna Halafoff is a research fellow at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University.

The role of religion in Australian schools has been vigorously debated since the 1870s, but it has recently generated considerable controversy, particularly in the state of Victoria. Christian volunteers currently teach the vast majority of the students who elect to take Special Religions Instruction (SRI) in Victoria's government schools. Minority faith communities, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs also provide SRI programs while the Humanist Society of Victoria's proposal to teach Ethics as a non-religious SRI alternative was rejected in 2009.

In early 2010 the case *Aitken and Others vs. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)* was lodged at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), in which three families claimed that their children had been discriminated against as a result of their choosing not to participate in SRI classes -- given that there was no non-religious SRI option available in Victoria. This case stimulated extensive public debate and calls for the introduction of education about religions and beliefs (ERB) which would incorporate teaching about diverse religious and non-religious worldviews by qualified teachers. It would be included in Australia's new National Curriculum and be provided from the first years of schooling. Presently, such programs are largely taught in faith-based schools, while few government schools provide ERB -- and then only in years eleven and twelve.

The United Kingdom, by contrast, has been cited as a leader in developing 'world religions education' programs since the 1970s. Canada also introduced an inclusive ethics and religious culture program in its government schools in 2005. Religious education in Australia's state schools has been described as lagging far behind other nations.

Due to globalisation, societies such as Australia have become increasingly culturally and religiously diverse. The 2011 Australian Census reported a relatively slight, yet significant, decline in Christianity (63.23% in 2006 to 60.53% in 2011) and rise in Buddhism (2.09% in 2006 to 2.43% in 2011), Islam (1.70% in 2006 to 2.19% in 2011), Hinduism (0.74% in 2006 to 1.27% in 2011), Judaism (0.44% in 2006 to 0.45% in 2011) and Other Religious Groups (0.52% in 2006 to 0.74% in 2011). Those declaring 'No Religion' also significantly increased from 18.48% in 2006 to 22.08% in 2011. However, as outlined above, the way in which religion is taught in Victoria's government schools does not align with these demographics.

Up until recently, public education has been the responsibility of state governments in Australia. Consequently, each Australian State has its own unique history, laws and policies concerning teaching about religions in government schools. The place of religion in Victoria's state schools has long been debated, largely due to different perceptions of what constitutes a secular society and thereby a secular education system. The secular clause in the 1872 and 1928 Victorian Education Acts prohibited religious education from being taught in Victorian Government school curricula yet allowed for religious instruction (RI) to be delivered by volunteers from Christian organisations before or after the prescribed four-hour school.

After considerable pressure from religious groups, The Education (Religious Instruction) Act of 1950, maintained the four hours of secular instruction provided by teachers, however it was permitted to teach RI during school hours by accredited representatives of Christian religious groups. These RI programs

were voluntary and students could be excused from attending at their parents' request. The 1950 Act also allowed Jewish RI to be provided in Victorian Government schools on a voluntary 'opt-in' basis.

Australia was a largely Christian nation in the 1950s, but it was about to experience significant cultural and religious transformation. Diverse religious groups, including Baha'is, Buddhists and Sikhs, were permitted to deliver RI programs in Victoria's state schools, alongside Christian and Jewish providers, in the late 1990s in response to increasing religious diversity. The 2006 Education and Training Reform Act, distinguished 'special religious instruction' (SRI) from 'general religious education' (GRE) and finally included the provision for teaching GRE within the core curriculum by qualified teachers given that education about diverse religions does not contravene secular principles. However, to this date there has been no allocation of financial resources by the DEECD to provide GRE curricula, or to train teachers to deliver GRE programs, other than in years 11 and 12.

The 2006 Act defined SRI as '[i]nstruction provided by churches and other religious groups and based on distinctive religious tenets and beliefs' and GRE as '[e]ducation about major forms of religious thought and expression characteristic of Australian society and other societies in the world', and stated that except for provision of SRI, 'education in Government schools must be secular and not promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect'.

As briefly described above, despite increasing religious diversity in Victoria, Christian volunteers currently teach the vast majority of the students who elect to take SRI in state schools and although there is a growing number of people who claim no religious affiliation, Ethics SRI remains prohibited in Victoria. Scholars have raised concerns that allowing a potentially narrow religious message to be taught to young Australians could lead to interreligious ignorance and heighten social tensions among Australian communities. A number of recent Australian and international studies have also acknowledged the positive role that ERB can play in promoting social inclusion and countering extremism and recommended that ERB be included in the curriculum from the first years of schooling. Indeed, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) published the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools, in 2007 (OSCE 2007) yet Australian schools are yet to comply with these guidelines.

The extensive public debate, particularly surrounding the VCAT

case that was heard in March 2012, has leant significant urgency to this issue. While VCAT dismissed the case in October 2012, and has recently denied an appeal, it acted as a catalyst for some of the above research to be taken seriously by state actors and diverse religious and non-religious communities. It also galvanized into action groups such as Fairness in Religion in Schools (FIRIS), and the Religions, Ethics and Education Network Australia (REENA) which has been disseminating research findings and awareness of problems with current SRI/SRE models and benefits of ERB.

These developments led to the DEECD making two significant changes to the SRI policy in August 2011 before the VCAT case was even heard. These changes include a shift from an opt-out to an opt-in system and to a commitment that children who choose to opt-out of SRI would have to be engaged in meaningful activities. There is still much that needs to be done in order to at least make SRI more equitable, and to ensure that Victoria's government schools are resourced to provide ERB. Until the current SRI funding model is reviewed, in which the controversial Christian SRI provider ACCESS Ministries has received substantial state support for providing both SRI and Chaplaincy programs while other faith groups have not, Christian SRI maintains a privileged position in a state school system that is supposed to be secular.

On a more optimistic note The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the agency responsible for the development of Australia's National Curriculum, has met with REENA scholars and peak religious and non-religious community leaders, including Humanists and rationalists, on several occasions to discuss ERB in the National Curriculum. Education about diverse religions and beliefs can be taught within subject areas of History and Civics and Citizenship, and in general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities such as Intercultural Understanding and Ethical Behaviour. Opportunities for appropriate resource development and dissemination, drawing on local and international best practices and resources, are also being discussed at national and state levels.

REENA is committed to working together with ACARA to ensure that education about diverse religions and beliefs is adequately developed and implemented across the National Curriculum to increase awareness of diverse religious and non-religious worldviews and to provide a critical education about the role of religion in society. The contentious issue of SRI/SRE in government schools, however, remains to be adequately addressed, despite increasing pressure from academics, parents, teachers and religious and non-religious community leaders.

“Despite increasing religious diversity in Victoria, Christian volunteers currently teach the vast majority of the students who elect to take Special Religious Instruction in state schools.”

Question: Should Australian schools be teaching about religions rather than teaching religion?

Scott Hedges is a researcher on secularism in Australia and a member of the steering group for Fairness in Australian Schools.



Stanley Milgram performed an infamous series of experiments in the 1960's in which he measured the willingness of the study's participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal conscience.

Teachers in Australian and New Zealand schools are involved in a similar exercise. It can be conceived of as a "religious education Milgram experiment", because, like the participants in the original study, the authority figures who employ them order teachers to administer a program of religious instruction in our schools that conflicts with their conscience, training, and professional code of ethics. Teachers comply with this system, against their wishes because they are ordered to do it by people in authority.

There is nothing singularly important about knowing about religion; the challenge is best understood as one of education. Since religions exist, and play a role in our world, they can and should be understood for what they are, where they come from, how they evolved – and the role they play in human society. None of this is complicated or terribly controversial.

More controversial, and complicated, are the claims and demands which increasingly vocal, and sometimes violent, religious extremists are making when they believe others are encroaching on their doctrines or considering them to be irrelevant or, worse, morally questionable. Yet no conversation about this is ever going to happen in a world where we cannot even by honest about the failure of the current system.

What teachers are ordered to do in our schools is best understood as a system of outsourcing whereby religious groups operate franchise programs in their classrooms. This program is not new, nor has it ever been a commitment of the education system per se. Neither is it something that teachers support. It creates obvious entanglements between religious groups and

public officials and is a capitulation of an important principle that once animated Australian schooling, whereby 'secular' and 'religious' instruction were considered distinct ideas. The latter is the purview of churches (and now mosques, temples and synagogues) and the former is accountable to the citizens through oversight of specialists employed by the government.

This separation was an essential and indispensable innovation in Australian life. The citizens of Australia pay for education, which is accountable to professional standards. Churches, whose doctrine is not subject to any standards boards, are free to teach their beliefs free of any interference so long as they are not violating the law. This state of affairs is the soul of religious freedom and toleration, essential to a pluralist society. Religious education in Australia, therefore, has never been under the control and purview of the education system itself. It is a kind of kick back demanded by religious entities, agreed to by a government that nominally approves and authorizes the program.

While the earliest efforts at education in Australia followed the old model of calling on the church to run schools, Australia eventually felt confident enough to base its education policy on what was, at the time, a world leading innovation in education: a system based only on offering secular instruction in its schools. Trusted churches were allowed to attend to their doctrines without government involvement or oversight.

Many Christians believe that churches are the best place to instruct children in faith. But a significant number, generally the more fundamentalist ones, believe that you cannot have true education that is 'secular'. No real confusion exists in the education profession about what is 'religious indoctrination' and what is reading, writing, math, language, history, arts, and science (aka, secular subjects). In the same way that no one is seriously

confused about how indoctrination differs from education, no one believes that limiting public instruction to secular subjects, limits children and families from being religious, just as it doesn't prevent them from playing tennis.

To some factions of the church, however, any system of education that does not include a means to indoctrinate children in religion, can be accused of being a threat to religion. The teaching profession does not struggle to understand these issues, but they have been subject to orders from above. First in NSW, in 1880, then in 1950 in Victoria, church activists struck on the idea, not of forcing state school teachers to do what they were professionally opposed to, but instead to order them to administer a system where the church did the instructing while the teachers kept order.

Though all Australian teachers have now come under orders of one variety or another to facilitate the activity of religion in schools, teachers and school administrators have never been happy with it. Nowhere has this struggle been more active than in Victoria.

In the early 1970s the Victorian schools admitted that the system of letting church volunteers use the schools was so broken that a large public report was commissioned to recommend scrapping the system and replacing it with what would be thought of as "General Religious Education". This was called "The Russell Report", and it stands as an unsurpassed analysis of the problems with Australian SRI. It carefully picks through the issues of how to teach religion in an educational way that would not offend the conscience or professional standards of teachers. In 1976 the Crown Solicitor reviewed the report, but found that the recommendations of the committee were not sufficiently clear to avoid breaching the secular clause in the education act. The report was put on a shelf and forgotten. The teachers, who were in favor of reform, remained under orders to watch as volunteers conducted instruction.

In 1998, the Government, facing a growing diversity of religious expression that did not exist when the 1950 legislation was enacted, created an extension of SRI to non-Christian groups, by means of a contract with an interfaith body, "Religions for Peace" which maintain a Religious Instruction Secretariat. This group in turn works with interested parties in the Baha'i, Buddhist, Orthodox Christian, Islamic, and Sikh "communities" to encourage more and different kinds of Special Religious Instruction in our schools.

While this expansion was never debated by the legislature, nor sought by the teaching profession, the fact that the system catered only to the Christian religion set up an obvious inequality. Rather than roll back the 1950 legislation, or dust off the work done

by Russell, as teachers would have preferred, the government effectively ordered the participants in the religious Milgram experiment to increase the dosage of SRI.

The 'Milgram experiment' escalated when the authority figure continued to order more and more outrageous acts until the person subject to the orders broke down sobbing or refused to co-operate. A similar situation exists in our schools. The groups who teach SRI are increasingly blatant about their goal of indoctrination and proselytizing, and are continually refining their material to be more and more offensive to professional educators. There are signs that the limits of professional endurance with this abuse are approaching. As the groups who control the religion franchise in our schools become increasingly intent on dropping any pretense of being educators, and move closer and closer to simple proselytizing, the teaching profession's limits are being tested.

