

# Common Theology

Vol 2 number 11, Winter 2010 — \$6 (Students & Penioners \$4)

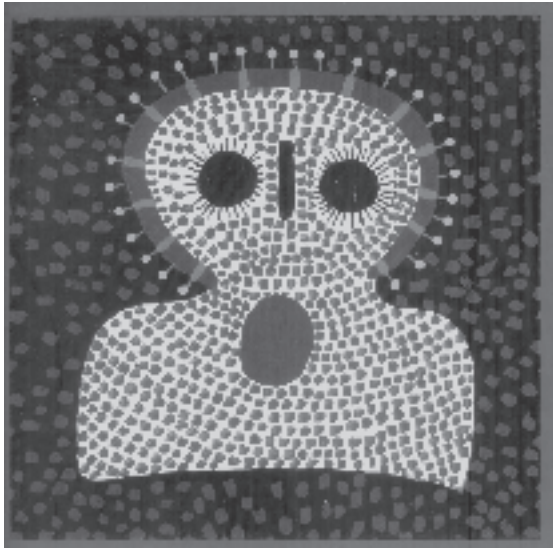
ISSN 1447-3615



## **INSIDE:**

- 'Progressive' Christianity in Australia
- Models of leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- Religion was the topic of the Atheists' Convention

A Periodical Journal for Australians



[www.commontheology.com](http://www.commontheology.com)

*Common Theology* is a periodical publication serving a community interested in emergent Christianity worldwide, and based in Australia. This journal is not a commercial venture but is funded by its sponsors and subscribers. It is intended to help build a participatory community sharing information about a new world order from a theological perspective.

**Sponsors:** Margaret Henderson OBE  
Kay McLennan, Amelia Cooper, Sarah Baker

**Published by HelassInk**  
P O Box 117, Sandgate, Qld 4017

**Editor:** Maggie Helass

**Subscriptions Manager:**  
Anne Bucetti, *doing data*

**Printing:** Ultraprint, Virginia Qld

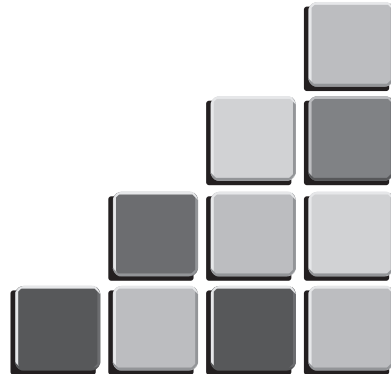
**Website Manager:** Kerri Maitland  
[www.KerriMaitland.com](http://www.KerriMaitland.com)

**Cartoonist:** The Revd Robert Paget

ISSN 1447-3615

**Cover photo** Signs outside a British Post Office illustrate the confusing and conflicting messages of public life today.

## all theologies



[www.mosaicresources.com.au](http://www.mosaicresources.com.au)

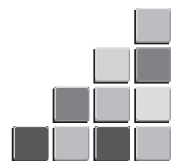
Mosaic Resources is a retail bookseller specialising in the religious market. We supply books, CDs and other resources in all areas of theology, spirituality, prayer, Scripture, liturgy, ethics, church history and worship. We offer our services to customers in Australia, New Zealand and throughout the Pacific region: libraries, universities, colleges, seminaries, parishes and congregations, schools and other centres of education; and of course, to individual customers.

Our list includes resources for all the Christian churches - Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Presbyterian, Salvation Army - as well as some of the smaller denominations. We also have resources of interest to the other great religious traditions - Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and many more.

If you're in the neighbourhood, drop in and view our extensive range at our new store in High Street, Preston, Victoria.

**Mosaic Resources**  
508 High Street  
Preston VIC 3072  
P: (03) 9470 6650  
F: (03) 9470 2381

E: [info@mosaicresources.com.au](mailto:info@mosaicresources.com.au)



# Contents

From the Editor	4
Life's a messy business	5
— a new model for leadership	
'Humanness' is the common bond	10
— progressive Christianity in Australia	
FORUM	13
— The Rev Pos Konea	
Atheist Convention "all about Religion	17
— Margaret Coffey's perspective	
BOOK REVIEWS	
<i>Molecules of Emotion</i>	19
— Candace Pert	
<i>The Lost Art of Sleep</i>	21
— by Michael McGirr	
HOME TRUTHS	23
— church matters	
SUBSCRIPTIONS	Back cover

## From the Editor

On Sunday February 28<sup>th</sup> this year hundreds of people lined the beach and cliffs of the Bayside where I live, armed with cameras and binoculars, waiting for the wave from the Chile earthquake. It was a touching display of our desire as humans for connection in a global society.

I went on a journey last year, which was why *Common Theology* was in recess. I called it my ‘oasis year’. One of our sponsors remarked that an oasis sounded rather a boring place to be – which I suppose it could be, if one had not slogged for months through the desert to get there.

Since the mid-‘nineties there has been a rash of books reinterpreting the world – but with a lens so large it may explain why few of us, individually, could have seen the whole picture of the future. Only now is a language emerging into the vernacular so that our culture can re-examine our place in Creation; so that those of us on what appeared to be a solitary pilgrimage are able, with increasing fluency, to share the experience with other pilgrims – who miraculously appear out of the mists of confusion and who turn out to be travelling in the same direction.

It occurs to me that the current situation in the world is not unlike it was in South Africa in the 1980s. We were few – people who struggled to see clearly in a dense moral fog. Sometimes (as a white person) one wondered if one was totally mistaken, or mad, to take on an entire system (*apartheid*) and claim that one was the only person in step, the only one to see that the nation was on the road to perdition.

For me, as I reflect on a sabbatical year in the crucible of God’s redeeming work in my life, I wonder if that great struggle in South Africa was a training ground for another struggle which we are all engaged in whether we like it or not – a bid for the future of the human species.

I don’t mean just our concern for the health of the planet (that of course is crucial to our survival), but the birth of a new way of being in the world. I note that it seems to be the North Americans who are writing most about a synthesis of ancient and new wisdom which may lead to a new way for humanity as a whole.

Meg Wheatley’s contribution to the debate on a new way of living has been significant and her views on leadership are featured in the following pages.

For years now I have been attempting to live differently, in my small way, here on the eastern edge of this little continent. It is both exciting and confronting to find that all over the world during the past thirty years others have been quietly attempting the same sort of thing.

My spiritual director, the late great Francis Cull, told me in 1991 that there was a new tide of the Spirit in the world which did not entirely fit into the old geography of the institutional churches. My father had foreshadowed the same message in 1968. I do believe these two priests’ prophetic insight of a new vision for Christianity is now coming into sight.

A ‘local’ who has spent many years in the USA, Dr Val Webb, gave her own perspective on ‘progressive Christianity’ as it is emerging in Australia to a company of people searching for new ways of being ‘church’, in Brisbane in March (page 10).

From readers’ letters during the past year it appears that many share my view that our job now in *Common Theology* is to help recover the language for the new dialogue of emergent Christianity.

**Maggie Helass**

# Life's a messy business

**Margaret Wheatley** is President Emerita of The Berkana Institute. Since 1992 Berkana has expanded its work to serve pioneering leaders and communities in all types of organisations in many nations. The following is a brief survey of Meg Wheatley's research into the changes required to make leadership work in the new global community.



**T**oday leadership in every major institutional form, whether public or private, for profit or for public benefit, is failing.<sup>1</sup>

This is because the world has so radically changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that former models of leadership are no longer doing the job.

The really serious problem is that there isn't time to wait for the up-and-coming generation to bring the necessary skills to new models of leadership which better suit the global networking community. They will need mentors who can remember what the world looked like when leadership did work. They need help to create a healthy society with a culture of hope. Which means that those already in leadership must adapt.

Nothing today is simple or slow. We can't make sense of the world by using the analytical processes we were taught. We can't understand the complexity of modern systems by reductionism. In a complex system, it is impossible to find simple causes that explain our problems – or even to know who to blame!

Leadership through command and control is doomed to fail in the webby world of non-hierarchical, organic social growth we find ourselves in today.

