



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.
Volume 45 No. 1 February 2006

Studies in comparative belief urgently needed

Art, like religion, is an attempt by humans to find meaning and value in life. Both emerged tens of thousands of years ago, and have continued to evolve as important cultural activities found in all societies. However, for Humanists and other secular thinkers, religion is problematic in ways that art is not. Because most religions make claims we reject.

Typically religions are based on three assumptions: that there is a non-physical component of a person that survives death and remains a being with beliefs and desires; that certain people within society are specially chosen to receive inspiration or messages from supernatural agencies; and that performing certain rituals can bring about change in the natural world.

By rejecting these assumptions Humanism challenges religion. It is a new and developing cultural way of being, based on the assumption that we humans are on our own and that meaning and value can be found through the experience and knowledge of ourselves and the natural world. While Humanists accept that ideas about life after death and supernatural agencies are fervently desired and believed, we consider them false. However, despite our desire to leave such beliefs behind, we still need to incorporate an understanding of them into our world view.

One way to do this is for school curricula to include studies in religion within courses on comparative belief. This would introduce students to a major cultural activity, alongside learning about art, music, science, story telling, etc. Comparative belief should cover a range of life philosophies, including Humanism, along with religions of significance in our society and world affairs.

The HSV made this recommendation to the Russell Committee of Inquiry into Religious Instruction (RI) in Victorian State schools in 1973. Even though our suggestion was then taken up in the Report, it was rejected, and the existing arrangement of permitting outside people to enter schools to give RI in Christianity continued. In 1998, to another Inquiry into the Education Act, the HSV again recommended studies in comparative belief. Though the Act was changed to include the option for non-christian religions to give RI, our suggestion was not adopted, even though studies in comparative belief are urgently needed to help foster respect and understanding in today's strife torn world.

We will continue to campaign for studies in comparative belief, but in the interim the HSV plans to enlarge the range of material on Humanism for general, as well as school use. If you can help us with this project we want to hear from you.

Rosslyn Ives, HSV president

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Monthly HSV Public Lecture

**Thursday
23 February
8.00 pm**

Balwyn Library Meeting Room
336 Whitehorse Rd. Balwyn

Brian Ellis

***“Humanism, a
political philosophy
for today.”***

Brian Ellis is Emeritus Professor in
Philosophy in the School of
Communication, Arts and Critical
Enquiry, La Trobe University.

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HSV DIARY DATES

HSV Public Lectures 8.00 pm 4th Thursday of the month
HSV Discussions 11.00 am 2nd Sunday of the month

FEBRUARY

- 7 Tuesday 8pm Existentialist Society. Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne
Anastasia Liveriadis: *"Martin Buber's Philosophy."*
- 12 Charles Darwin's birthday, 1809 – Darwin Day.
Sunday 9.30am **HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Sunday Discussion:** Motions for CAHS Convention. Current submissions, and celebrate **Darwin Day.**
2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South. Bring food for shared lunch. All members welcome.
- 14 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
Chris Short, Aust. Skeptics: *"Can Psychics Solve Murders?"*
- 15 Wednesday 6.30pm Fabian Society Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
George Williams: *"A Charter of Humans Rights for Victoria."*
- 23 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd., Balwyn.
Brian Ellis: *"Humanism, a political philosophy for today."*

MARCH

- 6 Tuesday 8.00pm. Existentialist Society, Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.
Howard Dossor: *"Towards an Existential Synergy."*
- 8 Wednesday 6.30pm Fabian Society Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
Clive Hamilton: *"The Death of Social Democracy."*
- 12 Sunday 9.30am **HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Sunday discussion** 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South. Bring food for shared lunch. All members welcome.
- 14 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
Dr Rod Foster; *"Could Natural Selection Prepare us to be Religious?"*
- 15 Wednesday 6.30pm Fabian Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
John Langmore: *"Making them Pay."* On US and Aust. tax cooperation
- 23 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd., Balwyn.
Speaker & topic TBA.

For latest Humanist news and updates

HSV internet website
home.vicnet.net.au/~humanist/main/main.html

**Humanist
Society of
Victoria**



Inc. (Reg. No. A0020272M)

A non-profit, educational organisation.

The **Humanist Society of Victoria** works to build a more civilised society using ethics based on human values. It believes that reason, free inquiry and a scientific approach enable us to understand our universe and our place in it. It defends freedom and democracy and provides a positive alternative to religious and dogmatic creeds. It supports separation of church and state, and secular education.