On the first day of Special Religious Instruction my daughter received a worksheet. On it, it had a magnifying glass. She was instructed to draw a picture of herself in the glass – the subject of Special Religious Instruction is actually you and your relationship to God. The child herself is the object of the church's interest, and the message they have is about the imperative of forming a relationship with Jesus. The activity asks the child "who am I?" My daughter's name is Janet, so she wrote "Janet" in the correct blank. Then it asks: "who are you?" The religion teacher wrote, "Ms. Marion". Then it asks: "who is God?" – and the answer to that question is found in the Bible, John 1:18 – "Jesus shows us what God is like". If this seems to you like anything other than an exercise in proselytizing to very young children, you flunk.

This is the first lesson and the subsequent lessons are not really any different. The teachers are told to stand there and watch. They know that this not "education" – it's a blatant missionary exercise.

There are certain sectors of the academic community who advocate something called "General Religious Education". Some sectors are calling for this to be called, "Religion and Beliefs Education" or something even larger in scope "General Religion and Ethics Education". (GREE) – the list of calls on our schools is potentially endless.

Personally, I think the legislators who wrote the 1872 "Secular, Compulsory and Free" Education act, had it right. Churches should attend to the instructional needs of their congregations without any involvement from the Minister of Education. The legislature should not order state employees to oversee evangelism and proselytizing in our schools as they plainly do right now.

"Religious education in Australia has never been under the control and purview of the education system itself. It is a kind of kick back."



The anti-discrimination maze

The government's plan to simplify anti-discrimination legislation is leading to problems.

by Moira Clarke

Religious institutions have long assumed a right to impose the dictates of scripture on the community at large, and especially when they are the providers of public services. While there is no doubt that freedom of worship is sacrosanct, a just society protects the rights of all by demanding that religious practice does not trump other inherent rights. An individual does not choose to be female or choose to be homosexual; any such attribute is as intrinsic as humanity itself. Faith, on the other hand, constitutes an adherence to unsubstantiated beliefs, opinions that can fluctuate radically over the course of a lifetime. No one is born with a religion.

It is therefore alarming that our government seeks to maintain the anachronism of a hierarchy of rights, upon which religious 'freedom' sits at the top. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recently drafted Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012. In particular, clause 33 of the document details the continuation of exemptions to law already available to religious organisations.

Australian anti-discrimination legislation has evolved into a mess. Litigants, legal counsel and the courts must manoeuvre their way through the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, the Age Discrimination Act 2004 and the regulating Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986, with added complexities thrown in by the Fair Work Act 2009.

To simplify and consolidate these conflicting laws, the government's attempt at an all-in-one legislation was released on 20 November 2012. The Senate then referred the bill to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee for public inquiry. Taking into account hundreds of submissions from the public, the committee has now released its report on the bill. The committee has dealt with the contentious matter of religious freedom, in particular clause 33, in its final two recommendations.

- The removal of exceptions allowing religious organisations to discriminate against individuals in the provision of services.

- The amendments to clause 33, such that employers relying on exemptions to discrimination laws must publicise their exceptions to prospective employees.

Assuming the government accepts them these would establish an improvement on the proposals in the draft document. But they still grant religious employers leave to discriminate on a range of attributes, including marital or relationship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, any other religion or lack thereof, pregnancy and, incredibly, 'potential pregnancy'.

Consider the following scenarios. A Catholic hospital can terminate a female nurse's employment should she become

pregnant outside of wedlock. An employment service, run by a religious organisation, can discriminate by refusing to employ individuals from certain groups. A schoolteacher can be denied employment simply because he is gay, despite the fact that neither religion nor sexuality has anything to do with the subject he teaches. The job candidate doesn't even have to be in contact with the students.

Robert Johnston from the Australian Association of Christian Schools explained that when employing a gardener he would expect that person to be 'consistent with the values and beliefs of the school'. He added that he was willing on one occasion to employ a man who had murdered his wife 'after the result of a domestic thing', but only 'after a very careful process' that took into account 'a religious experience he had gone through'. Such forgiveness and compassion is commendable. One can only wonder why the same level of tolerance could not be extended to a gay gardener, or one living in a de facto relationship, or one of another faith.

The impact of clause 33 on the lives and wellbeing of human beings -- all for the sake of 'religious sensibility' -- is profound. This is especially so when considered in the context of decades of government funding for church schools to the detriment of the public school system, the privatization of major government services and the preference for religious organizations as government-funded service providers. Not only are we, Australian taxpayers, forking out for religious institutions and their businesses to behave unfairly, but our government has encouraged the incursion of religion into the job market. As a result, workers whose innate characteristics are abhorrent to the religious, particularly in the health and education sectors, experience reduced employment opportunities.

Since there seems to be a consensus that health and education workers don't deserve the same protections available to everyone else, it comes as a relief that the committee has at least spared a thought for people in need of services. The government's draft legislation tiptoed rather timidly in that direction by removing exemptions for religious providers of aged care; elderly residents will in the future be treated with decency, even if their inherent characteristics or relationship statuses don't measure up to the exacting standards of the Vatican. The government has, however, exhibited willingness to wave through exemptions for other religious service providers, and this is of particular concern in the health sector.

Catholic-run hospitals in Australia operate according to a code of 'ethics' approved by the Vatican. In such hospitals, public

or otherwise, emergency contraception will not be supplied to victims of sexual assault, nor will the patient be referred to the Rape Crisis Centre where contraception can be administered. As medical ethicist Leslie Cannold has pointed out, a woman in a public hospital run by the Catholic healthcare system can be refused both an abortion and a referral to another provider, even when her health is at risk. This is not a hypothetical situation; in 2010 staffers at a Catholic-run American hospital were sacked for providing an abortion to save a woman's life. Savita Halappanavar was not so lucky. In October 2012 the young Hindu dentist died of septicaemia at an Irish hospital which allegedly refused to perform a termination that could have saved her.

This is not a simple matter of choice where a patient can choose to access another healthcare provider. It is a situation that exists in government-funded public hospitals, that exists in emergency scenarios, and exists in rural areas where the religious hospital is the only hospital. Again, the expansion of religiously run social services amplifies the impact of these policies. Catholic hospitals, both public and private, account for 10 per cent of all hospital beds in Australia, including in rural areas where no other choice is available. It might be possible to excuse this state of affairs on historical grounds were it not for the fact that it continues today. The WA Health Department is a prime example of the readiness of state government officials to proliferate Catholic-run public hospitals. The new Midlands campus will open in 2015 under the operation of St John of God Health care, despite their refusal to supply certain essential procedures for women.

The good news is that the Senate committee recommends the removal of exemptions for all services, not just aged care. However, this would effectively mean that Catholic hospitals and other religious organisations would no longer be permitted to discriminate on the grounds of, say, pregnancy or 'potential pregnancy', and in public hospitals would presumably be required to offer a full range of services. Can we really hope that Catholic hospitals will agree to do this any time soon? How will the government respond to this recommendation?

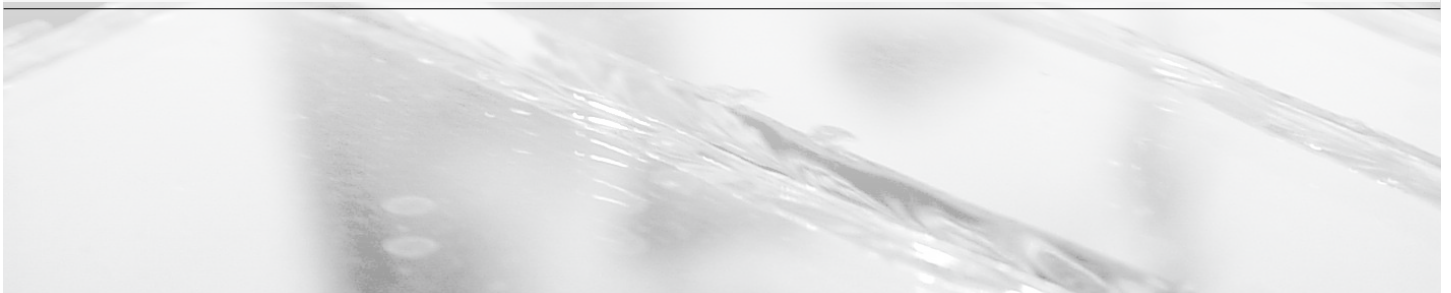
The answer could lie within submissions to the inquiry by religious organisations and, specifically, within clause 23, which describes a general exception for 'justifiable conduct'.

Many religious organisations complained that the draft legislation was to grant them 'exceptions'. Needless to say, they were not at all perplexed by the material results of those exceptions; rather, the terminology was the point of contention. They claimed that it 'undermined' their rights to religious freedom, and positioned religious freedom as a 'lesser' right. They proposed several solutions, one of which was to add a paragraph to clause 23 to explicitly state that the 'protection, advancement or exercise of another human right . . . is justifiable conduct'.

The government is under a good deal of pressure from the churches. Since religious organisations run many essential services (thanks to preferential treatment on the part of the government) they wield significant influence. The government will not find it easy to implement the Senate inquiry's recommendations for religious service providers. Even if it does, it remains to be seen whether Catholic providers will comply, whether anyone will challenge their lack of compliance, and if such challenges occur how the courts will interpret clause 23. Since 'religion' itself is a protected attribute, it is difficult to know what will constitute 'justifiable conduct'.

Although the inquiry's report is disappointing with respect to employment, it does at least pave the way for improved legislation for the recipients of service providers. The difficulty is that the legislation harbours potential loopholes, and it would be good to see effective amendments to the document, in addition to future resolutions elsewhere for the gradual rollback of religious management of public services. Unless the government takes a courageous stand, unless such legislation can successfully work its way through Parliament, for religious employers and service providers it could well be business as usual.

"Australian anti-discrimination legislation has evolved into a mess."



The truth about Jesus

Sifting through what little evidence there is about the origins of Christianity.

by Ian Hayward Robinson

The truth about Jesus is that we just don't know what the truth about Jesus is. There are of course a number of accounts of his life and words, and some of the deeds described and the sayings quoted may well have occurred or been said. But the problem is that the only accounts we have have been through such a tenuous transmission process and contain so many contradictions that it is nigh impossible to say with any certainty which bits are true and which are not.

We know that Christians existed back then, but the evidence for the existence of the religion's purported founder is so shaky that many have argued that no such person as Jesus ever existed. It can't be proved, but I believe, on the balance of probabilities, that there was indeed a Nazarene preacher called Jesus living and working in Palestine around 30CE. However there are a multiplicity of problems in being certain about much else about him.

Let's examine the fragile thread that gives us the stories about Jesus we have today.

The first important fact is that Jesus spoke and preached in Aramaic, the common Palestinian language of the day. But the accounts we have of him were written in Greek. The ease with which things can be "lost in translation" is evident. Without any Aramaic originals we have no way of knowing to what extent our Greek texts are accurate translations of what Jesus actually said.

Second, we have no eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life. Even if we did, this would not bring a great deal of certainty. American psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, among others, has conducted extensive research that challenges the credibility of eyewitness accounts. In the 1990s, when forensic DNA testing first began exonerating previously convicted people, 52 of the first 62 convictions overturned by new DNA evidence involved mistaken eyewitness testimony.

Third, the written accounts we have are transcriptions of already unreliable oral stories that were passed down from person to person for a number of decades before they were written down. The oral transmission of stories is subject to multiple sources of distortion and is of very low reliability. A number of processes well documented by narratologists come into play. For example, storytellers rationalise stories, that is make changes that seem to them to make the story more consistent or coherent or more in line with their purpose or their audience's expectations; they elaborate, add details that make the story more graphic or gripping or amazing; they personalise, that is they move the events of the story to their own experience or that of a close relative or friend, which gives it greater immediacy and credence; and finally, they mythologise, that is, if they are telling the story of a heroic figure,

they introduce story elements that mirror the mythic stories of other cultural heroes, elements which the audience will expect to hear. This certainly seems to have happened in Jesus' case: folklorists have analysed hero myths and established the "ideal type" of the hero story and they have found that the stories recorded about Jesus' life follow this hero paradigm remarkably closely, which raises the suspicion that the mythic aspects of his story, such as his miraculous conception, are no more true than those attributed to King Arthur or Jason or Siegfried.

