



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

Volume 45 No. 4

May 2006

Census 'religion' question

On August 8, the 2006 Census will be taken. Most of the 60 questions will have clear-cut answers, such as date and place of birth, years of education, income, marital status or number of languages spoken. They will yield accurate and reliable data, which the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) supplies to users – a valuable service in a complex, modern economy.

However the 'religion' question is an anomaly. Responses are subjective and the figures gathered are of questionable accuracy. When compared to data from other social surveys, the Census figures inflate the number of Christians, while under-estimating the number of Australians with no religion. For example a 2005 Darebin City survey found 35% of respondents had 'No religion', 47% were Christian, while the rest belonged to minor religions or gave no answer. Yet the 2001 Census figures for the same area scored only 16% 'No religion', but 65% Christians.

This discrepancy is achieved by the Census question asking 'What is the person's religion?', thus implying that *all* people have a religion, as they have a birth date. It also conveniently lists the main religions, leading many people with no religion now, to mark a religion with which they once had a connection. And unlike other Census questions, which place the negative option at the top of the list, 'No religion' is placed at the bottom.

For Humanists there is a further concern. In the instructions for 'Other' write-in religions the given examples are Salvation Army, Hinduism, Judaism, and *Humanism!* In correspondence to the ABS, Australian Humanists have made it clear that Humanism is a non-religious life philosophy. A fact recognised by the ABS itself which assigns all written instances of Humanism or Humanist, into the 'No religion' category. So what is going on, you might ask?

We can only suppose that religious lobbyists, especially Christians, have the ear of ABS officials and the relevant federal government ministers. In this way the religious lobby make sure that the 'religion' question remains in its current bias form.

We can do nothing about the 2006 Census, as it is now finalised, but we can publicise the discrepancy between its data and that from other social surveys. We can also point out social trends that show the growing secularisation of Australian society e.g. more than 50% of marriages are civil, nearly 70% of funerals services are handled by celebrants or family, and regular church attendance continues to fall. Most importantly we can encourage friends and family to mark 'No religion.' As for writing in Humanism, HSV will discuss this over the next few months.

Rosslyn Ives, HSV President

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Monthly HSV Public Lecture

**Thursday
25 May
8.00 pm**

Balwyn Library Meeting Room
336 Whitehorse Rd. Balwyn

Dr Kim Humphery

'Critiquing consumerism.'

Dr Kim Humphery is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Planning at RMIT. Among his publications is *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption*.

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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

MAY

- 2 Tuesday 8.00pm Existentialist Society, Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne. Assoc. Prof. Millicent Vladiv-Glover: *'Ethics of Popular Culture: Blockbuster Novels and Films.'*
- 3 Wednesday 6.30pm Fabian Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton. Defence Counsel Julian McMahon: *'Some Reflections on the Van Nguyen Case and the Anti-death Penalty Campaign.'*
- 3 Wednesday 7pm RMIT Globalism Institute, Storey Hall, 340 Swanston St., Melbourne. Prof. Jamal Nassar: *'Palestine & Israel: Is Peace Possible.'*
- 9 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton. James Gerrand: *'Higher Superstition: Anti-science in the Academy.'*
- 14 Sunday 9.30am **HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Sunday discussion**, 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South. Report on CAHS Convention. Current submissions. All members welcome. Bring food for shared lunch.
- 17 Wednesday 6.30pm Fabian Society, Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton. Senator Kim Carr: *'Australia's Future Cities.'*
- 25 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd., Balwyn. Associate Prof Kim Humphery of RMIT, will speak on *'Critiquing consumerism.'*

JUNE

- 6 Tuesday 8pm Existentialist Society, Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne. Professor Colin Duckworth: *'From 'The Outsider' to the 'The Misfit', adapting Camus to the stage.'*
- 7 Wednesday 6.30pm Rationalist Society. Trades Hall, Carlton. Dr Philip Nitschke: *'Dying With Dignity: What Next?.'*
- 11 Sunday 9.30am **HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Sunday discussion**, 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South. Current submissions. All members welcome. Bring food for shared lunch.
- 13 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton. Andy Blunden: *'Why Marx was Not an Atheist.'*
- 22 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd., Balwyn. Dr Dirk Baltzly, philosopher: *'On self-censorship.'*

For latest Humanist news and updates

HSV 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 with ethics based on human values. It considers 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.

