

Common Theology

Volume 1, number 12, Winter 2005 — \$3

ISSN 1447-3615



INSIDE:

- Astronomy and doctrine
- Rowan Williams overhauls the news media
- EYE WITNESS—Africa's solutions to poverty

A Quarterly Journal for Australians

Cover: A Japanese interpretation of Noah's Ark by Sadao Watanabe



Published by HelassInk
PO Box 117, Sandgate, Qld 4017
Technical Production
Clare Nolan, Clockwork Communicators

Administration
Anne Bucetti, *doing data*

Printed
Watson Ferguson & Co, Moorooka

Website: www.commontheology.com
Webmaster: Cameron Taylor

Common Theology is an independent publication funded by its subscribers and sponsors. It aims to be a forum where public matters that affect Australian Christians' daily life and decision-making can be aired in a theological context.

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From the Editor

The neglected dimension of time cropped up everywhere as this edition of *Common Theology* was gathered in. Language as a cultural phenomenon took a starring role in features on astronomy, the news media, and experimental theatre.

Tom Frame's piece on astrophysics and theology redirects the Church's current preoccupation with sexual ethics to a far more pertinent task—working with science to recover the language of metaphysics. Religion and the new physics appear to have much in common, and the age of science versus religion is over.

Rowan Williams shines a searchlight on the compromised role of time in his controversial piece on the news media. The current structure of news media means that three-dimensional, real time human affairs are vanishing from our television screens and newspapers, in favour of clip art constructed by a cultural elite. The Archbishop also tackles the corrosive effects on society of corrupt speech.

During the Live-8 Concert in London, Brisbane's Marie Menhinnitt was in Limpopo Province, doing her best to make poverty history. In *Eye Witness*, she takes time out to chat with an African lugging 80kg of corn flour home in a wheelbarrow. There is a law in South Africa making it compulsory for milling companies to include vitamin and mineral supplements in mealie meal—the staple diet of rural people—so that children get sufficient nutrients.

For the past generation or so the world's monotheistic religions have become lost in a fog of jargon, which threatens humankind's future as much as its abuse of the environment. *CREDO—the Innocence of God* made its Australian premiere at the Brisbane Music Festival in July. This ambitious attempt to recover a common language from the heart of the world's religious and cultural conflicts draws on a profound well of hope amongst young people most affected by these wars.

In *Home Truths*, Bible scholar Greg Jenks produces some surprising conclusions from the study of the metamorphosis of language since Jesus's parables. Leaven, it appears, is not your average yeast at all, but a far more subversive substance.

Maggie Helass

Astronomy magnifies doctrine

By Tom Frame

The *Weekend Australian's* columnist Phillip Adams has forged a reputation as the nation's most strident atheist through his public criticism of the Church and its endeavours, and consistent ridicule of Christians and their faith. He shows no sign of relenting—and some churches and many believers give him an array of reasons to persist. To my mind, his most regrettable pretexts have to do with astronomy and astrophysics, and the continuing debate about the nature of the universe.



In addition to displays of appalling ignorance and ludicrous examples of Biblical literalism among individual Christians, the present preoccupation with sexual ethics and ecclesial order has distracted the Church from paying proper attention to developments in science that pose a much greater challenge to doctrine.

There is now a widely held belief in the “public square” that modern science has effectively dispensed with the need for God; that physics can actually explain every aspect of the material world; and that human life is plainly the outcome of random mutation and is, therefore, utterly pointless. While these are nothing more than ambitious assertions open to serious debate, there is a discernable mood of reticence in facing these issues. Why? Perhaps it reflects a fear that religious faith might be unsustainable and a suspicion that cherished theological certainties are vulnerable?

Whatever the fears or suspicions, the questions cannot be forever ignored or those asking them simply wished out of existence. In my view, the reverse should be the case. The Churches ought to be enthusiastic about responding to serious and sincere inquiries arising from scientific research,

looking for ways in which science might actually expand and magnify the reasons for believing in a benevolent Creator, who wishes to be known by the Creation.

Human beings have always been curious about the Universe of which they are but a miniscule part. They have gazed at the heavens, at our Sun, stars, planets, in order to make sense of the Earth. At times there has been an extraordinary hunger for information and for abiding or absolute truths that can make sense of human life and impart some point to individual lives.

Some do not want to know that human life could be ultimately pointless, while others remain committed to searching for fundamental explanations to cope with existence in a world they might even disdain. In its broadest conception, astronomy is the study of the Universe. Over the last two millennia it has prompted an intellectual revolution, produced innumerable social benefits and posed compelling spiritual questions. It is a science with as many philosophical as practical dimensions as a brief survey of its progress reveals.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle produced *On the Heavens* in 340 BC. He thought that the Earth was a stable object around which the Sun, Moon and other planets revolved. Ptolemy agreed with Aristotle and in his work *The Almagest* assumed that each planet moved in a circle called an epicycle whose centre was in turn carried around the Earth in a second circular orbit they called a “deferent”. A Greek astronomer, Aristarchus of Samos, thought that the Earth might revolve around the Sun. His theory did not gain currency after it was dismissed by no less a mind than Aristotle. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all adopted the depiction of the Earth at the centre of all things as being consistent with a Scriptural outlook on creation.

In the 250 years between the birth in Poland of Nikolaj Kopernik, known to the world as Copernicus, in 1473 and the death of Sir Isaac Newton in 1727, there was a very remarkable change in the way that people thought about the world around them. The development is some-

times called ‘The Copernican Revolution’ after Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus* (initially published anonymously to avoid the charge of heresy) when he was an elderly canon in 1543.

This revolution was not fought with swords or guns but with scientific equipment. The most decisive weapon was the telescope. This instrument seemed to be able to divide truth from falsehood, to identify and disperse outdated thinking and superstitious belief, and it reigned supreme.

When Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* appeared in 1687, resistance ended and a new worldview had been planted. Newton was an Englishman and feared neither political pressure nor religious sanction. In any event, the world was going to change because the astronomers revealed what the Universe really was rather than what some preferred it to be.

The present preoccupation with sexual ethics and ecclesial order has distracted the Church from paying proper attention to developments in science that pose a much greater challenge to doctrine.

Many philosophers of science consider that those centuries actually witnessed the birth of science. Some would contest this, but it certainly marked the emergence of the scientific method. In addition to Copernicus and Newton, three other major players participated in the unfolding revolution: Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei. Each of the five was absorbed in trying to describe and explain the motions of the naked-eye planets, or the “wandering stars” as they were called in the ancient world. It was an entirely astronomical enterprise.

By the time the Revolution had run its course, the idea that the planets could influence human destiny was seen as being manifestly ridiculous. When it was shown that the Earth was not the centre of the Universe, astrology became impossible. Because there were no fixed points in the Universe, it was apparent that the relationship of

the planets to the stars was a matter of mere perspective rendering the prescriptions of astrologers entirely arbitrary.

It is now clear that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, Kepler and Newton changed the human view of the Universe. Their discoveries fuelled rather than quenched curiosity. With the next revolution starting early in the Twentieth Century, with new observing and interpreting techniques, astronomy entered a golden age with practitioners—professional and amateur—united in their insatiable desire to know more about the Universe.

The New Physics, Quantum Mechanics and General Relativity went to the core of astronomy and provided fresh insights into the intricate inner workings of our physical Universe. Einstein’s development of General Relativity was especially pertinent for astronomy.

The first hints that something was amiss with the Newtonian view of the world were astronomical in nature. Light did not seem to travel the way it ought. The 1887 Michelson-Morley experiment—to measure the motion of the Earth by detecting a difference in the speed of light travelling along, and then at right angles to, the Earth’s direction of travel—proved completely unsuccessful. It became apparent to Einstein that Newton’s laws simply cease to apply for things travelling at velocities approaching that of light. Indeed the velocity of light itself occupies a special place in the physical framework of the Universe. Hence, the significance of Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity, and all its related consequences for the discipline of astronomy.