It should be made clear that such processes are not always deliberate attempts to distort or deceive, but simply reflect the natural and admirable propensity of people telling stories to try to make them as meaningful and as compelling as possible for the listener.

We should also bear in mind that the fairly rigid boundary that exists today between fantasising and describing, between fiction and non-fiction, did not exist in the first century – there was no tradition of fact-finding investigative journalism – and the factual and the fabulous sat easily together in the narrative tradition of the time, as any reading of the classics will reveal.

There is no reason to suppose that such processes as outlined above did not operate on the transmission of the stories circulating in the first century about Jesus. Nor must we forget that most of these stories were not told dispassionately, just for information, but with the purpose of convincing the listener that the hero of the stories, Jesus, was someone worth believing in and worth following – this intention must have influenced the way the tales were told.

So when people such as the authors of the gospels started to write down their stories of Jesus, towards the end of the century, they had no single reliable source of information but a multitude of conflicting stories and theories about Jesus to choose from. Most of them are now lost, suppressed by the Church, although a few resurfaced at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945.

Moreover, the writers of the Gospels were themselves hardly disinterested parties. They were committed Christians and their versions of Jesus' story were written to confirm and strengthen the Christian community in its faith. On top of that, each writer had his own particular agenda and message about Jesus which he wished to push. For example, for Matthew, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, for Luke, he was the saviour of the whole world, and they each constructed their narratives accordingly.

Each evangelist tells a different version of the story and the versions are far from consistent. The myriad contradictions are not denied by Christians, who spend an inordinate amount of

energy trying to resolve them. What is disputed is the ultimate significance of the multiple contradictions, which believers try to minimise. But contradiction in evidence is seen as a key indicator of falsehood in many contexts. Police during interrogations, and barristers in courtroom cross-examination, will variously attempt to catch their subjects out in contradictions and inconsistencies in order to show they are not telling the truth.

Ironically, the Bible itself insists on consistency: in the story of “Susannah and the Elders”, Daniel convicts the two Elders of lying because their accounts differ (in a fairly insignificant particular) and this is accepted by the populace (and by God) as proof of their perfidy. On this criteria, the four Gospels must be untrue.

Be that as it may, the fact is that if they contradict each other they can’t all be true. Perhaps none of them are, or perhaps each of them contains some truth and some falsehood. But in the absence of other evidence, it is impossible to tell which bits are which, so even if we had authenticated manuscripts by each of the four purported authors we would not be in a position to make any reliable statements about what Jesus said or did. Hardly a secure basis for a religious worldview!

But of course we don’t have any such thing. We only have copies, and handwritten copies at that. For the first one thousand five hundred years the way the gospels were transmitted was by painstaking letter-by-letter transcription by multiple hands of varying levels of skill. The opportunities for making mistakes were numerous. And again, the transcribers were not disinterested and were not above making changes and additions when it suited their purposes. The most egregious example is probably the addition of a dozen verses at the end of Mark’s Gospel, describing the alleged resurrection, but there would have been many more of various degrees of significance.

Moreover, the earliest copies of the gospels in Greek that we have date from about 200 AD. Plenty of time for errors to creep in. Variations within the extant Greek texts are by no means rare. In 1707, when Oxford scholar John Mill finally compared the 100 oldest and most reliable Greek Gospel manuscripts then available, he found over 30,000 differences between them. Now we have many more manuscripts and the differences between them have grown exponentially. This testifies to the unreliability of the copying process.

The advent of printing in the fifteenth century meant that large

numbers of identical copies of existing texts could be distributed, which did nothing to rectify the inaccuracies, deliberate or accidental, that were already in them. And there was still the possibility of typesetting errors, which then became fixed and widely disseminated.

So it seems as time went on, the stories about Jesus available to us deviated more and more. In the early years the deviations – mainly additions – would have been quite substantial, as a diversity of stories about Jesus were incorporated. During the ensuing millennium the deviations – mainly transcription errors – would have been less prevalent, and during the last half century would have dropped away to virtually zero.

So how much is now true? For the sake of argument, let’s express it in numerical terms: suppose the average deviation from the truth each year since Jesus’ life and death has been only 0.05% per annum. This is a conservative estimate – the actual average deviation rate is probably much higher. But taking 0.05% per annum as our minimum, then this means that the probability is at best no more than one third of the Gospels account of Jesus is true.

Unfortunately we do not know which parts make up that third. We can however make some educated guesses.

It is most likely that, if anything, it is the plain facts of Jesus’ life that are true. It is not likely that storytellers would speak or write truly about someone being born of a virgin, performing a series of miracles, and rising from the dead, and then invent a totally fictional character called “Jesus of Nazareth”, to whom all these amazing things allegedly happened. What is far more likely, to the point of being the only rational conclusion to draw, is that the true bits concern a Nazarene preacher called Jesus who flourished in first century Palestine and who fell foul of the Romans and was executed; and that all the other stories about virgin birth and miracles and resurrection and ascension are fictional – later accretions to the myth that developed.

So, on the balance of probabilities, the truth about Jesus is that there may have been someone of that name in Galilee in the first century who preached the immanent apocalypse, and who went to Jerusalem in about the year 30, and in the words of the Creed, “was crucified, dead and buried”. But there is nothing else about Jesus we can claim is true, or even to claim as probable. The whole edifice of the Christian religion is based of a flimsy tissue of myths which have a purely human origin.

“When people such as the authors of the gospels started to write down their stories of Jesus, towards the end of the century, they had no single reliable source of information.”

Revolutionary reason

A post-modern observation about the future of rationality.

by Mark Manolopoulos

The experience of the present moment can perhaps be called the paradox of messianic time: on the one hand, given the Global Financial Crisis, the phenomenon of Wall Street power, ongoing economic strife (particularly in Europe), and the apparently ever-accelerating climate-change crisis, I feel as if the global revolution that will save humanity and the Earth may come very soon. But on the other hand, given capitalism's cunning, seductiveness, and resilience, the revolution may only come in the next decade, the next century, the next millennium... or perhaps never.

Only time will tell. But let us linger with the first and most attractive intuition: a feeling of impending revolution: a revolutionary Reason. My thesis is simple enough. Our faith and politics – and our economics, ethics, education system, indeed, all our social structures, institutions, and relations – should be fundamentally driven, shaped, informed by a certain kind of rationality. Our faith and politics must align with – and even conform to – the dictates of a logic that is simultaneously open and discerning, critical and constructive, humble and programmatic.

A key facet of this revolutionary thinking is its openness to self-development and self-revision. We now have at our disposal a range of epistemic currents that have developed, deepened, and nuanced our thinking: Marxism, feminism, ecocriticism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, queer theory. Exposing itself to, and humbly incorporating the truths in these currents, a radical Reason is constantly evolving, expanding. This passionate thinking is ceaselessly appropriating, amending, adopting and adapting the truths in these knowledges, remaining open to the invention and discovery of new epistemic currents which allow it to become more sophisticated, more nuanced, more thoughtful.

The open-mindedness that drives this neo-logic is not indiscriminate or 'anything goes'. On the contrary, it is fiercely selective, discerning. It identifies and retains whatever is good and true in these various fields, and discards their excesses. And each current would condition each other, thus maximizing their individual and collective rigour.

This rule of Reason would, then, not simply be a crude regurgitation of the Enlightenment with all its exaggerations and limitations. It would be a thoroughgoing radicalisation, simultaneously more ambitious and humbler, stricter and more compassionate – what I have begun calling a radical neo-Enlightenment. And so, I contend that a revolutionary faith, economics and politics would not just play lip service to this logic but shall align with it – indeed, conform to it.

To begin with, this neo-rationality treats the question of divine

existence akin to the openness and discernment with which it broaches the new knowledges that re-shape it. How so? First of all, the question of divine existence remains an essentially open one. Why? On the one hand, whilst religions act as if the divine is unequivocally real, there is thus far no compelling proof of divinity – no universally witnessed, indubitable revelation to silence its sceptics and validate its believers.

On the other hand, science cannot definitively settle this question. Given this undecidability, a revolutionary logic remains open to both possibilities. We could perhaps say that this neo-logic is presently 'agnostic' on this particular question – precisely the most rationally rigorous disposition. A treasonous disposition, no doubt, to dogmatic theists and atheists.

Of course, whilst this radical rationality is open-minded, it is not thereby epistemically indiscriminate, ridiculously relativistic, whereby 'any opinion goes.' On the contrary, this open-minded thinking is thoroughly discerning: whilst it remains open-minded when it comes to the question of divine existence, it vigorously critiques how the world's religious beliefs and customs influence social structures and individual actions, whether these influences are ethico-politically emancipatory or domineering.

In other words, it is a radically critical thinking, judging the effects of the various theologies and spiritualities, retaining and refining those that are liberating and progressive, and discarding and forbidding those that are reactionary and oppressive. Some of the positives include the ideals of love, care, justice, egalitarianism, an abiding wonder, receptivity to mystery. Some of the negatives include dogmatism, fundamentalism, extremism, sexism, barbaric ritualism, etc.

Additionally, this radical reasoning would not only maintain and reinforce a strict separation between religious organisations of every persuasion and the State, but these faith communities would also have to adhere to standards of rationality binding secular institutions (non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic). Also, the individual believer could hold beliefs that cannot be rationally compelling or empirically justified -- the revolution could not police our hearts in any practical sense. These beliefs would be held 'privately' in the sense of not being determining factors influencing the individual's public life, their role as a citizen of the world. So, yes, radical neo-Enlightenment involves the radicalisation of a certain secularism. Furthermore, with the increasing influence of this neo-reasoning, it is not unlikely that more of us shall dispense with our old gods and beliefs, constructing a new faith that more fully aligns with this neo-rationality.

Now, the critical treatment of religion by a neo-Enlightenment logic could perhaps be construed as some kind of ‘attack,’ for even though our radical thinking is only against what is bad in faith, quite a lot of badness inhabits it, with its multiple and multiplying disfiguring excesses. But our revolutionary reasoning is certainly no ‘enemy’ of belief in any crude or simplistic sense, for, in sharp contrast to dogmatically atheistic rationalisms (old Marxism, New Atheism), this robust rationality is open to the divine possibility, to faith, to communities of faith. It would therefore be more accurate to describe our neo-logic as faith’s ‘friend’ – a true friend whose friendship is evidenced by a compassionate harshness or ‘tough love.’

Just as religions and spiritualities need to be conditioned by and answerable to this critical thinking, so, too, must our political and economic theory. And these radically rational figurations of faith and political economy and other key social structures will constitute the blueprint for revolution.

Perhaps one useful – but also risky – way of figuring faith, politics, and thinking is by adopting a crude trinitarian framework. According to conventional Christian theological discourse, divinity is a triad consisting of ‘the Father’ (Yahweh/Jehovah), ‘the Son’ (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit: this gender-exclusive language obviously frames the deity as overwhelmingly male (the Spirit being neuter, with intimations of the feminine sophia), thus reinforcing patriarchal religion and all its horrors, whose sexism is obviously offensive to Reason, obstructing the thinking of divinity as possibly male and female and/or beyond gender. So I obviously use the analogy very warily.

Keeping this crucial qualifier in mind, the figure of a trinity is nevertheless useful for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a

thoroughly relational schema: each ‘element’ in the Christian Trinity is, on the one hand, distinct, a distinctive ‘entity,’ so to speak, and yet, paradoxically, they inter-penetrate each other; they are all intertwining, perhaps/probably inter-conditioning each other. They form a unity, a triunity.

So, too, with the faith-politics-Reason triad: they are distinct entities, but they are also overlapping, interconnected, relational.