But how do leaders shift from the old model of command and control? How does change happen? What are useful measurement systems? How do we lead when change is out of our control?

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century story of dominion, control, and materialism came from a 17<sup>th</sup> Century notion – from a time when philosophers began to describe the universe as a great clock.

When we created this mechanistic story of complete dominion over matter, we also brought in control's unwelcome partner – fear. Once we are intent on controlling something, we feel afraid when we meet with resistance.

According to this philosophy, in public life, in science, health, management, self-help, the focus is on creating better functioning machines. We replace the faulty part, reengineer the organisation, install a new behaviour or attitude, create a better fit, recharge our batteries. The language and thinking is mechanistic.

Meg Wheatley: "As I reflect on the awful demands placed on leaders by the old story, I wonder how anyone could survive in that job. Yet the mechanistic story has created roles for all of us that are equally deadly. It has led us to believe that we, with our unpredictable behaviours, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness – that we are the problem rather than the blessing."<sup>2</sup>

## Life seeks organisation but it uses messes to get there

A real problem for us as leaders is that if we tolerate creative expressions, we find ourselves with unmanageable levels of diversity.

In our nobler moments we want organisations to be adaptive, flexible, self-renewing, resilient, learning, intelligent. The problem is that these attributes are found not in mechanistic models but in living systems.

But living systems are a messy business: "Life seeks organisation, but it uses messes to get there. Organisation is a process, not a structure."<sup>3</sup>

The living systems model of organisation being pursued by The Berkana Institute is on offer through a support advisory service to various

<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, Margaret J, *Finding Our Way – Leadership for an Uncertain Time*, 2007, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, p 101

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 20

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 27

projects throughout the world, particularly in education.

For instance, the CIDA City Campus is a new university in Johannesburg for business, economic and social development. CIDA is managed by its students and has taken over the downtown hotels, abandoned by the business sector since the end of apartheid, for student support services which include accommodation, financial aid, transport, sports, societies and career advice ([www.cida.co.za](http://www.cida.co.za)). The Berkana Institute has been engaged to advise on this innovative venture.

The complexity of 21<sup>st</sup> Century systems cannot be understood by our old ways of separating problems, or scapegoating individuals, or rearranging the boxes on an org chart.

To understand this new world of continuous change and intimately connected systems, we need new ways of understanding and the best way to gain these insights is through the study of living systems.

Self-organisation in living systems is a powerful force that creates the systems we observe in the world of living things and testifies to a world that knows how to organise from the inside out.

Rather than thinking of organisation as an imposed structure, plan design, or role, it is clear that in life, organisation arises from the interactions and needs of individuals who have decided to come together for their own good.

Our great task as leadership in a living system is to rethink our understanding of community so that we can move from the closed protectionism of current forms to an openness and embrace which includes the planetary community. It is instructive that the instinct of community is not peculiar to humans but is found everywhere in life.

Evolution progresses from new relationships, not from the harsh and lonely dynamics of survival of the fittest. Survival of the fit is probably closer to Darwin's thesis. Species that decide to ignore relationships, that act in greedy and rapacious ways, simply die off. If we look at the evolutionary record, it is cooperation that increases over time.

This cooperation is spawned from a fundamental recognition that nothing can exist without the other – that it is only in relationship that one can be fully one's self.

Boundaries become places of meeting and exchange rather than warfare. Australian Aborigines recognise this through ancient rites of admitting strangers to their land.

Leaders who are learning to live in the new story can help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness; they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about our differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us.

In living systems “(o)rganisations... emerge from fundamentally similar conditions. A self gets organised. A world of shared meaning develops. Networks of relationships take form. Information is noticed, interpreted, transformed. From these simple dynamics emerge widely different expressions of organisation.”<sup>4</sup>

## Information is the nutrient of self-organisation

The process of living organisation proceeds thus: —

- **Identity** – making sense, interpreting the self, deciding what to do (you can never direct a living system, you can only disturb it enough for it to want to adapt).

- **Information is the medium** – life uses information to organise itself into material form to act. It is the nutrient of self-organisation.

The scientist's view is that complex living systems thrive in a zone of exquisitely sensitive information processing, on a constantly changing edge between stability and chaos that has been dubbed “the edge of chaos”. In this dynamic region, new information can enter, but the organisation retains its identity.

Contradicting most of our current efforts to keep organisations at equilibrium, living systems seem to seek this far-from-equilibrium condition to stay alive. If a system has too much order, it atrophies and dies. Yet if it lives in chaos, it has no memory.

It is information-unplanned, uncontrolled, abundant, superfluous – that creates the conditions for the emergence of fast, well-integrated, effective responses. (*To page 8*)

---

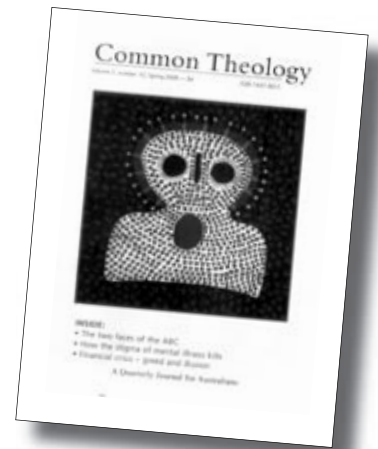
<sup>4</sup> Ibid 36

# Common Theology

## A Journal for Australians

*Common Theology* readership have affirmed the non-commercial foundation of this journal via last year's survey. Results can be viewed on our website or are available by mail on request. More readers' views will be published in forthcoming editions.

A draft of our new statement of intent is on the inside front cover and comments on this would be welcome.



**A subscription form can be found on the back of this edition**

### To the Editor

First let me congratulate and thank you for seven years of stimulating and encouraging thoughts through the pages of *Common Theology*. Its many and varied sources have been inspiration to this struggling Christian. I have subscribed to *Common Theology* since its earliest issues and as I open each consignment, I anticipate something unpredictable and thought-provoking.

My mind boggles at the challenges that must confront anyone with the courage to attempt and succeed at such an enterprise in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century! From your letter, it is clear you are looking to adopt 'ways and means' of keeping the enterprise afloat in challenging times for journalism.

The adage of 'get big or get out' must be a consideration for *Common Theology* and I hope it will be resisted. For me, the cottage industry dedication so evident in your presentation has been like a breath of fresh air.

That many of the leading articles are written by people I know of and some even I have met makes *Common Theology* like a letter from home. This

comment may not be helpful in repositioning your publication but it is certainly a feature I enjoy.

There will also, I feel, be pressure to consider a name change. For God's sake, please resist it. I have just read a little paperback entitled *The Problems of Theology* (Cambridge University Press) whose first chapter is 'Is there such a subject?' If theology is in fact "rational thought or talk about God" i.e. people's belief in God, then *Common Theology* is well named. Likewise, if *Common Theology* claims to be a lay ministry of the Australian church, "common" it is and should be – despite the church's challenging diversity.

As for content, suffice it to say that I have sometimes thought that I would like to see consideration of some of the transitions threatening the post-modern Church when "miraculously" I find that my wishes are realised.

Most recent of these was Hedley Beare's Winter 2007 summary of O'Murchu's twelve reasons for rebuilding the Church – good stuff.

If prayers for *Common Theology's* future, whatever that may be, are in order, feel supported in your work.

**Ian Hurwood, Indooroopilly Qld**

"*Common Theology* is food for God's 'little people'. I enjoy it very much."



Archbishop Desmond Tutu  
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate



"*Common Theology* is ecumenical with an Australasian focus and embraces current affairs – light years away from the 'god spots' of religious journalism in the past."  
Kay McLennan  
Veteran Religious Affairs Journalist

"*Common Theology* is significant to the Christian community and beyond because it avoids the twin dangers facing theology today – that of being populist, trivial and even sectarian; or of being too academic, remote and specialised."

The Revd Prof James Haire, Professor of Theology Charles Sturt University; Exec Dir Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture; Director Public & Contextual Theology Strategic Research Centre.