Its most profound consequence to date is bound up in the world’s most well known physical equation: $E = Mc^2$ (where E is energy, M is mass and c is the speed of light). Mass can be converted into energy. This was a prediction that became an awesome reality when the United States Air Force dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

From even a potted summary, it is apparent that the patient study of the Universe has already had the most far-reaching effects on human society. Whereas the first modern astronomical conclusions were resisted out of ignorance and fear, our society affirms that understanding dispels ignorance—and with it prejudice and conceit, suspicion and superstition.

When the pioneer astronomers claimed that the Earth was simply a small planet orbiting around the

Sun, their conclusions had a bearing on anthropology and the environment, philosophy and theology. They affected humanity’s self-view: we were not the centre of everything. This prompted a series of fundamental questions.

What if the Sun, the centre of our Universe, is a totally unimportant member of the galaxy? Is the existence of the Universe a mere sideshow to something bigger? Does the Universe have certain given features, embedded laws or customs that might disclose a purpose, intention or goal that might impart some meaning to our lives? Is there a cause to the Universe that gives away the existence of a designer, architect or sustainer? Does the Universe disclose a God or Gods? Are we alone? If so, what do we make, if anything, of our uniqueness? Is the Universe benign or malevolent? Is it a transitory entity on its way to something else? When did it begin and does it have an end towards which it is inexorably moving? These questions disclose an interest not only in the composition of the Universe and how it operates, but whether it has a starting point and what might be its destiny.

But we also live in an age of pragmatic truth where truthfulness is frequently measured in and by practical outcomes. This is a feature of postmodernism which rejects the notion that there is objective truth. This creates a difficulty for science that aims to establish some truth by the investigation and description of what can be observed publicly.

Science does not rely upon a special vantage point that is available to some and not to others, or insights that are not available to all but only to the members of a specific social group. While scientists might be able to make some objective statements about an object or to deduce a physical truth, the philosophical apprehension and the social construction of these statements or truths are matters that go beyond the discipline of science and are not subject to its usual rubrics. This is why cosmology straddles the disciplines of physics and metaphysics.

Cosmology began in ancient times although there was more interest in the arrangement of the heavens than their beginnings. In a thesis published in 330 BC, Aristotle described the general nature of the cosmos and his belief that the earth was a stable object around which the Sun, Moon and other planets revolved. He asserted that the “beginning of anything is the most important part, being indeed half of the whole”. Therefore, a small mis-

take at the beginning can produce great difficulties in what follows.

But shortly after Aristotle, we find that a more immediate interest in the motions of the Sun, Moon and planets saw cosmology steadily subsumed by what became known as astronomy, while the metaphysical concerns that featured in ancient thinking became the focus of philosophic and religious debate.

As little progress could be made on physical observation, the metaphysical component had no reason to develop. In fact, it appears to have stagnated until relatively recent times when we have observed lively exchanges between scientific findings and their metaphysical interpretation.

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In the light of Einstein’s theory of relativity in 1915 and Edwin Hubble’s detection of galaxies beyond the Milky Way in the 1920s, astronomers such as Georges Lemaitre and later George Gamow proposed the theory that the whole Universe had originated in a great explosion around thirteen billion years ago. It was rather pejoratively termed the ‘Big Bang’ by British astronomer Fred Hoyle during the 1950s. This was the birth of modern cosmology. In 1988, Stephen Hawking contended that through ‘Big Bang’ cosmology, questions relating to the beginning of the Universe have entered the realm of science.

John Gribbin claimed that these questions “may have been answered by a single highly successful theory that emerged during the 1980s. This theory, which goes by the name of inflation, also explains the incredible flatness of the Universe. At last we come down to the metaphysical nitty-gritty, the questions that used to be regarded as beyond the scope of science. Now, science knows no limitations, and can tackle all of these questions, even if the answers are not complete, or completely understood. We even have a line of attack on the problem of creation itself”.¹

But what was left for philosophers and theologians who also maintained an interest in creation

¹ Gribbin, John, *In Search of the Big Bang: The Life and Death of the Universe*, revised edition, London, 1998, pp. 184-85

and its beginnings? Fearing physical reductionism, Thomist philosopher William Carroll asks, “Are we on the verge of a scientific explanation of the very origin of the Universe? The contention of several proponents of the new theories is that the laws of physics are sufficient to account for the origin and existence of the Universe. If this be true, then, in a sense, we live in a Universe which needs no explanation beyond itself, a Universe which has sprung into existence spontaneously from a cosmic nothingness”.

This is the conclusion of Stephen Hawking, “So long as the Universe had a beginning, we suppose it had a creator. But if the Universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?”²

Is astronomy the new religion complete with its high priests, sacred texts and holy places?

Of course, to argue that the Universe has no beginning does not deny the possibility that it has no origin. However, the Australian physicist Paul Davies seems to have a definite answer to Hawking’s question despite a façade of reticence—

“For the first time, a unified description of all creation could be within our grasp. No scientific problem is more fundamental or more daunting than the puzzle of how the Universe came into being. Could this have happened without any supernatural input? Quantum physics seems to provide a loophole to the age-old assumption that ‘you can’t get something from nothing’. Physics is now talking about the ‘self-creating Universe’: a cosmos that erupts into existence spontaneously, much as a sub nuclear particle sometimes pops out of nowhere in certain high energy processes. The question of whether the details of this theory are right or wrong is not so very important. What matters is that it is now possible to conceive of a scientific explanation for all creation. Has modern physics abolished God altogether?”³

Curiously, Davies has written elsewhere that—
“Most theologians are prepared to accept that the Universe runs itself without the need for

continual supervision by a deity. Instead, the laws of nature are able to regulate all natural activity without supernatural assistance. Nevertheless, God is still invoked to set the system going in the first place. In scientific language, God must be manifesting his powers through the naked singularity that marks the big bang creation. There is certainly no incompatibility between these theological ideas and the scientific version, because the singularity, by definition, transcends the laws of nature. It is the one place in the Universe where there is room, even for the most hard-nosed materialist, to admit God. Yet surely a God that is pushed off the very edge of space-time is a pale shadow of the deity that most people would wish to accept. In this fascinating subject area, where science mingles with religion and philosophy, the urge to push science to its limits is compulsive.”⁴

Heinz Pagels is plainly susceptible to that urge. He is confident that “from microcosm to macrocosm, from its origin to its end, the Universe is described by physical laws comprehensible to the human mind”.⁵

This has enormous philosophical consequences according to Quentin Smith. If Big Bang cosmology is true, he argues that “our Universe exists without cause or without explanation ... and it exists non-necessarily, improbably and causelessly. It exists *for absolutely no reason at all*” [original emphasis retained].⁶ Such a conclusion might seem to abolish the God of Christianity, Judaism and Islam and undermine their claims to revelation of any divine, transcendent and infinite purpose expressed in and through creation.

Big Bang Cosmology appears to render belief in God defiant and foolish. But we need to ask the crucial question—is astronomy the new religion complete with its high priests, sacred texts and holy places?

As religious visions of human life and civilisation have been abandoned by many as being hopelessly lost in superstition and subverted by ideology, science has become the alternative. And the two scientific disciplines most closely associated with a human life and worldviews are biology and astronomy—the first dealing with some of the smallest units of matter and the second with the largest.

The biologist is concerned with the smallest building blocks of life and the inevitable demand

that practitioners shed some light on the question of whether human biology discloses something of the point of human life, and whether human behaviour is determined biologically rather than through the exercise of free will.

A demand for such answers can lead to the twin pitfalls of ‘determinism’ and ‘reductionism’—the notion that human identity is determined by genetic factors and that human behaviour can be reduced to biological impulses based on physico-chemical laws.

