

# Common Theology

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## INSIDE:

- Christianity on the Battlefield
- The impact of the Religious Right on world politics
- The role of Christianity in Australian Law

A Quarterly Journal for Australians



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## From the Editor

In this edition Dr Jane Shaw quotes a recent British church report describing incarnational theology as “translating the divine call to do justice into the ephemeral realities of day to day politics”.

The goal of *Common Theology* is to help Australian Christians do just that – to *do* theology, which is after all not just the study of faith, or religion, or even doctrine, but giving oneself to the study of God.

In his article on law and religion the Hon Justice Keith Mason makes the point that claims to Christian nationhood should be an acknowledgement of a blessing received, not some badge of national merit.

In Home Truths Peter Sellick takes issue with the federal government’s attempt to shape the values of the nation.

Eye Witness sketches the dark reality of war via a sermon preached for Remembrance Day in November.

One can’t help noticing that this edition of *Common Theology* focuses more than usual on politics – a serendipitous content with the sudden rise in December of Christian Socialist Kevin Rudd to leader of the federal Opposition.

This year, since the Labor Party’s loss in the federal election, Kevin Rudd has formed a parliamentary working group to discuss the ‘God factor’ in Australian politics.

The Labor Party has traditionally held that religion is a private matter and has no place in politics. But with the Coalition Government’s overt adoption of faith issues and the values industry – after the suffocating obsession with the economy of the past few decades – Rudd believes it is time to engage with the ‘God factor’ in federal Parliament.

We have a responsibility to keep a watching eye on how the Christian epithet is used in civic life, so that we shall never again be embarrassed to publicly call ourselves Christians.

**Maggie Helass**

# The political church

The Revd Dr Jane Shaw, Dean of Divinity at New College, Oxford, UK, delivered the Barry Marshall Memorial Lecture at Trinity College, Melbourne University in August. This is an edited text of her lecture.



A Christian group in New Zealand has advocated smacking children for up to fifteen minutes to beat the sinful manifestations out of them so that those manifestations do not become permanent fixtures. So went a headline in several Australian newspapers a few weeks ago.

Most of us will know how to decode the word ‘Christian’ in this context – the article is almost certainly talking about a right-wing Christian group that is biblically fundamentalist. This is what ‘Christian’ has come to mean in the media and the public sphere at large.

The problem is that now those of us who are Christians in a different mould do not know how to claim the title back. It is no wonder that some may have hesitations about how and whether to be associated with it.

This phenomenon has, for at least a decade or two now, been associated with American politics and religion, and has been well documented there. What struck me on coming to Australia this time – my fourth visit in four years – is that within the first few days of being here, I began to see signs of an increase in this sort of right-wing Christianity in the public sphere; or perhaps, rather, a growing *awareness* of its increased power in this largely secular country.

Within my first couple of weeks here, not only did I see that headline about smacking, but I also noted that the current *Quarterly Essay* is entitled ‘Voting for Jesus: Christianity and Politics in Australia’ (and here, ‘Christian’ again stands for a particular sort of conservative church perspective); a television programme explored the link between rightwing Christianity and rightwing politics; and

an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* investigated fundamentalist Christians and their tactics.

If you went to England I suspect you would notice a similar growth in awareness of the influence of conservative Christians. Both of our countries are becoming ‘Americanised’ in this way.

Dan Wakefield, in his recent book, *The Hijacking of Jesus*, charts the rise of the Religious Right and its meshing with politics in the USA.

He argues that the Republican party, its fortunes at their lowest in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, deliberately harnessed the voter power of the evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who had been hitherto dismissed as mere Southerners – behind the times.

The Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell’s crusade were born, and numerous right wing foundations and institutes were founded which merged conservative politics with conservative Christianity and

## I think the Religious Right is the political seduction of religion

prepared political campaigns, all funded by big businesses, such as the Coors brewing company, Vicks Vaporub and numerous Texas oil companies.<sup>1</sup>

Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, used to being ridiculed in the wider culture, found that they were being embraced by the Republican party and they embraced the Republicans back, suddenly finding themselves both affirmed and vindicated.

Jim Wallis, the liberal evangelical Christian and founder of the Sojourners community, puts it like this:

“I think the Religious Right is the political seduction of religion. There were political operatives on the far right who had meetings with a handful of television preachers – and they made a deal – “You give us your lists – your members list,

1. Wakefield, Dan. *The Hijacking of Jesus*. How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Prejudice and Hate (NY: Nation Books, 2006)

your database – and we'll turn our computers onto your lists, and we'll make you into household names. We'll make you famous and we'll gain political power."<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the mainline Christian denominations were going into decline. The Civil Rights movement had represented the height of their influence on public policy and, looking back, some mainline Christian leaders believe that social action replaced theology for liberal Christians. This may have been the case in some denominations and churches, but the *perception* that social action replaced theology for liberals has made them an easy target for the Religious Right.

Nevertheless, the Religious Right took one very important thing from the activities of the left in the Civil Rights movement – grass roots activism. They patiently started to take control of America's political structures from the bottom up, standing for election onto school boards, city and county commissions, as well as the local and state organisations of the Republican Party.

In 1988, they went national when Pat Robertson ran in the presidential primaries (after three million people had signed up to support his campaign). Liberals both sneered and relaxed when he did badly in that election, but looking back at his concession speech from the vantage point of 2006, we can see that the future he predicted has come true: "out of the seeming defeat of my campaign and the demise of what had been called the Moral Majority came an extremely offensive force which I believe is the wave of the future, and which is toppling historic liberalism and will bring about a conservative era in the United States."<sup>3</sup>

Today there are 60 million evangelical Christians in America. They make up about a quarter of the American electorate and form the core support base for George W Bush.

Why and how is all of this affecting my country and yours? At one level, and most obviously, the mindset of the religious right is affecting everyone because it is influencing international politics, and has done so increasingly since 9/11.

Take the current conflagration in Lebanon and Israel, for example. The Religious Right believes that Israel is doing God's work in a war of good versus evil. Pastor John Hagee, a televangelist and the founder of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, preached this message in Washington DC in July. His congregation was made up of 3500 evangelicals and a host of congressmen, as well as Israel's ambassador to the USA and a former Israeli chief of staff.

His view is strongly informed by Christian Zionism, a particular reading of the Bible that sees Israel's troubles as fulfilling biblical prophecy; a crusading mindset against Islam; and an apocalyptic vision gleaned from the Book of Revelation. Hagee has written books with titles such as *Beginning of the End* (which reached The New York Times Best Seller List) and *Final Dawn over Jerusalem*.

Israel, attacked by numerous nations, is miraculously protected, and the saved are suddenly taken up into heaven

These 'non-fiction' books complement the hugely popular 'Left Behind' series of novels and films in which the second coming of Christ and the "end of the world as we know it" are heralded.

Israel, attacked by numerous nations, is miraculously protected, and the saved are suddenly taken up into heaven in the Rapture, leaving their clothes in a pile and their unsaved friends and families bewildered (1 Thess 4.16-18).

This is understood as God fulfilling the biblical prophecy to protect the homeland of his ancient people, and remove his saints or 'Church' from the seven years of tribulation that will follow the Rapture, in which – in the Left Behind series – the antichrist heads up the United Nations and conflict takes over the earth.

Many evangelical Christians treat these novels and films as non-fiction, accurate interpretations of the biblical prophecies. In this scheme of things, the series of events that lead to the second coming of Christ depends on the existence of a Holy Land that is under catastrophic assault but survives unscathed. The Religious Right is

2. quoted in Wakefield, *The Hijacking of Jesus* p. 82

3. *ibid*

therefore obsessed with Israeli self-defence, but largely opposed to any peace plan.

Just a few years ago, it would have seemed impossible that the nineteenth-century idea of the Rapture and some late twentieth-century novels and films based on it could determine the foreign policy of the most powerful country in the world. As one commentator writes, “the rest of us can ignore Left Behind, or chuckle at its over-the-top Christian kitsch. We should keep in mind, though, that for some of the most powerful people in the world, this stuff isn’t melodrama. It’s prophecy.”<sup>4</sup>

But the key to the success of the Religious Right has always been local, grassroots activism. How then, are these religious views being promoted at the local level in our respective countries, Australia and Britain? How and why is it affecting the nature of Christianity *within* our countries?

The standard view of secularisation promoted by sociologists for a long time was that a steady and inexorable decline in religious belief began in the Enlightenment and continued over three centuries. This has, in the last decade or so, been re-thought in a number of ways.

First, it has been suggested by historians that secularisation happened much later. The eighteenth century was not only a period of scepticism but also one of devotion and piety, while the nineteenth century was a remarkably religious period, as was the first half of the twentieth century.