• **Relationships** are the pathways to the intelligence of the living system. Without connections nothing happens.<sup>5</sup>

People need opportunities to ‘bump up’ against others in the system, making the unplanned connections that spawn new ventures or better-integrated responses. This is the ‘stew’, the messy theatre in which living systems thrive.

Most people, whatever their organisation, are using information, relationships, and identity to get work done.

The problems that we see in organisations are artefacts of much deeper dynamics occurring in these three domains of information, relationships, or identity.

## often the price of belonging to community is to forfeit autonomy

A major problem for those of us obsessed with order and tidiness is that the path of self-organisation can never be known ahead of time.

But... *It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be.* The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another.<sup>6</sup>

And this is where we meet the great paradox of real life – the need for self-determination and the need for one another. Very often the price of belonging to a community is to forfeit one’s individual autonomy.

With the loss of personal autonomy, diversity not only disappears but also become a major management problem. The community spends more and more energy on new ways to exert control over individuals through endlessly proliferating policies, standards and doctrines. This is a dynamic we have seen thriving in our society since the turn of the millennium.

Conditions of freedom and connectedness in human communities are kept vibrant by focusing on what’s going on in the heart of the community rather than being fixated on the forms and rules of the community.

What did we believe was possible together that was not possible alone? What did we hope to bring forth by linking with others? These

questions invite both our individuality *and* our desire for relationships.

If we stay with these questions and don’t try to structure relationships through policies and doctrines, we can create communities that thrive in the paradox.

The call of purpose attracts individuals but does not require them to shed their uniqueness. Staying centred on what the work is together transforms the tension of belonging and individuality into energetic and resilient communities marked by congruence rather than coercion. This is the key to dynamic organisation.

Most public meetings, although originating from a democratic ideal, serve only to increase our separation from one another. Agenda and processes try to honour our differences but end up increasing our distance. These are “public hearings” where nobody is listening and everyone is demanding air time.<sup>7</sup>

Reflective leaders, including those in the military, have learned that the higher the risk, the more we need everyone’s commitment and intelligence.

In holding onto power and refusing to distribute decision-making, leaders have created unwieldy, Byzantine systems that only increase risk and irresponsibility – and nowhere more publicly than in the churches.

Quick fixes for the change from former models of leadership to the responsive models required in this century are not possible. Self-organisation is a long-term exploration requiring enormous self-awareness and support. This is true partially because it represents such a fundamentally different way of thinking about organisation, and partially because all changes in organisation take much longer than we want to acknowledge. If leaders would learn anything from the past many years, it’s that there are no quick fixes. For most organisations, meaningful change is at least a three- to five-year process.

Whenever humans need to change a deeply structured belief system, everything in life is called into question – relationships with loved ones, children, colleagues, authority, and major institutions – the higher you are in the organisation, the more change is required of you personally.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 40

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 117

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 53

Questions to ask during the transition have to do with ‘endurability’ – what about us is worth sustaining long-term? This focus flies in the face of current fashion. Our infatuation with ‘virtual’ organisations, outsourcing, and short-term contracts misses an important truth – we cannot create an organisation that means something to its people if that organisation has no life beyond the next project or contract.

As leaders, we have no choice but to figure out how to invite in everybody who is going to be affected by change. Those that we fail to invite into the creation process will surely and always show up as resistors and saboteurs, because they have been excluded.

When organisational change fails, instead of enjoying the fruits of a redesigned production unit, the leader must manage the hostility and broken relationships created by the redesign. Instead of glorying in the new efficiencies produced by restructuring, the leader faces a burned-out and demoralised group of survivors.<sup>8</sup>

## the solution will be discovered *within the system*

In our lives together, and in our organisations, we must honour the fact that everyone requires the freedom to author their own life. Every person, overtly or covertly, struggles to preserve this freedom to self-create.

We will always add our unique signature to the situation. Whether leaders call us innovative or rebellious depends on their comprehension of what’s going on.

As people are engaged in the difficult and messy processes of participation, we are simultaneously creating the conditions – new relationships, new insights, greater levels of commitment – that facilitate more rapid and complete implementation. But because participative processes can overwhelm us with the complexity of human interactions, many leaders grasp instead for quickly derived solutions from small groups, that are then pronounced to the whole organisation.

But the truth is that when a system is failing, or performing poorly, the solution will be discovered *within the system* if more and better connections are created.

Organisation found in living systems is always highly complex, but this complexity is obtained by an organising process that is simple and that honours the individual’s need to participate. The complexity is the result of individuals interpreting, in the moment, a few simple principles.

We humans have spent so many years determining the details of the organisation – its structures, values, communication channels, vision, standards, measures. Living systems have all these features and details, but they originate differently.

In a living system, they are generated as people figure out what will work well in the current situation. In a machine these features are designed outside and then engineered in.

In such brutal times as these, when good work gets destroyed by events and decisions far beyond our influence, when we’re so overwhelmed with tasks that we have no time to reflect, it is very important that the leader create time for people to remember why they’re doing this work. What were we hoping to accomplish when we started this? Who are we serving by doing this work?

The time has long gone for attempts to solve problems by seeking simplistic causes, by treating problems as enemies.

[www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)

### Pos Konea’s house project



The Rev Pos Konea is building a house in Mendi in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea – to accommodate his family and the orphans he cares for.

If you would like to contribute to this project you can send funds to the *Common Theology* account (details back page) clearly marked for PNG.

See update on Pos Konea’s story page 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 83

# ‘Humanness’ is the common bond

**Dr Val Webb** – a microbiologist who morphed into a theologian – spoke in Brisbane in March on the provocative topic ‘Does God create Religion or Religion create God?’ Her subject addressed some of the basic questions facing emergent Christianity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a movement within worldwide Christianity which is increasingly called ‘progressive’ in Australia. Here is an edited text of her address.



**T**here is something about me that dislikes “yes/no” questions. It is a blessing I finished my studies before multiple choice became standard... When I was doing theological studies, we were constantly presented with conflicting theories by different theologians from which we were supposed to choose one over the other, but I always saw something in both arguments, perhaps because I realised even then that whatever was said was human imagining within a particular time and place... Let me say at the beginning, I use the three letters G-O-D to indicate the Sacred, however we imagine it, with no specific theological baggage. That allows me to talk beyond religious boxes...

Few of us have the luxury (or misfortune) of approaching religion with a blank slate and thus it is hard to define a moment when God first engaged humanity or we first created God. Most of us have been raised in a society steeped in religious ideas and a culture that confirmed those “truths”. Even if our family was not religious, these values and morals shaped our slice of the world, such that we absorbed them with our mother’s milk...

My youthful theology was shaped in Queensland by the school Crusader movement, Billy Graham and the University Evangelical Union of the ‘sixties. The Student Christian Movement was also alive and well, absorbed in Bishop Robinson’s book *Honest to God*, whose

heresy the Evangelical Union was determined to combat.

In my brand of Christianity, spiritual experiences were signs of a good Christian and their absence questioned whether you were a Christian at all. Conversation focused on answers to prayer, miraculous events, or what God had “laid on your heart.” You kept quiet or did a little embellishing if you didn’t have any about which to talk...

I have spent my life in conversation with my religious past, including a return to university and a PhD in theology, and I now find myself helping others think through brands of dogmatic Christianity that stifle their reason and spirit... Since religion is part of our heritage at birth, it is hard to assess whether God first engaged us or humans created God. Freud said religion is a learned mechanism to control basic energy and release tension and frustration, a product of people’s helplessness, but could Freud prove there was not some encouragement from behind the veil? Marx declared religion to be “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions ... the opium of the people,”<sup>1</sup> yet could Marx demonstrate such hope was always illusory and there was no Object of that happiness some claimed to encounter?

## Does God create Religion or religion create God?

Religion historian E O James thought religion gave people something to hold on to in life’s uncertainties, especially death, because eternal rewards were painted as better than life, yet could James prove there is nothing beyond death or nothing supporting us in time of need?