Some ‘Neo-Darwinist’ biologists feel compelled to defend a unified biological theory that accounts for all living things together with their origins and destiny. Indeed, Richard Dawkins begins his ‘neo-Darwinist’ work *The Blind Watchmaker* with the grand conviction “that our own existence once

There are first-order questions arising from astronomy and astrophysics that ... appear to challenge the possibility of Christian belief.

presented the greatest of all mysteries but that it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it, though we shall continue to add footnotes to their solutions for a while yet”.

The contrast between Socrates’ famous reflection—“All I know is that I know nothing”, and Dawkins’ confident assertions could not be more striking

Clearly, we are in the midst of an astronomical golden era and it is unclear whether it will sustain or overturn the Big Bang theory or prove the existence of black holes and dark matter.

It is plain that previous generations felt likewise about the advances being made and whether extant explanations would stand the test of time. As Edmund Ledger remarked a century ago, “The progress of astronomical science during the last thirty years has been so rapid as almost to approach the marvellous”.⁷

It is impossible to say with any certainty that a bold new theory is not at hand or that our received wisdom will be shown to have been folly. As David

Leverington has observed—“A hundred years ago, Newtonian physics ruled supreme. Planck’s Quantum Theory, Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle did not exist. The photographic plate and spectroscopy were still relative modern developments; radio astronomy and space research were both born some decades in the future”.⁸

There is not scope in this article to present a persuasive case for conventional theistic belief although such a case can be mounted to demonstrate that religious belief is still reasonable and entirely rational.

But this is not my purpose in writing. To re-state this article’s main contention: there are first-order questions arising from astronomy and astrophysics that need to be addressed because they appear to challenge the possibility of Christian belief. And rather than approaching these matters with trepidation, there is actually ground for confidence that the reasonableness of conventional theistic belief will be upheld.

As Anglican Canon Keith Ward has observed, “I do not think any serious physicist or chemist could fail to be impressed by the intricate order and intellectual beauty of the basic structure of the universe. The point of the universe at least partly lies in the appreciation of that order and beauty—by God first, and then by finite minds. It is completely consistent with modern physics to say that ‘the heavens are telling the glory of God’ (Psalm 19). Even atheists must say: ‘It looks as if it was designed’. Well, then, why can it not be as it looks? Theists can find strong support in modern science”.⁹

Despite the fulsome claims that are sometimes made, neither cosmology nor astronomy has delivered all the answers to the great existential questions. We are still left asking about the ‘why’ behind the ‘how’ that we think we have just begun to understand. This highlights the need for experts in other academic disciplines—including philosophy and theology—to be attentive to the work being done by astronomers and the conclusions drawn from the data they collect.

Dr Tom Frame is Anglican Bishop to the Australian Defence Force and a former Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics at the Australian National University in Canberra.

² Hawking, Stephen *A Brief History of Time*, New York, 1988, p. 141

³ Davies, Paul *God and the New Physics*, New York, 1983, p. viii

⁴ Davies, Paul *The Edge of Infinity: Beyond the Black Hole*, second edition, London, 1994, p. 169

⁵ Pagels, Heinz *Perfect Symmetry: The Search for the Beginning of Time*, London, 1985, p. 17

⁶ Smith, Quentin *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 217

⁷ Ledger, Edmund *The Sun: Its Planets and Their Satellites*, (London, 1882)

⁸ Leverington, David *A History of Astronomy from 1890 to the Present*, London, 1995, p. ii

⁹ *Church Times*, London, 6 May 2005, p. 9

When the news is not good

A lecture by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, delivered at Lambeth Palace on June 15, and edited for print in *Common Theology*.



Look at it this way. News is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it.¹

Journalists often end up in jail because of their commitment to reveal important matters that those in power want kept hidden.²

Journalism as a profession largely exists to surprise—something that attracts the attention of “a chap who doesn't care much about anything” requires professional skill in its presentation. More seriously, uncovering what too many people want hidden is—potentially—a moment of real moral change.

A journalist may want to pursue surprise because he or she assumes that where people are starting from is boredom—and so the surprise has to be at some level entertaining. Or they may start from an assumption that the problem is that certain people have decided what you should know—so what needs to be challenged is such people's right to decide what others should know.

One of the most powerful defences the news media offer for controversial actions is “public interest”. The assumption is that concealment of this or that set of facts damages that shared space in which we find ways of acting on our common concerns.

Hiding something in the interest of a particular person or party gives them unfair advantage. Uncovering these facts restores a balance. On this premise, revelation in the public interest would be the same as working for the common good—the journalist in the service of active democracy. That picture of the media serving a genuinely and rightly questioning public, sometimes at considerable risk, is a deeply attractive image and very hard to quarrel with. Which is why the “public interest” defence is, at first blush, unanswerable.

But the way “public interest” is often appealed to in the present climate looks less impressive under scrutiny. Some aspects of current practice are lethally damaging to journalism, and contribute to the embarrassingly low level of trust in the profession shown in opinion polls—especially in the UK.

Let me start with two points which relate primarily to British journalism.

Some recent studies³ have pointed out that there is a difference between exposing deceptions that sustain injustice, and attacking confidentialities or privacies that protect the vulnerable.

If we assume that the question to ask of almost anyone (not just politicians) is the immortal, “Why is this bastard lying to me?” the effect is to treat every kind of reticence as malign. It becomes an end in itself to expose what is for any reason concealed, because the underlying reason for all concealment is bound to be corrupt. The political culture of “transparency” and the magic word “accountability” reinforce this powerful trend, found particularly in the tabloid press.

Consider a situation in which the general reporting of views or proposals during a period of delicate negotiation will skew or wreck the negotiating process. Since this is a routine political phenomenon, how professional is it to assume the public's “right to know”?

There is the further problem of an unblinking determination to find buried (and probably discreditable) agenda in every public statement or decision. As Peter Wilby writes about the parliamentary lobby⁴, it “allows no political event...to have meaning in itself, like a piece of poetry in a postmodern university literature department... What does an NHS (National Health Service) reorganisation or an “initiative” on behaviour in schools mean for doctors, patients, teachers or children? The political journalists cannot tell you. They can tell you that this is a Blairite or Brownite

idea, that it shows the minister is “getting a grip” or losing it, that it will pacify backbenchers or enrage them.” Parallels beyond the world of parliamentary journalism are not hard to find.

Various kinds of investigation—including the processes of journalistic enquiry—require confidentiality, and therefore concealment, in order to guarantee fair process. Certain things cannot be said while legal proceedings are in train. There is a convention about what can be said or shown about minors—especially the children of public figures. Even when papers publish the addresses of convicted paedophiles, most of us feel uneasy. It exposes individuals to mob law and does nothing at all to protect children. Medical and psychological records are confidential. Sensitive material around national security is confidential in the common interest.

...human discourse happens within a number of contexts, not in some sort of unified public forum.

Concealment is not by definition unfair. It may be part of a system guaranteeing fairness. Which of us would happily have our guilt or innocence assessed by a casual majority poll or our medical records made public? Which of us relishes our actions or words being subjected to exhaustive interpretation to reveal their “true” hidden agenda? As Freud said, sometimes a pipe is just a pipe...

There are undoubtedly facts⁵ which would be of huge interest to a certain sort of public, but are not by any stretch of the imagination matters of public interest in the sense that not knowing them creates or prolongs a seriously unjust situation. In a culture where conventions of ordinary privacy and modesty have been massively undermined, it is hard to set any conventions that restrict what is fair game. Human beings have always been fascinated by gossip about private lives—Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, written nearly two thousand years ago, is a good corrective to anyone who thinks we are a uniquely prurient and sex-obsessed civilization.

What is important is not to dress up the right to know as something essential to democracy. Democracy guarantees not only access to significant information but also some sorts of defence for the personal realm and its rights. The presupposi-

tion that the area covered by inviolable professional confidentiality is very small, and that therefore nearly all concealment is dishonest, is false.