A couple of examples should suffice to illustrate the point. First of all, consider the Christian emphasis on forgiveness. Given what we now know or theorise about human subjectivity -- its constructedness and conditioning, its unconscious character and multiplicity -- forgiveness is reasonable and necessary, for we are more than and otherwise than ‘rational autonomous agents’ that could be simplistically accountable to ethics, the law, and so on. But does the imperative to forgive belong exclusively to the religious domain? Doesn’t it also inhabit ethics and philosophy and law? Doesn’t it belong to them all, or, having arguably been historically enunciated first in one domain (say, religion), doesn’t it inter-penetrate them all?

A second example: take the very rational idea of treating others as one wants to be treated, the ‘Golden Rule’. Does it belong exclusively to the domain of Scripture, or to ethics, or to rationality?

We acknowledge, then, that each of the ‘separate’ domains of faith and politics and Reason are radically relational, intertwining; that any ‘borders’ that they appear to have are more porous and complicated than the ones we analysts, theoreticians, and scientists erect for the sake of the very honourable pursuits of description and critique, growth in knowledge, and liberation by truth.

“Just as religions and spiritualities need to be conditioned by and answerable to this critical thinking, so, too, must our political and economic theory.”



One of the knottiest questions of philosophy is: 'Can we find knowledge independent of experience?'

In the seventeenth century, rationalism was understood to mean the pursuit of knowledge by a priori reasoning. A priori reasoning was defined to be reasoning from general premises whose truth is known independently of experience. Its prime exemplars were logical (e.g. the principle of non-contradiction), geometrical (e.g. that two straight lines cannot enclose a space), and mechanical (e.g. that a cause is equal to its effect). This was certainly how Descartes had understood it. But Descartes not only believed that such knowledge is possible, he also believed that all knowledge of universal truths that we are capable of possessing is knowable a priori (*Discourse on Method*). Leibniz was also a strong believer in this strong form of rationalism. He said of the supposedly a priori principles he employed that they are true by 'the natural light of reason'.

hydrodynamics, and in fluid dynamics (the Bernoullis, Leibniz, D'Alembert, Euler). The eighteenth century Enlightenment project of developing rational mechanics culminated in the majestic works of Lagrange in his *Mecanique Analytique* (1788), and La Place's *Celestial Mechanics* (1799).

But the Enlightenment was as much a philosophical revolution as it was a scientific one. It began with Galileo and Descartes and it ended with Kant. Locke created a metaphysical framework adequate to accommodate Newton's theory, and this should have been the basis for further developments in epistemology and metaphysics. Traditionally, Locke is linked with Berkeley and Hume as the British Empiricists. But, while there are similarities, Locke's name should be linked with Kant's as the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Locke sought to construct an ontology that would include causal powers, and theories of knowledge and human understanding that would accommodate the Newton's achievements. And, in my view he was largely successful. Kant sought to justify apriorism in science and mathematics, and to define its limitations. And, since the process of developing rational mechanics involved a great deal of a priori reasoning and disputation, some such justification and limitation were evidently required.

But Berkeley and Hume were reactionaries. Berkeley rejected Newton's scientific realism and accepted essentially sceptical views of reality ('To be is to be perceived.'), and of human knowledge, (that all knowledge is basically knowledge of sense experience). And his main contribution to the Enlightenment project was to challenge Newton's theory of fluxions (which, indeed, needed to be challenged. Hume, for his part, accepted an ontology of events, and denied the existence of causal powers. He was an atheist, and consequently did make a major contribution to the Enlightenment project with his secular theories of morality and society. But causal power was psychologised in Hume's philosophy, and considered to be just a projection of our own habitual anticipations of nature on to nature itself. Consequently, all concepts of force had to be rejected, and dynamics reduced to kinematics. But if dynamics is reduced to kinematics, i.e. to the study of how bodies actually move (as Hume's empiricism requires), then Newton's laws of motion must all be rejected, since these laws are all essentially dynamical.

The only philosopher of note to take up the challenge posed by a priori knowledge was Kant, and his major philosophical works are all concerned with explaining and justifying the kind of synthetic a priori knowledge that we have of basic truths of geometry and arithmetic, and in discussing the scope and limits of

such knowledge. His explanation was, as the modern explanation is, that our geometrical, arithmetical, logical and mechanical intuitions are all shaped by our innate dispositions to perceive, understand, and think about the world as we do. As a theist, Kant naturally supposed that these dispositions must have been implanted in us by God to make us rational animals, and so able to appreciate the nature of His creation. He also supposed that in making us in His own image, God gave us free will, and thus able to affect changes in the world. Thus, the world might be essentially passive. But, according to Kant, we are not.

Galileo and Newton decisively overthrew Aristotelian authority in the natural sciences. The natural philosophers working on the Enlightenment project discovered a range of quasi-mathematical principles of symmetry, continuity, conservation, and so on, which could be used to explain the empirical laws of change or equilibrium discovered in the various fields being considered. And Kantian metaphysics seemed to legitimise these principles. With the publication of Newton's *Principia*, a new age had undoubtedly begun—one which has now become known as 'the age of Reason'.

The effects of this revolution are still being felt today. Rationalism is no longer thought to provide an appropriate

in determining suitable natural preferences.) In economics, it has succeeded in entrenching the myth of the invisible hand, and in justifying free market economics. In the field of morality, it has led to the development of individualistic ethics, and the wholesale rejection of positive human rights (nowadays call 'entitlements').

Yet the methodologies that are followed in these two areas are rationalistic in precisely the sense in which geometry has been pursued since classical times. In both areas, for example, empirical studies of the objects of investigation are considered irrelevant. A geometer, who drew figures and measured angles in order to determine the sum of the internal angles of a pentagon, would be laughed out of court. The sum is known a priori to be six right angles. If he got the same result empirically, you would not admire him for his painstaking and careful work. You would surely think that he simply did not understand the nature of the subject.

Similar attitudes undoubtedly exist now concerning the relevance of empirical studies in economics. Indeed, this view of economists about their own subject is pretty much standard. Consequently, many of those who have been raised in the economic rationalist tradition simply have no time for, or interest in, empirical findings concerning real people or real economies.

"The effects of rationalistic thought are now most strongly evident in economic theory and moral philosophy."

methodology for science. But it is still a force to be reckoned with because most of the intuitive beliefs we have about space, time, force, and motion are still with us. Plausibly, they are just human evolutionary responses to the nature of the environment in which we live. We happen to live in a region of the universe where space is very nearly Euclidean.

Consequently, it is not really surprising that we should have evolved a Euclidean spatial framework for conceiving the world about us. The world is also not strictly Newtonian. But again, it is near enough to Newtonian to have made some of Newton's intuitions about force and motion seem almost self-evident.

Yet, if our spatial and dynamical intuitions are products of evolution, as seems likely, we cannot just dismiss them as metaphysical speculations. We have to learn to respect them, without building too much upon them, and be willing to adjust our scientific theories to fit the reality we are now able to observe with a precision undreamt of in the eighteenth century.

The effects of rationalistic thought are now most strongly evident in economic theory and moral philosophy, where, a priori we should least expect them to give us any significant guidance. (Societies of the kinds in which we mostly live now have not existed long enough for natural selection to be effective

Economic rationalists (also known as 'free-market economists' and 'neo-liberals') work on the theory that, if left to their own resources, free markets, free trade, and so on, will eventually come to a prosperous state of equilibrium, in which there will be no 'involuntary' unemployment. Their economic models all 'prove' this to be the case.

John Maynard Keynes was well aware of the kind of opposition he faced. In 1936, in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynes said:

"The Classical Economists resemble Euclidean geometers in a non-Euclidean world who, discovering that in experience straight lines apparently parallel often meet, rebuke the lines for not keeping straight—as the only remedy for the unfortunate collisions which are occurring. Yet in truth, there is no remedy except to throw over the axiom of parallels and to work out a non-Euclidean geometry. Something similar is required today in economics. We need to throw over postulate[s] of the classical doctrine and to work out the behaviour of a system in which involuntary unemployment in the strict sense is possible." (Davidson, 2007: 26)

The attitudes of moral theorists to empirical data are mostly like those of the economic rationalists. Empirical evidence concerning the likeliness of bad consequences of rigorously enforced moral

positions are deemed to be irrelevant. And those who raise such objections are pejoratively called 'consequentialists'.

But consequentialists have themselves largely to blame. They do not challenge the moral rationalists at the deeper level, where they should. Moral rights, obligations and responsibilities are about what all social agents of a given kind should or should not do. If X has a moral right to do something, or be protected from something, then the government has an obligation to provide for this contingency. If X has a moral obligation to do something, then anyone appropriately like X in similar circumstances would have the same obligation. But these are not matters that X can or should decide without general agreement. I cannot justifiably decide anything on behalf of the government. Nor can I justifiably decide anything for everyone else who may ever be like me in similar circumstances. Therefore, a moral theory requires a social foundation, not an individualistic one.

Such a foundation is provided in my recent book: *Social Humanism: A New Metaphysics*. Kant's meta-ethical theory would also seem to support a practical theory of moral rights, etc. But only because he supports the practice of individuals legislating on behalf of everyone else, (and, indeed, for every other social agent for that matter, including the government). He does so, because he believes that individuals have the God-given capacity to know a priori what is right or wrong, and therefore to know it with the kind of certainty appropriate to a Euclidean axiom. But surely, our moral responses are not just evolutionary responses to human social experience. If they were, they would all be the same in whatever societies we might live. And even that would not guarantee that they were right in any absolute sense.

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Can't we all just get along?

Philosophy and science should work together, not compete.

by Peter Ellerton

Recently, Philosophy has copped a bit of a bashing from science; Stephen Hawking has even said it is dead. This has ruffled the feathers of philosophers and put a smirk on the faces of those for whom philosophy represents an esoteric and arcane way of dealing with the world.

Now, there are certainly philosophers who deal in obscure subject matter, or at least subject matter that is so abstracted from human experience that the connection between it and our everyday problems is more than tenuous. Certain metaphysical problems in time and identity, for example, are easy to point at in this regard. There are also philosophers who are disdainful of people working in other disciplines, philosophers who cling to an outdated idea of philosophy as the ultimate arbiter of epistemic credibility.

Other philosophers, such as Peter Singer and Dan Dennett, are very clear about the practical outcomes of their philosophy (or at least that there are practical outcomes). They also take pleasure in communicating this to the public in an engaging and accessible manner; indeed, they see this as a duty.

So what is philosophy today that means it can be in any sense related to the problems of modern living?

The first and most common answer is that philosophy answers questions of value. What should we value? Why should we value it? This naturally leads to questions of justice and fairness and thence to questions of social and political philosophy (though there are other ways to get there). Moral philosophy can hold its ground because nothing much is yet shaking it.

Not so questions of ontology, which are about what exists and what it might be like. Here physics has been rattling philosophy's cage with increasing intensity over time, leading to Hawking's comment. There is a sense in which it seems that philosophy, like religion, is being pushed by science into smaller and smaller volumes, becoming less relevant and more desperate for attention as it is starved for meaning and significance. But to think this is to badly misunderstand philosophy.

Philosophy can offer more than moral confidence or guidance. We forget that the roots of critical thinking can be traced back to philosophy. I don't just mean this in a historical sense (thanks, Aristotle), but also in a discipline sense. Too often people consider philosophy vague, hand-waving fluff. They do not recognize that it is, at core, a deeply analytical process. It is the one domain where the only thing that counts is how well you can think.

One of the defining characteristics of a good critical thinker is the ability to be metacognitive, which is to say that you are aware of your own thought process and are able to evaluate and

direct these as you see fit using the appropriate cognitive tools. Thinking about thinking is a necessary condition of philosophical practice, and hence metacognition is found in fullest bloom in the philosophy department of universities. It is also true that much of what is published in the area of critical thinking originates from these places.

