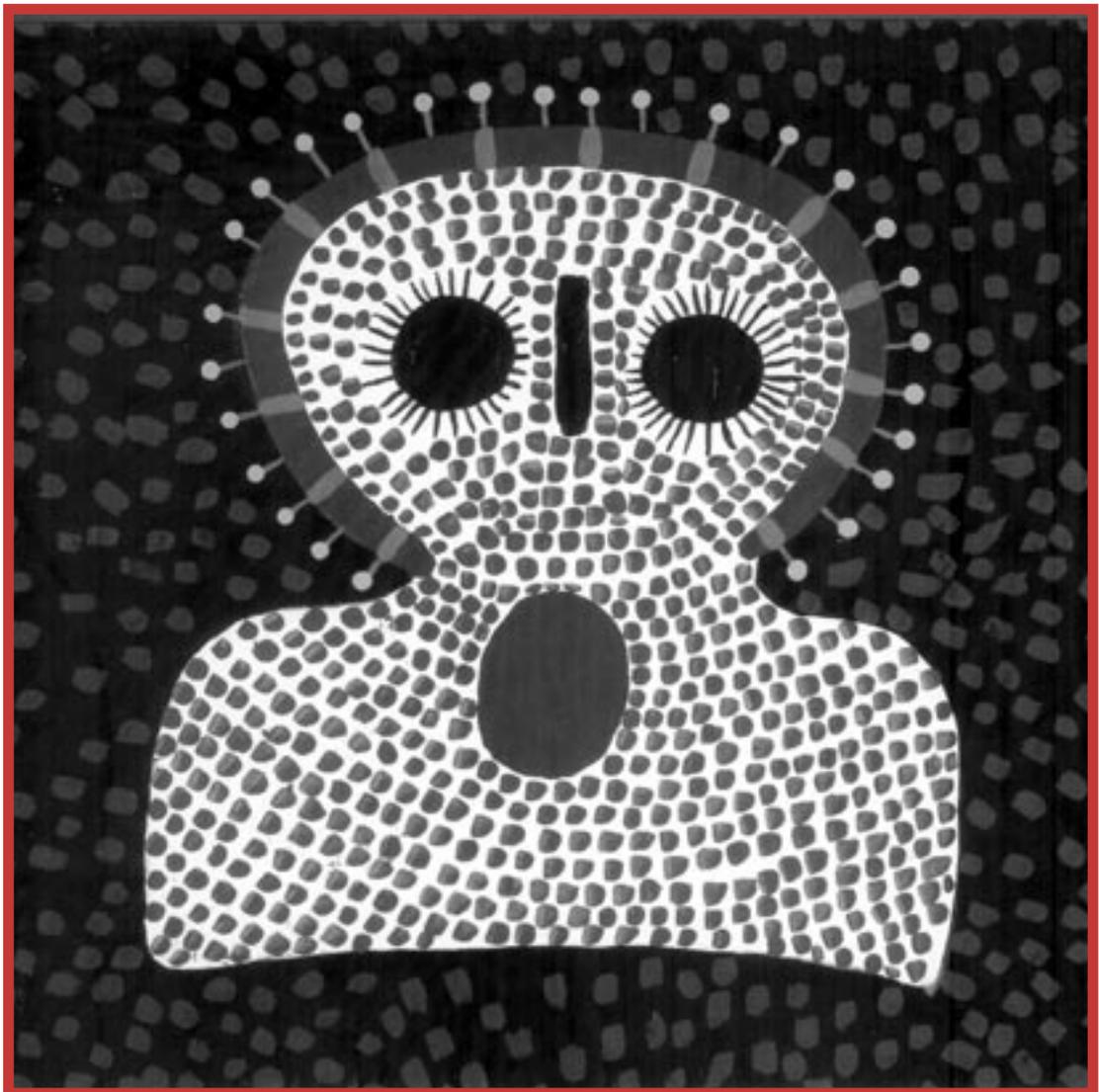


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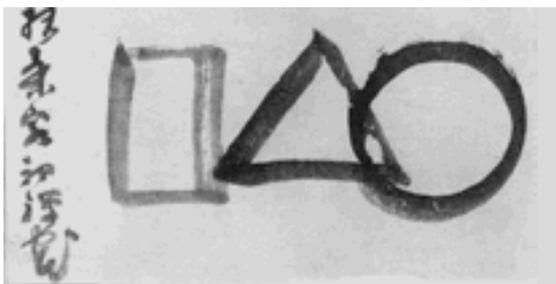
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INSIDE:

- The two faces of the ABC
- How the stigma of mental illness kills
- Financial crisis – greed and illusion

A Quarterly Journal for Australians



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From the Editor

Common Theology has the benefit of some exceptional minds as editorial advisors. We could not go to press this Spring without some comment on the financial tsunami engaging world attention.

Andrew Hamilton's usual perspicacious comments on the issue of greed were embraced by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

But greed is only one cause of the disaster which Benoit Mandelbrot (author of the Chaos Theory) has described as an apocalyptic meltdown of commercial structures.

Common Theology's editorial mentors have lived through most of the last century and saw money first detached from the gold standard and attached to commodity then to services. In the past few decades money has lost contact altogether with what it represents, as debt is traded against risk and insurance.

The core of the financial meltdown appears to be more pernicious than greed – which afflicts only a small number of people. The unstable core was illusion, which affects us all. The illusion that money, feeding on itself without any material foundation, creates wealth and power.

Like a Faustian pact it can work for a while but must collapse eventually because it has no incarnation in the real world. In theological terms this is what we call sin. Something that has an illusion of substance.

Common Theology borrows freely from *Eureka Street* on-line magazine and we have a cordial relationship with the editorial team. It is one of the features of the world wide web that we can share freely – and of course this also is creating havoc with the current market system.

Melbourne Anglican Archbishop Philip Freire's public conversations in Federation Square have taken the Church back into the market-place, and we feature his oddly ironic conversation with Mark Scott, Managing Director of the ABC, above Paul Collins' response to the revelation a month later that the ABC were to abolish The Religion Report. So much for truth in public places!

The story of Pos Konea will sadden many readers, particularly those who remember the Brisbane theological colleges from their salad days, when they were great communities.

From the postmodern fog between fact and fiction Bronwyn Lay brings us a Generation X perspective that no baby-boomer should miss.

It remains to thank subscribers who "value-added" to their subscriptions following last edition's editorial comment on how close to the breeze independent publications such as *Common Theology* have to sail in terms of resources. Your extra dollars have helped pay the bills, but much more importantly, have encouraged us to believe that *Common Theology* is seaworthy.

Maggie Helass

Dealing with Mammon

By Andrew Hamilton



It is interesting that the Churches have had little to say about the financial crisis and the behaviour that caused it. After all it has put at risk the lives of people throughout the world no less than do abortion, euthanasia or gambling. And Christian faith, with its insights into sin and salvation, offers some rich material for reflection.

Sin is popularly seen simply as the breaking of God's laws. But at a deeper level sin is the pursuit of values that sell your humanity short.

That pursuit typically both corrodes your humanity and undermines the conditions that permit you to pursue cheap values. This process can be seen in the financial crisis.

The root of the financial crisis was greed — seeking individual financial gain in ways that did not respect the common good. The symbols of greed were spectacular. Monstrous salaries of CEOs, for example, and takeovers that transferred fees to the engineers and debt to the companies.

But greed was not confined to the top end. Funds demanded that companies produce short-term profits, led in turn by their members who wanted spectacular superannuation growth.