Editor	Roslyn Ives
Ass. Editor	Howard Hodgson
Reader	Stephen Stuart
Mailout	Ray Dahlitz & HSV Volunteers

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



OHA Award to Ray Dahlitz

The CAHS Convention in Coolangatta on 8 April endorsed Ray Dahlitz as the 2006 Outstanding Humanist Achiever (OHA), for his many contributions to freethought and Humanism in Australia over more than five decades. For a fuller account of Ray's contributions see *AH* No. 82, page 9.

As Ray was unable to attend the Convention his award will be formally handed to him at the Sunday Discussion, 14 May, 2 Houston Court, Box Hill South.

CAHS Convention Report

HSV delegates to the CAHS Convention, held in Coolangatta, Qld, 7-9 April, Rosslyn Ives, Jennie Stuart and Stephen Stuart, will give an account of the Convention proceedings at the Sunday discussion on May 14.

Pub Lunch

Informal get-together

Saturday 27 May, 12.30pm

Shoppingtown Hotel, Williamson Road,
Doncaster. Opposite Westfield Shoppingtown. Melway ref.
47 D12.

Phone Lorna Noble 9857 6912

by Friday 26 May for table booking purposes.

CAHS

Separating Church & State

CAHS together with the Rationalist Society of Australia and the newly formed Australian National Secular Association are organising a public conference on 'Separating Church & State: Keeping God Out of Government', 17 and 18 June. Elisabeth Murdoch, Theatre University of Melbourne.

Prominent among the speakers will be Roy Brown of IHEU and Max Wallace, author of the eagerly awaited book, *The Purple Economy*. Interstate Humanists will attend.

A registration form is being distributed. So mark the occasion in your diary, contact the HSV Committee if you could help before hand with publicity or Powerpoint slides, and consider assisting at the venue in setting up, monitoring tickets or ushering.

VH Contributions Welcome

Send to editor by 20th of each month.

E-mail rosslyn@netspace.com.au or post to
GPO Box 1555, Melbourne VIC 3001

April Public Lecture

Another well attended HSV public lecture was held on 27 April when Dr Lea Jellinek, anthropologist, and Iswanto, visiting health scientist from Java, jointly presented an account of a highly successful project of waste management in Iswanto's home village, just outside Jogjakarta. The presentation in words, song and visuals was both entertaining and informative.

Instead of the usual book token for the speaker, HSV made a donation to Iswanto's village waste management program. Report on this lecture will appear in next *VH*.

Liberty Victoria

The Victorian Council of Civil Liberties Inc. will be celebrating its 70th anniversary and the centenary of the birth of its founder Brian Fitzpatrick with a special dinner in 8 July.

Fitzpatrick campaigned on behalf of Jewish refugees in the 1930s and 1940s, and against the banning of the Communist Party in the 1950s. He lobbied, wrote pamphlets, gave radio broadcasts and spoke on countless platforms, defending trade unionists, dissident writers and minority groups. He was an eloquent exponent of the traditions of justice, fairness and free speech, which he saw as central pillars of a democratic and civilised society.

HSV is pleased to support the centenary dinner with a \$400 donation from our Project Fund.

Victorian Peace Network

7pm Friday 12 May: Unity for Peace Benefit Concert @
Trades Hall Bar, Carlton South, Melb.

All Star Line Up: Comedian Greg Fleet,
MC Martin Pearson, David Bridie, Kylie Kain, Michelle
Chandler Band, The Borderers, Chubby Rae & The
Elevators, Joe Dolce & Lin Van Hek, Judy Small, Mal
Webb, Matthew MacLeod, Alex Legg, Fiona Scott Norman,
Barbara Joseph.