Having said that, there is a world of difference between teaching people philosophy and teaching people to think philosophically. Teaching philosophy can be as dry and content driven as teaching any collection of facts. It's true the subject matter itself is often mind-expanding, but that's also true for physics, say, which we know can be taught as if its nothing but data and algorithms. Philosophical thinking is not about subject matter, but about how subject matter is dealt with. Those who think philosophically are capable of going beyond discipline methodology; they are the ones who come up with the most interesting questions. And they are not always philosophers.

It's a rare discipline that would not claim for itself some skill in developing critical thinkers, and I'm constantly speaking with science, history and English academics who see no need for critical thinking outside what their standard courses offer. This has some truth to it. All methodologies embed critical thinking processes – that's why they exist, because they can critically process information. But a philosophical study of critical thinking reveals commonality across disciplines and methodologies that can be abstracted and taught.

In science, as an example, we seek to falsify hypotheses, not confirm them. We do this for several reasons, the first is that no matter how many times we confirm a hypothesis we have not proved it, and the second is because we much prefer to confirm our ideas than falsify them, a cognitive characteristic known as the confirmation bias. Science knows this and has developed a methodology that can manage the consequences of this for inquiry.

But how many courses teach the connection between confirmation bias and the need to falsify hypotheses? As someone who is trained in and has taught science for many years, I have never come across a text or course that explicitly states this.

The more we can encourage this the better, so why not let philosophy get a look in? Not to pass judgment, but to enrich and clarify. This means that some philosophers, often their own worst enemy in terms of public understanding, may need to dirty their hands with other disciplines and knowledges, or at least submit to an apprenticeship of sorts. Better to lend a hand that set up shop in opposition.

Not so big, not such a bang

by Alan Sparx



The strength of a scientific theory lies in whether or not it can be used to make predictions. This presents a problem for the Big Bang theory. It is yet to be used to make any successful predictions.

The Big Bang theory has received far more than its share of attention, but one thing good scientists learn is to not be too attached to a theory. Even those that become scientific law may be found wanting for a minor infraction. The Big Bang theory has been found wanting for a large number of much more significant reasons.

There are a growing number of scientists who are extremely concerned that the peer review system has become nothing more than a conformity check which does not augur well for the progress of science. Scientists who make discoveries that do not support the current paradigm are excluded and not given access to reasoned criticism from their peers; they are filtered out. And this applies not just to cosmology and astronomy but to most of the sciences and other fields of inquiry. Our funding system is in need of a major re-think.

The Big Bang was given its name by noted astronomer Fred Hoyle. Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian scientist who is referred to as father of the Big Bang hypothesis, described his theory as “the Cosmic Egg exploding at the moment of the creation”. Hoyle disparagingly gave it the name Big Bang.

To understand the debate, we need to consider the phenomenon of redshift, which is for light what the “Doppler effect”, is for sound. Christian Doppler in 1842 was the first to offer an explanation for why the pitch of a sound changes when the source speeds past an observer (when a train whistle goes past, for example, it changes in pitch). In 1848, French physicist Hippolyte Fizeau was able to describe a Doppler redshift for light. He pointed to the shift in spectral lines seen in stars as being due to the Doppler effect. That effect is now mostly described as redshift. That we can measure the speed of stellar objects moving away from an observer by determining the extent of redshift is unchallenged.

As recently as a hundred years ago the view of most, if not

all, astronomers was that our Milky Way galaxy was the entire universe and that it was static. But in 1915 Einstein proposed his theory of general relativity, a theory of gravity. Einstein found that his equations did not allow for a static universe unless he inserted a certain constant in the mathematics which became known as the cosmological constant. Then in 1922 the Russian Aleksandr Friedmann (1888 – 1925) found solutions to Einstein’s equations which allowed the universe to either expand, contract or be static. When, in 1927 Belgian priest/scientist Georges Lemaitre also discovered these solutions, possibly independently, he chose to promote the idea that the universe is expanding rather than static. He put forward his “Cosmic Egg exploding at the moment of the creation” which was parodied by Hoyle as the “Big Bang”. That is the name that has stuck.

Next, in 1929, the American Edwin Hubble made possibly the most important astronomical discovery of the twentieth century: that the shift in the spectra of galaxies is proportional to their apparent brightness. Scientists were still finding it a bit hard to come to terms with the idea that galaxies other than our own populated the universe. The most obvious interpretation of Hubble’s data was that the more distant, and therefore the fainter the galaxy, the greater the redshift. Ergo the faster they are moving away from us.

Today, redshift is routinely used to measure distance and considered to be a superior measure to apparent brightness. By the 1930s the front page of the New York Times stated that we live in an expanding universe though for almost the next 40 years the scientific community remained undecided between the static or the expanding universe, including Hubble himself, who died in 1953.

At this point, Quasi Stellar Objects or Quasars were discovered. They thoroughly defy Hubble’s Law and brought with them such anomalous results that Hubble’s Law should probably have been downgraded to a theory.

Hubble created a graph of brightness versus redshift for

galaxies, a nice straight line with the data respectably close to the line. But by the 1960s it was discovered that there were now a large number of objects out there that were not respectably close to the line. Worse, no one knew what they were. They certainly did not seem to be galaxies, and yet the only thing we should be able to see at those distances are galaxies.

These peculiar objects were dubbed Quasi Stellar Objects. According to their redshift distances they must be spectacularly bright, because they appear to be star like and yet they have more calculated luminance than two trillion stars put together.

They have some very strange properties. Stars become fainter with increasing distance because their energy is spread out over a larger and larger surface. If we see near a normal galaxy a Quasar with similar brightness it would be assumed to be the same distance from the observer. However, the Quasars will have much greater redshift, which puts it very much further away than the galaxy. Since the Quasar is much further away, according to its redshift, yet it has similar brightness to the galaxy, it must have a different means of creating brightness than a galaxy.

Indeed Quasars, if we take them to be at the distance the redshift suggests, must have a luminosity 2 trillion times that of our sun. Or, to put it another way, if you took all of the stars of one hundred Milky Way galaxies and crammed them all together, then you may have sufficient luminosity.

To add to the conundrums Quasars are small. By comparison, our galaxy is 100,000 light-years across whilst Quasars are typically less than one light-year across and often not much larger than our solar system. So getting all those stars from one hundred galaxies to fit into that rather small space is, on the face of it, just not on.

To continue to insist that Quasars are at the distance suggested by their redshift, it is necessary to contrive a whole new mechanism, such as super massive black holes. This speculative contrivance is completely untestable and verges on the metaphysical. Theoreticians, astronomers and cosmologists might have taken on the challenge of creating a new theory to account for the different redshifts of Quasars. But having witnessed the treatment of one of their colleagues they have become reluctant.

That person is the astronomer Halton Arp. The head of the Californian Institute of Technology's (Caltech) telescope allocation committee disallowed Arp telescope time for pursuing his interest in peculiar galaxies, particularly those with apparent association with Quasars. This imposition left Arp, who had a PhD from Caltech, with little option but to resign. He is seen by many as a hero and sometimes referred to as a twentieth century Galileo.

Yet he is systematically prevented from publishing his results and from having telescope time.

Official photos are routinely cropped to exclude his exciting discoveries. There is a kind of lemming-like momentum in science faculties today. Big Bang and string theory scientists are devoted to, and get funding for, following the idea that there is only one possible explanation for redshift. The interpretation of redshift is the founding premise for a large number of jobs in physics, astronomy and cosmology. The moment one considers other possible explanations then the foundations are shaken and continued funding is unlikely to be forthcoming.

This is leading to a form of corruption within University campuses, to the extent that departments will issue falsified data, or alter images to convince us that something, which has been photographically observed, simply does not exist.

This is not recent. One particular denial has been going on since 1966. Arp discovered that one galaxy, NGC4319, has a protrusion linking two stellar objects, which was confirmed by Jack Sulentic in the early 1980s.

Yet press releases in Space Telescope Science Institute, the research arm of NASA's Hubble telescope, presented shallow field images which did not show the link, stating "the two objects don't even live in the same city." followed by the vacuous: "They are separated by time and space." In denial of any physical link it was concluded that this was proof there was no contradiction with the current expanding universe paradigm.

According to the current paradigm, not only is the universe expanding, its expansion is accelerating. To sustain the argument, it is necessary to claim, or perhaps fabricate, the existence of yet other substances that we cannot find anywhere in the universe: dark energy and dark matter. Dark energy and dark matter are now supposed to comprise 95-96% of the universe -- and all of this just to support the current interpretation of redshift!

Hoyle was very discouraged by this trend and rather cynically said. "Any time you point a new telescope in the sky now, you're only going to find what you know is already up there."

Scientists these days cling too strongly to ideas they are sure are right and are far too reluctant to consider non-supportive arguments. It might even be said that cosmology has become not so much a science as a kind of metaphysics.

Perhaps it is just human nature, but it is clearly not how good scientists think. The Big Bang theory has degenerated into little more than well established prejudice.

"This speculative contrivance is completely untestable and verges on the metaphysical."

Will machines take control?

by Ben Goertzel

Ray Kurzweil is well aware that the concept of a technological singularity (the idea of the emergence of a superintelligent technology that will take control) doesn't fit well into the average person's world view. So in his book, *The Singularity Is Near*, he presents an elaborate and careful argument in favor of his thesis that some sort of technological singularity is going to occur around the middle of this century. He's drawn a lot of exponential curves showing the rate of advance of various aspects of science and technology, reaching toward infinity in 2040–50. His Singularitarian vision is relentlessly positive, involving humans becoming integrated with various technologies – enhancing our brains and bodies, living as long as we want to, and fusing and networking with powerful artificially intelligent minds.

Kurzweil is an accomplished inventor and businessman. He attributes much of his success as an inventor to his ability to forecast the future of technology and thus understand which inventions will best fit into the overall technological and social landscape – and when. But in recent years he's been focusing much of his attention on a more dramatic sort of prediction: the concept of a “technological singularity”.

The technological singularity, first labelled as such by science fiction writer Vernor Vinge, is a hypothetical future point in time when the rate of progress in science and technology becomes so fast that the human mind can't possibly keep pace. The result will be a world with little resemblance to the one we know today – a world where humans are fused with computers; where death due to ageing is abolished; where superhumanly intelligent robots wield great power; and where nanofactories manipulate molecules like Lego, dramatically reducing material scarcity and eliminating the practical need for human labour.

I count myself among the rapidly increasing group of scientists and technologists who generally agree with Kurzweil's vision. In fact, I felt this way before I knew who Ray Kurzweil was, simply from my own study of various technologies, interpreted in the context of a world view shaped by reading a lot of science fiction.

While Kurzweil tends toward optimism, the singularity is not necessarily a utopian vision. It holds a potential for great human fulfilment, but there are also darker options. Anyone who has viewed a few science fiction films can easily envision a singularity in which robots take over and humans are obliterated. Limitations in the capability of science and technology might also become clear after a singularity, ones that we are now too limited in intelligence to foresee.

I don't think a singularity is guaranteed, or anything close. Lots

of things could happen to prevent it. A world war could knock us back to the Stone Age, either using radical advanced bio- or nano-weapons or just good old fashioned nukes. There could be obstacles to scientific and technological progress that we can't now foresee. Or human culture could somehow drift away from technological advance.

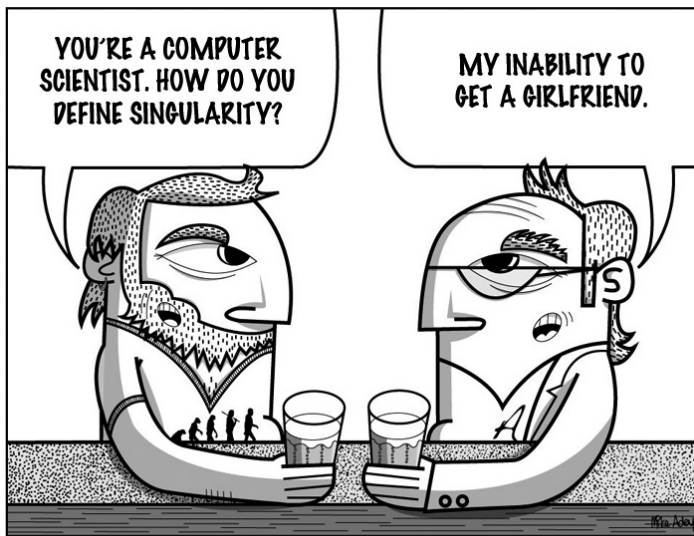
I think these things are possible, but I think they're unlikely. The singularity, in my view, is the most likely outcome for humanity.