“While [the human being] has dispelled many of the demonic ghosts of ignorance,” philosopher Sam Keen says, “he has at the same time fallen

---

<sup>1</sup> K. Marx, 1976. *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Collected Works, v. 3. New York). Reference from Wikipedia.

prey to the pretention of omniscience, to the foolish pride of believing that he can eliminate the mystery of being.”<sup>2</sup>

How we resolve this question is inevitably a faith statement. We cannot prove there is Something More, nor can we prove there is nothing. American physicist Lawrence Krauss, who does not hold a God-idea himself, says: “While nothing in biology, chemistry, physics, geology, astronomy, or cosmology has ever provided direct evidence of purpose in nature, science can never unambiguously prove that there is no such purpose. As Carl Sagan said in another context, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”<sup>3</sup>...

(H)ow can we demonstrate conclusively to anyone else something that we personally experience or don't experience?...

We progressives are an interesting mix. We meet together because we share a common desire to find an authentic religious shape for living.

Many have challenged traditional Christian doctrines and want to explore beyond these. Some come from outside formal religious traditions, interested in exploring spirituality free of dogma. Some are happy to jettison all God talk – and wish others would hurry up and do the same – yet still want to talk about living life with a capital L. Some find this as a refuge after leaving the church, an interim recovery space until they move beyond religion altogether. Some have lived a lifelong lie, wanting there to be a God and wondering why God has never shown the Divine Face in any convincing way, despite their pleading. Others experience a Presence in themselves and the world, but reject traditional explanations domesticating this experience. Others remain active in churches, cherishing community and social outreach while struggling with outdated theology in hymns and liturgy, hoping always to influence their church to progressive thinking.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Keen, *Apology for Wonder*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), 130. The original quote said *homo faber* rather than “human being”.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Krause, *Does the Universe have a Purpose?* Online article

Others are lucky enough to be in affirming progressive churches. What holds us together as progressives beyond what some see us as, people who wish to dismantle everything?

The Religious Experience Research Centre in England has carried out research around the question, “Have you ever been aware of or been influenced by a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?” In its Nottingham survey, sixty-two per cent of people recorded such an experience at least once or twice in their life.<sup>4</sup>

In a 2005 survey in America's *Newsweek* magazine, eighty per cent called themselves spiritual rather than religious.

Despite the flurry of books denying any Deity and labeling experiential claims delusional, progressive British theologian John Hick argues for an inbuilt human capacity for awareness of the Transcendent, given the millions who, over centuries and different contexts, have claimed such awareness. How many seriously mystical people do we need, Hick asks, both inside and outside religion, in order to take notice and not dismiss everything as delusional? <sup>5</sup>

## How many mystics do we need before we take notice?

Our decision today as to whether Something engages us or we have created God basically boils down to our experiences, or not, of the Sacred, or what we believe of the experiences of others, for example the Church.

In Christian history, individualistic faith or personal experience has not been the norm. God's covenant was with a Hebrew clan, mediated through leaders and prophets – “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6: 7). One such prophet was Jesus, whom some

<sup>4</sup> D. Hay, *Religious Experience Today: studying the facts*. (London: Mowbray, 1990), quoted in John R Hinnells ed., *Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 396

<sup>5</sup> John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 206

accepted as a Messiah or “anointed one,” a term applied to anyone called by God for a mission.

After Jesus’ death, the promised Comforter Spirit engaged the community, guiding them “into all the truth” (John 16: 13).

Paul did not focus on his personal spiritual journey, but his message to Jews and non-Jews.

The Bible is not an anthology of the religious journeys of individual saints, but a story of an ancient people’s corporate engagement with the Sacred.

Once Christianity was part of the Roman Empire, God was mediated exclusively through the institutional Church, with the Pope as Christ’s earthly representative and the Holy Spirit domesticated and operational only within the Church – outside the Church there was no salvation. The Church created the rules by which God could access humanity, and also became the mediator of people’s contact with God through priesthood, prayers and sacraments.

When the mystics challenged this church control of the Spirit, claiming individual unmediated God-experiences, they were marginalised and suspect and women mystics, given their supposedly irrational nature, were placed under male confessors.

## All Christians must have a working theology

The reformers also challenged the Church’s exclusive mediation of God, and moved authority to the Scriptures that people could read for themselves, guided by the Spirit. Martin Luther translated the Latin Vulgate into everyday German and William Tyndale published the New Testament in English, but Tyndale and his books were burned – perish the thought of lay people reading in their own language!

In practice however, since many could not read, authority simply shifted from Church to preacher. Anabaptist reform went further, declaring that the Spirit engaged the individual soul directly, not only through the church and those ordained for office.

The Quakers taught that everyone could have a direct relationship with God, their inward Light.

The Enlightenment allowed human reason as a way to “know” God for ourselves, along with scripture and tradition, and Wesley added experience, having felt his own heart “strangely warmed”.

This fourfold approach to engaging God – scripture, tradition, reason and experience – gave validity to those who sought God themselves or claimed God had engaged them. The Enlightenment also paved the way for biblical criticism, exposing the Bible as a human book with contradictions and cultural accretions, rather than Divine dictation. This opened the floodgates for all sorts of challenges to traditional beliefs, now that it was acceptable for anyone to critique the sacred texts.

In the early Twentieth Century, theologian Karl Barth temporarily doused this freedom of thought, declaring God to be known only through Christ as recorded in Scripture, but his colleagues Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich continued the rebellion, leading to Bishop Robinson and the ‘Death of God’ scholars of the ‘sixties who argued that our God-descriptions were outdated and needed to die so new ways of thinking could engage a contemporary world.

This heritage now allows us to use individual reason and experience to address God-questions, recognising that church, scripture and tradition are ancient human products always in need of reform and critique. Theologian Sallie McFague names us all theologians: “All Christians must have a working theology, one that can actually function in their personal, professional, and public lives ... there is nothing special about theology – every Christian has one. The question is, how good, appropriate and functional it is ... We need a theology that ‘begins in experience and ends with a conversion to a new way of being in the world’.”<sup>6</sup>

We must decide, from our experiences, whether Something engages us or are we simply

---

<sup>6</sup> Sally McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xiii

## The Rev Pos Konea

Readers have enquired about the welfare of the Rev Pos Konea whose story featured in the last edition of *Common Theology* (Vol 2. no.10).



He is currently caring for ten children, four of his own and six of them orphans of the AIDS epidemic in PNG. His wife, Miriam, travels the country conducting AIDS education programmes.

Pos Konea is currently building a house for his extended family.

Now the Brisbane College of Theology (BCT) is defunct it is impossible to find anyone to take an interest in his case and go on the record in an attempt to deal with the academic injustice suffered by this Uniting Church theological student.

He spend A\$50,000 over a period of four years (his figures) as a student with BCT. As a result of inadequate supervision – a fact which is well-documented – his thesis was failed and he was given no opportunity to revise it.

Because he did not gain his MA he could not take up the job which was waiting for him at a PNG bible college.

## Forum

Now, with his career stifled, he has joined the growing legion of overseas students who are “disappointed” with their treatment in Australia.

Not a good witness in the Pacific Rim and the wider world.

(See ad for the PNG house fund on page 9)

### *A Letter to the Editor*

A recent issue of yours described the extraordinary treatment of a PNG Highland student at Brisbane’s Anglican Theological College, St Francis’. I worked for years in PNG and, reading your account, could see clearly that the college staff had absolutely no clues about dealing with someone from another culture with English as a second language, and also seemed to lack ordinary human sensitivity to this Highlander.

I was going to write to the College, but as they were in a bit of a crisis, and were getting a new principal, I did not. I hope your magazine’s publicity caused some justice for the man.

**The Rev Theo Woods**

**Carina Old**

listening to our echo returning to us. We need to decide what is initiated by Something More or whether we have invented God – and how we have imagined God anyway. Faith is first-hand experience while beliefs are second-hand – someone else’s God-experiences cemented into doctrines by which we are told to live.

The question did God create religion or religion create God also depends on what we mean by religion. There are many definitions – binding the sacred to the profane, belief in spiritual beings, consciousness of the infinite, finding what is highest and deepest in our experience, an uneasiness about the human condition and its solution, a house of meaning built on the edge of despair, symbolic forms relating us to the ultimate, stories to live by and belief systems uniting us in a moral community.