Fundraiser to bring out speakers to the National Peace
Conference May 25-27. Tickets from New International
Bookshop or at the door. \$20 / \$10 concession. Phone
Hamish 9489 5654 or 0401 331 850 for more details.

Saturday 27 May, 10am-5pm. One-day 'Unity for
Peace' national peace conference at MUA offices,
West Melbourne. Download flyers from
www.vicpeace.org/unityforpeace. Cost \$20 / \$10 also
includes admission to Public Meeting on 25 May with
Cindy Sheehan. More details/downloads at
www.vicpeace.org/unityforpeace. Info:
dglanz@optusnet.com.au 0418 316.

SUBMISSION

On 'Ethical Guidelines in Organ and Tissue Donations after Death' we made the following points on the Consultation Draft:

- Humanists everywhere strongly support the altruistic act of organ donation.
- HSV commends the current review of ethics involved in this issue and hopes that the changes to the Australian Organ Donor Register will result in higher rates of donations here.
- We suggest that the Donor Register be updated periodically to note any changes in donors' consent and in their health status as a safe organ donor.
- We support the proposed mutual consent register to deal with the sensitivities of contact between donor families and transplant recipients.
- This very complex but vital health service requires adequate funding, which is lacking at present. We see such funding as cost-effective in the long term.
- The needs of grieving family members are well considered and provided for.
- We strongly support the ethical guidelines underpinning the allocation process, which must be just, free from bias or discrimination on any but medical grounds.
- We state our firm belief that a person's autonomy and clearly stated expression of altruism and responsibility should be respected at all times. Thus we cannot agree with a recommendation allowing family objection to donation to prevail over the known intention of the potential donor.
- To alleviate the distress felt by family members unable to accept the decision of the donor, we suggest a brochure on the relevant aspects of this problem, issued to the donor to aid in family discussion on the need to respect one's wishes and autonomy.

Halina Strnad, HSV Submissions Convener.

The Art of Vladimir Zacharczenko

A major exhibition of oil paintings and
works on paper
27 April – 10 May
At the Frater Gallery
Victorian Artists Society Galleries
430 Albert St, East Melbourne
Weekdays 10am - 4.30pm
Weekends 1.30pm – 4.30pm
Closes 3pm on final day

Humanist Ethical Education, No. 3

'Right' and 'Wrong' (for seven year olds)

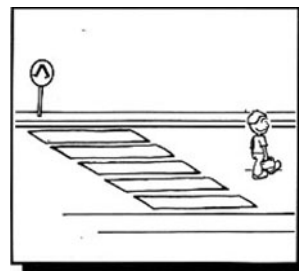
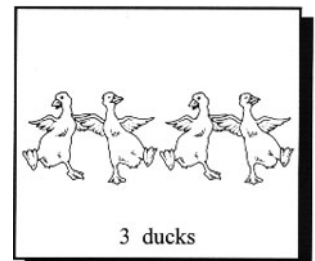
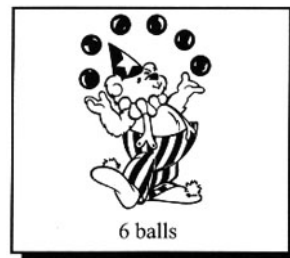
Harry Gardner

Aim: To show different ways of using 'right' and 'wrong'; see also an accompanying lesson (in next month's *VH*) on 'bad' and 'good'.

Write the words 'right' and 'wrong' on the black or white board and encourage the children to talk about them and different kinds of behaviour.

Display objects such as balls, balloons, fruit, toys, etc., together with simple arithmetic, $2 + 2 = 4$, and ask the children to count. Help them to understand why everyone can agree on some descriptive forms of 'right' and 'wrong'.

Now enlarge and display three pictures: juggling bear, the quacking ducks, and the boy crossing the road.



Does the third picture show the same sort of 'right' or 'wrong' as shown in the first two?

Ask the children to draw their own ideas of 'right' and 'wrong', and all the class can discuss them.

Lesson 3. Adapted from *Resources for Studying Ethics in Primary Schools, 1996*, with permission from the Queensland Department of Education.