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Victorian Humanist (VH)

Monthly newsletter of the
Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.
Deadline for letters, notices and short items, 20th of the month.

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Views expressed by contributors to this newsletter are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent the views of the Society.

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Welcome to the first **VH** for 2006

The Committee members hope to meet up with most of you at either a Sunday Discussion or a Public Lecture.

Discussion Sunday 12 February

- Celebrate '*Darwin Day*'
- Latest submission.
- Motions to CAHS Convention.

Come along and add your voice to these discussions.

Summer Solstice Social

Many thanks to John Russell & Rosaria Palmese for hosting an enjoyable social lunch on 11 December.

Annual Report

Humanist resources for schools

The HSV frequently gets requests from students wanting information on Humanism, or Humanist answers to set questions. We are currently building up a resource bank of articles, book titles webpages etc. to which we can direct such inquiries. Assistance from members with this project is warmly welcomed. Contact president or secretary if interested.

CAHS Convention 2006

Active Humanists from across Australia will gather in Coolangatta, Qld., 7-9 April.

All members are welcome to attend and enjoy the beachside location. See **AH** No. 81 for more details.

HSV Public Lecture Speakers

Suggestions for speakers and topics are most welcome. Contact Coordinator Stephen Stuart, tel 9857 8318 or email SNStuart@msn.com



Farewells

Ron Simpson

29.3.1923 – 10.12.2005

Ron grew up in the Mallee, won a scholarship to the Bendigo Technical College. Qualified in civil engineering and surveying at RMIT. He served as an army surveyor in New Guinea during WWII.

He worked as a surveyor in various country Roads Boards and urban Shires.

Ron was a life-long Humanist. An active contributor, he assisted with the **VH** & **AH** mailout on many occasions, right up until a few months ago. He was an HSV committee member 1969 – 1981, serving as Treasurer 1972-73 and again 1976-77. He will be sadly missed for his honesty, integrity and good humour.

Deepest sympathy to Mary and family.

Frank Kroyherr

27.9.1935 – 26.11. 2005

Frank served on the HSV committee 1985-86. He continued as a supportive member and regular contributor to the *Victorian Humanist*, until a few years ago, when his health began to fail.

Janet Villiers

19.4.1939 – 29.11.2005

A Humanist member for many years, Janet was most active during the 1980s and 1990s. A committed and socially engaged person, many will remember her lively contributions to Sunday discussions.



DONATIONS

to 27.1.06

Rudolf Anders, Ruth & Cliff Barnes, Ellie Bastow, Tony Bates & Gillian Rayner, Lottie Bench, Robert Bender & Carolyn Mooney, Itiel Berenson, Mary & Len Bergin, Judith & Ralph Biddington, Kay Bodna, Doris & Alan Chambers, Cannon Bernard, Bill Darby, Graeme Day, Peter & Ria & Eisler, Alison & Richard Harcourt, Donald Humphries, Margaret McLeod, Lars Lindahl, Frankie & Ross McKeown, Bert McLaren, Maureen & Alan McPhate, Patrick Moore; Linda Nash, Lorna Noble, Barry Revill, Joseph Rubenstein, Joe Sampson, Shirley & Ronald Thomas, George Venturini, Ruth Wailes, and Mary Walsh.

Many thanks to these members for their generous contributions.

Submission Report

1. To the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee we made the following points on the proposed **Anti-Terrorism Bill** Nov. 2005:

- * We acknowledge that current circumstances require measures to deal with terrorism. However, recent arrests of suspects indicate that adequate measures are in place and we question the need for more draconian legislation.
- * Regrettable invasions of privacy, such as inspection of bags or parcels, checks of identity and public video surveillance, are justifiable at present, provided they are applied to all citizens without selective aim.
- * More time is required to consider these significant changes that affect our civil rights and way of life. Without a wide ranging public and parliamentary debate we run the risk of having bad laws enacted in haste.
- * Potential for abuse of powers is created by greatly widening the powers of Australia's security organisations without adequate scrutiny of their operations.
- * The proposed legislation is in breach of our signed obligations to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on these points: arbitrary detention, insufficient access to judicial review, possible conflict in separation of executive and judiciary powers.
- * In the absence of a Bill of Rights in this country there is need for a set of strong safeguards to protect systems of justice and democracy. A biannual audit to Parliament from an independent panel monitoring the use of this new law would be a minimum safeguard.
- * The law of sedition, even in its modernised form, carries the risk of stifling free expression of views, debates in public and in the media. Laws of sedition are a hallmark of totalitarian regimes and are inimical to democracy. We urge that this section be deleted.
- * For a variety of reasons there should be frequent review of this legislation. We strongly urge that a two-year, rather than the proposed 10-year, sunset clause be enacted.