Importantly, for our topic, it was in the nineteenth century that evangelical religion embedded itself into English and American culture, through a series of revivals, and spread itself around the globe via missionaries, not least from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), as those evangelical Anglicans followed British colonisers and settlers.

Following this historical revision of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Callum Brown in his influential book *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001) has argued that religious decline in Britain occurred sharply and suddenly in the 1960s. This model also fits Australia, I think,

4. Michelle Goldberg, ‘Fundamentally Unsound’ in salon.com p.2 [http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2002/07/29/left\\_behind/index.html](http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2002/07/29/left_behind/index.html)

because although it has never been an avowedly religious country, traditional church membership began to decline in the 1960s, and has continued to do so in the last few decades. The National Church Life Survey statistics show that in 2001 only 8 per cent of Australians went to church weekly.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, it was realised that the secularisation model fitted only certain parts of the west. The USA didn’t exactly fit into this model, despite the decline of the mainline denominations from the 1960s onwards, because of the presence of evangelical Christianity, especially in the south, but also because of patterns of immigration.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many Hispanics came to America with traditional Roman Catholic beliefs and patterns of religious practice, and Hindus and Moslems also made up a high proportion of the increased numbers of people who came to the USA in the wake of the 1965 immigration act.

as religious belief and practice  
declined in countries such  
as Britain they were on the  
rise in the global south

Nor did the secularisation model fit much of the rest of the world. Indeed, as religious belief and practice declined in countries such as Britain and parts of Europe, they were on the rise in the global south, and had never declined in Africa. The secularisation of Britain, parts of western Europe and countries such as Australia is therefore the *exception* rather than the rule.

Thirdly, sociologists such as Grace Davie have talked about the phenomenon of believing but not belonging. People might have a belief in God, or a desire for spirituality, but they see it as a largely individual (and indeed individualistic) matter, which does not necessarily require church membership. (In fact, there is an overall decline in ‘belonging’ to institutions – not only

5. quoted in Porter M, *The New Puritans* p. 66. Porter provides a very useful discussion of churchgoing patterns in Australia from the nineteenth century to the present, see pp. 65 – 68.

churches, but also trades unions and political parties – as Robert Putnam pointed out in his influential book, *Bowling Alone*.)

In England, where we have a state church, this means that institutional religion plays a role in providing ‘vicarious religion’ says Davie – it is there for when it is needed, at times of national crisis and celebration.<sup>6</sup>

Conservative evangelicalism has seen its opportunity and taken it. The secularisation of Britain and Australia from the 1960s onwards had left a void. There was a solid base of evangelical believers in both of those countries but – as in America – they were largely dismissed in the wider culture through the societal revolutions of the 1960s.

They were, undoubtedly, both cheered by and willing to learn from the rise of the Religious Right in the USA. They benefited from the organisation and the wealth of that movement, and they learnt from it. Not only did they visit the mega churches of the conservative evangelicals in the States, and pick up their techniques of organisation, they also used the Internet to further their communication with them, and bought their books. Christian publishing is big business in the United States, with its own publishing houses and bestseller lists.

## We may be seeing an increasing connection between conservative Christianity and politics

We have seen the growth of American-style evangelical churches in both of our countries, such as Hillsong in Sydney and Holy Trinity, Brompton in London (home of the Alpha course), as well as numerous, so-called non-denominational churches that meet in churches, cinemas, football stadiums and any space that is big enough to hold them.

We may also be seeing an increasing connection between conservative Christianity and politics, though this is complex and ambiguous in

6. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) and *Religion in Modern Europe: a memory mutates* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

both our countries. In Britain, we have a Labour Government that touted its links to the Christian Socialist Movement when it came to power in 1997 (though these links are rarely remarked on these days) but has pursued a conservative foreign policy, almost entirely led by the agenda of the United States.

On the one hand, this Labour government in Britain has promoted the establishment of private Christian academies, often set up by millionaires from conservative evangelical backgrounds, as model secondary schools, in a way that has alarmed secularists and liberal Christians alike. But it has also encouraged the establishment of faith-based primary schools in other religious traditions, such as Islam, suggesting an openness to all forms of religiously based education which many evangelicals would disavow.

In Australia I have noticed that several books and articles in the last year or so explored the link between the Liberal Party and conservative Christianity.

Marion Maddox has made a strong argument – with which I am sure some will disagree – in her recent book, *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* (2005) that this government has been successful in a largely secular country in adopting American-style rightwing religious rhetoric, especially in issues related to marriage and the family, but also in relation to Aboriginal land rights and mandatory detention for asylum seekers.

Maddox argues that Howard has successfully linked ‘Christian values’ to ‘Australian values’ and has a number of conservative Christian ministers at the heart of his cabinet. She suggests that such political players have adopted and indeed used the Religious Right both to gain votes and to promote their own conservative agenda with regard to issues such as wealth (“the prosperity gospel”) and economics (deregulation), abortion, euthanasia and other hot topics such as single mothers and homosexuality.

In both our countries it seems that the liberal Christian voice has been largely eclipsed from the public sphere. There is a disparity between the statements of the mainstream churches and their leaders and what is promoted and represented as ‘Christian’ in the media, and even sometimes in politics.

In both countries, the majority of mainstream churches spoke out against the Iraq war; they produce sensitive and nuanced reports on social justice and the inner city; they promote, at least to some extent, ideas about the leadership of women that are more in step with society. But all of this is largely ignored as ‘Christian’ argues Amanda Lohrey, writing about the Australian context.

She quotes the liberal Jesuit priest, Frank Brennan, long an activist for human rights who comments, “A majority of John Howard’s senior Cabinet ministers are now Anglicans or Catholics. They wear religious affiliation on their sleeves more readily than did the senior ministers of the Hawke or Keating governments. And yet they have pursued policies on asylum seekers and the Iraq war contrary to the position adopted by most of their church leaders.”<sup>7</sup>

Where does all of this leave those of us who are Christians but who do not share the Reli-

## I think it leaves us bewildered; unsure in some public situations about whether to call ourselves Christians

gious Right’s definition of what that means?

I think it leaves us at times bewildered; unsure of how to regain lost ground; unsure in some public situations about whether to call ourselves Christians lest our views be mistaken for what passes as ‘Christian’ in the public sphere these days.

But I think it also leaves us angry that an understanding of Christianity based on mercy, love and grace has been largely eclipsed in favour of one based on fear and even hatred of others, rigid legalism and unquestioned readings of the Bible which take no account of the context in which those texts were originally written, nor of the context in which they are read today. Christianity has for many people become a force for

judgment and exclusion rather than peace and inclusion.

And all of this leaves those of us who have always considered ourselves at the centre of the church – ‘reasonable’ Christians if you like – squeezed between fundamentalist Christianity and fundamentalist atheism, under siege from both directions.

Ever since 9/11, there has been a renewed attack by some atheists on all religion – religion has been blamed for all the ills in the world. In fact, that atheist version of religion is fundamentalism. This is the form of religion that my colleague at New College, Oxford, the scientist Richard Dawkins, has repeatedly attacked, and did so recently in a Channel 4 television series in which the worst forms of conservative evangelicalism, the most fundamentalist versions of Islam and Judaism, were pitted against science.

It is important to acknowledge that our ideas about progress – which are at the core of liberal thinking – may be very out-dated. The fact is that lots of people want certainty; they even want hierarchy; they want to be obedient to a set of unquestioned beliefs. Any form of fundamentalism offers these things.

Why is there such an upswing in this desire for certainty, a new craving for unquestioning obedience, at a time when so many of us imagined that we would be living in a time of greater democracy and broader intellectual ‘enlightenment’? We have, after all, been used to associating modernity with progress.

This is a puzzle that cannot be ignored; and we have encountered it before in modernity. The Great War of 1914–18 shattered the Victorian illusions of progress; the holocaust and all that led to the Second World War caused a crisis of confidence in reason. It may be that we are now having our third shock, facing up to the great wave of fundamentalism that threatens modern liberal values of reasoned discussion, conversation and listening.

In the light of this, liberals will have to rethink ideas of toleration. How do we cope with the fact that inherent to our belief system is the toleration of others who will not and do not want to tolerate us? This is a specific problem that my church needs to address in the Anglican Communion. It is a *particular* problem for Angli-

7. Amanda Lohrey, ‘Voting for Jesus. Christianity and Politics in Australia’, *Quarterly Essay* (Issue 22, 2006) pp.

canism because it has prided itself on being a broad church, capable of holding together many diverse views and practices.