Paul Tillich called religion “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimate concern can be transcendent or immanent, a Being or a mysterious No-thing (Nothing). It can be personal or beyond personality, all-powerful or persuasive. ‘Religion’ is therefore a very slippery object, even before we consider its varieties and particularities.

Religion scholar Huston Smith lists several elements of religion: —

- authorities who specialise to help others;
- rituals to help people act together;
- speculation about its source and goal;
- traditions that bind the faithful;

<sup>7</sup> Brennan R Hill, Paul Knitter & William Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology: a contemporary introduction*

- usually a concept of Divinity;
- a consciousness of mystery beyond mundane human existence.<sup>8</sup>

These elements are also religion's problems. Each can be abused, dragging it from its initial inspiration into static institutionalisation and humanly constricted rules shaped by culture and those in power. —

- authority can shrink to personal or corporate power with secrets held from laity;
- rituals can reduce to empty shells of offerings and chants;
- speculation about the cosmos and human condition can become obscure, irrelevant or outdated;
- the Divine can be trapped in unhelpful human descriptions;
- mystery can descend into magic.<sup>9</sup>

Fresh challenges are needed to jump-start these elements back into progressive movement.

Even if a group begins with fluid relationships under a charismatic leader, structures develop, especially after the leader's death, to keep the original ideas in play, and these will constantly be adapted according to evolving worldviews and scholarship, regardless of how "original" its "truth" claims to be...

## Christianity dismissed God to an elsewhere heaven

(I)t is impossible to recover the original form of any ancient religion and see it through its founder's eyes. Our Fourth Century creeds were not there from the beginning and say nothing of Jesus' life and teachings apart from noting his birth and death – they are already a dramatic progression from original events, forged in battles, even to death, amongst bishops, political intrigue, imperial interference and deep-seated theological splits – like any church council today!

Finding the original Jesus is equally difficult since the Gospels were written up to eighty years after Jesus' death by different communities who

shaped their versions of his legacy; and there is serious debate as to which Jesus sayings actually came from his lips.

Beliefs that later became central, such as the Virgin Birth, are not even mentioned in the earliest writings – those of Paul and the Gospel of Mark – and the earliest Gospel fragment we have is a chapter from a Second Century copy of John – we have no original texts.

While Christianity claims the Holy Spirit as guide against error, our host of denominations today demonstrate a certain difficulty with this argument.

While a founder's revelations may be the impetus for a group to gather – God creating religion – how the group structures itself to engage this Divine are human creations within which that Divine is corralled to act...

We cannot talk about whether God created religion or religion created God without acknowledging that this is not only a Christian question, since many people claim to have encountered this Divine and formed religious traditions around It.

We can't simply make statements about all religion as delusion, using a few examples from an outdated variety of Christianity or a media-created view of Islam...

We are actually at a good place today. The new imagining of the Sacred within the world, rather than an intervening external God, has allowed us to speak across religions in our global village, since most religions share this image of the Divine infilling everything, even though Christianity dismissed God to an elsewhere heaven, which we are working on recovering.

We are finding that which we thought superior and unique in our religion is in many religions, often in forms more attractive and evocative than our own.

"All religions have caught visions of a transformed society," theologian Ursula King says, "Hindus call it *dharmaraj*, the reign of righteousness: Christians the *basileia* or [Reign] of God; Muslims speak of *ummah* as the community of all believers and the Quran sees this community encompassing all humans. Spiritual needs are basic to humans."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 1965), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 104

What we can share across religions is our humanness, the desire to be the best human we can be – fully human.

In Norman Habel's new book *An inconvenient text: is a green reading of the Bible possible?* he begs us to "get real" and recognise who we really are. "It is time," he says, "[that]we read [the Bible] as Earth beings in solidarity with Earth, not as God-like beings who happen to be sojourners on Earth,"<sup>11</sup> ...

We have been hoodwinked for centuries into believing that our earthly existence is purely a test for heaven. We have seen the soul as separate from the body, falling into the Greek philosophical trap of a pre-existing soul entering earth for a short stay in a foreign land and returning to its true home in the skies, making us separate from and superior to the rest of nature.

## If God is beyond conceptualisation, is God there?

God is preached as reached only by our removal from this sinful earth, ignoring biblical imagery such as Jesus saying "I have come that you may have abundant life [here]." It skews reality and downgrades the world and all its interconnected richness...

While Jesus was the human face of Divine Love at one moment in history, the Divine was not absent from the world before or after. Seeing God only through Jesus is not plausible if we imagine the Divine infusing everything. We cannot say this God within the world is only in us and all other experiences of God are false. We can't even argue that God only acts for those who "have faith" or say the right religious words if nothing in the universe is separate from the Sacred.

Even talking about our "spiritual" life or "spiritual" journey is problematic – all of life is spiritual if we believe in a Divine Presence infilling the universe.

Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard and a United Methodist layperson says, "Uniqueness, to me, does not mean that the "Jesus story is the only story of God's dealings with humanity, nor the only true and complete story. The language of 'only' is the language of faith, not of statistics."<sup>12</sup>

When we focus on our common humanness and our common human desire to seek the Divine, rather than doctrines claimed to be eternal as the only way to God, we see differences as the variety that comes with the common search from different cultures, histories and experiences. This is the theme of my book that will come out at the end of this year – *Stepping out with the Sacred: human attempts to engage the Divine*. This does not gloss over differences, but focuses instead, not on superficial commonalities of doctrines but our common humanness...

Faith in what we call ultimate concern comes down to our own experience – or not – of the Divine, helped by the other legs of scripture, tradition and reason. We may give different weight to each leg, yet all come into play. Our personal struggle to interpret our God-ideas and experiences, or lack of them, becomes "religion" or our consciousness of the Sacred, our explanations against despair.

As we shape our "theology" or talk about God in our time and place, we "create" God in the sense that we choose always inadequate metaphors to talk about the Unknowable...

Whereas once we were told to believe certain things about God, we now need to be respectful of other people's experiences and not declare our particular God-image, or none, to be what progressives must believe – whether Don Cupitt's Life as God, Spong's Love as God, the mystic's Unknowing, or no-God-at-all.

Since all God language is necessarily metaphorical, we need all the images and concepts we can get to speak of that beyond conceptualisation.

<sup>10</sup> Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: our global quest for a spiritual life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008) 41h

<sup>11</sup> Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum Press, 2009), 58

<sup>12</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: a spiritual journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 89

But here lies another problem. If God is beyond conceptualisation, is God there? What if we have invented God? What if descriptions of Presence and Ground of Being are simply interim steps before taking the final plunge?

If we have experienced Something engaging us, metaphors help us express that experience, but if we have not had such experiences, could this mean there is nothing to experience? Or, perhaps do we not need experiences at all? Can we have faith in Something simply because it make more logical sense than nothing, or because we need Something in our frightening world?

Many of us have experienced great relief in moving beyond dogmas that previously and uncomfortably bound us. It was scary at first, leaving the safe fold of group certainty, but once beyond this, it is unthinkable to go back.

## How can we encourage others to take this leap?

Gretta Vosper's book *With or Without God: why the way we live is more important than what we believe* issues a challenge that progressives must take seriously. Given our experiences, how can we encourage others to take this leap. Vosper says it is our responsibility to anticipate as many of the questions and challenges our progressive message will present to others and act to mitigate these negative effects, to lessen the burden of change and make the new terrain more habitable. We need to honour what has gone before, even as we show its inadequacies.<sup>13</sup>...

As for whether God created religion or religion created God, rather than struggling with what we cannot know, we can live in the mystery, the cosmic dance that includes everything, even the Unknowable. We can listen to all the Voices of the Universe – nature, science, Hinduism, literature, Buddhism, indigenous peoples, art, music, silence – and bask in the wonder of being in the whole, rather than hung up on separating out the little drop that is us, or what is God, from the ocean...

We can see the world as sacred, with or without a God-concept, not in tired religious

---

<sup>13</sup> Vosper, 185-6).

terms but as a wondrous living whole of which we are part.