I am not claiming that the media invariably do act as if there were no boundaries, yet high levels of adversarial and suspicious probing send the message that any kind of concealment is assumed to be guilty until proved innocent. But this case is not morally persuasive. And having referred to professional restrictions, I want to pass on to my second point about the difficulties of current journalistic practice—a point which is more complex.

Defining “public interest” as a “right to know” any kind of information that is being withheld implies a mass public which has no other social and corporate identity. For this public, any information at all is assumed to be empowering. For the purposes of media reporting, there are only information processors and information recipients. Whether a media outlet is basically oriented to the left or to the right, it still generalises its public in this way, by working with the model of consumers with common concerns.

A public is a necessary fiction. If a journalist or broadcaster, or of course, rather more significantly, a proprietor wants to secure consumers, a sense of solidarity and loyalty has to be built up. One strategy is to communicate as if every reader or consumer shared the same fundamental values, preferences and anxieties. Another is to communicate as if these fundamental values, preferences and anxieties were the moral environment of everyone with a brain or a conscience. The calculation of what will surprise—or better still, shock—the public is based on a careful assessment of what is taken for granted by that public. The left wing press knows that “secret government memo reveals plans to restore death penalty” will attract its public's attention. The right wing press knows that “secret government memo reveals plans to make national anthem illegal” will attract its public's attention. The public is assumed to be homogeneous; and each respective readership is taken to be representative of the genuine moral life of society.

But human discourse happens within a number of contexts, not in some sort of unified public forum. Actual human learning about most things that matter happens in overlapping sets of relationships and conversations. In human life generally,

⁵ The point was eloquently made by Onora O'Neil in her 2002 Reith Lectures.

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop*, p.66.

² Tim Dean, in *The Guardian*, 14.05.05.

³ I'm thinking especially of John Lloyd's *What the Media Are Doing to our Politics*.

⁴ *New Statesman*, 13.06.05, p.23.

information is shared in such overlapping networks, and absorbed at different levels, over time.

So there is a tension at the heart of the journalistic enterprise. It promises to deliver what other sources can't—information to equip the reader or viewer or listener for a significant role in society. But at the same time it is bound to a method that treats its public as consumers, and the information it purveys as a commodity—which is selected, packaged, and (to that degree) inevitably slanted. This marketing of the reporting process introduces yet another group—the professional producers of information, whose commercial interests inhibit impartial freedom of information.

Classical media outlets claim to serve democracy, but often undermine the potential of an active, critically questioning readership by assuming a passive undifferentiated public. The drift in some quarters to near-monopolistic practices, the control of the product by careful monitoring of response, and periodic re-designing, is subverted by Internet journalism. Ian Hargreaves, in his excellent *Journalism: Truth or Dare*, gives a sharp account of the difference made by the Internet. Surely this is the context in which genuinely unpalatable truths can be told, “unsullied by the preoccupations of the mainstream media”?⁶

Yes and no. Unwelcome truth and prompt rebuttal are characteristic of the web-based media. So are paranoid fantasy, self-indulgent nonsense and dangerous bigotry. The cyber environment is like that of unpoliced conversation—for good and ill.

Many traditional newspapers and broadcasters now offer online versions of their product and many have allowed interactive elements in their regular material—for example, publishing debates conducted on the web. But they have not thereby abdicated claims to be professional—to control the quality of output.

Onora O'Neil⁷ spoke about “assessable communication” as the ideal. This means incorporating into what is communicated the material necessary to judge its reliability, “showing your workings”, and distinguishing between report and comment. In short, a return to old-fashioned journalism.

Alan Rusbridger wrote a comment for *Newsweek* on that journal's troubles over the imperfectly confirmed story about the treatment of the Qur'an in US detention centres. His point was that media admissions of fallibility could have the paradoxical effect of strengthening trust. Admit that what

is written or broadcast is highly provisional, produced (often) by non-experts under pressure, and this realism might offset the deep cynicism generated by the media's reluctance to apologise or explain. It will be interesting to see if the spread of the online culture into the mainstream media will move journalism as a whole towards this provisionality—towards a more general notion of “assessable communication”.

What I have said so far boils down roughly to this. We need to deflate some of the rhetoric about the media as guardians and nurturers of democracy simply by virtue of the constant exposure of “information”. We need to be cautious about use of “public interest” language that ignores complex and, often, artificial ideas of “the public”. We need to recognise that there is a difference between concealment that is corrupt and designed to exclude or disadvantage, and boundaries that are properly patrolled by professional systems of accountability which gain nothing from being exposed to universal—potentially demagogic—scrutiny.

Corrupt speech...leaves us less human.

This is a very difficult discrimination—it could be used as an excuse for avoiding proper debate—but it helps simply to acknowledge that there is a discussion to be had. “Public interest” should not be too readily identified with the prejudice of a particular readership. We need a form of self-regulation that admits provisionality and includes reasonable means of assessment. We need media that equip their own critics.

Another element that surrounds these matters is a world of communication in which uninterrupted and instantaneous information flow is the norm. “Breaking news” we read at the bottom of the screen, and we know that someone is being made ready to produce an instant reaction. When the pace of events slows, but the situation remains critical, there is a real practical problem (e.g. the last days of Pope John Paul II)—uninterrupted coverage with no significant change for long periods. Urgency is all, and when urgency is an inappropriate or inadequate response to a situation, there is a risk of inventing the news for the sake of action.

⁶ p.259

⁷ The Reith Lectures

Some information can be mastered quickly, almost instantaneously, some requires the passage of time. I suspect that the difficulty most of the modern media finds in reporting religious affairs is not simply a hostile bias to religion as such, but the extreme difficulty of representing religion in an “urgent” medium. Which is why, incidentally, the recent BBC series, *The Monastery*,⁸ succeeded in such a remarkable way—it was about what can be known only by taking time, in company. BBC Director General, Mark Thompson, in an address to the Churches' Media Conference seemed to endorse very clearly the significance of the time dimension to religious broadcasting—that is, allowing religious knowledge to be complex and engaging.

Christian belief takes as fundamental the idea that humans are created for communication—they are gifted with language. They are designed to speak to God, and to each other, and to give names to the things of the world around them. They are who they are in and through how they communicate. There is quite a bit in the New Testament from Jesus and St Paul and St James on the dangers of “idle” speech—speech that debases the currency because it is inflated, untruthful, aggressive, contemptuous or salacious. Corrupt speech—inflaming unexamined emotion, reinforcing division, wrapped up in its own performance—leaves us less human. Bad human communication leaves us less room to grow. So the issue for a religious believer—a Christian in particular—is the responsibility of the media for the quality of communication in society.

I am not talking about the charges of “dumbing down”—that's a different problem. Nor am I talking about indecent language—again a different problem. The bigger question is about what is liberated or restricted by the word. What is the quality of humanity shown in various styles of communication? Corrupt speech assumes certain things about what it is to be human by manipulating fear; exhibiting violent conflict between people for entertainment; living off internal feuds and dramas between members of the professions. These are not wholly unfamiliar elements in our current media culture.

The degree to which material is produced with a tacit slant towards these unexamined responses is the degree to which communication is “shutting down the plant”. It may be true, as Steven Johnson argues in his recent book *Everything Bad is Good For You*, that much material now being broadcast

or published requires a quicker intelligence than comparable material from twenty years ago. But a quicker intelligence does not of itself guarantee an imaginative depth—a wisdom connected with processes that take time.

Serving democracy and nourishing the common good is, for the media, something that requires not only attacking corrupt securities in a society, but also promoting creditable communication. Journalistic communication is bound to a market model. That is not going to change overnight. But news media is a parallel universe when compared with the actual ways in which people learn—which contributes to the exasperation and scepticism with which so much of the media world is treated.

What could offset this alienation would be if journalists were sensitive to the actual communities in which information was processed and understood, and since journalists have been increasingly restricted to their desks and rarely go out on ‘rounds’ this sensitivity is being lost. Also, there is a dominance among commentators—columnists in particular—in the national media of people whose main experience is urban, usually metropolitan.