Halina Strnad & Rosslyn Ives

2. The Human Rights Consultative Committee asked the HSV to comment on their report to the Victorian Government. We made the following points in response:

- * We find the report an impressive and informative document.
- * Victorian Humanists are pleased by the inclusion of responsibilities in the Charter as we always supported a nexus between rights and responsibilities.
- * We support most of the recommendations made and comment on some.
- * Breaches of compliance with the Charter should incur a specified penalty.
- * Old statutes as well as new legislation should be examined for compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.
- * We express our disappointment that the vital economic, social, and cultural rights will not be included in this Charter at present and hope that at the review of this Bill in four years these essential rights will be included.

Halina Strnad

Which Blog?

Are you tired of the spin, the omissions of editing and the dumbing down of the news by our media institutions?

In discussion, chez John Russell & Rosaria Palmese at December Humanist celebrations, a small group of us noted the phenomenal rise of the BLOG (short for WEB LOG) and its power to inform and to generate debate outside the formal media cycle. In the two-way traffic of this many-to-many model, news is gathered and broadcast at the same time as it occurs, 'in the moment!'

If you have children under 30, you will know they are not tied to the 7pm news or the 6am newspaper delivery to find out what's going on in our shrinking globe. They are tapping into the net, where 'everyone is a witness, everyone is a journalist', and issues are teased out-now!

Is there a downside to this free news gathered from a favourite BLOG? YES! There is much blether, blah and bombast that the 'time-poor' (and 'patience-poor') don't want to sift through, in order to find the unique BLOG that is worth reading.

Can you help fellow Humanists to navigate the BLOGOSPHERE? If you have found an on-line media site that offers civil debate of Humanist interest, please advise the VH editor so that a couple of BLOGS can be published each issue. Include the name, the focus and a short description. We will then try some and gain experience to choose WHICH BLOG we want to add to our media mix.

Meanwhile, try this one:

www.melbourne.indymedia.org

Based in Brunswick and affiliated with world-wide indymedia. Not a favourite of government when policy comes under scrutiny. Very handy at 11 time.

Not all BLOGS are media sites. Val Yule suggests a few free interactive sites you may like to investigate.

<http://www.globalideasbank.org>

Put your ideas (briefly) on ways to improve the world and help solve social problems. Comment and assessment – acorn, bud or tree!

www.bonzer.org.au

This is a general magazine. Based in Croydon. Val has a series 'WASTE NOTHING', posted now.

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas>

This is Val's site, is interactive and welcomes ideas and inventions.

Audrey Goldberg

Editor's Note: There is also the national Humanist conversation which you can subscribe to on

<http://lists.topica.com/lists/humanist/>

Freedom of Speech is Not Enough: Can a Victorian Human Rights Charter bring human rights into our daily lives?

HSV Public Lecture given by Jamie Gardiner, Equal Opportunity Commission,
on 27 October 2005 at Balwyn Library

Report by Jennie Stuart

Jamie Gardiner was actively involved in the development of 'The Justice Statement', a ten-year vision for Victoria¹. Released in 2004, it dealt with many matters relating to courts and tribunals, but also took a radical step towards canvassing issues related to human rights (initiative 18). As a member of the Equal Opportunity Commission, Jamie was aware of many areas of discrimination, inequality and prejudice, deeply entrenched within the fabric of society; they are therefore outside the scope of the Commission, being unable to be brought forward as cases by individuals.

Now, twelve months or so later, the consultation, which was a recommendation of 'The Justice Statement', is being implemented. Four eminent Australians have been appointed to oversee the process of seeking community opinion as to whether Victorians want a Human Rights Charter – George Williams, Rhonda Galbally, Haddon Storey and Andrew Gaze. They have produced a consultation paper, outlining details of similar charters in the USA, UK, Canada, NZ and South Africa. However their brief does not include any proposed model for Victoria, and thus Victorians are being asked whether they agree to a concept that is not clearly defined.