We can be filled with awe through science, the wilderness, someone's sacred story, the eyes of a child and by experiencing a Presence. These are not either/or options, although we have long made them so. Sir Lloyd Geering describes this as a "new form of mysticism," living deeply in the present world in all its splendour, tragedy and messiness.

Faith is not about having answers. Even if we got them all catalogued, they would change before we filed the last one... We don't find faith – we live it. If we insist on defining unchanging truth, we have to choose between certainty and agnosticism or atheism, rather than flowing along the evolving continuum between the two.

Paul did not claim certainty – "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part ...." (1 Corinthians 13: 9) Certainty cannot accept grey, believing God created everything in black or white. The beauty of grey is that it is the only area where movement and change can happen and, if you add a little light to grey, you get silver.

I'll close with Matthew Fox, "A lifestyle is an art form. It brings life and wonder, joy and hope to persons otherwise condemned to superficial living. Our times call for the creation of lifestyles of spiritual substance."<sup>14</sup>

**Dr Val Webb** is a native of Brisbane and her career spans microbiology, business, public relations, writing, art and theology. She completed her PhD in Theology at Luther Seminary in Rochester, Minnesota in 1988. Her new book, *Stepping out with the Sacred: human Attempts to engage the Divine*, will be published later this year.

---

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, quoted in Lucinda Vardey, ed., *God in all Worlds: an anthology of contemporary spiritual writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), 508

# *Atheist Convention “all about religion”*

This is the wrap-up from ABC Religion’s blog on the Atheist Convention in Melbourne during March, from religious affairs journalist

**Margaret Coffey**



**I**t wasn’t inevitable that ABC Religion would go to the Atheist Convention – other areas of the ABC had staked the territory, and how many times ought one media organisation interview Richard Dawkins? In the end, we went because we were curious about the aim/s of the convention, its unfolding purpose and direction, the people who would be there, and what it would tell us about atheism as a contemporary position. Then, we discovered that the convention was fully within our remit not because there was particular attention to ethics; it was virtually all about religion.

At this distance from that weekend – we’re two and a half weeks down the track as we bring this blog to a conclusion – it doesn’t get easier to sum up the convention or our blog enterprise. Yes, some philosophical and scientific claims stay, to be pursued in arenas where conversation is possible and questions can be asked. And so does the loathing and abomination of hypocrisy in religious institutions. These things are more than important.

But other aspects come forward, in part I acknowledge because they have been reinforced by the blog process. Thus, often in tension with my recollection of individual attendees, I recall the convention’s ‘culture’, alongside the quality of content in various presentations, and the tenor of comments from blog readers.

Who came to the convention? Mostly Australians, with probably fifty per cent, I’m told, from Victoria. It was a cheery crowd, happy to foregather and in the end mildly triumphant about the achievement of the convention.

As Gary Bryson and Chris Mulherrin noted, many we spoke to felt ‘liberated’ or ‘affirmed’ by

the opportunity to get together with like-minded people.

In what sense were they like-minded? Much of the on-stage and commentary narrative resisted diversity or range – no such stance as agnostic for example. Nevertheless, a recent commentator on the blog has described the convention attendees as “a bunch of staunch individualists with enormously disparate views on a whole range of issues.”

We noted the predominance of males, the presence of younger people (interestingly, many of those to whom we spoke were making their way towards atheism from no personal experience of religion).

And we noted the increase in attendance on the Sunday, when the headline speakers were to take the stage and to become available for book signings.

We noted the intense interest in specific issues, like the influence of creationism in education and in politics, the presence of chaplains in schools, the perceived ‘control’ by religion of the limits of personal freedom – interests that had drawn people to the convention.

## It was difficult to discern individualism

But inside the main venue it was difficult to discern individualism, staunch or otherwise. It seemed inside that group think prevailed, in the collective responses to quips, characterisations, and comic routines; in the apparent imperviousness to chauvinism, ignorance and simplicities on stage; and in the absence of critical questioning of speakers.

I am still astonished that no-one challenged John Perkins’ depiction of Islam; that no one picked up on Richard Dawkins’ shift from naked ‘mental money’ to ‘gratitude’ still vested in all its cultural (including religious) clothing; that no-one responded to Peter Singer’s dull flattening out of Jesus’ “turn the other cheek” remark; that no-one remarked the focus on Christianity and the figure

of Jesus; the strenuous and mocking rejection of 'the tragic vision'.

It's easy to describe the convention culture *en bloc* as crude, naïve, and aggressive. That's what it was often like, from the opening night when it first framed religion as comedy and first represented itself as unfairly denied government funding.

Certainly the guest comedians hit the spot (hypocrisy, silliness, credulity), but sometimes the cruelty and crudity of the comedy just amplified the anti-intellectual strain of much of the convention content.

I mention naivety – that comes across in the emblematic funding story. It's clear that obdurate naivety was involved there – a refusal to doff the lens of prejudice in order to see clearly structures of government, bureaucratic processes, necessary objectives.

Naivety was there in the response to Taslima Nasrin and in the axiomatic laughter in response to references like A C Grayling's to the *Quran*. It is naïve surely to imagine that there is nothing to be known or understood about the *Quran* beyond what is comprehended in a cheap quip.

Naivety was there in the suspension of enquiry – no questions about why the convention was dominated by white middle class males who carried strong whiffs of atavistic anti-Catholicism (little to do with rationality) and who apprehended atheism as a dimension of the 'good life' not yet available to the poor of Africa and India.

No questions about what that might say of the atheism they represent and its capacity for critical attention to the world we live in.

No question about the curious conjunction of fundamentalisms in someone like Dan Barker.

No question about the globalising dynamic of American style creationism – how is it that Turkish Muslim creationists and American Christian fundamentalists can work together in order to defeat Science?

And of course naivety was comically there in the teleology proffered by the convention – its placement of atheism as a point of achievement (purpose?) where the cleverer, smarter etc might be found.

As for aggression, that was implicit in the language of attack, contempt and derision.

I've been challenged by some commentators on this blog to admit my bias, as if there is one telling bias, religious belief. Well here's a bias and it's not half joking – English accents of a certain kind remind me that I'm not so far removed from the colonial experience. I hear in Richard Dawkins and in A C Grayling that smooth voice of imperialism, going about quashing languages and symbolic structures as it 'rationalises' and 'improves', systematises and reduces, ruling out other voices, other experiences and complexities beyond its ken, erasing boundaries and setting up arbitrary borders – and not in the least interested in upsetting the way the imperium works.

And I admit to another bias, towards history and the work of historians, who are curious and open and who never imagine that complex reality can be explained by reduction, and who tell us about the harm that imperialism has visited upon the world we live in today. There was no history at the convention, just doses of pseudo-history.

## an urgent desire for a practical collective ethic

But I come back to individuals, like some of our contributors, and their concern for issues of equity and justice, and their urgent desire to build a practical collective ethic and indeed to find community. They are memorable. I hope they are able to get to work.

I come back to those few speakers, like Leslie Cannold, who stood on their distinctive ground, holding out the prospect of discussion and collaboration. And I'll hope that next time, the Atheist Convention will get around to developing an ethic for the moment when the persistence of religion (against evolutionary purpose?) challenges our arrival at that religion-less utopia envisioned by atheism's contemporary advocates. I'll be interested. <http://blogs.radionational.net.au/>

If you are interested in milieux where conversation is possible, try ABC Radio National, and try also a blog site like 'The Immanent Frame', which attends to 'secularism, religion and the public sphere'. Check out Columbia University's Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life, attend to events coming up hosted by the Australian Catholic University's Faculty of Philosophy and Theology, including the annual Simone Weil lectures.

# Book Reviews

*Molecules of Emotion* by Candace B Pert, PhD  
Schribner pb, NY, 2003. ISBN 10:0684846349,  
pp 368. Rrp US\$16.00.

Reviewed by Maggie Helass

**Dr Candace Pert** found God through her work in the laboratories of psychoneuroimmunological research – and earned notoriety as the scientist who suggested that God was a peptide.