In the Kurzweilian/Vingean prediction, as singularity approaches, most advances will be made by AI software, or intelligent robots, or humans uploaded into digital substrates, or humans whose brains have been enhanced via neurally implanted computer chips or other similar technologies. Not all of these options match the everyday media portrayal of “artificial intelligence”, but they have one thing in common: in any of these possibilities, discovery and invention are being wholly or largely driven by engineered technology rather than by good old-fashioned human brains.

One aspect of the singularity I like to stress is that it's not something that's just going to happen to us – it's something that we're going to make. From a big picture perspective, huge advances like the creation of language, or tools, or mathematics, or computers are things that just happen, with a force of historical inevitability. But they happen because of the choices made by individual people in the course of conducting their lives. We, who are alive today, are going to play a large role in creating the singularity, and in determining what kind of singularity it is.

Those of us who live in the developed world these days, at the start of the 21st century, have a wonderful amount of freedom to choose what kind of work we do and how to spend our time. It's not the same level of freedom that will likely be afforded once the singularity has drastically minimised material scarcity, but it's far more than most of our historical predecessors have. So I'd encourage you to do your own research on the singularity and related ideas – and if you find the Singularitarian thinking of Kurzweil, myself and others compelling, ask yourself what you might be able to do to help!

Exactly what forms the first highly powerful AI will take remains unclear at this stage. Will they be humanoid robots serving various real-world roles like house-cleaner or laboratory scientist? Will they be software programs inhabiting the Internet rather than the everyday human world? Will they be uploaded humans – ordinary human personalities scanned from human



Words by Simon Taylor • Drawing by Mike Adey FlimFlamComic.com

brains, re-implemented in digital form inside computers or robots, and then improved in various ways? Will they be cyborgs – part human brain, part “brain chip”?

I like to clearly distinguish two kinds of AI – one that I call “narrow AI” and the other that I call “general AI”, “Artificial General Intelligence” or simply AGI. In the early days of the AI research field, no such distinction existed – the original AI researchers in the 1950s were focused on creating software and robots with the same general thinking power as human beings. But in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the AI field drifted away from this focus toward the easier problem of making software capable of solving highly specific problems in specialised domains. Most of the research done in this era was focused on designing programs to do very particular things like play chess, predict stockmarkets, control industrial robot arms and search databases. These sorts of specialised problem-solving applications are fascinating and valuable, yet very different than trying to build a human-level general thinking machine.

Even relatively unintelligent, uneducated humans possess a kind of general problem-solving ability that these narrowly brilliant programs lack: the ability to go into a new kind of situation, gradually orient ourselves and figure out what’s going

on, and get incrementally better and better at achieving our goals in the next context.

For instance, if a person became very good at playing chess, they would still be able to play fairly well even if the rules of chess were changed slightly. No brain surgery would be necessary. But to get Deep Blue to play a slightly modified version of chess you’d need to change its programming at least a little – the computer equivalent of brain surgery. Deep Blue can’t automatically adapt to changing situations and figure out how to achieve its goals therein because it has narrow AI, not AGI.

Why is the time now ripe for creating AGI? After all, the AI field has been around for 50 years and no one has created the human-level thinking machine yet. Why is 2012 so different than 2002 or 1972?

We understand the brain a lot better now than we did a few years ago. We’re nowhere near understanding “how the brain works” yet, but combining neuroscience information with knowledge from psychology, computer science, philosophy, linguistics, genetics and other areas, cognitive science is putting together a reasonable understanding of how the mind works.

The second factor is cognitive science, which has advanced tremendously in recent decades. By combining results and ideas from a host of different experiments and theories, cognitive scientists now have a reasonable understanding of the different aspects of the human mind, how they connect with each other, and how they conspire to create human-level intelligence. We had far less of a clue about these things three or four decades ago. Cognitive science came together as an integrated discipline in the 1980s and it’s grown up a lot since.

As a third factor paving the way toward the creation of AGI, computer science has advanced tremendously in recent decades. Put simply, we have much better algorithms now. The same algorithms we have now, even if implemented on computers from decades ago, would proceed dozens or hundreds of times faster than the algorithms from decades ago.

We live at an extraordinary time in history, and have the chance to participate in creating an amazing new world.

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“The technological singularity... is a hypothetical future point in time when the rate of progress in science and technology becomes so fast that the human mind can’t possibly keep pace”

Time to think with our head

We can easily make the head of state Australian by dispensing with the words 'republic' and 'president.'

by Ron Walker

In 1999 the Australian people rejected a constitutional amendment to establish a Republic. The continuing debate about replacing the hereditary British Monarch as our Head of State is desultory.

At this time the Australian people as a whole do not place this issue high on their priorities. Nevertheless the government has foreshadowed that at the next election it will start the process of asking the Australian electorate for its views and decisions on the subject.

The issue could become urgent if our present Queen came to the end of her reign. It would be much better to be prepared rather than scramble to a hasty and unthought through answer.

The 1999 referendum questions should not be re-presented to the Australian people. The issue of Australia's remaining constitutional tie to the British Monarch calls for a new approach that is simpler and more likely to receive general assent.

The Federal Constitution is written as if the Monarch of the UK were sovereign in Australia. This personal sovereignty was already something of a legal fiction in 1901. Today, the Australian people (not the Monarch) are sovereign in Australia. This is the general view of constitutional lawyers and conforms with general popular sentiment (although few people ever think explicitly about the issue). It is also arguably implicit in Section 128 of the Federal Constitution which is interpreted to mean the Australian people (not the Monarch) can alter the Constitution and indeed in the preamble, which cites the wishes of the people as the first reason for the Constitution to be written and proclaimed. Similarly, the States under their respective Constitutions implicitly recognise the sovereignty of the people of their respective States but explicitly maintain the fiction of personal sovereignty by the Monarch.

Current texts of the Constitutions do not reflect this sovereignty, however. Our Federal Constitution and that of each of the States are in the form of an Act of the British Parliament. The Federal Constitution in its preamble reflects the historical origin of the Constitution as a gift of the British Parliament. It does not reflect the fact that the Australian people later by referendum accepted that gift and became owners of the Constitution.

Another British Act of Parliament (the Australia Act) precludes the UK government from advising the Queen on Australian affairs (except as regards the Royal Succession). In other words, our independence from Britain is enshrined in British law, but not in Australian law.

British law, self evidently, could be repealed or infringed by a British government. This may seem theoretical; but more

plausible is that a British government might advise her on a matter of significance to both countries (for example to push for British commercial interests, disregarding ours –fair enough for the Brits to use their head of state for their purposes; but off-putting for our head of state to be used by a foreign government, perhaps against our interests).

What is the remedy? It would be appropriate for our Federal Constitution to reflect our sovereignty and for our independence to flow from that document. Only a small change would be required: replace the present preamble by the words "We the Australian people affirm our sovereignty and this our Constitution."

There would then have to be consequential textual changes. Where the Constitution presently refers to the sovereign the words "sovereign Australian people" would replace "queen" or "crown" etc., with such grammatical or other formal adjustments as this necessitates. Those elements of the present preamble that may be useful in Australian law would be repackaged in an appendix.

In short, all that is proposed are minor amendments to bring the text of the Federal Constitution into line with present popular and legal opinion and sentiment. No change is proposed in our operational constitutional arrangements. No expectations or fears of drastic change are warranted.

How does this contrast with the proposals rejected in the 1999 plebiscite? The first question put to electors was whether they approved of a proposed law to "alter the Constitution to establish the Commonwealth of Australia as a republic with the Queen and Governor-General being replaced by a President appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament".

In retrospect, this question invited a negative response. It suggested that a major change was proposed and that the name or nature of the Federation might be changed. In reality, there is no reason to call ourselves anything other than "the Commonwealth of Australia" or to mention the word "republic", which has no positive resonance for most Australian people.

It proposed giving Australia a "President", when that word has negative baggage for most Australians. It proposed merging the currently distinct roles of Head of State and Governor General, which would be a radical change to our constitutional arrangements. It suggested this President would be our sovereign. It proposed enshrining in our Constitution a procedure for appointing the President, when public opinion on that issue was divided.

It is worth considering the powers and role of the Governor General and State Governors. Our Constitutions say that the

Governor General and State Governors have several explicit powers and responsibilities. Notably they call and prorogue Parliament and have responsibility for giving Assent to convert bills into Acts (i.e. law). This latter power is extremely important. Assent should be refused if a bill had not passed the constitutionally required processes. The power thus acts as a deterrent and backstop forcing governments to make sure all legislation is procedurally correct.

In practice the Governor General and State Governors have acquired more far-reaching powers and duties. They appoint and dismiss prime ministers and premiers and thus governments. They have unspecified “reserve powers” which amount to the power to do whatever is necessary in the national interest in circumstances unforeseen by the Constitutions.

If the textual change to our Federal Constitution made explicit the sovereignty of the Australian people, the Governor General’s legal role would continue unchanged ---as would his/her title.

The Governor General plays yet another role which is not mentioned in the Constitution and which she or he fulfills because the Head of State is usually absent from Australia and little involved in its affairs. The Governor General seeks to embody the nation and to speak for us, both domestically and internationally. But her or his ability to do so is constrained by an unclearly delineated role in this sphere and the competing existence of the British Monarch as Head of State.

Today our Head of State has only one legal function: to appoint or dismiss a Governor General or a State Governor at the request

our expectations require this role to be performed by our Head of State. At the moment this is the British Monarch, but any other legitimate Head of State we gave ourselves could do it equally well.

The British Monarch and members of her family fulfill some ceremonial functions when they visit Australia and can on occasions act in relation to Australians outside Australia. But she/he is ill-equipped to act as an embodiment of this nation for domestic purposes. She lives outside Australia and is focused on British affairs. She cannot understand us or articulate our feelings the way an Australian could. She is a confusing focus of loyalty for newcomers to this country – more than one in five of us.

The British Monarch is not equipped to substitute for the Governor General in domestic legal matters, as she does not know these as well as the Governor General does and besides has other consuming calls on her attention. The former practice whereby she performed the functions of the Governor General when she was in Australia has been quietly dropped in the late 20th century. By tradition she does not interfere in Australian affairs. To her credit it should be noted that Elizabeth II has been cautiously reticent, even when some Australians invited her intervention.

Most Australians are put off by the process whereby the successor to the British Monarch is chosen. We don’t like the fact it is by inheritance nor that it is not open to an Australian. Even more inconsistent with our sovereignty – although again not an issue on which most Australians are currently focused– is the ability of non-Australians to determine who is our Head of State. The Royal

“If the textual change to our Federal Constitution made explicit the sovereignty of the Australian people, the Governor General’s legal role would continue unchanged.”

of the government of the Commonwealth or of the relevant State. This function is purely mechanical: it involves no choice or power of refusal on the part of the Head of State.

The Head of State also has an important potential role, not mentioned in the State or Federal Constitutions. That is to be representative of us, an embodiment of the nation and as such the focus of our loyalty and able to articulate our feelings. She or he can speak on behalf of the nation domestically and internationally and send messages to foreign heads of state or to Australian communities or individuals. She or he can also perform ceremonial roles, including awarding decorations (again on the instructions of the government).

The British monarch is unsuitable to these roles. The appointments of Governors General or State Governors at the bidding of the relevant government is so automatic that a machine could do it – albeit a machine would not have the necessary dignity and legitimacy in our eyes. In other words, our Constitutions and

Succession remains a matter on which the UK government retains the prerogative to make decisions.