The way in which greed saps the humanity of the greedy and injures the welfare of ordinary human beings and of societies is evident enough.

It is less recognised that unfettered greed destroys the conditions under which the market itself can function and under which the greedy can reward themselves.

If they are to function, financial markets require confidence. They are based on credit, and we give credit only to people whom we believe to be credible, and only if we believe creditable the processes by which we give credit. If we believe that people in the market are trying to rip us off and can rely on shonky processes to do so, we shall refuse credit. Without credit financial markets collapse.

Greed alone does not destroy trust and confidence. But it breeds a fatal lack of

responsibility. We accept responsibility for our own gains but refuse responsibility for others' losses. The evasion of responsibility creates bad process. We make a legal and commercial framework that diffuses responsibility. When we need to reckon our debts and our credits, we shall be unable to do so. Confidence and credit will disappear from the market.

In this financial crisis evasion of responsibility has been refined into an art form. The slicing of debt into instruments that make it impossible to determine who has responsibility is a clear example.

So is the propensity of banks to press money on those who cannot repay and the failure of boards to resign after approving policies that gutted their companies and employees.

So the wage of sin is the death of the market and consequent real deaths in a world that relies on credit. That is where the parallels with Christian theology get interesting. There too the cycle of sin begets irresponsibility, and irresponsibility begets a doomed world. Salvation needs to come from outside by the intervention of a beneficent creator.

Unfettered greed destroys the conditions under which the market itself can function

He must take responsibility for debts owed in an altruistic and painful way. Thus is the working of greed and irresponsibility healed, doom averted, and credit restored. Sinners will be inspired to another and better way of life.

It all sounds familiar, doesn't it? The Reserve takes on all bad debts, and market players are freed from the consequences of their greed and irresponsibility. So salvation comes to the market whose devotees henceforth eschew greed, are responsible, and look to the common good.

The market can be trusted to regulate itself.

Sound likely? Or in the market does salvation merely mean that the greed and irresponsibility are spectacularly rewarded?

In Christian faith, of course, there is the little business of original sin. People continue to sin, so that even after they come to faith life is a school for learning altruism. That experience suggests that financial markets will continue to encourage greed. So they need to be carefully structured in order that they don't foul their own nest of confidence as well as smearing those who depend on them.

Churches have a lot to say about markets. They ought to humour as children those who tell us to trust the markets to regulate themselves.

Greed is part of the human condition. It does not offer salvation. That is something altogether different and better.

The Revd Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ is the consulting editor for *Eureka Street* on-line magazine where this article first appeared on September 25. He also teaches at the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne. www.eurekastreet.com.au

What the ABC said in the Square...

Melbourne's Anglican Archbishop Philip Freier holds regular public conversations in Federation Square, opposite St Paul's Cathedral. These popular meetings reflect the lost medieval role of the cathedral as a city's market place and communications centre. The rood screen in Europe's old cathedrals divided the straw and rabble of the populace from the Eucharistic offering, rather as Flinders Street divides cathedral and square today.

Mark Scott's comments in this article are ironic in the light of the ABC's intention to downsize religious broadcasting next year (see next page).

Just at the time journalism is under greatest pressure financially, the demands for high-quality journalism are more pressing than ever before, Mark Scott, Managing Director of the ABC, said in October.

Speaking as part of a breakfast time conversation with Archbishop Freier and Gary Morgan, Executive Chairman of Morgan Research, at Federation Square, on the topic 'In this global 24/7 world, are we ruled by the media?', Mr Scott spoke of the need for new models for quality journalism in the face of our new global democratised world:

"The impact of climate change, the rise of fundamentalism, the crash of the world financial markets are highly complex, detailed and nuanced issues which need good journalism, not only to break news and give us insight into what is happening, but to provide us with an analysis and the insight into why it happened, what were the causes of it and what will happen next.

"This does require sophisticated analytical journalism that isn't just journalism that you can outsource or crank out."

Archbishop Freier opened the conversation with the Prayer for the Media, found in *A Prayer Book for Australia*

*Almighty God,
You proclaim your truth in every age by many voices:
Direct those who speak where many listen,
Those who write what many read
Those who influence what many see,
That they may do their part in making the heart of
this people wise,
Its mind sound and its will righteous
To the honour of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

The Archbishop suggested the prayer set a high benchmark. Mark Scott responded that it was legitimate for the public to have high expectations of the media, but a changing world was placing considerably more pressure on the media.

Both he and Gary Morgan argued that the single most dramatic transformation within the media landscape is the introduction of the Internet. They agreed this has led to a decline in the power of the 'media baron' and has democratised the media, giving anyone with a modem and a keyboard access to a wider public.¹

1. Another august Melbournian, Gerald Charles Davis, former Editor of *Church Scene*, was one of the first to appreciate the revolutionary potential of the Internet. Even before the world wide web existed, in 1987 his editorial team were already networking by e-mail.



Mark Scott (centre) in conversation with Archbishop Freier (left) and Gary Morgan (right).

Gary Morgan presented some surprising statistics about people's perceptions on the bias within the media. Research undertaken by his company indicated that people were most suspicious of newspapers, with 85% of those surveyed believing that newspapers were biased, and 74% and 69% respectively believing that television and talkback radio were biased.

Mr Morgan welcomed the Internet, believing that it will lead to a more honest distribution of information. "Younger audiences don't want to be broadcast at, they want to participate in – they are part of the media," he said.

Mr Scott presented a view of our lounge rooms in the future, where the box in the corner, or the flat screen on the wall, will have three plugs – one plug for free to air television (offering up to fifteen channels); one plug for subscription television

(with hundreds of offerings) and one broadband plug giving the view access to tens of thousands of channels all around the world.

He said he believed reliability and public confidence become paramount amidst this mind-boggling array of choice.

He expressed concern that it is becoming increasingly easy for individuals to read and match material supporting only their particular worldview.

"You can narrow your exposure to anything that doesn't fit this world view."

"The question is who are you going to trust, rely on and believe," Mr Scott said.

Dr Freier told the audience at Federation Square that this issue of trust and credibility was fundamental to relationship.

He said that in oral societies, such as the Indigenous one he came to know in the Northern Territory, reliable information comes from people you have confident relationships with.

"There is something very deep in our humanity which links relationship to information and the effect it will have on us."

Some of the questions from the audience related to concerns about the loss of quality journalism and the role of print journalism in allowing for reflection.

This article appeared in the November issue of *The Melbourne Anglican* diocesan newspaper. www.melbourne.anglican.com.au/tma

meanwhile, back at ABC HQ Ultimo

An extraordinary opening comment by Radio National Religion Report presenter Stephen Crittenden on October 15 was the first many ABC listeners heard about serious changes to the Radio National schedule planned for 2009.

By Paul Collins

Words tell you everything. When you hear "interdisciplinary" you know it means "dumbing down"; and "consumer focused" always refers to the lowest common denominator.

This is precisely the rhetoric used by ABC Radio National management in October to describe their intentions for Radio National programming next year.

Several specialist programs are being taken off-air including 'The Religion Report', 'The Media Report' and 'Radio Eye'.

The Reports are flagship programs that deal with issues central to current culture. Apparently they are being replaced by a movie show and something about the future.

Specialist broadcasters will spend more time responding to opinionated bloggers rather than making programs. God help us!

Let's be clear what ABC Radio management is up to – it is a case of the bland leading the bland.

Specialisation is out. Nowadays the belief is that any old (or, more likely, young) "interdisciplinary" journalist can deal with any topic.