Remember that Australia played a leading role in placing human rights on the world stage, when Dr Evatt presided over the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the UN in 1948. The charters adopted since that time by countries such as UK, Canada, NZ and South Africa are based on this Declaration and on other UN treaties, such as the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic and Cultural Rights – covenants to which Australia is a signatory.

By October the consultation process had elicited an unprecedented 2100 submissions!² The majority of them have been in favour of a charter; a few have argued against it. The consultation committee is currently compiling a report and by early 2006 it is likely that the Government will make an announcement. The Attorney-General is known to be supportive, but other ministers may argue that change would be too costly. In view of this, lobbying of individual parliamentarians by members of the community could be useful even at this late stage.

Speculating on what a proposed Human Rights Charter would encompass, Jamie said that although civil and political rights are inseparable from social, cultural and economic rights, it is likely that the government will focus on the former, taking the view that the latter would make impractical budgetary demands. This argument is flawed, on two counts: political rights such as freedom of speech matter little to someone who is sleeping on the streets, or has been denied a decent education, for example. Furthermore a charter need not be organised in such a way that the courts appear to be dictating to the government. Secondly, civil and political rights require their own costly infrastructure, such as courts and a police force.

As had been shown in Britain, the existence of a human rights charter provides a framework for better community debate, policy-making, public administration and legislation. The existence of a charter in Victoria would help create a human rights culture, informing decision-making and legislation in a rational, humanistic way. The key issues are the respect for human dignity across the board, irrespective of gender or race or age, and the existence of a more formal human rights culture would make a repetition of the tragedy that befell Cornelia Rau unlikely.

1 www.justice.vic.gov.au (select About the Department: Policy Development & Consultation: Attorney-General's Justice Statement).

2 These submissions, including HSV's (incorrectly copied), may be perused on the above website (select Human Rights Consultation Project).

Editor's Note. HSV response to the subsequent report of the Consultative Committee is given on page 4 of this *VH*.

The Afterlife

Speculation about life after death has been with us since time immemorial, and even in today's secular, scientific era, fascination with ideas about the afterlife remain undimmed, fed by the growth of the 'New Age' industry. This has not escaped the attention of TV moguls. Their latest offering (*The Afterlife*) is another in the genre of the supernatural, designed to titivate viewer interest in a possible existence beyond the grave.

But what do we *know* about the afterlife? The short answer is, nothing at all! The hope of immortality may be all but universal, but it remains just that, a dream, not reality. Undeterred by the lack of evidence, many preach with spurious certainty about this most *uncertain* of subjects, making claims which cannot be tested and urging their lurid apocalyptic fantasies upon receptive ears. Unfortunately, there is no theological consensus, no agreed eschatology on offer, so believers are left to ponder which version of the hereafter makes the most sense, and hope for the best.

But having this faith, or lacking it, does not absolve anyone from their responsibilities as citizens of the world and members of the human family. A neighbour in need doesn't care whether you think you have an immortal soul or not, his plight requires our response, and Jesus famously taught his followers the true meaning of 'neighbour'!

So, whether an afterlife believer or not, let's all knuckle down and address, where we can, the problems besetting society. Let's focus on this, the *only* life we can be certain about, striving together to make the world just a little nicer for our having been here.

David Milan

The Need for a Strong Secular Voice

Address given at the HSV Annual Dinner on 21 October 2005 by the Hon. Chris Schacht

Report by Jennie Stuart

A man of many parts, Chris Schacht trained as a primary teacher and became a Labor member of federal parliament for 13 years. He was a founding member of the parliamentary Humanist Group, ascribing his orientation as a sceptic, rationalist and humanist to his childhood on a Gippsland dairy farm, having parents who took a keen interest in politics and current affairs.

According to the Census, about 30% of Australians are not committed to any of the major religions. In addition, many people who do endorse religion also recognise the importance of the separation of Church and State. But at present the primacy of separation is under threat. We have all taken it for granted, but it is now at risk, under pressure from opponents who are becoming well organised in a political sense – with little evidence of resistance from the Prime Minister's quarter.

Firstly, it is critical to understand that it is not possible to have freedom of religion without a secular society and a secular constitution. A theocracy or dominant religion imposes its own rules, with the curtailment of divergent views. Secondly, freedom of thought can only flourish in a secular society. There are disturbing trends at present. For example, the federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, has been equivocal about allowing 'intelligent design' to be taught as part of the science curriculum, instead of rejecting that option outright. Only a secular society can guarantee freedom of speech, a healthy democracy and open education.