Personally I have no theological problem with that – if God could become incarnate as a baby, why not a peptide?

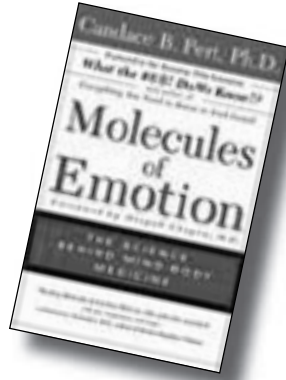
In 1996 Pert was on the set of a US PBS program called *Healing and the Mind*, where she had explained the ways that our bodies' chemicals communicate with one another. A television cameraman (normally a cynical breed) approached her and asked quietly, "You were talking about the Holy Spirit, weren't you?"

It is worth wading through the first 148 pages of this book, which chart the course of Pert's own journey in the sciences of neurology, immunology, endocrinology and psychology, in order to understand why this veteran of hard science had to answer the cameraman by admitting "Yes, maybe I was".

Her research has taken place in the crucible of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century breakdown of Western concepts of the separation of body and mind which she suggests dates back to Descartes, but I would place the beginnings of that rift much earlier, with Aristotle.

Quantum physics pulled the rug out from under that worldview and post-modernism is still grasping at new ways of expressing the reality emerging from the smashed concepts of the past few centuries.

The neologism Pert uses is 'bodymind' to denote the reconciliation of body and mind as a union, informed by a complex biochemical information network.



She describes this work as "putting back what was taken out three hundred years ago," to reveal that we are far more than the sum of our parts.

"What we had seen in our research was that the brain, the glands, the immune system, indeed the entire organism, were joined together in a wonderful system coordinated by the actions of discrete and specific messenger molecules."

"I see the process of communication we have demonstrated, the flow of information throughout the whole organism, as evidence that the body is the actual outward manifestation, in physical space, of the mind."

"In summary, the point I am making is that your brain is extremely well integrated with the rest of your body at a molecular level, so much so that the term mobile brain is an apt description of the psychosomatic network through which intelligent information travels from one system to another...."

the sum of these sounds would be  
the music we call the emotions

"Every second, a massive information exchange is occurring in your body. Imagine each of these messenger systems possessing a specific tone, humming a signature tune, rising and falling, waxing and waning, binding and unbinding, and if we could hear this body music with our ears, then the sum of these sounds would be the music that we call the emotions."

At this point in her thesis a basic understanding of biochemistry becomes indispensable and one is grateful for the slog through the first half of the book.

"Using neuropeptides as the cue, our bodymind retrieves or represses emotions and behaviors.... (Eureka!) biochemical change wrought at the receptor level is the molecular basis of memory" (my italics).

The infinitesimal objects of Pert's research she describes lyrically thus: "Peptides are the sheet music containing the notes, phrases and rhythms that allow the orchestra – your body – to play as an integrated entity."

## Book Reviews

This startling new science proceeded to reveal that the reach of our biochemistry is not confined to the body but vibrates in time and space.

“I also started to become aware of synchronicity, to see connections between events and people happening simultaneously and to act on this awareness instead of out of the more familiar linear cause-and-effect model.”

C G Jung described synchronicity as “The coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance”.

Armed with this groundbreaking research Pert’s journey into medical research was a much more bumpy ride, fraught with the commercial realities of Big Pharma and the hostility of a paternalistic medical establishment.

She coolly explains the Mars/Venus phenomenon, with a remarkable lack of bile in view of her difficulties with the male-dominated realm of scientific research: “Because women have a thicker corpus callosum – the bundle of nerves that bridges the left and right brain hemispheres – they are able to switch back and forth from the rational, or left brain, to the intuitive, or right brain, with relative ease. With fewer nerves connecting the hemispheres, men tend to be more focused in one hemisphere or the other”.

Once in the sphere of medical research Pert “was beginning to think of disease-related stress in terms of an information overload, a condition in which the mind-body network is so taxed by unprocessed sensory input in the form of suppressed trauma or undigested emotions that it has become bogged down and cannot flow freely, sometimes even working against itself, at cross purposes”.

The mindbody, she found, had all the resources necessary to heal itself, once its biochemical pathways were cleared. However, this finding did not interest the pharmaceutical industry and funding for her research was withdrawn. “Since ...natural substances are not patentable, there is no incentive for drug companies to study their benefits...” she concludes.

Pert broaches the crucial subject of information theory in a conversation with Bob Gottesman, a medical doctor with an impressive pedigree in both western and eastern medical traditions.

“It seems to me that the way to heal the split between body and mind is to change metaphors,” Gottesman suggests.

The discourse runs thus: Information theory is an advance on Einsteinian physics, the older metaphor of matter, force, energy ( $E=mc^2$ ).

“While these terms are useful for building locomotives and bridges, even atomic bombs, they are not so useful for understanding the human body,” Gottesman says.

“Physical processes aren’t things, they are dynamic and take place in an open, fluid system, and therefore fit better with the metaphor of information than that of matter and force.”

“Information is not dependent on time or space, as is matter and energy, but exists regardless of these limits!”

“...(S)ince information in the form of the biochemicals of emotion is running every system of the body, then our emotions must also come from some realm beyond the physical.”

### Information is the missing piece that allows us to transcend the body-mind split

This discussion gives Pert the inspiration to take a leap into previously uncharted waters of psychoneurobiochemical research, which has enormous potential for bodymind health.

“Information... is the missing piece that allows us to transcend the body-mind split of the Cartesian view, because by definition, information belongs to neither mind nor body, although it touches both. We must accept that it occupies a whole new realm, one we can perhaps call the “inforealm”.

The bottom line is that physiology and emotions are inseparable: —

“As a culture, we keep our feelings hidden, afraid to express them honestly for fear others will be indifferent to our sorrows or alienated or hurt by our anger. Better to deny feelings, to suppress them, we tell ourselves, go through the motions of happiness and pretend to have fun – until the

# Book Reviews

day the bottom falls out and the family physician hands us the diagnosis: depression.”

“Many ancient and alternative healing methods refer to a mysterious force we cannot measure with Western instruments, that which animates the entire organism and is known as “subtle” energy by meta-physicians, prana by Hindus, chi by Chinese. Freud called it libido, Reich called it orgone energy, Henri Bergson called it *élan vital*. It’s my belief that this mysterious energy is actually the free flow of information carried by the biochemicals of emotion, the neuropeptides and their receptors.”

This subtle energy is portrayed in the ancient Christian tradition as halos round the heads of saints.

What we need is a larger biomedical science to reintegrate what was taken out three hundred years ago.

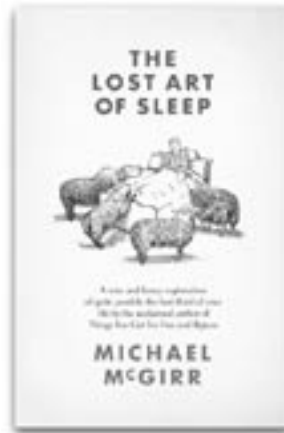
The journey of this book concludes at a Wellness Conference in northern Wisconsin in the summer of 1996. Although considered a conservative region, the alternative health movement of California had by then penetrated the Midwest of the USA.

The healing power of touch was back on the agenda at this meeting. “Just as we harness the power of our minds for physical healing, so can we do physical things to help heal our feelings,” Pert told her audience.

“It’s true, we do store some memory in the brain, but by far, the deeper, older messages are stored in the body and must be accessed through the body. Your body is your subconscious mind, and you can’t heal it by talk alone.”

**Candace Pert PhD** has been a Research Professor in the Dept of Physiology and Biophysics at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington DC. In 2004 she appeared in the film *What the Bleep Do We Know* and spoke as a serious scientist lending her research background to the notion that we create our own reality. In 2006 she co-wrote *Everything You Need to Know to Feel Go(o)d*. She is currently Scientific Director of RAPID Pharmaceuticals, Inc.