But a quicker intelligence does not of itself guarantee imaginative depth

Once again, whether the journalist writes for the right or the left matters less than their location in a particular elite.

Ian Hargreaves⁹ notes some internationally based research on journalists which offers an interesting profile of the profession—predominantly male, young, drawn from the majority ethnic group in their society and university-educated. In the UK at least, we could probably add, for the national media, that their professional experience has been largely London-based. If it is a significant part of the profession's justification that it helps to equip a maturely questioning democracy, it is unfortunate that its profile suggests a strong tribal identity which may be far removed from the specific local and civic loyalties that form the raw material of serious “discursive politics”, to use John Lloyd's phrase.

That suggests in turn that the profession has to ask some questions about how it works to help

⁸ British Broadcasting Corporation

⁹ op.cit. pp.229-30

interaction and argument between real local and civic communities, resisting the temptation to apply metropolitan templates as the obvious frame of reference. My own sense of the risks here was intensified by some of the national media coverage of the Foot and Mouth epidemic a few years ago, which revealed some disturbing gaps of information—let alone empathy—in regard to rural affairs. In respect of religious communities of all kinds, the problem seems endemic.

My argument is that “public interest”, if it is understood as the process of opening up conversation and debate between communities that make up a society, is a crucial priority for a society’s health—for the common good. It is too important to be reduced to a battleground where information is dragged out of reluctant and secretive power-brokers, or to a gladiatorial spectacle staged by an unelected political opposition. This task will certainly involve unwelcome questioning of random power in the media. But the media will only regain credibility if it shows more awareness of its own limited and therefore compromised position. It is also a task which entails taking responsibility for the quality of communication. Moral credibility is essential to a healthy and properly critical common life. Journalists need to be seen to be working for the sake of humanity, not just providing a supposedly liberating flow of information but a wide imaginative horizon, where cynicism is checked and facile emotion challenged.

A model of good journalism is good conversation in the wider social context. That is, it may be, and should be at times, argumentative and

one-sided; but it must leave room within its own medium for reply, and provide material for critical evaluation. It must work with a sharp sense of what different kinds of community know, and how they know it. Without this, it will move constantly further into its parallel universe. And so long as there is real work in a real world to be done by the news media, this movement into a parallel universe is disastrous.

Keith Murdoch once said, “Beware the desk habit. It is the curse of journalism”. It is ironic that his son should preside over the domestication of journalism and its increasing dependence on cyber information. We need people who are recognisably professionals in facilitating exchange and mutual critique between the worlds people inhabit—actual three-dimensional people in the real world. Common good requires public space. But public space is a good deal more than a market—in information or anything else.

A flourishing, morally credible media is a vital component in the maintenance of genuinely public talk, argument about common good. Such talk is not in rich supply just now, and it is only fair to ask what share of responsibility the media has for this. But it is not fair to treat news media as a scapegoat. Their relationship with the wider society is mutual—societies to some extent have the media they deserve and license. Can a more grounded, less fevered, more modestly provisional journalistic practice recover a sense of how to nurture public conversation in a mature democracy—even a truth that sets people free?

reader's view

Having received this morning the Autumn 2005 issue of *Common Theology* and renewed my subscription for the next 12 month period, I set about to read it.

As usual I found myself becoming engrossed with each article, especially the book reviews. Subsequently, in endeavouring to ascertain how to make a purchase of *When I talk to you: a cartoonist talks to God*, by Michael Leunig, and *Australian Religious Diary*, all I could find were the names of

the publishers. Is it possible that the names of the appropriate booksellers, with addresses and telephone numbers could also be given?

With best wishes for your future success,
James Nelson
Highbury, SA

Rainbow Books can supply you with the 2006 Australian Religious Diary, and Michael Leunig's book is available at all good bookshops. Email: rba@rainbowbooks.com.au Ed

Poverty at ground level

Marie Menhinnitt is Sponsorship Coordinator of the St Veronica Welfare Committee, a voluntary aid organisation based in Brisbane, which assists children's education in economically poor countries.



eye witness

gap in the population pyramid, which has not been seen since pandemics such as the Black Death in the Middle Ages.

There has been a huge increase in the number of orphans, defined as children who have lost at least one parent, and in the number of grandmothers trying to rear these young children and provide for their needs. Agencies predict that, soon, there will be a population of five million such orphans.

The post-apartheid government has had ten years in power since the heady days of Nelson Mandela's release and term as first president of the new South Africa (the Rainbow Nation as it came to be called), so any changes in the economic reality of South African society should now be evident.

Crèches and preschools have become one way in which South African society has responded

Despite earlier reluctance to equate the transmission of AIDS as being due to a virus, the present government is slowly providing anti-retroviral drugs to pregnant women, in a trial fashion, to reduce mother to infant transmission. It is estimated that 50% of children born HIV+ (estimated at 30% of all births) are now saved from an early death. There are also 300 specially developed centres, both private and government funded, providing Anti-Retroviral treatment to those affected with full-blown AIDS so that they can be restored to good health, live normal lives, and, in many cases, return to work. Presently these centres cater for about 145,000 people throughout the country. Another 40,000, mainly women, are attending AIDS health clinics, made possible by funds from Catholic Relief Services from the USA.

More and more people are realizing that education is the key to improving many aspects of life—

In June I made my third visit to South Africa, as a gesture of solidarity with the people of an area which I had come to know and love from two previous, and much longer, stays in 1999 and 2000. I was based at Dwars River in Limpopo Province, known until recently as the Transvaal. Limpopo is one of the poorer and less developed provinces of South Africa, where migration of men to work in cities has led to social dis-ease and imbalance in family life, leaving 60% of the population female.

The province includes Venda, Sotho and Shangaan tribal homelands, artificially constructed during the apartheid regime (1948-1994), and most of the population resides in villages and rural areas.

My connection to the area is through a Catholic high school, St Brendan's, with 600 pupils, about 65% of whom are boarders, and the rest gathered from the local villages. Parents of these day scholars (“learners” in South Africa) are bypassing the local government high schools for this fee-paying—though by no means elite—school because of the consistency of their very high matriculation pass rates, 95% compared to 35-50% in many local high schools. This provides opportunities and opens doors to universities and technikons.

South Africans are struggling to cope with the effects of the devastating HIV virus and millions of deaths caused by AIDS. The most profound social effect is that 90% of AIDS related deaths are occurring in the fertile/reproductive age group, 25 to 35. Another group disproportionately represented are children under ten, who have contracted the virus from their mothers during birth.

Demographers will have to grapple with the societal/economic/cultural effects of such a large

earning sufficient salary to provide for basic needs, choosing employment, gaining knowledge of how a social system operates. Crèches and preschools have become one way in which South African society has responded to families overburdened with the care of children.

Though there is slow but continuing growth in the provision of government funding to improve vital services such as education and health there is no funding as yet for crèches/preschools. In Limpopo there are private and NGO funded training centres. One of these, Thusenang, outside Tzaneen, provides six-week courses in early childhood teaching, as well as sewing classes to give village women the opportunity to earn a little income for themselves. It also employs five field officers to help with on-going skills improvement. This training is not free (about A\$2,000 to Level Two) so those in training as crèche teachers have to find some person/agency to provide funds. Participants must “live-in” and pay this cost, plus their transport, by taxi, which is the cheapest means of transport between villages.

I met a young man pushing a wheelbarrow with an 80kg bag of mealie meal.

As education in good nutrition and healthy living conditions help in the fight against HIV/AIDS, there is a law making it compulsory for all milling companies to include vitamin and mineral supplements in all bags of mealie meal (corn flour) for sale. As the staple diet of black South Africans, especially in the villages, is mealie porridge this is an excellent way of ensuring that the children are receiving sufficient nutrients for their mental and physical growth. One day I met a young man pushing a wheelbarrow along the dusty road, with an 80kg bag of mealie meal balanced across it. When he stopped for a rest, I chatted to him and asked him questions. He told me the bag cost 160 Rand and would feed a family of four for a month. The nutritional additives were printed on the bag.