As the founding chairman of the federal parliamentary Standing Committee for Human Rights, Chris traveled widely. When discussing instances of human rights abuses with foreign leaders he frequently met the defence of *cultural relativism* or, to put it more simply, was told, 'You just don't understand our culture.' This argument which would be under siege in a secular society was elsewhere tantamount to an excuse for political exploitation and thuggery on cultural grounds. However, although it is shocking that genital mutilation is still perpetrated against 90 million young African and Middle Eastern girls and Australia has legislated against this practice with bipartisan support, we still have our own pockets of cultural relativism. In some tribal indigenous communities the traditional custom of marrying adolescent girls to very old men is still practised. When he described this as an abuse of human rights Chris met with the riposte, 'You don't understand Aboriginal culture.'

What are we going to do as humanists to preserve a secular society? If we do nothing, the opposing forces are likely to chip away our fundamental rights of equality and opportunity. They are better organised than we are – the radio talk-back callers and the shock-jocks never let up, and the Family First party is showing political clout with strategic preference deals, an elected Senator and a large army of volunteers. If we do not want to see an increasing trend towards merging church values and state issues we should consider joining forces with other like-minded groups. Given the Census data, that should be possible; apart from the rationalists, atheists, agnostics and humanists, there

are also many committed religionists who support the importance of separation. Why not consider organising a national conference next year, to provide a forum for individuals and groups from a wide range of political parties and persuasions who understand the importance of a secular society and want to protect it politically?

LETTERS

Intractable problems

Let's get some issues into perspective. The US invasion of Afghanistan was justified as the Taliban regime was training terrorists for use against US citizens and its national interests. However, the current US government, under President Bush, has used the public psychology produced by that justifiable invasion to justify the invasion of Iraq.

The weapons of mass destruction argument used to support the invasion of Iraq was false, but strangely this doesn't seem to concern many people now. US policy now is clearly 'regime change', a wholly illegal outcome in International Law.

The Middle East is a heterogeneous place with many ethnic, political and religious groups and even linguistic divisions. However, the Muslim Arabs are easily the largest, most dominant group in the region. Any government the US cobbles together in Iraq will not survive in the long-term as it will be seen as a tool of non-Arab, non-Muslim forces.

Similarly, the Palestinian issue can only be resolved with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The Israeli solution of converting the Palestinian Territories into autonomous regions of a greater Israel is doomed to failure, for the same reason the US style Iraq solution will fail. It will be seen as an attempt by non-Muslim, non-Arab interests at imposing their policy on the region.

Given the hardened attitudes on both sides of the Palestinian dispute, a peaceful resolution is impossible. As Humanists we like to think all serious issues can be negotiated to a peaceful conclusion by reasonable parties acting in good faith. Unfortunately the Palestinian issue shows us that that belief is rather naïve.

Peter Sherbrooke, Clayton Vic.

Human rights in an age of terrorism?

Is it the right question to ask about humans running the Earth? It is a fundamental question whether humans are free to ask about their wishes of free will.

We had 1500 million people at the beginning of 1900. 6500 million are now living on earth and the number is growing. Does everyone have the right still to ask for their entitlement? I don't think so! If every-one expressed a set of rights of free will, we would not live to find the room to give each what they will and wish. We have got used to such rights in the past in Australia and we live as if they remain. But the Earth is no longer capable of such freedom. Millions are now under dictatorships, millions are under terrorism, millions are under some rule that cuts their freedom.

The Earth is not so free any more to give humans the right to have its freedom. Each animal is hunted and its right to life is cut. We have our will, but the entitlement is ever smaller.

The Earth is not to blame, it is only a heap of rock of different striations. What life is there, is only there by chance; what we are willing to make is our opportunity of the moment and it is not long.

When our death is due, we have no more rights and no more entitlement. When we live in an African village, not of one of the favoured people, but one of the persecuted, we have no rights. And if we are subjected to a territorial claim we have nothing to live on and die.

The more millions of people are crammed on this planet, the less each individual's part becomes. At 6500 million there is no more spare room left. We have to live with terrorism now, because there are no freedoms for everybody anymore.

The solution is not in presenting old rules any longer, but to mend what has been many times suggested. To free euthanasia to anybody who wishes it, to limit birthrights, to limit health and survival reasons. To give no more executives help and give no more money assistance for humans who don't earn it. And to do away with money wherever it is possible, to give this ideology its end.