The broad and diverse mainstream of Anglicanism was what kept the connections between individual parishes, dioceses and provinces as well as the Communion itself together. Attempts at tighter unity will almost certainly only cause greater fragmentation and real exclusions.

Since the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, liberals have been notoriously disorganised, despite the fact that they were the ones who got modern grassroots activism going.

We need to recapture the public sphere, so that 'Christian' does not become the monolithic term that it is in danger of becoming, solely framed in the public's mind in relation to the Religious Right.

In order to do this we will need to make strategic alliances with agnostics, non-fundamentalist atheists and people of other faiths with whom we share certain core values.

Just as conservative evangelicals think it more important to make cross-denomination alliances with other conservative evangelicals, so Christian liberals may need to recognise that their most important allies may be those who are not Christian but who share their values of reasoned dialogue, the dignity of the human person and therefore the importance of human rights, and a respect for (if not a belief in) a form of spirituality that recognises that God is greater than a very particular and narrow interpretation of the Bible.

This will be important for all kinds of political and ethical issues, not least public policy – whether we are talking about stem cell research, poverty, gay marriage or asylum seekers. We need to speak out on these issues, write articles, preach, get ourselves informed, and present a different form of Christianity which believes that God is already at work in the world and we are God's hands and feet. This may mean that we will sometimes be counter-church, rather than counter-cultural, when to do so would be to take us closer to the heart of the gospel.

A lot is going on, but it is not always known about. The solution lies partly in wresting back a place in the public sphere to make this work

known, and thus to shift perceptions of what it means to be a Christian.

The common perception is that Christianity is largely about believing impossible things. This is certainly how the attack from the fundamentalist atheists is framed, while the conservative evangelicals accuse liberal Christians of having no theology at all.

But we should make a positive virtue out of two key aspects of practical Christianity that are closely identified with the 'broad church'.

First, all that is associated with the biblical commandment to love ones neighbour. We need to articulate that the *practice* of Christianity can help us to live life sanely – which is to say, shape a moral life which will make for peace both within ourselves and within the communities in which we live and work (whether local or global). This means that we necessarily become more outward looking, engaged with the concerns of those outside as well as inside our circles.

one of the most important  
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Christian voices to co-exist

Secondly, we need to emphasise the importance of prayer and liturgy in shaping our beliefs – they are vital binding forces. We participate in the corporate worship of the church because in doing so we allow ourselves to be caught up in the great ancestry of Christians who have responded to the gospel message, and thus we open ourselves up to change, to the transformation which is at the heart of faith.

Conservative evangelical churches have been so successful because they have harnessed the forms and sounds of popular culture to their worship and their church life. As Amanda Lohrey says in her *Quarterly Essay* on 'Jesus and Politics' in which she focuses on Hillsong in Sydney – one reason Hillsong has been so successful is that their workshops and bible study groups, targeted at specific audiences, have borrowed the language of self-help books. The message is that religion will do something for me.

It seems that perhaps one of the most important tasks that faces us is how we enable different Christian voices to co-exist. Liberals have long survived on a model of dialogue that allows everyone to have their say.

But many conservative evangelical Christians don't want others to be heard; to have a voice in politics; to have a public space in which their interpretations of the Bible and the Christian tradition will be given due value and weight. We need to be savvy about this.

A recent Church of England and Methodist report on the church in the inner city, *Faithful Cities* defines Incarnational theology like this: "Incarnational theology is about translating the divine call to do justice into the ephemeral realities of day to day politics. It calls people, as Jesus

Christ put it, to be 'wise as serpents' and 'harmless as doves'".<sup>8</sup>

The irony of the situation we are in, then, is that in order to demonstrate and practise God's love, we shall sometimes have to be very tough. But the life of Jesus, who overturned the tables of the moneylenders in the temple and, minutes later with the same hand, healed a leper at the temple gate, is a pretty good model for us.

The full text of this lecture can be found at [http://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/theological\\_school/news](http://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/theological_school/news)

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8. Commission in Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice* (London: Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, 2006)

# Common Theology

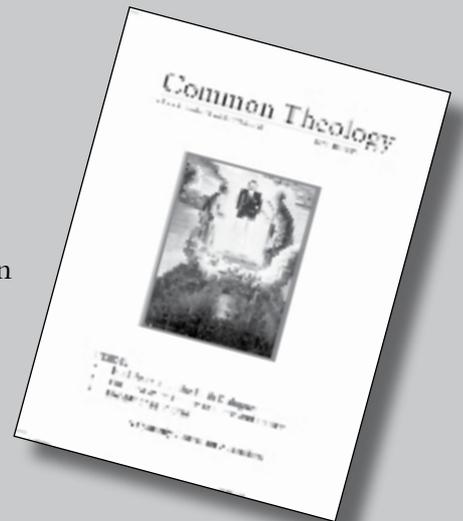
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# Christianity on the battlefield

By Hugh Begbie

The beautiful lament that begins Psalm 137 – “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept” – has inspired songs, and touches readers with its sense of pathos. But the curses against Edom and Babylon in verses 7-9 are a different matter.



It is one of those psalms where one part is loved and quoted but another is seen as a cause for embarrassment, and habitually omitted. However, this psalm has a very important message for a world torn apart by war and violence.

In Australia we honour our war veterans, and Anzac Day bears many of the marks of a religious festival. Our Armed Forces currently have more than 2000 defence personnel in war-torn countries, and in every place there are chaplains with them. How can these ministers of the Gospel of grace live consistently in this most ungracious of circumstances?

Psalm 137 gives us some insight into the real horror of war. Through this poem we become a witness to the deep grief and anguish experienced by the people of God who were conquered by the Babylonian army, with many killed including infants.

*“Happy shall he be who takes  
your little ones and dashes  
them against the rock”*

War is no picnic. It unleashes dark and chaotic forces that overwhelm and destroy the environment, people, nations and property. Once the dogs of battle are cut loose no one – not even the President of the United States – can predict where they will go or whom they will bite.

War is filled with noise, physical discomfort, destruction and the stench of filth and death.

## eye witness

“I looked over to the left and here was the London Scottish who were on our left, running forward across the three or four hundred yards of green grass towards Commecourt Wood. Then they vanished into the smoke. And then there was nothing left but noise. And after this we saw nothing and knew nothing. And we lived in a world of noise, simply noise.”<sup>1</sup>

Surprisingly war has its attractions and it can be addictive. Chris Hedges, a war correspondent for many years, says:

“The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years.”<sup>2</sup>

But it is also frightening, confusing, boring and, as Hedges goes on to say, brings with it a culture of lies.

“War is peddled by mythmakers – historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state – all of whom endow it with qualities it does not possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty.

“It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humour, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death.

“Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaningless of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us.”<sup>3</sup>

1. M Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*. Milsons Point, Sydney, Random House, 2002, p 158.

2. Hedges, C, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, New York, Public Affairs, 2002, p 3.

3. *ibid.*

## The Dogs of War

Bent double, like old beggars under sack,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through  
 the sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.  
 Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime....  
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As a under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.  
 If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch his hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues –  
 My friend you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro Patria mori*

Quoted Stallworthy, J, *Wilfred Owen*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1974

War breaks down moral boundaries and is often associated with pornography, sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse, and rape.

When the Russians invaded Germany at the end of World War II, the vast majority of females in Prussia were raped. At least 100,000 rape babies were born.

Readers who are older would understand something of the horror of war. Those who are younger can only view war remotely, witnessed through the eye of camera and reporter as they wander the violent places of the earth. This form of testimony is weak and the impressions given

are false. Cameras edit out the more gruesome scenes and they cannot smell the stench of death, nor experience the slipperiness of blood, or know the fear that makes a person urinate, defecate or totally collapse.

“Robbins pulled up some undergrowth and as we fished our way through, there was a dead Jerry, his whole hip shot away and all his guts out and flies over it. Robbins just had to step back, and then his leg that was up a tree became dislodged and fell on his head. He vomited on the spot. Good Lord, it was terrible.”<sup>4</sup>

War creates deep fear, as C Day Lewis described in 1943:

*Now Fear has come again*

*To live with us*

*In poisoned intimacy, like pus*<sup>5</sup>

There is not only the fear of injury and death, but also the fear of killing. Killing does not come naturally to most human beings. They have to be trained to kill and the training is only partially successful. In the end, most feel pain and guilt for taking the life of another. A B Facey describes a kill by bayonet: “The awful look on a man’s face after he has been bayoneted will, I am sure, haunt me for the rest of my life; I will never forget that dreadful look.”<sup>6</sup>

To disarm this fear of killing every war is fed by the lies of propaganda and reinforced by the soldiers’ need to caricature the enemy. Enemy become ‘nips’, ‘Huns’, ‘gooks’; their humanity is diminished so that killing them is easier.