My latest visit was primarily about visiting crèches and helping to resource them. I visited fifteen, part of a group of twenty helped by the Dwars River Catholic Parish outreach services. The parish has a pastoral team helping crèches

by providing training and equipment, and helping AIDS sufferers by training home based carers. Those involved in both these areas are usually local village women, trying to address the problems at a grass roots level. Often, when death is near, the clinics and health centres have done “all they can” for the person with AIDS.

Because of the enormity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic there is a large amount of aid money available from wealthy countries. Volunteers, aid agencies, and churches are all working to enable people to access whatever money is available to help them. Slowly, the structures are being put in place to disperse this aid. For instance, the parish I was working in applied for, and secured, financial aid for its projects from diverse groups including the Siyabhabha Trust (the social justice arm of the South African Catholic Bishops Conference), the Solon Foundation (a Swiss group), the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Congregation, in Rome, Ireland and Australia, and private individuals and groups in Australia.

There was a wide range of facilities/training/equipment among these fifteen crèches. Numbers of children ranged between fifteen and eighty, and fees were between 20 and 40 Rand per month. This money provides daily food (using the six Rand per day food supplement from government feeding programmes), teachers’ salaries, rent if payable, equipment, etc. Many teachers told me that, though they have children who are eligible for the food grant, the government has not paid them since last September.

Orphaned and disabled children are eligible for further assistance. The possibilities of corruption, with guardians using the moneys for other purposes, is high. The government is being urged to introduce a Basic Income Grant for all South Africans. This would go a long way to breaking the poverty cycle by lifting four million people out of it. All children under four are eligible for a Child Support Grant of 170 Rand but this is almost impossible to get because of limited access to government offices, bungling, red tape and sheer inefficiency. Crèche teachers were often away, at a government office, trying to access such aid. Voluntary children’s agencies are pressuring government to extend the age, and increase the amount, as well as streamline the process of obtaining the grant.

Most of the parents/guardians find the fees somehow. A common source of income is from a

grandmother/carer who receives an age pension which can supplement any other income coming into the family. Unemployment is high at 50% and many live at subsistence level or rely on the (little) social security or income from teachers, police, nurses, etc. Other sources of income are casual jobs on farms nearby and in the informal economy. Casual jobs are often poorly paid, seasonal and subject to market fluctuation. The informal economy (selling foodstuffs, artifacts, etc) has limited potential in a cash-strapped situation.

Culturally, Africans live communally and if one member of an extended family receives an income, that person is expected to contribute to the greater family needs. So, somehow or other, a certain amount of money comes into a family to enable it to survive, and to the crèches/preschools to enable them to function.

When children use a long-drop toilet there is a danger of falling into the hole below.

The physical environment of crèches varies. Some have good buildings, with spacious, well-equipped activity areas and well-trained teachers, plus safe cooking facilities. Some of these crèches are supported with grants from NGO’s, similar to the one I work with.

Others pay a small rent and are housed in church halls or Burial Society premises, often very run-down and in need of painting and repairs. One was even built over part of a village street and is marked for demolition. Cooking of the children’s lunch, porridge and soup made with spinach, cabbage and tomatoes, is done on gas burners, using large 21 litre cooking pots. However, in a couple of crèches, which were very poorly equipped and with no trained teachers, cooking is done on a kerosene stove. This is very dangerous especially when the stove is in the main learning area. It made me shudder, each time I visited, to think about the consequences of the large pot tipping over or the kitchen causing a fire.

Many crèche toilets are another potential danger to small children. The toilets in the villages consist of outhouses, with a long-drop, covered by a cement box, with an adult-sized seat hole. When children use this type of toilet, without adult

supervision, there is a danger of falling into the hole below. In a couple of places two-litre plastic buckets (with lids) were being used as “potties” and emptied into the adult toilets. An organization with which I am connected donated funds to one crèche to construct three child-sized toilets, lower than a normal toilet, with a small step and a smaller hole to prevent a child falling through. However, in the crèches I visited, this was the only child-sized toilet block.

Before local parish aid became available to these fifteen crèches the children mostly slept on cement floors and were plagued with colds and coughs all winter. Provision of carpets and blankets has helped to alleviate this. Fifty-plus children often sleep close together, in rows, like sardines in a tin. In many crèches there were no tables for craft and art work or anywhere to store materials. Each child has a plastic chair which must be provided by the parents.

Another important resource of crèches is the vegetable/fruit garden which provides fresh vegetables for the children’s meals. Not all crèches are able to establish gardens because they have no access to water, or fences to keep out wandering goats and poultry.

Educational toys are a pretty exotic item, usually way down on the list of “needs” for survival. It was a joy for me to accompany teachers from four crèches, where the equipment was almost non-existent, and provide each of them with 1,500 Rand (about A\$300) to spend. They worked together, comparing and chatting among themselves, and made a selection of toys and equipment covering a wide range of learning skills for young children.

Since my last visit in 2000 it heartened me no end to see, growing on the landscape of most villages, a sprouting of green water tanks, indicating that a spear had been put down and water found. This also told me that more money is now available in that village.

Limpopo is semi-desert (Africans were given the least fertile land during the apartheid forced removals) and there is little surface water, but a good supply of underground sources. So, I expect to see sinks and taps slowly appearing in crèche kitchens in the next five years. Two of them already have this facility. Otherwise all water has to be carried in containers and stored in large plastic basins or—for drinking—eighty-gallon plastic kegs.

It is not helpful to compare crèches in South African villages to those in Australian suburbs. The

range of facilities and equipment in Australian crèches would be the envy of any South African teachers, and probably the sophistication of our teaching programmes would amaze them. Can we imagine working in buildings with cement floors, sometimes without electricity, in a climate where it often drops below 10°C in the winter?

Burial Societies have an important influence on village finances, because of large numbers of AIDS related deaths. It is very difficult to convince Africans not to follow long-held cultural traditions of lavish funerals, feeding all who come. Most people belong to a burial society and contribute a small sum each week. When a member dies there is a set amount paid to the family, or, if there are insufficient funds, people are asked to make a lump sum payment to help with the funeral. At a set time after the burial, when the grave has been enclosed and covered with a headstone, there is another ceremony of dressing the grave. The headstone is veiled, and a service conducted to unveil the stone as a mark of respect to the deceased. A meal is also provided after this service. These customs add another strain on the financial resources of the poor.

So I suppose I could sum up my impression, after my third visit, as principally one of hope for the future of people in Limpopo. The signs of a developing and growing economy are there, with the first supermarket, a new building supplies store, and a new variety store and police station at Matoks, the central point of all the linked villages near Dwars River. These have appeared since my 2000 visit.

People have already made the connection between being educated and having a better life, hence the proliferation of so many crèches in every village. This is a grassroots acknowledgement of the importance of caring for the youngest members of society. They are one of the most important resources for the future of South Africa.

As a visitor from a country with an unbelievably high living standard, compared with the area I visited, I often pause and look about me, and wonder why we live in a world with such a gulf between those with much (too much) and those with little (too little). While material goods do relieve the harshness of a daily struggle for survival, they do not ensure happiness. The poorest people are often the ones to provide us with a lesson in how to live, with their dignity and hope in the face of their struggles. stveronica@gil.com.au

reviews

CREDO—the Innocence of God. A multimedia music theatre Fabrica

Reviewed by Maggie Helass

The Queensland Music Festival opened on July 15 with a multi-media music theatre embracing three continents in a eulogy to Islam, Judaism, Christianity. The libretto explored the absurdity of ethnic and religious conflict.