Well, I've been interviewed literally hundreds of times on ABC radio and television. My experience is that while most journalists make a reasonable go of it, they just don't know the detail and often have to be led to the key questions.

Take religion for example. There are no more than half a dozen specialist religious journalists in Australia. Two work for Fairfax (Linda Morris and Barney Zwartz) and the rest for the ABC which has had a religion department since the beginning of the corporation.¹

Post mortem trips



Eternal Float

Loved ones ashes are floated to sea in a beautifully hand crafted shell urn.



Eternal Bloom

A beautiful pot that cradles your loved ones ashes with a rose bush.



Eternal Flight

A portion of your loved ones ashes are released to the heavens in a balloon.



Eternal Etch

Ashes are painted onto an exquisite piece of canvas artwork.



Stephen Crittenden [who disappeared from 'The Religion Report' after 15 October], John Cleary and Rachael Kohn are able to cover a complex spectrum of beliefs, practices and theologies from a wide cross-section of traditions precisely because they are specialists.

Nowadays religion is a mainstream political, cultural and socio-economic issue with enormous impact on world affairs. To cover it adequately you need specialists.

That is precisely what Stephen Crittenden has done on 'The Religion Report'. He knows what the issues are and where the bodies are buried. Sure, he has upset some powerful people, but that's the nature of a free media.

I'm not paranoid. I don't see this as an attack on religion. It's more a lack of appreciation of specialisation, derived from the half-witted, postmodern conviction that everyone can do anything.

Sure, they can ask a few prosaic, "man-in-the-street" questions. But that's not the task of Radio National. If you think it is, get a job with the commercials.

It effectively spells the end of religion as a specialisation in the ABC

We need to be clear where this is leading. It effectively spells the end of religion as a specialisation in the ABC.

If you only have a couple of minor, essentially life-style programs on air you don't need people who know their stuff. All you need is an "interdisciplinary, consumer-focused" approach, produced by the type of journalist who doesn't know the difference between an Anglo-Catholic and an Evangelical!

Paul Collins is a former specialist editor (religion) for the ABC.

This article first appeared on www.crikey.com.

¹ One of the founders of the ABC Religion department was the Revd Dr Kenneth Henderson, whose daughter now sponsors *Common Theology*.

A body blow to church mission

By Maggie Helass

Education is Australia's top services export after tourism. Annual earnings from overseas education, including students who come to Australia to study, are estimated at \$3.7 billion.

The Rev Pos Konea from Papua New Guinea was one of these students, who found international donors to fund his post-graduate studies at the Brisbane College of Theology (BCT).

Now, after four years of tragic mismanagement he is back in the PNG Southern Highlands, disillusioned with church and state, and particularly with the Australian academic establishment.

He is working to provide for nine children – six of his own and three adopted. His wife, Miriam, is travelling the country with a group of women engaged in AIDS education initiatives while Pos attempts to rebuild a house large enough for them all at home in Mendi.

Australia has a sentimental relationship with PNG highlanders through the so-called 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' who helped Australian servicemen survive the Kokoda Track during WWII.

PNG students do not qualify for Medicare in Australia

Pos Konea's people met their first white man in 1951, but Pos is of that same highland stock as the wartime 'angels' – sturdy, steadfast, with a primal intelligence that gets the job done... whatever the cost.

Readers will remember that *Common Theology* financed a trip home for Pos Konea at Christmas 2004. At the time he was living at St Francis College, the Anglican campus of the BCT, in dismal circumstances, paying \$80 a week for a room.

The college was no longer the august institution of the past century, had ceased to be residential and the buildings had fallen into disrepair.

Pos had made himself a garden in the grounds to grow some food – sweet potato and greens – because no food was available at the college and the alien fare on offer at the local supermarket was very expensive.



The Rev Pos Konea and his wife Miriam.

Christmas seemed to be a good time for a trip home to see his wife and children, get a good feed of wild pig, and do some research for his Masters Degree. It actually cost less for us to send Pos home than he would have paid to stay alone on campus over the Christmas holidays.

The downside was that when he returned to the college after the vacation he was told that his room was no longer available.

This surprised him as he had helped the new principal's wife to establish a garden, and had made himself useful in various ways around the campus during the previous year.

His room was needed for an Anglican, Pos was told. He belonged to the Uniting Church college of BCT and would have to find alternative accommodation.

Pos used to take an hour or so recreation in the afternoon in the common room, now derelict and used as a storeroom, but where there was still a pool table. This got his body moving again after spending hours studying at his desk or in the library. This and the gardening kept him fit. Leaving the campus after a year building up these routines was not easy.

He found lodgings far in the outer suburbs, together with some Asian overseas students. The rent was manageable and St Augustine's Anglican Parish in Hamilton donated the deposit on his room.

The trip to the college library and for lectures entailed a longish walk, a bus ride, and a train trip with a change of stations. Thus isolated, after several months Pos became ill.

PNG students do not qualify for Medicare in Australia. They are obliged to pay for private medical insurance which is very expensive for a PNG person, and which does not cover real medical expenses.

When Pos saw a doctor she prescribed a proper chair and desk for study. Weeks and months slumped over his 'papers' had seriously upset the metabolism of this sturdy highlander. Stress and malnutrition had also played a role.

Under doctor's orders Pos made a raid on St Francis College to retrieve his own desk from his old room, and found a better chair to sit on during the days he spent poring over library books in pursuit of his Masters Degree.

He joined the army of office cleaners who worked the graveyard shift for under-award wages in Fortitude Valley, in order to pay his rent and to buy the odd sack of rice to keep himself fed.

A leading Uniting Church theologian has since rated the chapters on tribal society as the kernel of the work

Here we must digress to make it clear that Pos Konea's English was not good. In fact a lecturer at St Francis College pointed this out as a reason why he was not popular with staff.

I could not help noticing that Pos Konea's English improved markedly with his confidence. If he felt confused he could be barely comprehensible. But if he felt confident in a friendly environment, his English became almost fluent.

By June 2006 Pos believed he was in the home strait. He had not seen his family for more than a year, but the end was in sight.

Meanwhile, your correspondent had become disturbed by the apparent lack of oversight for this overseas student, who was clearly out of his depth with the study course he had undertaken, who was paying large amounts of money into the college coffers, but who appeared to have inadequate supervision.

The fact that supervision was inadequate had become apparent much earlier, when Pos had asked another tenant on the college campus to type work for submission to his supervisor.

As there was nowhere else to meet they had to do the work in her bedroom, which was not ideal. She was an art student and was grateful for the money. But this work – a PNG highlander writing post-graduate biblical studies in a foreign language – was a bigger job than even her goodwill could cope with.

In August 2005 I phoned the principal of the Uniting Church college of BCT, with which Pos Konea was enrolled. Not only was I concerned about Pos's welfare, but I was worried about other Pacific Islanders whom Pos had told me had "gone home disappointed".

I asked Dr David Rankin how many overseas students were studying at BCT. He told me that no special arrangements were made for overseas students, and then to my astonishment he put the phone down on me.

Pos Konea's thesis emerged by July 2006. It was almost twice as long as it should have been. The Revd Canon Gary Fagg (well-known in the Pacific Anglican congregations) word-processed the oeuvre and I did the editing.

A leading Uniting Church theologian has since rated the central chapters 'Mend Society and Social Justice', about this PNG Southern Highland tribal society, as the kernel of this work.

The thesis was accepted by Pos Konea's supervisor with minor corrections.