But for many this attempt to keep the enemy distant fails, and their spirit and their conscience is seared for life. This is one reason why so many soldiers cannot talk about their war experiences.

4. The words of Gunner Ounsworth, quoted in Arthur, M., *Forgotten Forces of the Great War*, Milsons Point, Sydney, Random House, 2002, p 165

5. Lewis, C Day, Ode to Fear, quoted in Fussel, P, *War-time: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War*, New York, Oxford University Press, p 276.

6. Facey A B, *A Fortunate Life*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood Victoria, 1981, p 260.

It is just too painful to remember, too difficult to explain, too morally remote from normal human life.

The soldier speaks a language, conceals a moral guilt, that only another soldier can understand.

Psalm 137 reminds us that war is always embraced by darkness, pain, grief and death. While it may from time to time be a necessary evil, it must never be seen as a good thing in itself.

It is sometimes said that there are no atheists in foxholes. While it is true that in times of danger some people return to church and some find faith for the first time, it is also true that some became atheists, some become hardened cynics, and some have their moral lives so destroyed they never recover. The much-loved quotation is in the end not entirely true.

Certainly as Christians we need to hear and feel the religious confusion of this psalm. How can those who have witnessed what seems to be the collapse of God's covenantal care for his land now, in exile, sing the Lord's song? Witness their agony as the Babylonians taunt them, challenging them to pick up their harps and sing the songs of Zion.

As we read these words we need to reflect on whether we have been guilty of standing in judgment on our wounded Diggers, or given simplistic, pious answers to their suffering? Perhaps our willingness to condemn the curses of this psalm reflects such naivety?

Whether this is a good prayer in the end or not, we must not diminish the honest cry and deep grief out of which it comes; or belittle God's permission for us to lay the rawness of our anger before his throne in prayer.

I am grateful for psalms like this one. It reminds me that the Bible is real. It does not sweep our human condition under the carpet but acknowledges the full depth of our struggle, our fears and our pain.

As one who knows what it is like to hold a dying spouse in my arms, and the struggle and confusion of learning to live again, I am glad that I have a God who understands – who does not exclude my emotions or my doubts from the embrace of his unlimited grace.

Psalm 137 reminds us not to glorify war, but also encourages us to deal compassionately with those scarred by it. It allows us to accept without

judgment the pain and confusion of those harmed by war, and resist simplistic answers that deny their suffering.

War often brings with it poor behaviour and moral guilt that stains the memory and the conscience. We must support our Diggers, but let's not force dishonesty upon them by turning darkness into light. They are sinners, not saints, and many live with painful regrets.

Finally, there is something that this psalm does not tell us. The Anzac tradition speaks of sacrifice, but this sacrifice is mainly that of mate for mate, Digger for Digger. The value honoured is the courage to face and kill the enemy even when the odds are poor. But as Christians that view of sacrifice goes only halfway. We are called on to love our enemy and do good to those who hate us.

God is not on the side of anyone's army. In Christ he carries his cross on both sides of any war. And he reminds us that it is okay to be afraid. It is okay to be angry and to feel the emotions rise up like erupting volcanoes in the smoke of battle – *but in your anger do not forget me*, just as in the psalm the call is to never forget Jerusalem.

Their risk is that they will be  
overcome by the darkness  
of war, and clothe its lies  
in religious jargon

“The cross is the giving up of God's self in order that he might not give up on us; the cross is the result of God's desire to break the power of human enmity without violence, bringing us into his divine communion.”<sup>7</sup>

The great challenge for those of us who bear the name of Christ is to transcend the call of the Anzac Tradition. To again quote Volf:

“For the self shaped by the cross of Christ and the life of the Triune God embraces not just the other who is a friend but also the other who is the enemy. Such a self will seek to open its arms

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7. Volf, M, *Exclusion and Grace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p 126

towards the other even when the other holds a sword".<sup>8</sup>

The Psalm contains a curse. While this curse does at least leave vengeance to God there is, in the end, a better way.

It is the chaplains' difficult task to enter the dark places of the earth and to sing a song of grace. Their risk is that they will be overcome by the darkness of war, and clothe its lies in religious jargon. Pray, above all else, that they will be enabled to sing the song of grace – the song which sings as much to the enemy as it does to

the friend; pray that in the midst of the noise of battle, in a foreign land, when it is difficult to sing the Lord's song, the chaplain may be given the strength to do so. After all, are we not enemy too?

The Revd Dr Hugh Begbie is Principal of Cromwell College within the University of Queensland. He completed his National Service as an officer in the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps in 1972-72 prior to theological training.

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8. *ibid* p 146

## A Common Core in Ethics

Many people from different life philosophies and belief systems have similar ethical views. This has led Doug Everingham and me (both members of the humanist movement) to set up a project to express and publicise what is held in common.

The result may be a declaration of ethical values – an inspirational document that may attract signatories. Towards this end we invite people to join a newly-formed email discussion group; details may be found by starting from the website <http://lists.topica.com/lists.ethics/>.

Some respondents may also be interested in contributing to the associated committee work; in that case please contact the address below.

As a first step, I have written an article – drawing on suggestions made by others – entitled

'A Common Basis for Ethics.' It is not focussed on specific ethical values. Rather, the article asks how a person is to arrive at improved ethical judgments, and suggests how the various aspects of ethics fit together.

It is affirmed that value claims are to be tested according to their harmony with feelings – with reason and the golden rule playing key roles.

A copy may be obtained from the undersigned. Comments on the article are invited – preferably via the discussion group.

Doug Everingham is a secular fellow-traveller with religious people and a former Australian Minister for Health. I am a physicist and a former university lecturer.

**David Blair**

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# Religion and the Law

This is an edited text of a paper on 'Law and Religion in Australia' delivered by the Hon Justice Keith Mason AC, President of the NSW Court of Appeals, to Australia's Christian Heritage Forum in Canberra during August.



Foto:Ramon Williams

At the time of white settlement in Australia, the idea that Christianity was not embedded in the law would have been regarded as a heresy. For example, when in 1797 Kenyon CJ effectively instructed a jury to convict the publisher of Paine's *Age of Reason* for blasphemy, he told them that "the Christian religion is part of the law of the land".<sup>1</sup>

The Church of England was established by law in England and, to a degree, also in this country. It enjoyed several privileges in the early decades after New South Wales was first colonised. This tended to upset other Christian groups more than church outsiders.

Many rules of the common law, including its crime of blasphemy, were traceable to the Ten Commandments. But it was the law of man and not scripture that defined the offences in detail, established procedures for trial, and determined appropriate punishments.

Murder, theft and false swearing are crimes everywhere – not just in the cultures of Jews, Christians and Muslims. This suggests that guidance about right and wrong derived from holy scripture may indicate not just that something is good for humanity, but also that God wills that which is by nature good.

Non-Christian and pre-Christian societies have in many instances come to a similar understanding about matters the law should address – perceiving signposts to truth in what catholic theology calls natural law.

Claims that Christianity is part of our law are often associated with statements about Australia

being a Christian nation. The latter proposition may be true in terms of predominant religious orientation acknowledged in the census. But the label tells us little about the nature or depth of religious conviction in this country, or its impact upon the public or private lives of our citizens.

In any event, a claim to be a Christian nation should be an acknowledgement of a blessing received, and not some badge of national merit. If we have a good system of law and a sound democracy, we should regard these benefits as products of divine grace not things the nation has achieved because many of its citizens have been Christians.

Some claims of biblical pedigree were quite false and only demonstrate our capacity for self-delusion.

Slavery was recognized by the English common law as part of the law of property until the late eighteenth century. Biblical defences of the institution were mounted well into the nineteenth century in the southern United States.

It was a famous decision by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in 1772 that proclaimed slavery within England to be incompatible with the common law.<sup>2</sup>

Mansfield would have been branded a judicial activist for this bold conclusion had that sloppy term of abuse been in vogue at the time.

Legislation by the Parliament in the early nineteenth century banned the overseas slave trade within the British Empire. This only came about through the political efforts of the radical Clapham Sect – lasting more than a decade. They were stoutly opposed by traders concerned about loss of profits – and bishops concerned about social stability.<sup>3</sup>

Slavery was not an issue in Australia because convicts provided the cheap labour necessary for our pre-industrial society.

The common law established that it was lawful for a husband to rape his wife, and biblical explanations were offered for this rule. This doctrine lasted until 1991 when it too was overturned through

2. *Somerset v Stewart* (1772) 1 Lofft, 98 ER 449.