The Monarch of the UK is not equipped to act for Australia in international affairs. In Britain, New Zealand, Canada, Papua New Guinea and her other realms, they see her as their, not our, Head of State. She cannot represent us to them. When visiting a foreign country beyond her realms she is seen there as the Head of State of the United Kingdom, not Australia. In her international dealings, she advances the interests of the United Kingdom, not those of Australia.

At the emotional level, what the House of Windsor means to us as individuals varies from the deep affection of the monarchists, through the mild good will of many, indifference of many others and active dislike of some. They are no longer a unifying focus, nor an emblem of our nationhood.

Historically, there was a time when Australians legally were British subjects and this common subjection to the Monarch of the

UK was part of our sense of identity. Economically and militarily we were part of the British Empire and culturally, although we were provincial and increasingly local, the UK was almost our exclusive touchstone. We spoke of the British Isles as “Home”. But all this has changed, since World War 2, especially after Britain’s entry into the EC and our tentative involvement with post-colonial Asia.

We have strong remaining ties with the UK, a large and valued British inheritance in our institutions and many of us have deep involvement with and affection for family and at least some aspects of Britain. All that is much more significant than the residual token function of the British Monarch in anointing our choice of Governor General or the dead letter references to the Queen in our constitutions. The real ties do not depend on these anachronistic leftovers and would not be diminished if their wilted remains were discarded.

If the Head of State lived in Australia and were focused on Australian affairs she or he could be expected to perform better than an absent, distant British Monarch at understanding and articulating the feelings and aspirations of the Australian people

at times of triumph, sorrow, introspection or rededication – if only because she or he had been chosen for this task and was committed to it full time. He or she would be more effective as a focus of loyalty and popular affection. Internationally she or he would be immediately and uniquely recognisable as an embodiment of the Australian nation.

The Head of State would inevitably compete to a degree in these roles with the Prime Minister – as does the Governor General today. Management of this relationship would call for skill on both parts. But if the Head of State also had the powers of Governors General, to assent to bills, appoint governments, call or prorogue parliaments etc, the power of the Head of State against that of the Prime Minister would be increased to the point of changing our constitutional arrangements. There is very little demand for such a change and much fear of what it would mean.

I believe the Australian people are ready to affirm their sovereignty, as long as they are not asked at the same time to change our constitutional arrangements as well.



The undiscovered country

by Graeme Lindenmayer

Proof of Heaven is an account by neurosurgeon Eben Alexander of how he came to believe that he has directly experienced and communicated with a supernatural entity. A central part of that belief is that consciousness is supernatural and independent of the brain.

I should declare my own perspective on this. I am an Agnostic, believing in neither the existence nor the non-existence of the supernatural. But I think one of the few things that might possibly point to the existence of something supernatural is consciousness. I look very hard at any purported evidence put forward by either side of that argument.

Proof of Heaven is a bit like a novel. It is easy to read and has a plot. It has lots of characters and lots of descriptive detail. It has lots of scientific explanations that are relevant to the story and there are also continual reminders that as a neurosurgeon Doctor Eben Alexander M.D. knows all the science relating to his experiences. There are also continual statements that he knows that his experiences of the supernatural are more real than his experiences of the material world. And he uses italics a lot to emphasise this.

According to his account, Alexander's belief arose from incidents in his life that he is sure could have no material explanation. This raises issues. Were the incidents exactly as he relates them? Does he really believe that their only possible explanation must be supernatural? If he does believe so, what has convinced him; and does the book provide any justification for belief in the supernatural?

There were several significant incidents. As a boy he often dreamt he could fly and could reach the stars, and this was associated with a real-life obsession with flying. Once, during

freefall while skydiving, he was in a situation where his split-second action saved at least two people, including him, from certain death. He believes his brain could not have had enough time to decide on the crucial action.

As a child he had been content with his loving adoptive parents. Later, after his sons became teenagers and asked about their biological grandparents, he started to feel that something was missing in his life. When, after much unsuccessful trying, he finally managed to contact his biological parents he was overjoyed, and his wish that he could believe in God, long-suppressed by his scientific training, became more intense.

And then a very serious and unaccountable disease affected his cerebrospinal fluid, causing him great pain, and putting him in a coma for a week in an intensive-care room in the hospital where he had been working for some years. While in a coma he had a typical near-death-experience, leading, after further experiences, to finding himself in an indescribably grand and beautiful place and encountering an angelic personage in the form of a girl. The girl spoke to him wordlessly, but he understood. On a second visit to this place he wordlessly learnt and understood the greatness and realness of the universe, and its secrets.

His consciousness of all these things was direct, that is, quite independent of his brain, which had been very badly damaged and, as "all the charts indicated", completely shut down.

Miraculously, he recovered. He opened his eyes and blinked, to the immense joy of family and friends who were there. They were astonished that he was still alive. He then sat up and assured all that he was now well. He then went through the typical disorientated recovery period that follows a long severe coma, trying to remember things from his previous life but able to

remember every detail of his experiences during the coma.

Shortly after he recovered, his birth mother sent him a photo of his now deceased biological sister whom he had never met. To his astonishment the photo perfectly resembled the angelic girl he met during his coma.

Each of these incidents is described in great, and sometimes surprising, detail. For example, at the onset of his brain infection Alexander takes a bath to relieve his excruciatingly painful headache. When this does not help, he gets out of the bath and puts on his “scarlet terry-cloth bathrobe”.

So how much of this is true? I assume his skydiving club existed, but the skydiving incident might not have been as critical as reported. An internet search confirms his professional status and location. In the book, another neurosurgeon from his hospital confirms how sick he was.

We have to take on trust everything that he thought and felt and saw. If true, it is easy to understand how these experiences convinced him about the supernatural. Here was the rationale to satisfy the longing for belief that he had suppressed. As mentioned in his book and confirmed by a website, he co-founded an institution to spread the good news. Most of his colleagues, however, are not convinced.

Does this book provide any justification for the existence of the supernatural? The cynics have already pointed out that it

topped the New York book sales immediately on its release. The story has elements of suspense and of hope. In parts it's a bit of a tearjerker. It says everything believers like to hear. And it's written by someone who was a sceptical neurosurgeon and has now discovered the truth. No wonder the cynics are suspicious. But that says nothing about truth.

Dr Alexander goes through all the materialistic arguments that scientists use to explain near-death-experiences, mystical experiences and numinous experiences. He dismisses them all. And his grounds for dismissal? Well, his brain was partly destroyed by the infection and had shut down, so there was no effective material brain to cause his experiences. But it is, presumably, the same brain that allowed him to open his eyes and sit up and speak immediately on coming out of the coma. It is the brain that now enables him to see and hear and feel and write *Proof of Heaven*. (But now it cannot quite understand the secrets of Heaven,) And as for seeing and experiencing independently of the brain, it does not take much loss of brain to destroy sight or hearing or memory.

Alexander is not the only person to have “seen the other side”: he had one version of a well-known and diversely interpreted experience. He tells an entertaining story about it. Parts of it may be true, but it is still a fairy tale.

Proof of Heaven: A neurosurgeon's journey into the afterlife.
 Eben Alexander. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Wisdom: From philosophy to neuroscience

by Meredith Doig

Many years ago, I acquired a book called *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven Covey. It sat on my bookshelves for a couple of years before I could bring myself to read it such was my aversion to the title. However when I did, I found it was actually quite insightful. For example, the introduction traces the history of how descriptions of human nature have changed over time, pointing out that before the 20th century it was common to refer to someone's ‘character’ but since the rise of psychology as a professional discipline, it has become more common to refer to ‘personality’. And whereas character has connotations of virtue, personality tends to be a values-free zone. An interesting distinction.

Highly Effective Habit number 2 in this book was “Begin with the End in Mind” and it urged readers to develop a personal mission statement. Now I don't know about you but if a book urges me to stop reading and do something, I usually ignore the plea and keep reading. But the canny Dr Covey anticipated me, and reading

on, I found his challenge to take the time to put into words what was important to me in life was ultimately compelling and so... I did end up writing a personal mission statement.

What I wrote might be the topic for another day but suffice it to say it has eight lines, the last of which is “To become wise”.

Which raises the question, of course, of what is wisdom.

Stephen Hall is a science journalist who writes books, magazine articles and essays, primarily for The New York Times Magazine. As an author, he has that happy knack of being able to write about complex scientific research in plain English. In *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*, Hall traces the history of the concept of wisdom from its philosophical roots to its modern neurological frontiers in an accessible, engaging manner.

Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience is a book of some 280 pages with nearly 40 pages of Notes. Each chapter begins the usual quotes from well-known and not so well-known philosophers, poets, and religious figures about some aspect

of wisdom. The first section concentrates on history, literature and philosophy; the last section is more contemporary, with an analysis of wisdom in leadership and management, education and politics.

The central section of the book is a description of what he suggests are the “Eight Neural Pillars of Wisdom”, aspects of human functioning and behaviour that for centuries have been associated with those history has called ‘wise’. These are:

1. Emotional Regulation: the art of coping.
2. Knowing What’s Important: the neural mechanism of establishing value and making a judgement.
3. Moral Reasoning: the biology of judging right from wrong.
4. Compassion: the biology of loving-kindness and empathy.
5. Humility: the gift of perspective.
6. Altruism: social justice, fairness, and the wisdom of punishment.
7. Patience: temptation, delayed gratification and the biology of learning to wait for larger rewards.
8. Dealing with Uncertainty: change, ‘meta-wisdom’ and the vulcanization of the human brain.

Each of these ‘pillars’ forms a chapter that focuses on contemporary research by selected leading academics into the neuroscientific basis for these traits, explaining in lay terms the mechanisms that underlie each set of behaviours that over centuries people have associated with ‘being wise’.

For example, the chapter on Patience begins with the story of Odysseus and the Sirens, a classic illustration of the age-old tussle between short term indulgence and delayed gratification. Hall then describes his interviews with George Ainslie (in graphic journalist mode: Ainslie “speaks in a rapid, gravelly voice, edgy with authority”), a behavioural economist who is challenging orthodox ideas of human motivation in decision-making. In a remarkable feat of imagination, Hall manages to connect Ainslie’s ‘hyperbolic discount curve’ to Socrates, Saint Augustine and Shakespeare.

One of the problems with tackling a subject like wisdom is that there is no consensus on just what it is. Like good art, people tend to say they don’t know much about it but they can recognise it when they see it. But Hall sketches out some general principles: wisdom requires experience-based knowledge of the world; mental focus and the ability to discern what’s important in acquired knowledge; and the capacity to mediate between narrow self-interest and broader social welfare, immediate rewards and future gains, emotions and reason.

This latter distinction – between emotions and the intellect – is one that has fascinated me for years. It is my view that American culture repeatedly tries to elevate the status of the emotions (the “heart”) and diminish the value of the intellect (the “head”), in contradistinction to the ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle who admired above all else the human capacity to reason. Thus Hollywood films, for example, focus on emotional crises and their dramatic resolution (with those emotions expressed by shouting and physical confrontations) rather than a more cerebral exploration of human dilemmas, expressed in complex word play and subtle imaging.

Hall continues this tendency, most clearly in his Chapter 3 entitled *Heart and Mind* (his italics) in which he describes the work of Vivian Clayton, an early researcher on the subject of wisdom. “In Clayton’s view, wisdom was different from intellect and necessarily went beyond mere cognitive ability” (p43). “It incorporates emotional intelligence”.