Three movie screens behind the orchestra opened satellite windows to Istanbul, Jerusalem and Belfast—where musicians and poets conducted a live dialogue with a packed Brisbane Concert Hall.

Composer and conductor Andrea Molino had the task of morphing the Queensland Symphony Orchestra in and out of ballads from Northern Ireland, a percussion extravaganza in Istanbul, creating sonic landscapes with exotic musical instruments such as the kanun, mey, darbuka, the kamanche, and ney flute.

William Barton, Australia's best-known didgeridoo custodian, provided an anchor hold for those of us who sometimes lost track of which continent we were on.

Words were a pastiche of wisdom literature which began with the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel and ended with Kahlil Gibran and Hans Kung.

The work of exploring human expression beyond language (which was confused at Babel to confound the hubris of mankind) belonged to experimental vocalist David Moss, Swiss-Ghanaian Joy Frempong, and Gunnlaug Thorvaldsdottir from Iceland.

Moss's centre-stage vocal acrobatics incarnated an earth creature—gurgling, muttering, gasping at the primal boundary of language. Frempong and Thorvaldsdottir, a black and a white woman in big-screen close-ups, together portrayed the spine-tin-gling intimacy between screaming and song—the stratosphere of language where music takes over.

Today's existential angst in a meaningless world was poignantly captured in twin video clips of an

Israeli mother whose son had survived a bombing in Jerusalem, and the Arab mother of the suicide bomber. These grieving women's words showed in vignette how the cycle of violence begins on the doorstep of a society.

Video-taped stories from young people living in the world's heart of ethnic and religious conflict provided a useful discussion of fear and the structure of evil.

Mick Dodson made a startling appearance on screen, in close-up eye contact with the audience, voicing key words in synch with narrative from Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

A section entitled The Bastards and the Assembly of the Lord brought to the screens young people with parents of mixed cultures and religion. Some came from left field, appreciating being both Israeli and Arab, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—hybrids bringing worlds together.

CREDO is a global project, adaptable to many cultures, and Australian artists spent time at the Fabrica workshop in Karlsruhe, Germany, to acculturate the music theatre for dissemination in Australia.

CREDO gave a glimpse of a new form of communication. The immediacy of television news provided by the live link, combined with the intimacy of dialogue via telecommunication, the intense community experience of the movie house, and the visceral confrontation of live theatre shrank world conflict into a crystal ball. At the end of the two-hour 'performance', when musicians in Brisbane, the Middle East and Northern Ireland all bowed to applause from the Queensland public, one had a keen sense of understanding what is happening in the world. Our daily diet of news media seemed thin rations by comparison.

A risk of borrowing literature for a libretto is that, although the text has integrity in its home context, it may be compromised in an exotic environment. Hans Kung's words on bridge building, for instance, although undeniably true in their original context, sounded anachronistic, almost trite, as a finale to the sound and fury of CREDO.

The progress of CREDO is worth watching as a cross-cultural phenomenon. **The world's monotheistic religions have long since become lost in the fog of jargon.** CREDO is a sincere attempt to reinvent a language for religion and culture that makes interfaith dialogue possible.

Fresh Words and Deeds — The McCaughey Papers

ed. by Peter Matheson & Christiaan Mostert
David Lovell Publishing, Melbourne, Australia.
ISBN 1863551069. Rrp \$35.00

Reviewed by Arthur Grimshaw



The late Dr Davis McCaughey

Dr Davis McCaughey may well be called a luminary of his time, and this tribute to mark his 90th birthday is a valued second collection of his writings. As an academic, a theologian, a dedicated ecumenist and highly-respected public figure, his wide-ranging and measured statements are a joy to read.

Professor Harry Wardlaw's introductory essay introduces the reader to Davis McCaughey the man, with a warmth and depth of understanding which opens out for us the varied background of the person whose writings are set before us in this collection. As one might expect, the writings include six of his major theological papers, eight shorter papers reflecting his ecumenical perspectives, and nine important sermons for seasonal or academic occasions.

A valuable section is also devoted to seven addresses (masterpieces of their genre) commemorating the lives of some of Dr McCaughey's contemporaries—Church leaders and theological colleagues. In all the writings gathered together in this book, the reader is constantly aware of light being brought to bear on varied subjects—the light of understanding, the light of personal knowledge and experience, and the light of a deep personal relationship with God, founded on what he describes as the foundations—prayer and obedience.

My personal experience of Dr McCaughey's ministry was somewhat peripheral in my university days, and through this publication I have enjoyed the opportunity to come closer to an appreciation of the breadth and depth of his scholarship and spirituality. Highly commended! The recent publication of the ARCIC document on the place of Mary in the plan of salvation would indicate that the inclusion of Professor McCaughey's shorter paper "Mary and the Protestant tradition" in this birthday tribute is very timely.

book reviews

Wrestling for Blessing by Marilyn McCord Adams

Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2005, ISBN 023252846. Rrp \$34.95

Reviewed by Arthur Grimshaw

This is basically, a collection of sermons from Marilyn McCord Adams, currently Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University—gathered as reflections relating to people who find God’s goodness problematic.

Most of these had their expression in the United States of America, as may be seen from some of the special commemorative days at which she preached—such as Gay Pride Sunday, and Coming Out Day. These observances are not currently defined in either English or Australian Calendars, but the wisdom contained in the sermons is still appropriately on offer. For this reviewer, the book’s most valuable and helpful section is the 17-page introduction by the author, apparently after her appointment to Oxford, which sets the sermons in context. This essay ought to be required reading for theological students.

Some people in skimming through the contents of this volume might dismiss them as “hobby-horse” sermons, but that would be a pity, for they are eloquent addresses directed to important issues in today’s world—issues which need to be confronted and not pushed aside.

The theme of Jacob’s wrestling with the angel, chosen as the title for the collection, is a reminder that the theological process involves a real conflict of mind and will, in order to interpret God’s truth in contemporary terms for today’s world.

Professor Adams shows a real concern for what she describes as people “church-damaged and battered by life”. These sermons, by their focus and lucid exposition, are a very helpful resource for church folk (clergy and laity) in their ministry to the alienated and hurt. The reason for their publication in England in 2005 may indicate a perceived need for such sermons to be readily available to people who may not have been exposed to such teaching hitherto. In her choice of language (as one might expect of a

leading academic) the author’s political correctness in dealing with gender ascriptions to God is sometimes distracting—as in the following: “Father-Mother God identifies herself as parent only in relation to his offspring who recognises itself as Deity in response” (pp 38–39).

A Question of Truth, Christianity and Homosexuality by Gareth Moore OP

Continuum Religious, ISBN 0826459498. Rrp \$39.95

Reviewed by Philip Russell

This is a book which every Christian should read, for no Christian today can be unaware of the discussion and concern which surrounds its subject. It should be regarded mandatory reading for any Christian whose sermons, addresses or public prayers in any way influence others’ thinking.

Firstly Fr Moore reminds us of the basic requirements needed for anyone to claim “the Bible says...” I do not believe that anyone can quarrel with what he has written in this respect.

Secondly, it is important to see the conclusions he comes to as he examines “key texts”. This he does with clarity, conviction and charity.

Fr Moore states, “The social, political, cultural and religious contexts within which these texts were written are not ours, and are often very foreign to us. It is often the context of a text—not only the literary context, in which the text is embedded, but also and more importantly the culture which author and reader share and which enables so much to be left unsaid—which makes it readily intelligible to its original audience, and the lack of that context that makes its original meaning difficult for us to grasp.

“Even if the meaning seems fairly obvious, we can still get it wrong. One reason why the meaning of a text might seem obvious to us is that we as readers have our own social, political, cultural and religious contexts, which may make a certain way of reading a text appear natural, even compelling. But in view of the huge gulf between biblical times and our own age, this impression can be very deceptive.” (Page 59)

So it is very difficult to get to the real meaning of text. Ordinary ‘tools’ such as biblical commentaries, dictionaries, even those full of references to etymological origins, are of limited help. And in the sheer nature of things, none of this helps us get to an understanding of why the text in question condemns, or approves a particular activity. We can, after much digging around, get a reasonably coherent understanding, but we have to have the humility to recognise even then that we might be wrong.