3. See E M Howse, *Saints in Politics: The "Clapham Sect" and the Growth of Freedom* (1971).

1. *Williams' Case* (1797) How St Tr 654 at 703.

the proper exercise of the lawmaking powers of judges in Britain and Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Even sound biblical authority for particular conduct being right or wrong does not mean that the law should necessarily intrude. Nor does it indicate what legal response is appropriate.

Different times may also produce different attitudes about the wrongness of particular conduct and the proper sanctions for curbing it.

Approaches to child discipline based upon a literal interpretation of the Biblical Proverb about “sparing the rod” (Proverbs 13:24) are no longer acceptable. Indeed, an Australian parent who caused injury through beating a child would expect to be in trouble with the law.

## we should be questioning whether our readiness to resort to law is the problem, not the answer

Societal attitudes may swing from particular conduct being permitted and even morally obligatory, to it being frowned upon morally – then to it being prohibited by law.

For example, attitudes to smoking cigarettes in restaurants and burning off leaves in the backyard have changed profoundly. In times past, each activity would have been strongly encouraged in particular contexts. The moral worm later turned, but when the sanction of public disapproval proved inadequate we resorted to the criminal law.

Sometimes things move in the opposite direction: for example, consensual homosexual conduct involving adults is no longer criminal.

We take child sexual abuse much more seriously nowadays than in the past. This has thrown up a fascinating jurisprudential debate in sentencing law. Should a person convicted today of having committed such a crime thirty years ago be punished according to today’s sentencing tariff, or the tariff when the offence was committed?<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament distinguishes clearly between crime and sin. Law and morality have always been separate spheres. They generally reinforce each other, but not always – because not every human law is just, and because even just laws may be self-defeating.

Christianity teaches that, while we must respect those put in authority, some laws may be so unjust that a believer’s higher duty to God requires martyrdom unless and until the unjust law can be lawfully overturned.

We must never forget that law is not an end in itself. Some types of law may lack a sufficiently high level of support for the mere majority to force through Parliament. Other laws may be counterproductive if only because they provoke disobedience rather than compliance. Some laws may simply be too costly to police and enforce.

We cannot therefore always look to “the law” to achieve what is good or prevent what is bad. Law and government have limited roles in promoting public welfare – and even more limited roles in promoting the Gospel, however we view it.

Sometimes sound laws produce unintended outcomes that are unjust. Sometimes legal rules are invoked inappropriately. Human limitations prevent us from seeing all the consequences of our actions – even those stemming from good intentions.

Contracts can become tools of oppression. Statutory schemes designed to confer benefits to the needy can be rorted. Law has its limits and we do not necessarily overcome them by passing more detailed or onerous laws. Sometimes we should be questioning whether our readiness to resort to law is the problem, not the answer.

Law’s greatest limitation is that it depends on human actors for its enforcement. Yet police can overstep the mark; witnesses can be dishonest, confused or biased; judges and juries can make mistakes in forming decisions.

Both the Bible and human experience teach us that terrible miscarriages of justice occur from time to time and that they are not always remedied in the lifetime of the actors.

Over the last hundred years or so we have responded by adding extra layers of appeal and judicial review, royal commissions and every manner of inquiry.

4. *Reg v R* [1992] 1 AC 612, *The Queen v L* (1991) 174 CLR 379.

5. See *MJR* (2002) 130 A Crim R 481.

Australians have always been unhappy with the state assuming the role of moral guardian or religious nanny. Remnants of establishment of the Church of England were swept away by the mid nineteenth century.

Since then, courts have bent over backwards to avoid becoming embroiled in religious doctrinal disputes. Indeed, judges have had to remind warring Christians of St Paul's injunction against "go[ing] to law before the unjust" (1 Corinthians 6:1-7 (KJV)).<sup>6</sup>

Hostility to any form of theocracy is definitely an aspect of our Australian legal heritage. I also like to think of it as part of our Christian heritage, because it reflects my understanding of scriptural principles about not using the institutions of the state to resolve religious disagreements.

Australian law's unwillingness to get involved in theological disputes also stems from our pragmatic spirit and distrust of authority. It is part of the reason why we have not needed to erect a strong wall of constitutional separation between Church and state.

## we are fortunate to have been spared the worst excesses of the legal culture wars we see in North America

I believe that we are fortunate to have been spared the worst excesses of the legal culture wars we see taking place in North America.

Individuals have many important rights, human rights, which neither the government nor Parliament should transgress. My point is that courts are not the best place to work out and define the content of these rights.

Topics such as sexuality; the nature of marriage; when it is right to discriminate and when it is not; abortion; and the proper separation of Church and state are too important to be sidelined by channelling them into the debating chambers of our constitutional courts.

Yet this is what happens if we pass high-sounding Bills of Rights or anti-discrimination statutes. I do not want decisions about such issues to be set in concrete by a cabal of seven legal scholars in the High Court, no matter how eminent.

6. See my lecture, "Believers in Court: Sydney Anglican going to law", *The Cable Lecture 2005*.

Legal precedents on constitutional issues become very hard to recall and American experience shows that the stacking of constitutional courts is not a desirable way to address the problem.

Judges are skilled and experienced in the matters of the law and (to a degree) in the way that law intersects with ethics, psychology, politics, public health, economics etc. But judges are not ethicists or psychologists and they have no special skills or present mandate to be making society's decisions for it.

Only the profoundly naive think that giving judges the role of defining our most contentious and sensitive rights will reduce the heat of debate. Judges have their own passions, even those who loudly proclaim the value-neutrality of the law.

One consequence of constitutionalising any issue (i.e. removing it from the sphere of development through the common law or by Parliament) is that the highest judiciary itself becomes politicised. Candidates for office are vetted for their political correctness in hot political areas - sometimes at the cost of concentrating on their capacity to perform core judicial functions.

Our founding fathers made a deliberate choice to leave state and federal parliaments generally free in the matters about which they might legislate. Certain powers were assigned to the Commonwealth Parliament, but few matters were excluded from the reach of all legislators.

We have no constitutional Bill of Rights. Nevertheless basic freedoms are widely enjoyed by those fortunate enough to live here or get to our shores.

One of the few exceptions to the policy of having no constitutionally embedded rights was s116 of the federal Constitution which provides:

"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."

The provision was framed cautiously and has been interpreted narrowly. This is hardly surprising given that the Preamble to the same Constitution humbly relies on the blessing of Almighty God.<sup>7</sup>

7. See generally Tony Blackshield, "Religion and Australian constitutional law" in Peter Radan, Denise Meyerson and Rosalind F Croucher, *Law and Religion: God, the State and the Common Law*, Routledge, 2005.

The practical consequence of keeping religious issues out of our Parliaments and courts has been that, unlike our colleagues in the United States, judges in this country have not been embroiled in the often evanescent culture wars of the day. This has been to the good of our society and most fortunate for those who hold judicial office in this country. Judges have enough to do in the core areas of the law.

Men and women of goodwill who share a common Christian heritage may disagree strongly about what is or should be the law. Christian judges do not always agree about the outcome of a particular case. Christians are on all sides of politics and may tend to disagree on what biblical values are important, as well as the ways and means of giving effect to them.

In public discourse in this country, including legal discourse, there is increasing reluctance to acknowledge the source of genuine biblical principles. Citing scripture may be needlessly controversial or positively misleading.

## the Christian mainstream was unfair to non-Christians in the area of free speech

But at times believers have been silenced by a false argument, much in vogue nowadays. This is the idea that so-called secular policies have free passage into public discourse while faith-based policies must be suppressed on that account. How often have we heard it said that X should keep his religious ideas to himself, or at least confine them to preaching to his own flock.

There is a false dichotomy at work here, because all policies have values, including secularly-derived policies.

There is, of course, a more fundamental objection, in that free speech is both an important individual right and vital to the welfare of society. There should be no spurious barriers to entry into public debate. With this attempt of modern secular society to gag the religious voice it is hardly surprising that we find modern Christians restating classical free speech doctrines.<sup>8</sup>

8. See eg Bishop Robert Forsyth *Dangerous Protections, How Some Ways of Protecting Religious Freedom May Actually Diminish the Freedom of Religion*, Acton Lecture 2001.

There is an irony here, because in times past it was the Christian mainstream that was unfair to non-Christians in the area of free speech.

Those proclaiming that our laws are value-free – or should at least be purged of faith-based values – are either deluded or dangerous.

National security, self-reliance, the unhindered pursuit of profit, the good of the environment, individual healthiness, protection of the vulnerable, tolerance and privacy are all values.

Of course, some of them derive from biblical principles and have been given effect through law because they are widely supported by voters, or embedded in authoritative legal precedents.