Indigenous Justice and the Politics of Petrol Sniffing

HSV Public Lecture given by Graham Ring, assisted by Sandra Mortimer, on
23 March 2006 at Balwyn Library Meeting Room

Report by Jennie Stuart

There are estimated to be 700 Indigenous young people in Central Australia who, by sniffing petrol, are at risk of seriously damaging their health. In 2005 a new health education kit, 'Sniffing and the Brain,' was launched in Darwin by the Federal Minister for Health and Aging, the Hon. Tony Abbott. It outlined the detrimental effects on the lungs, blood and nervous system of inhaling petrol fumes. In Mr Abbott's view a crisis of authority in Indigenous communities has laid the groundwork for substance abuse: the solution therefore should come from local communities. He maintains that *they* need to act to prevent and control such self-destructive behaviour.

It is thought that the practice of petrol sniffing may have started during the Second World War, following contact with American troops and wider availability of petrol. In 1992 the introduction of aviation fuel, or Avgas, was an initiative that helped combat the problem. It had fewer aromatic hydrocarbons and did not give a 'high' when inhaled. However, it was expensive (taxed at 45c/litre if not used for aviation purposes), contained lead and damaged car engines. Under these circumstances there was limited uptake of the option. Later Comgas, which was merely Avgas with a Commonwealth subsidy to make it more affordable, was offered to selected communities. More recently the oil company BP, in a gesture of enlightened self-interest, has marketed Opal fuel. It contains only 5% aromatic hydrocarbons, compared with regular petrol which has 25%, is unleaded and is safe for cars.

In 2004 the Comgas Evaluation report found that this fuel was a safe, effective and popular remedy for the problem of abuse. But the program was only effective overall if there was no alternative, sniffable fuel within easy reach and if other interventions, such as youth workers, recreational projects and better policing, were available also. The evaluation committee when gathering evidence visited many affected communities and recorded strategies such as elders teaching the young people traditional hunting and fishing skills, and communal decisions to publicly dispose of the cans and equipment needed by habitual users. No lack of community leadership there!

In February 2005 Opal fuel was released onto the market through the Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program. A subsidy of 27c/litre was offered to facilitate the program, but the fuel was only supplied to communities after they had made submissions to the

Federal government for it. Currently many remote communities in Central Australia have petrol bowsers that dispense Opal, but there is only one petrol station in Alice Springs that supplies it. As a consequence very young users have found it more difficult to find sniffable fuel, but trafficking is nonetheless a problem. Supplementary legislation is planned to help combat this.

In March this year a report about Opal fuel compiled by Access Economics contained a cost-benefit analysis which was overwhelmingly in favour of a general roll-out throughout Central Australia. In 2005 petrol sniffing cost the government \$79 million for services such as health care, rehabilitation, legal fees and long-term care of the chronically disabled. Added to this is the incalculable cost of fit, young people being reduced to invalidism and unable to contribute to their communities. The cost of supplying Opal fuel and linked community projects would be \$26.6 million. However, savings of the order of \$25.1 million, mainly related to health costs, are likely to accrue from the regional availability of Opal, leaving a net cost of \$1.5 million.

A Senate Committee has heard submissions from the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS), the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council and the GPT property group, which has commercial interests in Central Australia. Together they make up the Opal Alliance. The Committee is due to report its findings at the end of March 2006.

But why is there petrol-sniffing? Boredom, desperation and disenchantment among young people are important factors, but some of the broader issues have a bearing also: questions related to land justice, for example, and how the Indigenous voice will be heard, now that ATSIC has been dismantled.

Humanists could make a contribution by writing to newspaper editors, a local MHR or Victorian Senator. Consider also the Minister for Health and Aging, the Hon. Tony Abbott, who is due to pay a visit to the Pitjantjatjara lands in June this year. There is a draft letter on this matter in the April edition of *Victorian Humanist*, page 8. Further details of the Access Economics report, 'Regional Rollout of Opal Fuel in Central Australia – Cost Benefit Study Findings,' can be obtained from www.gpt.com.au/gpt/main.nsf/all/newsgpt_20061403.