Gerhard Weissmann, Adelaide SA

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Right and Left: New Politics and the Cultural Wars

By David McKnight

Allen & Unwin 2005. \$24.95

This is probably the best introduction to the opposing philosophies and clash of cultures that characterise Australian politics today. At the end the author has some ideas he describes as a 'new humanism'.

McKnight's student activism and early interest in politics have helped to develop his ideas about change in society. This is a great contribution for those who still believe that society can progress, with the proper policies, but are having trouble coming to grips with the reality of today's radical conservatism – or neo-liberalism. Under his analysis there does not appear to be a solution to the impasse which those from the left (and many humanists) seek without a total re-examination of fundamental aims and the ability to define a new direction.

He describes the history of the Deakinite liberal ideas and their transformation by the followers of Hayek and the radical reformation of the Thatcher and Reagan governments. They became obsessed with the individual's ability to survive in the marketplace without the help of the state and the antithesis of the Keynesian interventionist ideals of the post-war governments. Aided and abetted by Hugh Morgan and Charles Kemp in Australia and significant investment in think-tanks like the Centre for Independent Studies and the Murdoch press, the ideas became policy for the Liberal Party under Howard. **The characteristics are:** individual choice is better than any other economic arrangement; government regulation should give way to self-regulation and competition; privatized state-owned assets, and sold to shareholders; taxes should be as low as possible with user-pays principle as for government services; barriers to trade be eliminated; the market principle

be applied to all public goods – health, education, environment, and globalisation etc. Although they were resisted by the Hawke government in the early years, gradually Treasurer Keating adopted the same policies, privatising the government airline, TAA, the Commonwealth Bank, and was moving to sell Telecom.

The author is less clear on the decline of *socialism*, which has been based on the differences of class and the strength of the unions. Except for the collapse of the Soviet Union even granting the progress of the redistribution of income, education and opportunity, the feminist and environmental movements that are still a large part of the Nordic democracies. What happened to the role of government in *planning* for future essential conservation issues?

In the 'cultural wars' he seems to underestimate the Powerful influence of media moguls and their favoured Protagonists while promoting 'greed is good', consumerism And entertainment as their 'stock in trade'. The other profound and disturbing attitude is the acceptance of the horror that the US model, has become where silence from the West has given consent to its stated hegemonic ambitions, the worst excesses of rampant capitalism and the despair of the under-privileged. (Over-all has been the unquestioning alliance by Labor – dare one say allegiance – to the policies, be they economic, trade, foreign policy, environment or industrial relations, of the Bus administration and its imitation of the 'moral majority'.) It is nevertheless true that common ideals requiring government intervention are not being canvassed. In this both parties have no substantial difference in policy except in industrial relations, and then only because of the massive support raised by the union leadership.

McKnight is however positive in stating that society needs a caring philosophy, a moral conservatism in its broadest and personal sense, which should form the basis of a national identity free from racial stigmatism and the public interest as its principal objective.

While we live in a relaxed and comfortable, but blind and bigoted society and have little chance to voice these values in open forums it seems that an Australia based on humanism has a long way to go.

Howard Hodgens

Foster Humanist Growth for Years to Come

Please remember the **Humanist Society of Victoria** (Inc.) when making your will.

A variety of arrangements are possible, such as gifts of a fixed amount, creating a living trust, or a contingent bequest which provides for the

Humanist Society only if your primary beneficiaries pre-decease you.

HSV, GPO Box 1555, Melbourne VIC 3001

FILM REVIEW

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe

Directed by Andrew Adamson, 2005.

139 minutes. PG.

I offered to review this film after reading an article in *The Age* (27.12.05) by religion editor Barney Zwartz, who claimed that 'It is hard to find a group today more puritanical than the anti-Christian, anti-Narnia brigade.' He had taken umbrage that Polly Toynbee had written in *The Guardian* (London), 'Adults who wince at the worst elements of Christian belief may need a sickbag handy' if they go to see the film. I am English, and hail from north Oxfordshire (where part of the film is set), and have heartily disliked Christianity for half a century.

For good measure I decided to see the film with my daughter Alice. She, unlike me, was born and brought up in Victoria, so her cultural and emotional 'baggage' is very different from mine. Also, she is 20, I am 61.

We were curious to see if there was any truth in the notion that this film might be an attempt to push Christianity, overtly or subliminally, on to unwary children (or adults). I had already checked that C. S. Lewis's story had not been Americanised for this production, otherwise wild horses would not have dragged me to the film.