Pos had to leave the country by the end of July. His visa had run out.

Full of hope in September 2006 Pos applied for a post to teach religious education at Dauli Teacher's College in PNG.

He wrote: "I have undertaken a Master's Degree in Theology at Brisbane College of Theology through Trinity Theological College in Brisbane, Australia. I completed the course units between January 2003 and the end of 2004. In 2005 until June 2006 I did my research and wrote a thesis on social justice in the Old Testament (Hebrew Society) compared with social justice in traditional Mend society."

Eight months later, in April 2007 Pos received a letter from the Dean of the Brisbane College of Theology apologising for the delay but saying that the final decision of the Committee of Deans was

that Pos's thesis was "too flawed to be able to be reasonably corrected".

In fact, Dr Grahame Martin, one of the external examiners, had submitted that "the degree be awarded to the candidate subject to minor amendments, including typographical errors, being completed".

However, the other external examiner, the Revd Gregory Jenks, had submitted that: "I am not able to recommend acceptance of the thesis in its present form and I do not think there is any way for the shortcomings identified to be addressed by revision and resubmission".

So that was that. Pos was invited to appeal, or to accept a diploma instead. But that did not help his job prospects.

Imagine negotiating an appeal from a country which white men first penetrated in 1951. It is more expensive to phone PNG than to call the UK, even if you can find a phone contact in the first place.

It does not make sense to alienate respected citizens of that country

And what was Pos Konea to say to the people who had financially supported his bid for academic success?

At the Anglican Brisbane Diocesan Synod in June 2007 a question was asked to the effect: "How many overseas students studied at the Brisbane College of Theology... in the past five years?"

"How many of these students obtained the qualification for which they registered?"

The answer to this question, delivered by the Revd Dr Gregory Jenks, by then Dean of St Francis College, was inconclusive but tended to the effect that no differentiation was made between overseas and Australian students. It appears that BCT makes no special arrangements with regard to accommodation, health or English language skills for Pacific Islanders.

By now some senior churchmen in the Anglican and Uniting Church orbit were concerned enough about the fate of Pos Konea to recommend that somebody should take up the matter as a case of dereliction of duty of care by BCT.

Not only was the student not served in basic matters of health care, subsistence and English

language tuition, he was not given what he richly paid for – academic supervision.

But in the end nobody amongst the church hierarchy seemed able to grasp this particular nettle.

Pos Konea comes from significance bloodlines in PNG. Even before this terrible thing happened to him, he was under pressure to leave the church and go into politics, as an influential member of his society.

His relationship with his God is paramount to him and he would have preferred to stay in the church. Now he keeps his distance from the hostile world of western academia and does what he can informally to help PNG onto a stable political path, with particular advocacy for the neglected Southern Highlands.

The western Church has a long history with societies to whom we sent missionaries with the Christian Gospel to bring their peoples into a different way of life.

Fifty years since missionaries reached the Southern Highlands of PNG wars are still fought over boundaries – even a dispute over a chicken recently instigated a two-year war, with many human casualties. It is still a very different culture from our own – and we have much to learn from these people.

When indigenous men and women from societies we have influenced feel called to bring the Word of God to their own people within their own culture by training for ministry in Australia we should encourage them – not expect them to conform to our mores, not exploit and humiliate them to the point that they abandon their ministry.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is talking up the affiliation of Australia with the Pacific. We already have this abiding relationship with PNG because of the epic of the Kokoda Track.

It does not make sense to alienate respected citizens of that country when we could rather be building on the existing foundation of almost a century of careful, costly one-on-one relationships through mission.

Maggie Helass has spent thirty years in cross-cultural ministry and is Editor of *Common Theology*.

For God's sake let's talk about it

By Gillian Bouras



Humans cling to the illusion of control, to the notion that we are masters of our fates and captains of our souls, but when that veil of illusion tears, as it so often does, the results are often disastrous to our emotional and mental well-being.

I consider myself a suitable case for treatment – apart from anything else, my original family has a demonstrated genetic tendency towards marked mood disorder. I am not alone, of course – one in three of the general population has suffered, or will suffer, an episode of what used to be called nervous breakdown.

My sister and our first cousin suicided after years of undiagnosed suffering – undiagnosed largely because of family fear of stigma, which exists because ‘normal’ members of society are terrified of mental illness, and of its threat to order.

Yet mental illness has always been with us, as the ancient Greek tragedies prove. Hippocrates' theory of the four humours, particularly the part of it that attaches melancholia to an excess of black bile, has remained significant throughout the centuries, as has his view that what is needed in the human psyche is isonomia, a balance – none of the four humours should dominate.

Later a supernatural explanation was advanced: Christ cast out the demons from the afflicted.

The demonic explanation of mental illness persisted for centuries, during which time the clergy were the equivalent of psychotherapists.

In Greek villages they still are. In the Peloponnesian village where I live, difference of any sort is immediately suspect, and the false self is rigorously cultivated.

Mental illness is regarded with fear and loathing, and most villagers, when not denying its existence, blame its incidence on the Evil Eye.

A relevant anecdote. A handsome young shepherd named Yianni was going about his business when he sustained a severe shock – another villager, an older man, had hanged himself from the branch of an olive tree.

Yianni cut the body down, but never recovered from the experience.

I envisaged assistance from doctors, counsellors and anti-depressants, but Yianni's family thought otherwise. Church and priests were the answer.

Unfortunately, this solution has not worked – Yianni's health, both physical and mental, is very precarious, and his marriage broke down long ago. The damage that stigma can do!

One weapon against stigma is knowledge. In 1963 nobody knew much. Mental health was a given, so people rarely asked what recipe/circumstance/magic wand was a guarantee of what is now viewed as a fragile state of well-being.

There is, after all, a disturbingly fine line separating those who cope with their pain and those who cannot.

It was in 1963 that my sister, at seventeen a star in every way, had her breakdown. She never recovered.

There must be an end to the fear that leads to so much distress

Doctors too numerous to mention advanced their own theories. My own bitter reflection is “what does it matter now?”

What matters is the trying – the heartfelt attempt to treat such desperate unhappiness, to recognise symptoms and to nip them in the bud, if possible.

It is also essential to acknowledge the dignity in difference, to accept the fact that some people will never conform to society's expectations, will never be content to have a so-called conventional life.

There are multiple ways of living, and no precise moment at which mental illness starts.

What is needed is the greatest possible awareness of contributing factors. Mental health and illness are very complex issues, and parents have a weighty responsibility to build resilience in their children.

This is best encouraged via honest communication and the fostering of creativity. Creativity can be a weapon for life, enabling us to live doubly, in providing us both with escape into alternative worlds and solutions to problems in the mundane everyday one.

A ruling passion is at least some protection against the dreadful sense of futility that is a feature of mental illness. An active social life also protects, which is one reason an extended family is important in traditional societies.

Parents and friends also need to recognise warning signs without becoming overprotective. Any change in behaviour, any prolonged withdrawal from usual company, any impulsive acts such as binge drinking and eating, extravagant and irrational spending, and/or sexual promiscuity, should be monitored very carefully, and professional help sought.

Intending suicides often seem almost recklessly happy, for the decision has been made. They also often start giving people presents.

Before this stage has been reached, however, the voice can be another signal: it is often very flat and monotonous, reflecting the terrible hollowness that the sufferer lives with. Such severe stress affects the vocal cords, experts have found.

Honesty, courage and open communication are absolutely essential for mental health to be achieved and maintained.