Of course, some policies in statute and common law will be hostile to gospel values.

Those concerned with the law as it should be (i.e. public and politicians) and as it is (i.e. judges) should be allowed to debate the strengths of relevant values without having to keep silent merely because certain values are labelled as faith-based.

Lawmakers (including our judges, who are responsible for law's application and the development of the common law) bring a diverse range of attitudes to their task. A substantial number of them are practising Christians who hold to an increasingly fashionable view among Christians (especially Evangelical Christians) that the daily vocations of the laity are gospel ministries when pursued with integrity.

In my respectful view, citation of the Bible is not an attempt to enforce interpretations of scripture, any more than a judge who quotes Shakespeare to explain his or her thought processes is trying to enforce the dramatic themes of that playwright.

If we want transparency in our lawmakers and judges, then we surely want them to be up front with the ideas moving them to decision-making.

Hopefully we have not reached the stage that an idea relevant to public or legal discourse is off limits if it is sourced to the Bible, or because it forms part of a larger corpus of philosophy or theology.

I am pleased to report that, in the New South Wales Court of Appeal decision in *Harriton*, one Jewish judge cited the New Testament and one Christian judge cited the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Harriton v Stephens* (2004) 59 NSWLR 694 at 700[17] (Spigelman CJ, referring to Matthew 19:19), 721[155] (Mason P, referring to Job 3:3).

In modern times, the common law has turned its face against formalism and legal fictions. Judges are expected to explain and justify their actual thought processes and not to cloak them in a fog of legalese. This is a vital aspect of judicial accountability.

Of course, it may expose the judge to criticism from legal brethren or outsiders. Such criticism goes with the turf and tenured judges have broad shoulders.

The point I wish to emphasise is that the judge's duty, both as a judge and a person, is to give an honest account of his or her true reasons. If they are unacceptable they may be corrected on appeal, ignored by judicial colleagues on the same appellate bench or overturned by Parliament (if the ruling does not involve a matter of constitutional law).

Our Australian legal system is replete with biblical and Christian values. Its central role is to deliver justice and to settle disputes. It aspires to

find out the truth, while recognising that what is true is not always relevant to the particular legal dispute.

The criminal law endeavours to suppress what *The Book of Common Prayer* describes as "wickedness and vice", while realising that the divergent aims of penology are hard to reconcile, and even harder to achieve across the board.

The human fallibility of judges will ensure that these mighty (dare I say godly) goals of justice, peace, truth and goodness are not always attained. But the goals are important enough in themselves – our legal heritage does not have to seek out dubious biblical roots.

The full text of this paper can be obtained from <http://www.australiaschristianheritageforum.org.au/aboutUs/forum-papers.aspx>

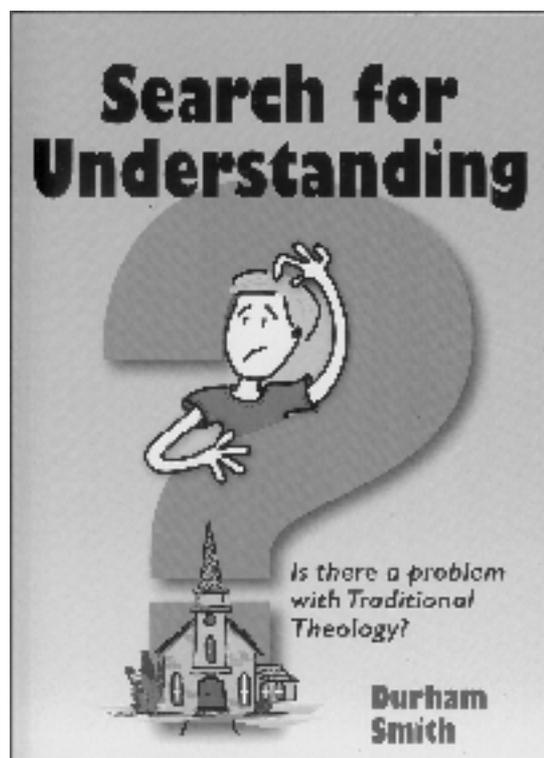
## reader's view

I enclose a copy of a book I have written, which may be of interest. I am not a theologian, as is obvious from my background – retired consultant Paediatric Surgeon from the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne – but I am deeply concerned to try to re-interpret the faith in the context of our contemporary world.

Most of my copies have been given away to friends, as the book was only ever written as a "hobby" production, but it is available commercially, either directly from me at [durhams@netspace.net.au](mailto:durhams@netspace.net.au), or at retail outlets Unichurch Bookshop, the Uniting Church shop at 130 Little Collins St, Melbourne; and at Dymocks Book Stores, at \$22.95.

**Dr E Durham Smith**  
**Balwyn North**

ISBN 0646466119



## book review

*God's Advocates – Christian Thinkers in Conversation* by Rupert Shortt.  
Darton Longman & Todd, 2005.  
ISBN 0232525455. Rrp \$39.95 pp 284.

Reviewed by Maggie Helass

Rupert Shortt, a journalist, has selected a group of eighteen theologians from the Anglophone world who have the premise in common that theology has recovered its nerve in recent years.

This book showcases how an informed, professional journalist can bring rarified academic debate to an armchair near you.

Shortt's skilful interviewing brings the men and women behind the most creative thinking of our times into ordinary conversation, giving some lively vignettes of their theological formation.

The interview with **Rowan Williams** is a concise roadmap of the people who have influenced his thinking since his youth.

He describes the New Testament as “work in progress” – which is certainly throwing down the gauntlet to his fratricidal church.

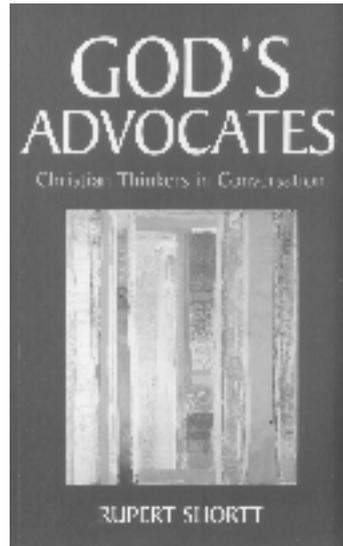
He seems perfectly at ease tinkering with the dynamics of theology, insisting that relation with God takes time – it is not to be rushed.

“What we mean by soul is not some little extra bit, but the shape and the sense of the cohesion of this bodily history that is a person in the world... the relation between the smile and the face...”

“I sometimes feel that a lot of our theology has lost that extraordinarily vivid or exhilarating sense of the world penetrated by divine energy in the classical theological terms”.

Williams wants to restore theology to public debate through a new literacy about God, to replace the lost common language of antiquity.

As a whole, these interviews bestow a context on the history of modern Christian theology – the influence of Barth challenging the barbarism of politics in Germany in the '30s; their common debt to Wittgenstein; the return to pre-modern modes of thought.



Philosophical theologian **Janet Martin Soskice** remembers how difficult it was to find intelligent people who were both Christian and literate in the '60s.

“Maybe I suffered too much the disorientating effects of Camus and Sartre as an undergraduate...”

Shortt's leading question that theology is a “well-kept secret”

instigates a discussion of how philosophical theology is attempting to regain the academic ground zero from atheistic prejudice. Far from being a discrete discipline, theology brings together ethics, politics, metaphysics, aesthetics.

Soskice the philosopher theologian contributes that “faithful knowing must also be unknowing, for the wonder of God exceeds our frail brains”, opening up another contested arena of debate – the relative merits of negative/positive or apophatic/cataphatic approaches to God.

Christianity's relationship with Judaism also looms large in several interviews.

The philosophy of religion slot is filled by **Alvin Plantinga** and **Christopher J Insole**.

They discuss liberalism, on one hand characterised as hubristic, individualistic and relativist, but on the other hand the individual is the unit of reflection. Insole's book *The Politics of Human Frailty* is an attempt to uncover a much older, theologically informed and motivated liberal tradition through a study of Hooker, Locke, Burke and Acton.

A dip into more recent church history includes a critique of radical orthodoxy – of which Rowan Williams is said to be the father.

**Sarah Coakley**, systematic theologian, describes her theological formation as grounded in the ‘mystical’ and ‘critical/rational’. *Honest to God* had a significant influence on her teenage years – she was at school with John Robinson's daughters.

At Cambridge she was attracted to the “ferocious clarity” of analytic philosophy of religion with Don Cupitt, and later came under the influence of Troeltsch and his view that doctrine was always profoundly entangled with social and cultural forms and locations.