This romantic aspiration, to elevate the status of the emotions and diminish the role of intellectual functioning, is, however, contradicted by the scientists Hall later interviews. Neuroscientist Stephen Kosslyn from the Department of Psychology at Harvard says: “We now know that emotion plays a major role in how we reason, and wisdom may have a lot to do with knowing when emotion is helpful and when it is not” (p 17) and Jonathan Cohen, Director of the Center for Brain, Mind and Behaviour at Princeton University, says: “Neuroeconomic studies have shown that activity in the prefrontal cortex is associated with decisions that override pride or impatience. Moreover, the new part of the brain seems to be involved in the kind of systematic social activity and training designed to overcome the short-term urges of the emotional brain. The kind of thing we might think of as civilisation.” (p 200)

Throughout the book, Hall consistently comes across scientists explaining the constant interchange between the intellectual parts of the brain (prefrontal cortex) and the emotional parts of the brain (limbic system) and if nothing else, this book demonstrates that progress in civilisation consists not in equating these two functions but in recognising that we need to strive to use the human capacity for reflection and reasoning to override many of our instinctual emotional urges.

Wisdom: from philosophy to neuroscience. Stephen Hall. Knopf, 2010.

Physicians, heal thyselfes

by Warren Bonett

“Medicine is broken.”

So begins Dr Ben Goldacre’s latest work, *Bad Pharma*. The rest of the 400 pages is spent defending that assertion whilst taking a rather large bat to the pharmaceutical industry and the regulatory bodies set up to defend the public interest. In terms of public interest and importance, *Bad Pharma* is in my view, one of the top five most important books produced in the last 50 years. Why? Because it outlines an appalling yet fixable problem that affects every single person on the planet and does so using the gold standard of evidence, systematic reviews of peer reviewed research.

Now, as someone who has fought against the meme that is ‘Big Pharma’, I approached Ben Goldacre’s recent offering with nervousness. Not because I thought he’d fallen from the rational wagon but because the name of the book has the ability to outstrip it’s content for public dissemination. I remember hearing Richard Dawkins speak with regret about the title of his book, *The Selfish Gene* because it led to a misconception about what he intended and because the name seemed to have a power even greater than the revolutionary concepts explained inside. He ended up defending his thesis thousands of time in debates, lectures and interviews for the next 30 years, in fact he still does. I fear the same result for ‘*Bad Pharma*.’

My fears aside, this weighty book is as powerful a damnation of the processes that bring drugs to market as there could possibly be whilst staying confined to the evidence. For those of you who don’t know Goldacre, he is a medical doctor and science writer and tireless opponent of pseudoscience and quack medical treatments. In *Bad Pharma* he highlights many shocking failures of the public health systems in various countries, although inevitably he draws on the US and the UK for the majority of his examples. This doesn’t lessen the relevance for us here in Australia as these countries are powerful shapers of the industry as a whole and anyway, our own system is not different enough to prevent the same things that he describes from happening here.

Of all the problems he does write about, missing data from drug trials is probably the worst. This one fact distorts and undermines all medicines currently in use, putting millions of patients at risk:

“Missing data is different, because it poisons the well for everybody. If proper trials are never done, if negative results are withheld then we simply cannot know the true results of the treatments we use. Nobody can work around this, and there is no expert doctor with special access to a secret stash of evidence. With

missing data, we are all in it together. And we are all misled.”(p341)

According to Goldacre, fixing this problem requires clearer and stronger action from our regulatory bodies, which have not merely failed us they have been complicit in making the problems worse whilst providing the illusion of making them better. Governments seem reluctant to do anything meaningful to change this—by way of example Goldacre describes what happened in Australia when the Government rejected the recommendations of its own review, one which would bring all pharmaceutical companies into line with the best practice code of the members of Medicines Australia who, in response, stated in a press release: “Our members are {going to be} disadvantaged by doing the right thing” if the Government insists on relying on self regulation. Sometime economics, public interest and ethics are not always heading in the same direction.

It doesn’t matter that this is one of the few Australian examples Goldacre cites. Because the picture presented really is a global one. And the problems are immense, hidden data being the worst. There is also: the revolving career door between regulatory bodies and drug companies; poorly designed trials; the fact that the majority of trials are conducted by those with a vested interest in their success; papers are ghostwritten; ‘educational’ programmes for doctors are subsidized; there is a lack of transparency in the regulatory process; pharmaceutical industry marketing budgets far exceed their R&D expenditure; academics and doctors are in the pay of drug companies (frequently undisclosed to their employers, colleagues or patients); and one of the most damning areas of all, there is a coupling of the regulatory system with the exigencies of competitive economics which actually encourages companies to not have the patient’s best interests at heart.

All of these claims are big and in many ways I’d be happier if they weren’t so well supported in his book, because it would mean I wouldn’t have to do anything. It would be just more conspiracy theory bunk that normally surrounds the medical industry. But it’s not and as he says, we are all in this together. At some stage we all have to rely on our doctor’s advice and take medicine. A doctor who is as in the dark as you about medicine whose full effects will be unknown. Read this book and then hand it to your doctor. Unfortunately, they will probably baulk at receiving it because they’ll see the title and think it’s been written by some anti-science whacko as opposed to one of it’s finest champions.

Bad Pharma: How drug companies mislead doctors. Ben Goldacre. Faber & Faber, 2013.

My religious reminiscences *cont.*

by Bertrand Russell

Until the age of eighteen I continued to believe in a Deist's God, mainly because the First-Cause argument seemed to be irrefutable. Then in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* I found that James Mill had taught him the refutation of that argument – namely that it gives no answer to the question “Who Made God?” It is curious that Mill should have had so much influence on me, for he was my father and mother's close friend and the source of many of their opinions, but I did not know this until a much later date. Without being aware that I was following in my father's footsteps, I read, before I went to Cambridge, Mill's *Logic and Political Economy*, and made elaborate notes in which I practised the art of expressing the gist of each paragraph in a single sentence. I was already interested in the principles of mathematics, and was profoundly dissatisfied with his assimilation of pure mathematics to empirical science – a view which is now universally abandoned.

The intellectual temper of the 'nineties was very different from that of my father's youth; in some ways better, but in many ways worse. There was no longer, among the abler young men, any preoccupation with the details of the Christian faith; they were almost all Agnostics, and not interested in discussions as to the divinity of Christ or in the details of Biblical criticism. I remember a feeling contempt when I learned that Henry Sedgwick, as a young man, being desirous of knowing whether God exists, thought it necessary, as a first step, to learn Semitic languages, which seemed to me to show an insufficient sense of logical relevance. But I was willing, as were most of my friends, to listen to a metaphysical argument for or against god or immortality or free will; and it was only after acquiring a new logic that I ceased to think such arguments were worth examining.

The non-academic heroes of the 'nineties – Ibsen, Strindberg, Nietzsche and (for a time) Oscar Wilde – differed very greatly from those of the previous generation. The great men of the 'sixties were all “good” men: they were patient, painstaking, in favour of change only when a detailed and careful investigation had persuaded them that it was necessary in some particular respect. They advocated reforms, and in general their advocacy was successful, so that the world improved very fast; but their temper was not that of rebels. I do not mean that no rebels existed; Marx and Dostoevsky to mention only two, did most of their best work in the 'sixties. But these men were almost unknown among cultured people in their own day, and their influence belongs to a much later date. The men who commanded respect in England in the 'sixties – Darwin, Huxley, Newman, the authors of *Essays and Reviews*, etc. – were not fundamentally at war with society; they could meet, as they did in the “Metaphysical Society” to discuss urbanely whether there is a God. In those days democracy ruled even over heaven.

But in the 'nineties the young men desired something more sweeping and passionate, more bold and less bland. The impulse toward destruction and violence which has swept over the world began in the sphere of literature. Ibsen, Strindberg and Nietzsche were angry men – not primarily angry about this or that, but just angry. And so they each found an outlook on life that justified anger. The young admired their passion, and found in it an outlet for their own feelings of revolt against parental authority. The assertion of freedom seemed sufficiently noble to justify violence; the violence duly ensued, but freedom was lost in the process.

An excerpt from *The Rationalist*, 1938.

“I think, in retrospect, that loneliness had much more to do with my unhappiness than theological difficulties, for throughout the whole time I never said a word about religion to anyone,”

My religious reminiscences

by Bertrand Russell

My parents, Lord and Lady Amberley, were considered shocking in their day on account of their advanced opinions in politics, theology and morals. When my mother died in 1874 she was buried without any religious ceremony in the grounds of their house in the Wye Valley. My father intended to be buried there also, but when he died in 1876 his wishes were disregarded and both were removed to the family vault at Chenies. By my father's will my brother and I were to have been in the guardianship of two friends of his who shared his opinions, but the will was set aside and we were placed by the Court of Chancery in the care of my grandparents. My grandfather, the statesman, died in 1878, and it was his widow who decided the manner of my education. She was a Scottish Presbyterian, who gradually became a Unitarian. I was taken on alternate Sundays to the Parish Church and to the Presbyterian Church, while at home I was taught the tenets of Unitarianism. Eternal punishment and the literal truth of the Bible were not inculcated, and there was no Sabbatarianism beyond a suggestion of avoiding cards on Sunday for fear of shocking the servants. But in other respects morals were austere, and it was held to be certain that conscience, which is the voice of God, is an infallible guide to all practical perplexities.

My childhood was solitary, as my brother was seven years older than I was, and I was not sent to school. Consequently I had abundant leisure for reflection, and when I was about fourteen my thoughts turned to theology. During the four following years I rejected, successively, free will, immortality, and belief in God, and believe that I suffered much pain in the process, though when it was completed I found myself far happier than I had been while I remained in doubt. I think, in retrospect, that loneliness had much more to do with my unhappiness than theological difficulties, for throughout the whole time I never said a word about religion to anyone, with the brief exception of an Agnostic tutor, who was soon sent away, presumably because he did not discourage my unorthodoxy.

What kept me silent was mainly my fear of ridicule. At the age of fourteen I became convinced that the fundamental principle of ethics should be the promotion of human happiness, and at first this appeared to me to be so self evident that I supposed it must be the universal opinion. Then I discovered, to my surprise, that it was a view regarded as unorthodox, and called Utilitarianism. I announced, no doubt with a certain pleasure in the long word, that I was Utilitarian; but the announcement was received with derision. My grandmother for a long time missed no opportunity

of ironically submitting ethical conundrums to me, challenging me to solve them on Utilitarian principles. The result in my case was a determination to keep my thoughts to myself. Ridicule, nominally amusing but really an expression of hostility, was the favourite weapon – the worst possible, short of actual cruelty, in dealing with young people. When I became interested in philosophy – a subject which for some reason was anathema – I was told that the whole subject could be summed up in the saying: "What is mind? – No matter. What is matter? – Never mind." At the fifteenth or sixteenth repetition of this remark it ceased to be amusing.

Nevertheless on most topics the atmosphere was liberal. For instance, Darwinism was accepted as a matter of course. I had at one time, when I was thirteen, a very orthodox Swiss tutor, who, in consequence of something I had said, stated with great earnestness: "If you were a Darwinian I pity you, for one cannot be a Darwinian and a Christian at the same time." I did not then believe in the incompatibility, but I was already clear that, if I had to choose, I would choose Darwin.

Until I went to Cambridge, I was almost wholly unaware of contemporary movements of thought. I was influenced by Darwin, and then by John Stuart Mill, but more than either by the study of dynamics; my outlook, in fact, was more appropriate to a seventeenth or eighteenth century Cartesian than to a post-Darwinian. It seemed to me that all the motions of matter were determined by physical laws, and that in all likelihood this was true of the human body as well as of other matter. Being passionately interested in religion and unable to speak about it, I wrote down my thoughts in Greek letters in a book which I headed "Greek Exercises." In which, to make concealment more complete, I adopted an original system of phonetic spelling. In this book, when I was fifteen I wrote: "Taking free will first to consider, there is no clear dividing line between man and the protozoon. Therefore, if we give free will to man we must also give it to the protozoon. This is rather hard to do. Therefore, unless we are willing to give free will to the protozoon we must not give it to man. This, however, is possible but it is difficult to imagine. If, as seems to me probable, protoplasm only came together in the ordinary course of nature without any special Providence from God, then we and all animals are simply kept going by chemical forces and are nothing more wonderful than a tree (which no one pretends has free will), and if we had good enough knowledge of the forces acting on any one at the time, the motives pro and con, the constitution of his brain at any time, then we could tell exactly what he would do."

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