A Secret Country

by John Pilger
(Vintage, 1992)

Book review by Howard Hodgens

With the scandal of AWB kick-backs to Iraq, a country our military is engaged against, ringing in our ears, it's timely to revisit *A Secret Country* by well-known expatriate journalist, John Pilger. He writes with an independence he may not have been able to maintain had he remained 'embedded' in the local media. He has a great affection for his early life in Australia but makes a scathing critique of Australia and its easy-going inhabitants' unflinching ability to be conned and to accept the myths that formed their views of themselves, their history, culture, politics, race, and authority, clothed in secrecy by their leaders.

He grew up the son of a carpenter and Australian pioneer in Bondi within coo-ee of the beach. A suburb with its characters and brilliant, burning sun and the, then, democratic use of the beach as a public space open to anyone of any colour or creed. Bondi epitomised the laid-back nature of those times. The famous photo of the sun-bather by Max Dupain adorns the cover of Pilger's book. Campbell Parade on the Bondi ocean front hides the secret of workshops and armories where the first Australians created tools to fight the invaders.

His chapter on the treatment of Australia's Indigenous inhabitants, 'A Whispering in our Hearts,' is one of the best. Its coverage of their utter poverty, the brutality of both official and common behaviour towards them as well as the ignorance of their history – it should be a must for schools. His description of deaths in custody, their struggles to be recognized, and Pilger's own shame is epitomised by his story of the degradation of natives on the South Coast he wrote for the *Illawarra Mercury*. His editor said he knew all about them: 'I have never bothered with them. Firstly, they are only coons and live like animals anyway. And secondly, nobody gives a damn.'

Pilger has a chapter on the migrants who made their way to Australia, their bewilderment, the DPs and 'ten pound poms', the waves of ethnic 'New Australians' like those that built the Snowy River Scheme, the escapees from Vietnam. He credits us with our success in adopting them but reminds us of a million of those migrants who have never become naturalized.

He brings to light our acquiescence, first to the British in the WWI, to the mine owners in Newcastle, and then to the dictates of Sir Otto Niemeyer, which brought on the Great Depression. Indeed unlike other dominions Oz under

Menzies was happy for decisions to be made in London. During the approach to WWII the Australian Government was considered 'expendable' by Roosevelt and Churchill, whose contempt for Australia arose from his view that we came from bad stock (convicts and Irish). Our sycophancy towards more powerful nations continued with our commitment of troops in the Vietnam and Korean Wars, further examples of fighting everybody else's wars, with profound deceptions paraded as the reasons for Australia's involvement.

However, it is in describing the background of the coup against Whitlam and the part played by the CIA and its ASIO co-conspirators in wrecking a government that his investigative powers stand apart. In the words of Victor Marchetti, former senior CIA officer, 'The CIA's aim in Australia was to get rid of a government they did not like and that was not co-operative ...it's a Chile (but) in a more sophisticated and subtler form.' Few knew Khemlani was set up by the CIA and backed by Mercantile Bank and Trust, another front of the CIA. How many people knew Whitlam was about to denounce US interference on the morning of the sacking when Kerr called him? It was also Whitlam's intent not to renew the Pine Gap treaty, a move that America considered most provocative. Even Hawke had expressed some belief in the subversion.

Under Hawke and Wran the secrecy became, like the Mason's handshake, a happy alliance between business and political power, the so-called 'Mates', from Sir Peter Abeles, Rudy Tham and TNT, Rupert Murdoch and Packer in the Lotto deal, Alan Bond, David Hill, Brian Burke and Laurie Connell in WA: it became the modus operandi of the NSW Right of the Labor Party, with familiar overtones echoing today. Robert Maxwell was another, whose threatened take-over of *The Age* was only stymied by concerted action from John Cain and the Fairfax staff. Worse was to come. In the week Hawke called an election the Media Bill was rushed through parliament, re-structuring commercial television giving Murdoch and Packer a billion tax-free dollars.