It is helpful to listen to Fr Moore as he applies this canon of understanding to some of the texts which are often used in discussions about the subject of homosexuality (Genesis 2 and 19.1–11, Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, Romans 1, I Corinthians 6.9–10, 1 Timothy 1.10).

I shall not make any attempt to summarise the points that Fr Moore makes. One has to read slowly and carefully through all 100 pages for scriptural references, and then 40 more of the chapter ‘Aquinas, Natural Law and Sexual Natures’.

I quote Fr Moore’s own comment—“If we summarise the results of our investigation, the con-

clusions are simple to state and substantiate the thesis put forward in the preface: if we look for cogent biblical or natural arguments against homosexual relationships and acts in general, we will not find them: there aren’t any. There are plenty which look faithful to scripture and compelling in their logic, but none which actually are.” (Page 281)

So where do we go from here? I believe that the last thing in the world that Fr Moore would want would be militant shouting that he is right and that all the others are wrong.

On the other hand, those of us who are deeply concerned about this whole matter cannot just be silent, virtually suggesting that all that he has said does not warrant further thought and action. It clearly does—but what?

My suggestion is that groups of concerned people should meet as theologians, biblical scholars, recognising the virtual impossibility of being free from prejudice, to see what that next step should be.

Philip Russell is a former Archbishop of Cape Town, now living in Adelaide.

Leaven

By Greg Jenks

One of my favourite parables is the saying about a scholar (scribe) “who is schooled in Heaven’s imperial rule” (Matthew 13:52). While it probably cannot be attributed to Jesus, the image of a “toastmaster who produces from his cellar something mature and something young,” remains an inspiration for me as a priest and scholar.

What follows is a selection of two vintages from my cellar, both dealing with the parable of the leaven (Luke 13:20–21, Matt 13:33, and also preserved in Thomas 96:1).

The influential parables scholar, John Dominic Crossan, draws on the work of his Jesus Seminar colleague, Bernard Brandon Scott, when he observes:

... “leaven in the ancient world was a symbol of moral corruption,” according to Brandon Scott, since it was “made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold forms. The bread rots and decays ... modern yeast ... is domesticated”.¹ Furthermore, “in Israel there is

home truths



an equation that leaven is the unholy everyday, and unleavened the holy, the sacred, the feast” (p324)...(W)e are confronted with an image of the Kingdom that is immediately shocking and provocative. And it is compounded by the fact that, again from Scott, “woman as a

symbolic structure was associated in Judaism, as in other Mediterranean cultures, with the unclean, the religiously impure. The male was the symbol for purity.” Furthermore, “the figurative use of hiding to describe the mixing of leaven and flour is otherwise unattested in Greek or Hebrew” (p326). Here then, stands a triply shocking image for the Kingdom—a woman hiding leaven in her dough. It’s there, it’s natural, it’s normal, it’s necessary, but society has a problem with it.²

¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Page 324ff.

² John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. Pages 280f.

In a more recent study of selected parables, Scott notes the intertextual connections that draw Jesus, his audience and their shared sacred tradition into a new act of imagining a world where God's domain is a lived reality—

“The “three measures” of flour alludes to Abraham's hospitality to three anonymous sacred visitors in Genesis 18. ...

“When the parable employs the term three measures it conjures up from the audience's repertoire the story of Abraham and the birth of Isaac. In parable it suggests a comparison between the woman's actions and the birth of Isaac.

“Now we begin to understand the difference between parabolic or oral thinking and our own literate, more abstract way of thinking.

“In parable “three measures” serves to compare the event of Isaac's birth with the event of the parable. Literally and abstractly it makes little sense. But parable is a concrete way of thinking, not an abstract way.”³

Leaven is a symbol of decay and corruption, as Scott outlines—⁴

“In the ancient world the process of leavening frequently stood as a metaphor for moral corruption. ...

“The New Testament contains several examples of this negative use of leaven. In Mark's Gospel Jesus

warns the disciples concerning the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod (Mark 8:15). ...

“Twice Paul quotes the proverb, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” ...

“In the Hebrew Bible unleavened bread is a powerful symbol of the holy. During the feast of Passover, the feast of unleavened bread, all leavened bread was to be cleansed out of the house.

“When we reflect how leaven is a product of rotten bread and is associated with a corpse, we begin to see how it can serve as a powerful metaphor for corruption and how its opposite, unleavened bread, can serve as a metaphor for the sacred and holy.

“The very beginning of the parables with the simple word “leaven”, would throw an audience off guard and maybe into panic. For leaven is surely no correct symbol of the kingdom of God.”

Scott has an eye for detail as he guides us through this tiny parable—

“In the normal process of baking one might expect a woman to be kneading the dough. There is nothing untoward about her role here. But as a parable for the Kingdom of God, a woman's role as an emblem of the sacred becomes highly problematic.

“Again, there is nothing wrong with the Kingdom of God being hidden. But in this parable an unexpected word is used for hiding. “Concealed” — *krypto* (Luke) or *enkrypto* (Matthew) — is a much more negative term, for hiding than the more neutral *kalypto*. *Krypto* has some sense of concealment.⁵

Finally, under the delightful subheading “Kneading the parable,” Scott begins to sketch out a way of hearing this parable:

“... my contention is that Jesus told parables to let people in on his experience of God. Parables were his way of making God available to them. Actually, empire of God is a symbol used to make God available to folks, to provide them with an alternative to their everyday life in the empire of Caesar or in the kingdom of Caesar's puppet, Herod Antipas.”

“If we listen to the parable it says something like this.

The empire of God is like moral corruption.

“Well of course, that is a very bad start. Most folks in Jesus' audience would have blanched at the first term “leaven” ... perhaps they would snicker that the empire of Caesar is more like leaven.

³ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World. An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001. Page 28.

⁴ *Re-Imagine the World*. Pages 25–27.

⁵ *Re-Imagine the World*. Page 27f.

...which a woman took.

“Again how can a woman, weak as she is, have anything to do with God's empire? But if it is like leaven, then there is a certain logic, a weird logic, to the parable.

...and concealed ...

“Does she do it while no one is looking? How can she keep it concealed? Will folks be unaware that it is leavened bread? After all most bread in the ancient world was flat bread, like tortillas or pita.

...in three measures of flour ...

“Now we are getting somewhere. Finally an image of great size, an image appropriate to God. And this tells us we are on the right track. Three measures assures us that this is after all the empire of God. What a huge banquet she is preparing, enough for a hundred people! This is an event like the birth of Isaac. Is she preparing the messianic banquet?

...until it was all leavened.

“Until it has worked its way through everything, until it has corrupted the whole mass of dough. Surely such total corruption is nonsense as a way of talking about God or experiencing God. What is this about?”⁶

Scott then poses the question, “for whom would this parable be good news?” Whether or not it seems good news for me probably depends on whether I see myself as doing well under the status quo, or whether I yearn for change and freedom.

These notes are prepared by Dr Gregory Jenks,
Executive Trustee of FaithFutures Foundation.
www.faithfutures.org

⁶ *Re-Imagine the World*. Pages 31–34.



Riding high on dragon's breath

The world has changed since the glory days of St George. Dragons have been driven back into ancient history—except in the imaginations of children.

This drawing shows the primal contest between St George and the Dragon as more of a game. The Dragon challenges St George with his breath, and there is a little smile in the corner of his mouth—for the game is not over yet.

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Paget's parable

Paget's Parable will be back next edition. The Revd Robert Paget has been in PNG in his capacity as an RAAF Chaplain, officiating at a Battle of Milne Bay Commemoration and participating in the burial of remains found in a Dakota that crashed during WW2.

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