Well, my verdict, at any rate was: Move over, Polly Toynbee! Far from needing a sickbag, this grumpy old man was captivated by the film from beginning to end. Alice clearly liked it as well. It was a rattlingly good, sometimes frightening, sometimes poignant, 'let's pretend' fantasy story!

The film opens with the graphic depiction of a German bombing raid on London. A family's four children are then evacuated by train to Oxfordshire and alight at Coombe Halt – okay, this was not the railway halt I remember so well from when I lived in Coombe (1950-52), but this a story, not a documentary, remember.

The children are billeted in the rambling house of an eccentric, kindly, elderly professor. They discover a room containing a large wardrobe, the back of which gives them access to another world, Narnia, that has been kept in perpetual winter for a century under the tyranny of the creepy, devious White Witch, ably played by Tilda Swinton.

The youngsters learn that those opposed to the White Witch have been sustained by a prophecy that the arrival of four human children will herald the end of her rule. So the White Witch tries to hunt down and kill the children.

The acting by the youngsters who play the children was magnificent, but Georgie Henley, who played the youngest, Lucy (first to discover Narnia), was wonderful. The dialogue between the siblings was excellent. I was very impressed with James McAvoy as Mr Tumnus, the faun who invites Lucy to tea; and Alice and I were both delighted by the dulcet Cockney voice of Ray Winstone as Mr Beaver – with Dawn French as the voice of his spouse.

Liam Neeson provided the judicious voice for Aslan, the lion who is military leader of the revolt, and who offers his own life to prevent the White Witch ritually killing one of the children she had captured. The character of Aslan, laying down his life for others, can clearly be seen in Christian

terms, but the notion of a king or popular leader dying for his people is much older and wider than that.

Much of the action of the film depicts the anxieties, fears and conflicts of childhood as the clash of mighty, magical armies: the downtrodden, honourable but occasionally fallible goodies against the unspeakably evil, ruthless, ugly and treacherous baddies. The White Witch is almost an archetype of the cruel, dysfunctional, psychopathic step-mother or witch from other fairy stories. And at least two of the children are beset with the dilemma of having to decide whether to use lethal weapons in combat.

The imagery of *Narnia* comes from a whole mass of sources, of which Christianity is bound to be one. Graeco-Roman mythology is certainly another and perhaps even Wagner's operas. Yes, I can understand why some evangelical Christians are hoping and trying to use the film for propaganda purposes, but it will not surprise me if I eventually learn that America's loopy Christian fascist fringe have fantasies – when they turn the US into a grinding theocracy – of executing film directors who depict lions, fauns and the like being brought back to life.

People who are determined to dislike *Narnia* will find reasons for doing so. I can imagine a Jewish writer, having a bad yarmulka day and a touch of paranoia, seeing the ugly monsters in the White Witch's army as symbols of anti-Semitic stereotypes, even though I'm sure that nothing like this was intended. For me, the White Witch's dreaded secret police, a pack of wolves, suggested the Nazi S.S. and their dog squads, and this probably *was* intended.

The only thing that surprised us was the film's Australian classification. Neither Alice nor I would dream of taking a five-year old to this film because of the battle scenes. We estimate that children from the age of nine or ten upwards would be able to cope with the violent bits.

A review by Tom Ryan (*Sunday Age* 1 January 2006) describes the film as a 'passable but generally uninspired adaptation' and adds, 'It's all mildly diverting, but devoid of the lightness of touch that might have made its magic work'. Hell's bells! Well, it damned well worked on me!

Nigel Sinnott (with Alice Sinnott)

Science vs Religion

"So, will science and religion find common ground, or at least agree to divide the fundamentals into mutually exclusive domains? A great many well-meaning scholars believe that such rapprochement is both possible and desirable. A few disagree, and I am one of them. I think Darwin would have held to the same position. The battle line is, as it has ever been, in biology. The inexorable growth of this science continues to widen, not to close, the tectonic gap between science and faith-based religion.

Rapprochement may be neither possible nor desirable. There is something deep in religious belief that divides people and amplifies societal conflict. The toxic mix of religion and tribalism has become so dangerous as to justify taking seriously the alternative view, that humanism based on science is the effective antidote, the light and the way at last placed before us."

Edward O. Wilson, *New Scientist*, 5 November 2005