The book further illustrates the colonial state of mind in which Paul Keating bowed to the transnational companies denuding Australia's finite resources, while national debt grows and grows, delivering economic orthodoxy to financiers and speculators. No wonder we are a 'Banana Republic'.

Throughout *A Secret Country* Pilger pays tribute to the genuine battlers, who despite all the deceptions, have maintained the vision of Evatt and Whitlam, however flawed. Australia needs more Pilgers.

Howard Hodgens social activist and
HSV committee member.

Is Doing Good Any Good?

The difference between doing good and the consequences of self-consciousness about doing good. *

[VY's spelling has not been altered. Editor.]

Valerie Yule

This is a response to Dr Len Perry, *Ockham's Razor* 9 April 2006, who in effect repeated, perhaps rather too glibly, the comfortable popular belief that it is better not to try to do anything 'to make the world a better place,' because it will backfire or power will corrupt, and *The Book Show* review on the same date of philosopher Adam Morton's book *On Evil*.

Whenever a man does a thoroughly stupid thing, it is always from the noblest motives, wrote Oscar Wilde.

Sometimes, the best way to serve the people is to lawfully serve oneself. Len Perry.

Whenever someone makes a sweeping generalisation, look for the evidence and the arithmetic. vy.

'Doing good' has got a bad name today, for many reasons. There is, rather an obsessed fascination with evil. It is interesting/alarming to see what has happened to religious leaders who were consciously trying to do good. What, if anything, do people remember about what good Jesus tried to do? His teachings about goodness are mostly forgotten or attributed to others who also came up with them, such as Native Americans.

By their fruits you shall know them, said Jesus, adding a parable or two about people whose deeds did or did not match their words.

By his deeds we know a man, goes an old African proverb, said Len Perry on *Ockham's Razor*.

The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones, wrote Shakespeare, someone else who can be supposed to never have existed.

* Trying to do good may not achieve good. It can deceive itself. The European do-gooders were blind in wanting dwellers in the tropics to wear clothes. But it was in the self-interests of the Europeans for the 'indolent' tropics-dwellers to have to labor in order to obtain the clothes, and so that the do-gooders would benefit from that labor.

* The do-gooders may not think thru or realize the possible consequence of their good. For example, some of the thousands of wells dug by do-gooders to relieve the sufferings of peasants in arid areas are now poisoning those peasants with toxic metals from the groundwater. Burning off half Kakadu National Park every year to prevent fire catastrophes is now found to be killing off much of the unique fauna and flora.

Do-gooders may have no inkling about the consequences of what they do that they think has been good. A Children's Hospital doctor was proud of his clever operations so that seriously spina-bifida babies

survived – until he saw what happened to the children he saved, and to their families. As a psychologist, I helped the survival of a 3-year old child, constantly hospitalized for failure to thrive; his mother cared for him for 14 more years as he slowly deteriorated from an incurable neurological disorder.

Do-gooders seeking to bring life can also bring death. Terrible human suffering has been relieved and prevented by Westerners bringing Western medicine and stopping inhuman practices. But population balances had been kept sustainable by the cruel means of disease, famine, wars, infanticide, forced celibacy, cannibalism and human sacrifices. When these checks and balancers have been removed without replacing them with more humane means of keeping a sustainable population, populations have exploded beyond the continued bearing of the earth.

The do-badders have killed their millions deliberately, with holocausts from the beginning of human history, castles with dungeons, murderers, enslavers, starvers and ravagers. They have killed more than the do-gooders, but the notoriety goes to the bad done by those intending to do-good – the Maos, Torquemadas, and the like. Oliver Cromwell and Lenin meant well. So, it was thought, did Robespierre, and the doctors who for centuries bled patients to death. Where should Halliburton be placed, and the manufacturers of torture instruments and weapons of horrible destruction in the free world? And their employees?

A careful look at history shows how much of what we think is good in our world has been due to people consciously trying to do good, often at great cost to themselves, who did not use evil or misguided means to try to achieve it, or blow trumpets that they were do-gooders. Parents and teachers, civil servants and doctors, neighbors and rescuers. Who have been honest against their own interest. The millions of Animal Farm's work-horses. Children should do projects about these people too. Perhaps I should write a manuscript on 'People who tried to do good and did not do worse instead,' to complement another unpublished manuscript on 'People they laughed at'. It would probably support the likelihood that, when the prelates and celebrities reach their heaven, they will find the 144 seats of glory given to poor old Russian peasant women.