Coakley’s study of systematics is founded on the practice of prayer: “the regular undertaking of an intentional form of what I term dispossession”. This position of powerlessness is paradoxically the starting point for her study of theology and the precondition for her feminism.

She has introduced new themes to systematic theology in her three volume work *Metaphor and Religious Language*, such as desire, gender, race and class.

“All the conflicted theological questions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries require, as I see it, a re-examination of this nexus of difficulty about *eros*...”.

The Triune God is **Christopher Schwöbel**’s focus of study – God’s creative, revealing and inspiring agency. He moved towards the ‘activity of God’ after becoming disillusioned with liberal theology.

He noticed that divine speaking and divine action were not two separate worlds, and moved from there to a notion of the dynamic presence of relationship.

“The Father as the origin of all being, the Son as the exemplification of the communicative structure of being, and the Spirit as the energiser of the divine being... only together do they form the creative act of the divine Trinity.”

Schwöbel says that the justification for all anthropomorphic language in theology is the incarnation of the Son: “embodiment, corporeality, the linguistic character of communication – all these are, for God, permanent features of his interaction with the created order.”

Schwöbel foresees a third way between individualism and collectivism, which is essential for ecumenism to prosper between liberals, Evangelicals and Charismatics – the main Christian groups across denominational and confessional boundaries.

**John Milbank** and Simon Oliver present the case for **radical orthodoxy**.

Shortt introduces the basic premise that in the Middle Ages philosophy became divorced from theology and as a result theology lost its concern with reality as a whole.

“Western culture thereby lost the patristic and early medieval sense that reason and revelation are not opposed concepts.”

Milbank confirmed that philosophy was a religious practice in antiquity, concerned with a coherent intellectual vision.

He was influenced by Nicholas Lash’s view that theology doesn’t have its own special subject matter: “it’s much more a question of the way in which the epiphany of God makes a difference to everything”.

Radical orthodoxy exposes the concealed extreme authoritarianism of ‘Enlightenment’, he says.

“The apparent advocacy of pure reason without the intrusion of emotional prejudice is always secretly the promotion of a cold will to power.”

**David Burrell** discusses Thomas Aquinas – his dialogue with Jewish and Muslim thinkers, and his role in reconciling faith and reason.

## the conflicted theological questions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries require a re-examination of eros

Burrell says that the post-modern environment is much more accepting of faith-type premises than the Enlightenment and therefore much closer in spirit to the medieval period.

**Jean-Luc Marion** provides a ‘continental perspective’ with what Shortt describes as “a few tools for looking at common condundrums in a fresh way.”

**David Martin**, as a sociologist, tackles the nexus of Christianity and society and reaches the conclusion that Christianity, as a sign language of peace, love, sacrifice and brotherhood, is deficient in terminology to cover the exigencies of power.

Theological ethics is tackled by **Stanley Hauerwas** and **Samuel Wells**, the former tabling that the disengagement of Christianity from Stoicism is one of the greatest tasks faced by theology today.

Just War theory comes out for an airing, a question which Shortt raises with several of his interviewees.

Hauerwas makes some withering comments on contemporary medicine, and in defence of doctors.

“One of the demonic things that has happened to medicine is to change its purpose from care to cure.”

“If you ask what the most important developments for the health of the population over the last century have been, they don’t have anything to do with crisis-care medicine. They have to do, of course, with sewerage, windows and better diets.”

Wells contributes that the one key decision at the centre of medical ethics is that we agree not to give up on people when they cannot offer anything to society in any tangible form.

Feminist theologian **Tina Beattie** makes the point that today it is not just women but non-Western cultures and religions that are changing the shape of Christian doctrine.

Beattie, a Roman Catholic, carefully assembles the argument that if Mary’s ‘yes’ was enough to incarnate Christ in her body, a woman’s prayers of consecration ought to be enough to incarnate him in bread and wine.

The association between divinity, masculinity and transcendence; and nature, femininity and bodiliness, is a hugely significant construct that continues to shape theological language, she says.

“Feminists debate about the relationship between sex and gender – between our biological bodies and cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity – but pre-modern Christians knew that gender was primarily social rather than biological.”

**Miroslav Volf**, born in Croatia, talks about justice and reconciliation from a theological perspective and makes the trenchant comment (in a book about Anglophone theologians) that the future of Christianity belongs to non-Western Christians.

Black theology, although he has reservations about the term, is outlined by **J Kameron Carter** who mounts the argument that a corrupted theology underlies a good deal of racial thinking and is still today one of the problems of nationalism.

Unlike “white” academia, black intellectual life has remained implicitly religious throughout – and perhaps because of – a history of oppression.

The American Civil Rights movement was a potent example of lived theology, and theological discourse will always have its deepest witness in the lives it is able to produce.

Political theology is the field of **Oliver O’Donovan** and **Joan Lockwood O’Donovan** who are concerned with the recovery of practical

reasoning – “reasoning has become addicted to abstract schemas”.

“The self-description of democracy is a wholly abstract one, and to bring it into contact with reality we must first treat all the key terms – people, choose, government – as terms-of-art in need of extensive theoretical development.”

The modern establishment is starved of the theological language of its foundation Joan O’Donovan says, and her work has been concerned with rescuing biblical theology in its political aspects.

She describes this as the recovery of pre-modern theological articulations of political authority and order, which situate it within a dynamic conception of humankind as created, fallen, redeemed and sanctified.

“The legal individualism of human rights law... breeds contempt for a legal past in which both legislators and the legal profession... assumed a cultural, moral and religious horizon for public law.”

“I have tried to return contemporary thought about rights to the theological formulations of Ockham and Hooker.”

Christianity, as a sign language  
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She believes there needs to be a more whole-hearted return to the traditional Christian political concepts of obligation, obedience, law and justice.

Shortt’s introductions to the interviews place these theologians in context and encourage them to talk about their thought through the lens of their lives.

His role as an interviewer/editor has ensured lots of cross-referencing between his subjects e.g. Oliver O’Donovan on Rowan Williams: “Paradox and unexpected reversal is the essence of a Williams train of thought”; “His engagement with ethics and politics tend to be night-time raiding parties.”

This collection, although necessarily drawing on the academic language of theology, includes much common theology – nourishing talk about God with intelligent, articulate people guided by a perceptive professional interpreter.

## books in brief

### ***Biblica – The Bible Atlas A Social and Historical Journey through the Lands of the Bible***

ISBN 0670029866. Rrp \$150.

I recently saw an advance copy of this extraordinary book to be published in December in time for Christmas. The price seems high but it is a large book, lavishly produced and illustrated, stunning in its graphics and contemporary in its style, and reflecting current biblical scholarship in its commentary.

An attractive feature of the book is the fact that four outstanding Australian biblical scholars have contributed to this international production: Margaret Beirne, Mark O'Brien, Anna Grant-Henderson and James Harrison; while Janet Healy, another Australian writer, was part of the editorial team.

There is more information on our website and many of your regular bookshops will have stock in time for Christmas.

Denis Edwards teaches theology at the Adelaide College of Divinity. His new book ***Ecology at the Heart of Faith*** has recently been published. Those of you who admire Denis' previous works (*Breath of Life* – a theology of the Creator Spirit, *God of Evolution* – a Trinitarian theology and *The Human Experience of God*) will welcome the new book. Subtitled 'Change of heart that leads to a new way of living', the book appeals to us as Christians to affirm and rejoice in our connectedness with God's creation and to take seriously our responsibilities for its welfare. The book retails at \$39.95 and should be available in your bookshops.

Diarmuid O'Murchu, the Irish theologian with a special interest in the new cosmology, will be in Australia in January and February to give some seminars in Melbourne and Sydney. His new book ***Transformation of Desire*** will be published in the UK in January and should be here a little later in the new year. The new book will retail at \$39.95. ISBN is 0232526915. Like all the books in Rainbow's growing list, they will be available from your local Christian bookshop.

Hugh McGinlay

Rainbow Book Agencies

www.rainbowbooks.com.au

The following is a brief description of some new books available through your Christian book shop

### ***Bede Griffiths: Friend & Gift of the Spirit by Meath Conlan***

Templegate Publishers. ISBN 087243270X

Rrp \$37.95 pp128

From the barren land of the Australian wilderness to the tropical landscape of South India, Meath Conlan traces his spiritual journey under the guidance of the late spiritual master Bede Griffiths. He shares with us a fascinating and intimate portrait of this humble and holy man, who was not only a mentor but friend and confidante. Father Bede's conversations and wisdom come to life through Conlan's recollections and vivid pictures which chronicle their years of friendship. The twenty-eight full color photos from the author's private collection include public celebrations, interfaith meetings with world religious leaders, as well as private moments of contemplation and worship.