*The Lost Art of Sleep* by Michael McGirr  
Pan Macmillan Australia 2009. ISBN 9780330424912.  
Rrp \$32.99



Reviewed by Morag Fraser

It’s hard to imagine Michael McGirr asleep. Easier to picture him nodding off because the movement of the head can be read as resistance to life’s tedium. And we know what this gifted connoisseur of life’s ironies thinks about tedium because he tells us. Staff meetings are not

his cup of tea. Tutorials rarely galvanise him. Cant bores him to stupefaction. About sermons he maintains a stout scepticism – he once dozed off during one of his own.

Yet by nature McGirr seems so much more the avid magpie than the dormouse. Even when he confesses to curling up under his desk to have a post-lunch kip (I have seen him do this) you figure he’s just closing his eyes the better to plot mischief, or give his racing brain a few horizontal minutes to organise and file the prodigious miscellany that might otherwise leak out and stain the carpet.

*The Lost Art of Sleep* is mayhem and wisdom in one handbook – a disconcerting package, because it makes you anxious and glad at the same time. Anxious because sleep, or lack of it, obsesses all of us at one time or another, and the extremity of McGirr’s personal sleep pathology (acute sleep apnoea), however comically told, is daunting because it makes us all feel vulnerable – there but for the grace of ...

He knows too well that we simply can’t manage without sleep. Like water, it is essential (little wonder that sleep deprivation and water boarding have become the tortures of choice for our disarrayed times). But the book also makes one vehemently glad – glad at the prodigal generosity of the writing, its humanity, its lust

for family (a very extended ‘family’) life in all its exhausting and patched variety, for its comic brio and its grace.

On one page you can enjoy McGirr’s zany scholarship (never waste a Jesuit education). He’ll tell you that the word ‘mortgage’, from the French, means ‘death grip’, and the derivation makes mordant sense when you consider its context in the book: McGirr and his wife and young family of three in the clutches of the Melbourne real estate industry – an experience to rob one of more than sleep.

A few chapters on and you are reading bedtime pirate stories with McGirr’s three children and feeling only gratitude for the joyously realistic way this former priest has become a husband and father. There is no sense here of an earlier life discarded, but rather of a rich evolution, with the past honoured, all the traces of experience cherished and worn on the front.

that bright spark,  
Thomas Edison, who brought us  
light and noise

In between you get to follow the characters McGirr casts as the heroes and villains in this chronicle of sleep and wakefulness. There’s that bright spark, Thomas Edison, who brought us light and noise in the form of the electric bulb and the phonograph. McGirr savours Edison’s eccentricities – like proposing to his second wife (his first “died of nervous exhaustion”) by tapping out “Will you marry me?” in Morse code.

After Edison comes Homer and the *Odyssey* (“a book about getting home to bed”) and then Virgil and his Aeneas, whose life trajectory, as we might say in tutorials, is not towards rest.

Then there’s Florence Nightingale, known to most of us as the woman who lit the Crimea with her lamp, but whom McGirr depicts as another eccentric, this time an austere one who “spent most of her long life in bed”.

Dickens, another McGirr favourite, scarcely went to bed at all. He paced London’s streets instead. Then comes Freud on the truth of dreams, and before him Aristotle, who thought of them otherwise: “a random collection of mental bricolage ... not to be trusted”. And Plato and

the Qur’an, the Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures and Shakespeare and Balzac and Don Quixote and some heartfelt chapters on Z-class drugs and other hazards to be negotiated by the world’s insomniacs, the author included.

A random collection of mental bricolage? Never. McGirr is an inspired synthesizer, serious in intent even while riotous in execution. For him everything chimes in a narrative that, in the best essay tradition, uses the self as a sounding board. But if the central character embodies the quandaries, the delight of the writing lies in the world around him, particularly the close world of his wife Jenny, their son Benedict and the twins, Jacob and Clare.

**Morag Fraser** is a former Editor of the on-line magazine *Eureka Street* where this review was first published. **Benedict McGirr** made his media debut in *Common Theology* Vol 1 no.5 (Spring 2003) with a photo of his birth.



## HOME TRUTHS — *church matters*

The Archbishop of Canterbury ended up as the Passover lamb for the English-speaking world's media this Easter. Well, someone must die for the people! Good Friday is a low news day because politicians have left town, and desk-bound journalists in London's Wapping snoop around the airwaves for something 'religious' to print for the Easter weekend.

Luckily ++Rowan Williams made a point on air in a lengthy BBC interview to the effect that a society like Ireland's, which was so intimately bound up with the life of the Church, would inevitably suffer when the Church lost credibility.

Good-oh! Soon the world was informed that the head of the Anglican Church had said that the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland had lost all credibility.

At this the head of the Anglican Church in Ireland was persuaded to join the fray and said public figures should be more careful about what they say. So there we have it! Church leaders should keep their mouths shut over Easter if they don't want to be roasted.

You can listen to the original interview at [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2815](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2815)

Sexual abuse scandals are devastating church institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, today. The universal nature of this scandal proves beyond doubt that the problem is an institutional one and therefore a problem for leadership.

Yet church leadership, where it does attempt to confront the problem, almost invariably homes in on blaming individuals rather than investigating where the institution has failed.

In February all licensed clergy in the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane received a mandatory questionnaire from Archbishop Phillip Aspinall entitled 'Safe Ministry Check – Choosing the Right People for God's Ministry'.

Twenty-eight, many deeply personal questions were to be answered in writing and returned to diocesan management as a prerequisite for retaining a licence.

It has yet to be tested in court in Australia, but requiring such information in writing from people who are already employed (many retired

but still with licences to officiate at services) almost certainly infringes upon their civil rights and liberties.

The unfortunate choice of title for the questionnaire 'Choosing the Right People for God's Ministry', addressed to people who are already in active ministry, is inherently offensive – particularly to those who have served the diocese for decades.

The Archbishop's own job description includes the important element of chief pastor – the pastor of the pastors, a role which is in a conflict of interest with the requirements of his *Ad Clerum* (letter to the clergy) which accompanied the questionnaire.

There is no question that sexual abuse must be addressed. The problem in this case was the process.

Had this questionnaire come from diocesan management with a covering letter from the archbishop its injurious nature could have been mitigated.

Or if the archbishop had done the time-consuming work of pastoring his clergy and visited them individually to enquire about their personal lives, a greater purpose could have been served.

The truth of the matter is that the Christian churches have never had an adequate theology of sexuality, conflict or even incarnational love.

It would be far more to the point if the leadership gathered its resources – its people in ministry – and began to work out such a theology, so that the scandal and betrayal of sexual abuse could be dealt with at its source.

### Correction and clarification

In our last edition (Vol 2 no.10 – Spring 2008) an editing error transposed two paragraphs of Kay McLennan's article in Home Truths. What should have read "the gui'd elders of said kirk" (Scots Kirk) erroneously read "the guild elders of St Michael's". It was the elders of Scots Kirk who rewrote the Ten Commandments, not St Michael's.

The Editor apologises for any embarrassment caused by the error.

# Common Theology

A lay ministry of the Australian Church

ABN 92 025 730 860

## I want to make a Subscription

- Four Editions delivered by e-mail — \$16 p.a.
- Four Editions delivered by mail — \$27 (\$33 overseas airmail)
- A multiple copy mailed subscription at 20% discount No of copies:.....
- Concession for pensioners and students \$20 for four mailed Editions (enquire for full subsidy)

I enclose \$.....(cheques/money orders to be made payable to *Common Theology*)

I have direct-debited *Common Theology* with \$.....  
(Bank of Queensland, BSB 124-039, Account no. 9143-1261)

- Share it! Please send a complimentary copy to (fill out name and address below)

.....  
My current delivery details are as follows/My details have changed to:

Title:.....Name:.....

Postal address:.....

.....State.....Postcode.....

Email:.....Tel .....

Mail this form or write to:

Common Theology, PO Box 117, SANDGATE QLD 4017  
www.commontheology.com

If undeliverable please return to:  
Common Theology  
P O Box 117, Sandgate Qld 4017

**Print Post Approved PP424022 1567**

**SURFACE  
MAIL**

POSTAGE  
PAID  
AUSTRALIA