There must be an end to the fear that leads to so much distress being swept under a metaphorical carpet.

Gillian Bouras is an Australian writer who has been based in Greece for 28 years. She has had eight books published. Her most recent is *No Time For Dances*. This article first appeared in the on-line magazine Eureka Street on October 6. www.eurekastreet.com.au

This nomad will not go grey

By Denise Nichols

In 1991, I became a refugee worker in Thailand, working with ethnic refugees from Burma, political asylum seekers in Bangkok, political prisoners and those detained in the Immigration Detention Centre.



This transition occurred quite quickly for me, after twenty-three years of full time parenting of five children – together with my husband who is an Anglican minister.

Only our thirteen-year-old daughter went to Bangkok with us.

I had training in social welfare and political science and the two skills were brought together in the variety of work I undertook.

The frontiers were literally geographical, but also cultural, religious, social and economic – as we plunged into the challenging life of accompanying and advocating for refugees, with the Jesuit Refugee Service.

These frontiers once crossed proved to be liberating in terms of my self perception as wife and mother to adventurer – walking across mountains, sleeping in refugee camps, and, among many other things, sitting amidst the numbed silence of a village after a battle hard fought between ethnic soldiers and the Burmese military.

eye witness

The Karen soldiers and civilians, young and old, were in a state of shock, trauma and exhaustion. As we sat and waited in the deep heat of the afternoon on a verandah of a village house we did not move, conscious of the deep silence around us.

People gradually came and spoke with us about those who had died in the fighting, and the voices of their women they heard that day.

As they were advancing towards their enemy, they heard their own women who had been captured by the military and who were being pushed into the front lines call out to not worry about them but to keep on going.

Unknowingly I was journeying towards new frontiers

“Do not worry about us brothers, we are ready to die”. Words were inadequate to express the inexpressible that day.

So, unknowingly, I was journeying towards new frontiers of academic work and overseas assignments. Both of these involved understanding more about transitions to democracy and the needs

of women and children as they try to recover from conflict and violence.

Academically, I was able to research the role of Aung San Suu Kyi as a public intellectual who mobilized and unified a country behind the calls for democracy and freedom in Burma. Despite being elected as the Prime Minister in 1990 she has spent thirteen of the past eighteen years under house arrest.

While studying for my Ph.D (AN1), I was invited by Oxfam Great Britain to work in Kosovo following the conflict between Serbia and NATO forces and the return of one million refugees to Kosovo.

I was facilitating community services for women and men and also those with disability.

Primarily, it was a coordinating role between UNHCR and non-government organisations to provide food and shelter to those who were most vulnerable.

There was sporadic fighting, nightly machine gun fire and a heightened sense of insecurity

I went a second time for six weeks to the Gjlane region to manage an office which focused on women's programs.

It was deep winter. There were sub-zero temperatures (29C degrees below freezing), an 8pm curfew, continual electricity shortages, and at first no telephone access except for a satellite phone which didn't work from my office.

The area was heavily patrolled by American troops. There was sporadic fighting, nightly machine gun fire and overall a heightened sense of insecurity. And this was six months after the fighting ended and refugees returned.

I lived by myself in an apartment which was comfortably furnished but because of power shortages was often dark except for a hand held fluorescent lamp. I attempted to cook on a single-flame camp stove, hand-washed my clothes in the bath and listened to the American Armed Forces radio station on short-wave – which was incredibly anti-Clinton at that time.

But what of the women refugees? They had returned to their homes in this rural area, most hiding for three months in the forests surrounding

the region. They were very conservative Muslims who, once married, did not usually go outside their compounds.

They had been self-sufficient farmers but now they had no crops, no seeds to plant, no animals or farm machinery. They had never voted or had a voice and had lived under repressive Serbian rule for the past eleven years.

Our programs attempted to look at their strategic needs, such as registering them to vote, as well as their practical needs and how these could be linked.

There were also Serb women and Roma (gypsies) who were now in the minority and tragically isolated.

Our mandate in humanitarian work is to be impartial and respond on the basis of need – not gender, race or religion – but women are often the most needy.

Young Kosovan women were our community mobilisers. They were educated, long suffering after years of oppression and ready for the challenge of changing women's lives in their new post war reality.

This snapshot does not tell half the story of the challenges facing women following war, ethnic conflict or natural disasters.

As a worker and later as Manager of Oxfam Australia's emergencies unit, focusing on vulnerable women and children and bringing their short term and long term needs together was a major priority.

We worked under a rights-based framework to enhance their survival, security and quality of life so they would have a voice in their future.

Listening and accompanying them was my small gift.

*Trembling it crosses the frontier at dawn
From non-being to being
Carrying a small banner
Bearing a message.*

From 'Over the Frontier' by Rosemary Dobson

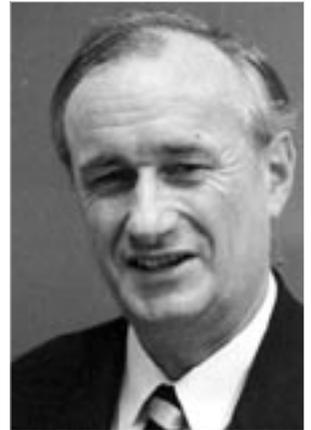
Denise Nichols conducts training and evaluation for several international aid and development organisations. Recently in the course of her work she has been to the Solomon Islands, Pakistan, Vietnam and Cambodia.

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Kay McLennan
Veteran Religious Affairs journalist
formerly with the Australian
Broadcasting Corporation

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Forum

The congregation at St Mary's Catholic Church, South Brisbane had until December 1 to make a response to concerns raised by Archbishop John Bathersby earlier this year about liturgical practices in that parish. Over several years members of *Opus Dei*, the reactionary watchdog of lay people in the Catholic Church, have laid complaints about St Mary's which have been forwarded to The Vatican. The following article is an attempt by a member of the congregation to clarify an issue that may be at the heart of the matter.

These ideas were presented in a homily given at St Mary's in September. They are based on the idea that close to the core of the controversy are different concepts about the nature of the Church. The congregation, broadly speaking, appears to have a different concept of the Church to that expressed by those who complain about St Mary's, and perhaps also different from the concept which dominates among Church authorities.

>>>>>

The case for the Defence

By Dermot Dorgan

In August Archbishop John Bathersby was quoted in the press as saying, in relation to St Mary's, that if you're in a club, you keep the rules of the club. This seems to point to an idea of the Church as a glorified club.

In a club, there is a register of members, a committee which makes the by-laws, a subscription to be paid.

Membership of the club demands that you pay your subscription, observe the by-laws and show your membership badge or number when required.

That's the glue that keeps the members together and distinguishes them from non-members. If you don't do these things you should not have access to club facilities and activities.

This is an idea of the Church that many of us grew up with. It's very clear-cut, black and white and relatively easy to manage. But it's not the only idea or image of the Church. There are others which are more imaginative, richer in theology and more biblically based.

At the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, when all the Catholic bishops of the world came together with many theologians and advisers, there was a passionate debate about the nature of the Church.

Eventually a long document was issued which was the fruit of these discussions. It was called the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, sometimes referred to by the first two words of the Latin text – *Lumen Gentium* (Light to the Peoples).

The first chapter of this document refers to more than a dozen ways of thinking about the Church. Below are a few of the images of the Church suggested by the Council:

- A sort of sacrament
- The kingdom of God now present in mystery
- A people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- A mystery
- The flock of Christ
- The vineyard of God
- The temple of the Holy Spirit



- The initial budding forth of the kingdom announced by Jesus

- The new people of God
- A pilgrim in a foreign land.