### ***Oxford Concise Dictionary Of World Religions New Edn, Bowker***

Oxford University Press. ISBN 019861053X

Rrp \$36.95 pp 736

Abridged from the acclaimed *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, this is the most comprehensive dictionary of religion available in paperback. Written by an expert team of contributors, the volume contains over 8,200 entries, an extensive topic index, and an original and in-depth introductory essay. Contains unrivalled coverage of all the major world religions, past and present, and entries on religions; movements; sects and cults; individuals; sacred sites; ethics; and many more.

### ***Beliefnet Guide to Gnosticism & Other Vanished Christianities by Richard Valantasis***

Random House USA. ISBN 0385514557

Rrp \$17.95 pp 128

This book takes a look at the diverse strands of the early Christian church. It examines the alternative

Christian ideas propagated by the Gnostics, Sethians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Encratites, and Montanists, illuminating the philosophical sources and religious traditions that fostered them. Special attention is given to sects that presented the greatest challenges to the developing orthodoxy: the Hermeticists, the Manicheans, and the Neoplatonists. There are also thought-provoking discussions about the secret Gospel of Mark and the Gospels of Mary and Thomas, and the newly discovered Gospel of the Savior.

***Ethics: Key Concepts in Philosophy***  
**by Dwight Furrow**

Alliance Distribution Service ISBN 0826472451  
Rrp \$26.95 pp 160

Key Concepts in Philosophy is a series of concise, introductions to the core ideas and subjects encountered in the study of philosophy. Specially written to meet the needs of students and those with an interest in, but little prior knowledge of, philosophy, these books open up fascinating, yet sometimes difficult ideas. The series builds to give a grounding in philosophy and each book is a companion to further study.

Western philosophy has always placed questions of ethics – of how to live well – centre stage. It offers thorough analysis and explication of six core concepts in moral philosophy: agency; reason; happiness; obligation; character; responsibility. The book covers all the major moral theories to have emerged from the Western tradition, and pays close attention to those philosophers who have made significant contributions to ethics. In addition to the six central themes, the text also discusses such key topics in ethics as relativism, egoism, naturalism, autonomy, objectivity, religion and integrity. The book concludes by looking at the challenges to moral philosophy posed by recent technological and social change.

***Key Words in Christianity***  
**by Ron Geaves**

Alliance Distribution Service.  
ISBN 0826480470. Rrp \$19.95 pp 112

Written in response to students' worries over the demands of dealing with a range of complex and unfamiliar concepts, this reference book enables readers to grasp the essentials of the subject up to graduate level. It also provides a pool of

information for all who want to extend their general knowledge of the subject – whether for personal or professional reasons.

***Stages on Life's Way : Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics***  
**by Lyn and John Breck**

St Vladimir's Seminary Press  
ISBN 0881412996. Rrp \$30.00 pp 250

In this collaborative effort, Fr John and Lyn Breck provide practical, theological, and pastoral thinking on complex matters: the use of embryonic stem cells, gene therapy, new definitions of sexuality and marriage, treatment of addictive behavior and substance abuse, and end-of-life care. Taking us through the stages on life's way, the authors show us how the ancient, vital wisdom of the Orthodox Church inspires and informs contemporary life.

***Sing! New Words for Worship***  
**by Roslind Brown**

Canterbury Press. ISBN 0953483630  
Rrp \$34.95 pp 100

Canterbury Press is pleased to distribute this new hymn collection on behalf of the Sarum College Press. Three of the finest contemporary hymnwriters and church musicians have set new words to familiar tunes and also offer a selection of brand new hymns.

***Pascal's Fire : Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding, by Keith Ward***

Bookwise International. ISBN1851684468  
Rrp \$29.95 pp224

In the midst of global resurgence of interest in religion, and especially religion's relation to modern scientific knowledge, Pascal's Fire offers an erudite and original perspective. Many scientists have written about religion. However this is the first contemporary volume in which a theologian takes on science. In examining four pivotal figures in the history of the science-religion debate, Ward argues that each individual challenge, and scientific knowledge generally, elicits a new, up-to-date concept of God rather than an obituary. But the question remains: is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob also the God of the scientists?

# Politics and public education

By Peter Sellick

The Federal government plans to spend 29.7 million dollars on promoting values education in our schools. These plans are outlined in a document available on the web entitled 'National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools'.<sup>1</sup>



The reason for this initiative is not explained in the document, but the idea is that if only we could teach the young values then our society would again be set on firm foundations.

Anxiety about the character formation of the young is common to most civilizations. In all cultural breakdown the stories and myths at the centre of that culture have been gradually forgotten. Cultures survive when their stories and myths describe human reality, and when they are rehearsed with the young.

Our central stories and myths come from the Judeo/Christian tradition, and the decline of the churches means that these stories are no longer rehearsed with the young. Indeed, the separation between church and state almost demands that they are not. Our insistence on giving equal airtime to all religious traditions further alienates them from us.

My first response to the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools was that it looked like a massive dismissal of the much-touted separation between church and state. While any influence of the churches on the state is loudly protested against, it seems that when the state encroaches on the business of the Church we hear hardly a whimper.

The document states: "Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians' intellectual, physical, social, moral, *spiritual* (my emphasis) and aesthetic development". As the influence of the churches further weakens in our society it seems that governments feel duty-bound to pick up the pieces. This ignores the fact that the Church is the bearer of a long history of thought and

1. [www.valueseducation.edu.au](http://www.valueseducation.edu.au)

## Home Truths

experience concerned with what it means to be human – spiritual matters.

This document is peppered with words whose origin lies in various sociological, psychological and educational movements. This is a document written by a committee, with each 'stakeholder' adding their bit. Concerns for students' self esteem, resilience, responsibility, compassion, caring, fair play etcetera are rife.

This is the cherry-picker approach to ethics and the good life. But there is no cohesion; there is no underlying narrative that illustrates the nature of our life in the world. This is the sort of document that no one in their right mind could object to; it is all about "best practice".

No mention is made of the Judeo/Christian tradition or of any religious tradition. Managerialism has already produced a language of its own for 'appropriate' and 'committed' speech.

the great men and women  
of history were caught up  
in a motivating narrative  
– for good and evil

But a thin veneer of morality – which is all that we will get from values education – is liable to result in a false piety behind which evil and corruption will breed. This is the sort of behaviour that is condemned in the New Testament and is the opposite of freedom.

The problem is that these values (gleaned from bits of Australian history, as if we have a monopoly on "a fair go") are to be dumped on students in the absence of a motivating narrative that could put fire in their bellies.

The people who produced this document are naïve in thinking that they can skim off values from the narratives that have forged our society and serve them up to be taken like medicine for bad

character and behaviour. Character is not formed like that.

Do they really think that the great men and women of history became what they were thanks to values education? No, they were caught up in a motivating narrative – for good and evil.

Without the narrative of the Fatherland and the ascendancy of the Arian race Germany would not have gone to war, and ruin, a second time. The same is true of the Soviet Union.

Secular attempts to provide character formation for citizens run the risk of simply being

it is not the function  
of governments to engineer  
the values and character  
of their citizens

ignored. Students spot an agenda at once and they will simply turn off when it occurs to them that this class is designed to make them good.

When such attempts are motivated by a narrative based on nationhood they can cause vast misery and suffering.

I would have thought that the bloody history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would have taught us that it is not the function of governments to engineer the values and character of their citizens.

Our problem is not that we don't know the difference between good and evil – we learn that in kindergarten. Our problem is that our characters are now formed by popular narratives of lifestyle and material progress.

It is the inherent nihilism of these narratives – their shallow narcissism – that produces the anomie that leads to drug and alcohol abuse. It is ridiculous to think that a course in values could compete with the expensive, subtle, seductive advertising campaigns of multimillion-dollar corporations.

The imposition of values will do nothing for the person who lives without hope; without a rich narrative that tells them who they are, where they came from, and why they are here.

Character – and the behaviour that derives from it – cannot be developed simply by asserting values. Character is born of passion. We may think that democracy came from the Greeks

but a much broader base for democracy is to be found in the New Testament.

Our egalitarianism comes from the teaching that every person is made in the image of God. The character of our forbears was formed out of biblical narrative which dramatically – in story and song and poetry and legend – fired the imagination and the belly.

In contrast, values education is a poor thing, a weak attempt at social engineering aimed at making us 'better'.

The Revd Peter Sellick is Senior Research Officer at The Auditory Lab, Dept of Physiology, University of Western Australia. [www.onlineopinion.com.au](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au)

## Paget's Parable



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