Last of all, the Church is also referred to as “a society furnished with

hierarchical agencies...constituted and organised in the world as a society”.

So in addition to thinking of the Church as a club, or society, it is possible, legitimate and orthodox to think of the Church in any one of these other ways also.

Each of these images puts the emphasis on different aspects of the inexpressible reality of the Church.

Speaking personally, the image I find most powerful is that of the new people of God – a reference to the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land.

The promised land we are in search of is the fullness of the reign of God, as announced by Jesus – an era when peace, justice, truth and love will reign.

I have this image of a people in movement towards a common goal. It's an untidy crowd, not all marching in step, not in uniform, some progressing faster than others, some keen on short-cuts, others not.

What is important is the common vision and goal, rather than uniformity or conformity within the community.

In the work I do in the Church, I don't think it matters if the person working beside me is a Catholic or not. It doesn't matter if he or she is divorced or gay or a lapsed Catholic or a member of another religion.

What matters is that they have a common understanding of the principles and values of the reign of God and a commitment to realising those goals in their lives and in their society.

In the context of the current problems people have with St Mary's, three things come to mind as important.

Firstly, it's important for all of us to be aware that there are different ideas about the Church, none of which can entirely encompass the reality of the Christian community.

Thinking of the Church as a society is legitimate and orthodox, and so is thinking of the Church as the new people of God, or as a sacrament.

Secondly, we all have to try to understand where the others are coming from and tease out the implications of thinking about the Church in this way or that.

Thirdly, all of these images of the Church are compatible with one another. They are not mutually exclusive.

If there is an aspiration I have, as a member of the congregation of St. Mary's, it is that the theological, liturgical and social expressions of some of the broader concepts of the Church should be allowed to continue at St Mary's, and indeed be encouraged, so as to explore ever richer meanings of the reality of the Church.

It's an untidy crowd, not all marching in step, not in uniform

Pope Benedict was recently quoted as saying, "Everyone has a place in the Church, every person without exception should be able to feel at home and never rejected".

There is a place in the Church for those who wish to see the "traditional" Latin Mass maintained.

There is a place in the Church for those who think of the Church as a hierarchical society.

There must also be a place in the Church for people who are inspired by some of the biblical images of the Church elaborated in Vatican II, and who wish to explore the expression of these images.

Dermot Dorgan spent fifteen years in the Columban Fathers and has worked in the fields of overseas aid, community development and social justice education, most recently as Coordinator of the Romero Centre for refugees in Brisbane.

book reviews

The Twilight of Atheism by Alistair McGrath, Doubleday, 2004, ISBN 9780061436864, rrp \$27.99. pp 306

Reviewed by Donald Cameron

This is a book, which, according to the dust jacket "will unsettle believers and unbelievers alike". The author is the principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford and is a Professor of Historical Theology in the University. His first studies were in the natural sciences. As an undergraduate he professed atheism, founded an Atheist Society and saw Marxism as holding the "key to the future" (p.176).

Atheism, and its alternative, have been in the news, or certainly in the bestseller lists. Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* has been the subject of newspaper articles and television programs. It has provoked a variety of responses, including one from the author of this book. The response is entitled 'The Dawkins Delusion'.

The Economist, which is selective in the choice of the books which it reviews, dealt with several works on this subject in 2006 under the heading "To believe or not to believe".

Closer to home *Quadrant* joined the debate in several articles including a memorable 'Letter from God to the Editor' coming from the pen of Peter Coleman.

The Twilight of Atheism is instructive, readable, serious and sometimes lighthearted, ambitious and of considerable historical scope. It ranges from Homer to Dr Dawkins himself.

Its thesis, and its title, is not to be read to imply the new dawn of Christianity.

In the final chapters where Professor McGrath addresses the future, he both raises questions as well as venturing into prophecy.

The book begins with brief reference to classical Greek and Roman atheism. However its greater part deals with the period from the fifteenth century on, concentrating principally on movements of thought and events in regions that were traditionally Christian.

The author's passing comments on the sixteenth century rearrangements of religion and power in Europe, as a prelude to both violent political

change and philosophical revolution, are both provocative and stimulating.

Were the intellectual forebears of Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to be found among the critics of Christianity in the eighteen hundreds?

The rise and dominance of the natural sciences is referred to, but not at length.

A longer chapter is given to the nineteenth century 'Crisis of Faith' with mention of the 'Life of Jesus Studies' and concurrent themes in the literature of the period. The influence of such movements is still, I would say, very much with us.

The emergence in the nineteen sixties of the 'Death of God' debate is given a chapter. Looking back over half a century it is hard to remember what all the fuss was about. Perhaps Bishop John Robinson is better remembered for his writings on the New Testament.

The last chapters of this book may be for many the most arresting. Atheism is described as "in its twilight". Religion is back in favour.

We are introduced to postmodernism, with some helpful explanations for those, who, like myself, are not quite sure what postmodernism actually is.

And then, in the final chapters we encounter what could be said to be the central positive theme of the whole book, that is, the affirmation that "there is something in human nature that will cause us to yearn for God" (p.181).

Augustine's prayer is quoted, "You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until...". The longing remains part of us. And, as said elsewhere, we are born with an "incurable nostalgia for the Garden".

The rejection of imagery within the Protestant tradition, the claim that "knowledge tended to take the form of information" rather than "encounter between the believer and spiritual realities" is asserted. And this resulted, according to the author, in a vacuum, an emptiness.

"The outcome was inevitable and predictable, God became an absence in the world" (p.202).

Pietism was "a corrective influence in Protestantism," (p.204), but "mainline Protestant orthodoxy presupposed a disembedded God" (p.202).

Atheism has now but a "fading appeal" (p.257). And if atheism does not have much of a future, what is the future or futures of Christianity?

Reconstruction, multiplicities are suggested, and well to the fore, Pentecostalism, offering "a direct

personal, transformative encounter with God in the worship of the Church and in personal experience" (p.225).

Will this be so? Professor McGrath has moved from history to prediction. Time, or eternity, will hold the answer.

The debates, past and present, which are discussed in this book will remain with us. So, TS Eliot, writing in 1931, contrasts Voltaire with Blaise Pascal, as protagonists of unbelief and faith respectively, and comments "in the end we must all choose for ourselves between one point of view and the other".

And, while writing of Pascal, I would close by mentioning one of the more arresting and chilling of his *Pensées*, and one not irrelevant to this book. "Men hate religion and fear it, lest they find it to be true".

Bishop Donald Cameron is the former Anglican Bishop of North Sydney and is now retired.

Hugh's books

By Hugh McGinlay

New from Continuum is ***Christianity as a World Religion*** (9780826498410, \$56.95) by Sebastian and Kirsten Kim.

The book presents a wealth of information about historical and contemporary forms of Christianity across the world, acknowledging that Christianity is both an agent of globalisation and a product of it. Here is a fascinating and comprehensive account of how Christianity over the centuries became embedded in different regions and in diverse cultures.

The period in Church history when seven Popes lived in Avignon rather than Rome is not remembered as especially glorious in the annals of the mediaeval church. It was a time of anarchy, fear, wars, avarice and religious agony – one of the most turbulent times in the history of Europe. Edwin Mullins' new book ***The Popes of Avignon – A Century of Exile*** (BlueBridge, 9781933346151, \$49.95) captures the mood of the period with contemporary descriptions of avarice and extravagance, setting the story of the Popes



there against the larger Europe background of wars, tyranny, ambition and sheer human folly. This is an engrossing story of the seven Popes (and two antipopes) who ruled the Catholic Church during some of its darkest days.

Knowing Truth, Doing Good by Russell Pregeant (Fortress, 9780800638467, \$49.95), subtitled 'Engaging New Testament ethics' asks fundamental questions about using the New Testament as a basis for moral behaviour. Does it provide a solid foundation for constructive values in a society that many consider corrupt to the core; or is it a bastion of reactionary thought, enshrining oppressive social patterns from a hopelessly outdated past? The author acknowledges the complexity of controversial ethical issues in our society and in the society of New Testament times. He explores the environment of each of the Jesus movements represented in the canonical texts, asking what "knowing the truth and doing the good" looks like in each case and suggests some ways of being faithful to the traditions while recognising our own responsibilities within the complex ethical task.

Diarmuid O'Murchu will be in Australia again next year. His latest book **Ancestral Grace – Meeting God in our Human Story** (Orbis, 9781570757945, \$44.95) blends history, anthropology and spirituality to demonstrate that God has been and always will be with us – the story of the human race and God's unfailing presence. This is a compelling book that reminds us that God has been with humanity over its seven million years of evolution, not merely during the last five thousand years of 'revelation'. If this is true, what are its implications for our relationship with our world and with our God?

Some books demand your attention by the boldness of their titles. **Jesus – The Complete Guide**, edited by Leslie Houlden (Continuum, 9780826480118, \$119.95) was first issued in hardback in 2003 then re-issued in paperback in 2005. It has a vast array of contents, listed alphabetically from Adoptionism to Wright (NT) and this gives us a clue to its contents: theological and biblical topics, issues from the history of the church and key writers across the centuries. For students (and academics) it's an ideal way of finding basic information about important issues (Nicea, the death of Jesus, Irenaeus, Redemption...). It's a book that will be invaluable in any personal and theological library.

Yet another title on Pius XII, this time from UK author Gerard Noel. Called **Pius XII: The Hound of Hitler** (Continuum, 9781847063557, \$59.95), the book is neither an abolition job nor a piece of hagiography but offers us personal and professional insights into the exercise of papal power and the psychological mechanism behind that power.

SCM/Canterbury continue to publish volumes in their series called 'Briefly' – the idea being to introduce readers to key texts in philosophy. Recent titles include Nietzsche's **Beyond Good and Evil** (9780334041238), Aristotle's **Nicomachean Ethics** (9780334041313), Hume's **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding** (9780334041245) and Ayer's **Language, Truth and Logic** (9780334041221). Each is priced currently at \$28.95 and the entire series has been described by one reviewer as a "painless way to become well read" in the various classics of the discipline.

New from Paternoster in the UK, under their 'Regnum Studies in Mission' series comes **Christology in Dialogue with Muslims** by Mark Beaumont (Regnum Books, 9781870345460, \$44.95). Concentrating on the most creative periods of Christian-Muslim dialogue – the ninth and the twentieth centuries – the study provides invaluable resources for addressing some of the crucial areas of contemporary Christian-Muslim conversations.

a "painless way to become well-read"

In the same area of scholarship comes **Theology of Religions** by Eugene Gorski (Paulist, 9780809145331, \$49.95). Although his primary audience is within his Catholic tradition, he asks what Christians of all denominations should think of other religions. Is the one God working in all these other religions or are they hindrances to God's plan? The author's intention is to establish some groundwork for a theology that considers what the Bible and the teaching of the Church have to say about the ultimate meaning and value of non-Christian religions.

Lawrence Boadt is known to many of us for books on the Old Testament. His new book – to mark the year of Paul in the Catholic tradition – is simply **The Life of Saint Paul** (Paulist, 9780809105199, \$24.95). With illustrations by Linda Schapper, this

is a biography of Paul, introducing us to his life and thought, as far as these can be gleaned from the Scriptures themselves and the earliest tradition of the church. It is an ideal introduction to the life and teaching of the apostle.

Finally from Sydney author Benjamin Edwards comes *Wasps, Tykes and Ecumaniacs* (Acorn, 9780908284740, \$39.60). As the title suggests, this is a book about the sectarianism that was part of the Australian religious experience until fairly recent

times. The account is often painful, embarrassing and bitter and traces the gradual improvement in relations between the churches and the factors (not all from within the churches) that enabled this to happen. This is an excellent resource for anyone who wants to understand the recent religious divisions in Australia.

Further details of the titles are on our website www.mosaicresources.com.au.

A Gen X view of Obama as fiction

By Bronwyn Lay

When I first saw Obama on the Internet I wiped away my tears and thanked God no one was in the room.

Why did I cry? Perhaps I was so bereft of optimism that the smallest amount moved me. I was hungry for hope and his words felt like cool water pouring over a parched world.

One of the reasons Obama's rhetoric sparked my attention was because of the experiences of my generation, Gen X.

For some, if not all of us, world affairs affect our soul in ways we are not always aware of.

This is where epic literature springs from – the connections and disconnections between the inner life and the polis.

Many in my generation were born to optimistic parents who survived or instigated the social revolution of the 1960s.

The disconnect between what our parents told us was possible and the 'reality' that blasted from the media and in our daily life was like daily shock therapy and from an early age we were immediately suspicious of anyone who told us it was a wonderful world.

The possibility of nuclear winters loomed over our birth and youth. Then Reagan and Thatcher came along and there was no-one to hang our youthful hopes upon.

In adolescence the Berlin Wall fell – an ecstatic, even hopeful historical event – but imagine the confusion when our left-wing parents cry with joy as each brick is passed down the line.

That was it. But the hard left was dead and its fans were completely, and understandably, relieved. There were no good guys and bad guys anymore.



Then, as young adults, the media told us we were pathetic, apathetic, cynical, spoilt and apolitical. They branded us a whinging generation who harboured poisonous resentments and were not liable to contribute to the wider social discourse.

This doesn't make you confident your small voice will ripple through the polis with authority.

Some of us marched off to university thinking that's where the action was; only to be told that there would be no more discourse because the great ideological battles had been fought and won.

History was finished. Capitalism had triumphed and there was no bit of revolutionary activity or new thought that would stop its reign.

Fukuyama told us that from here on in there were only 'events', not history and this was confirmed by the rest of the curriculum.

Everything was post: post-feminism, post-modernism, post-Marxism, as if new thought had to be tacked onto its predecessors to give it any credit.

After the hard right, the bland triumphed. It felt like a certain kind of capitalism, a certain kind of man, a certain kind of ideology (that pretends it's not an ideology) had prevailed and was permanent, so we might as well take up bats and balls and exit from world history.

No wonder our inner life felt depleted and starved. And it got worse. Along came Howard and Bush; countries and worlds were divided. Wars that felt intuitively wrong were launched on the basis of 'foolproof intelligence'.

We tried to march against it – join the masses and let our voice be heard. What happened? What was once centrist became a horror show.

The binaries were back, with Muslims the new ghoul. 'Events' like Guantanamo Bay, detention camps and Abu Ghraib flashed on our screens nightly.

It seemed nothing would stop this world from descending into a Hobbesian mess; life seemed solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

But the bitterness obviously hadn't hardened because an event came up on the horizon, led by Oprah Winfrey and good old-fashioned American values – Obama – delivered by television screens and Youtube.

Obama talked about faulty intelligence, dependence on oil, renewable energy, grassroots consultations, and how politics had become small and bitter.

He talked about the power of diplomacy, and education and health care in a way that made me listen and believe he might just do something about it.

Obama says nothing new. Half of it is regurgitated from my parents' generation and it still feels like spin – but he knows that the world, not just America, is thirsty for words like change and hope.

In true 'post' style I found reasons not to like Obama, to distrust him and to reject the sentimentalism that often marks the USA's rhetorical style.

But I still hoped like hell that justice, including a mature comprehension of its nebulous difficulties, was central to his ambition and that my cynicism would be proven wrong.

David Foster Wallace wrote about the act of reading fiction: "This is nourishing: redemptive, we become less alone inside".

I dare not speculate on what he would have thought about an Obama victory. But on the day Obama was elected many of us felt nourished, redeemed and less alone.

Raised by television my generation learnt to distrust semiotics, so naturally I'm waiting to be told that Obama is a mirage.

It's all too good to be true, we say. Good men don't get into power.

How sad that our hope is constrained – experience shows that a marketing horror show always lurks in the backstory.

Obama's term will be tested like none other in our lifetime.

Declining American global power, an economy in tailspin, giant debts, global warming, a healthcare system in its death throes and over-extended military commitments lie before him like a nightmare.

We know it might all be fiction
but like fiction; it makes us feel
less alone inside

A healthy democracy keeps its leaders on their toes, but I fear Obama faces insurmountable hurdles. But for now it's celebration time.

I never would have thought I'd see a man with a name like Barrack Hussein Obama become president of the United States.

Following Fukuyama's theory, the election of Obama may only be an 'event', rather than being central to the great clash of ideas – but it feels like history.

If you see some Generation Xs out there in the street, smiling like drunk cats, forgive them their madness – it's been a long time coming.

We are letting our inner lives blend with the polis – all the way from a small village in Kenya to the biggest cities of America.

We know it might all be fiction but like fiction; it makes us feel less alone inside.

Bronwyn Lay lives with her family in rural France. She is currently enrolled in a Masters of English Literature at the University of Geneva and is working on her first novel. She has worked as a legal aid lawyer in Australia. This article appeared in Eureka Street on-line magazine on November 6. www.eurekastreet.com.au

When the going gets tough — the tough go shopping

By Kay McLennan

Quite a milkshake in a mug we're having lately in downtown Melbourne. It all started with a couple of large billboards in the city proclaiming:

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS – ONE OF THE MOST NEGATIVE DOCUMENTS EVER WRITTEN.

Behind these was the Revd Dr Francis Macnab, graduate of the School of Theology within Ormond College at Melbourne University, minister of the kirk from 1957, appointed for life to the Independent Church (city seat of the Congregational Union) in 1971, thence to the Uniting Church upon Union in 1977 – when the church changed its title (but not its independent statutes) to St Michael's. Macnab is also a noted psychotherapist.

St Michael's sits on the northeast corner of Collins and Russell Streets. On the northwest corner glowers the Scots Kirk.

Media interest was instant. By mid-September there was a huge spread in *The Age*, followed by an interview starring Macnab on the ABC's 'Stateline'.

The guild elders of St Michael's met in Session and did what amounted to their own re-write

Home Truths

of the Big Ten. Being the cautious kirkers that they are, however, in order to avoid any chance of being accused of blasphemy or heresy by anyone, they referred to their collection as "3000 year Engenderings".

The last five are:

- respect for life...
- respect for our spouse...
- respect for property...
- respect for the truth...
- respect for personal integrity...

The whole lot is posted in a billboard on the Russell Street kirk fence.

Media response to this has been one of agog indifference.

But there's more to this storm in a mug than just a couple of commentaries on the Big Ten. As *The Age* article reveals, Dr Macnab is out to start a new religion. It's necessary, he says, because the old one (Christianity) no longer works.

"Jesus Christ (was) just a Jewish peasant who certainly was not God. In fact, there is no God, in the usual sense of an interventionist deity... At the Jesus Seminar we are inclined to think there was a real Jesus but we don't know much about him."

The Jesus Seminar is a scholarly but sceptical movement which reaches its conclusions by vote. (What if we learned that A Squared plus B Squared equaled $(a+b)(a+b)$?)

The new faith, Macnab continues, seeks the good, the tender and the beautiful, and finds it in Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism.

Dr Macnab is being advised by Barry Whelan, media man for Cardinal George Pell when he was in Melbourne.

The October issue of *Crosslight*, the Uniting Church newspaper in the southern states, was awash with calls for Dr Macnab's resignation.

Letters in the November issue are more mixed: "I write to offer my thanks to Dr Macnab," comes from the Rev John Smith of Malvern. "Many



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Christians, lay and clergy, have questioned the relevance of the Virgin birth, the resurrection of a resuscitated body, the miracles and the divinity of Jesus... he is one of the few who has the courage to say it openly”.

Another Uniting Church cleric observes that any stream of thought which puts humanity at the centre is “very suspicious of anything that cannot be explained. It does not believe in miracles and certainly no mysteries”.

I liked the one from the Revd Dr Bob Faser of Neerim South: “The other evening I heard a comment from Francis Macnab... that opposition to his call for a “new faith” was mainly coming from those with a “literalist” understanding of Christianity.

“If the relevant debate at Synod was anything to go by this is not the case... All the speakers...were people whose own faith was shaped by a critical understanding of scripture.

“In the Uniting Church and in other denominations, there are many people – laity and clergy – who affirm a number of things:

- a critical understanding of scripture.
- a conviction that there are better ways to understand the Good Friday event than as a “substitutionary blood sacrifice”.
- a belief that God isn’t going to condemn people to be fuel for an eternal barbecue just for getting their theology wrong.
- a growing commitment to develop healthy interfaith and multifaith relations.
- a desire to worship as part of congregations with a strongly inclusive ethos...

“We’re used to being on the receiving end of the ‘slings and arrows’ both of the militant fundamentalists and of the aggressive secularists. We’ve learned to ignore these attacks and even to laugh at them.

“However, it is much more damaging to the cause of progressive Christianity when a person who should know far better glibly informs us that we’ve been wasting our time.”

My own tongue-in-cheek contribution was: “What a busy time is ahead for Francis and his followers. Added to daily prayers and the fasts of Advent and Lent, there will now be every Shabbat to observe, to say nothing of all those homages to Mecca, and Ramadan; the liberating of cattle and pigs from abattoirs; the memorising of Torah and

Koran; the men in yarmulkes and the women in the veil; and all that after finding somewhere to live and the means to support themselves. The Jesus Seminar has a lot to answer for.

“But first a challenge! I dare my ex-fellow theolog – as he obviously hasn’t yet done so – to read that very scholarly but beautifully written tome by Rowan Williams’ good mate Tom Wright: *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.”

Developments will unfold. As Wendy Podger of Bairnsdale wrote to *Crosslight*: “I look forward to Synod’s encouragement and support for St Michael’s Church in its ministry to the many people who want to live the Christian life in a new way”.

Well, yes, but for those on a journey too much navel gazing is neither a good nor safe idea.

Kay MacLennan is a graduate of the same theological college as was Francis Macnab. She was for 25 years a broadcaster with ABC’s Religion department.

Paget’s Parable

**It’s not what we planned but ...
this way we’ll store enough water to
hold as many Baptisms as we like even
under the strictest water restrictions**



The spire was finally lowered onto St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane, on the night of November 9, completing the hundred-year project to build the newest Gothic cathedral in the world.

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