The problem may lie in a devil's scripture, 'The means justify the end'. For in practice, every action is its own end, regardless of whether it is intended to be only a means to a good end. And every action can have unforeseen consequences that perhaps could have been foreseen.

It is important to think about this question about whether anyone should try to 'make this world a better place', because there is a strong *laissez-faire* neo-liberal ethos around that, if everyone tries to do the best for themselves, that will all work together for the common good. As we look around the globe at those who are most able to do the best for themselves, and at what happens to the common good when they do it, it should

be difficult to agree with that *laissez-faire* proposition and to take Adam Smith absolutely seriously. Sure, everybody has a T-shirt and nobody today is clad in rags – but what about the ravaging, the wars, the desolation and the future? Are walled estates for the rich the real answer?

So examine the reasons for teaching people not to try to do good but go for their own interests first. These may also be close to our current fascination with evil. When an Oxford journal of educational philosophy published a long article on the necessity to teach children about evil, I submitted a response on teaching children about good, but it was rejected on the odd ground that it did not include sufficient research – odd, because the original article included none too. Good is often thought of as boring and banal: evil is more fascinating. There is a constant stream of books and films obsessed with evil. I think one reason for this is that senses and sensitivity have become blunted. Stronger sensations are needed to make people feel anything – louder music, raunchier sex, stronger drugs, harsher interests.

* Possibly a reason for crying down doing good is that people who do not want to do good themselves do not want to be made to feel as if they should. And attack is the best defence.

* The do-gooders may seem proud of what they are doing. *'Look at me'*. This self-righteousness can be attributed to them regardless of whether it is true or not, and even tho the 'do-badders' may be prouder still. Do-nothing seems benign, although 'We have not done what we ought to have done' is daily confessed in churches as a sin that is as serious as what they have done that they ought not to have done. 'The only reward of virtue is virtue . . . tart, cathartic virtue.' (Ralph Waldo Emerson.) The reward should not be to feel good.

* People often do not want to have 'good' done to them. They do not want the indignity of being 'one down' and a means for others to be one up. They may not see the supposed 'good' as being good at all. Sometimes it is a very real good, but for the sake of protecting their personal fragile ego, the Done-By reject it. And if you have ever had good done to you against your will, you will be firmly on the side of those who are Done-By.

None of all that makes good argument against attempting to 'do good'. They are arguments for the way you go about it.

* Microsoft's Spellchecker was so coy about the word 'good' it wanted me to replace it with 'well'.

Valerie Yule, creative thinker, author and HSV member.

vyule@labyrinth.net.au

Speak Out!

A photographic exhibition by John Ellis explores the concept of social change through community activism. Exhibition profiles writers, musicians, artists, actors, poets film makers and broadcasters and others who have made a contribution to social change.

Includes AHOYs Phillip Adams, Eric Bogle, Henry Reynolds and Robyn Williams.

Protest – A Global View

From the Robert Smith collection of art works on social protest. The exhibition features such great humanist artists as Francisco Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Honoré Daumier, George Grosz and Noel Counihan.

Counihan Gallery

233 Sydney Road, Brunswick

21 April – 14 May

Wed – Sat 11 am – 5 pm

Sunday 1 pm – 5 pm

Not a prayer

Praying for someone might give you hope, but it won't help them recover from heart surgery. It may even harm them. That's the surprising result from a multi-year clinical trial on the therapeutic effects of prayer.

Herbert Benson and Jeffery Dusek of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Massachusetts, and their colleagues followed the fates of 1802 patients undergoing coronary bypass operations. Several Christian prayer groups prayed for one set of patients, while another did not receive any prayers. All these patients knew they were in the trial, but neither they nor their doctors knew which of the groups they were in.

The prayers made no detectable difference. In the first month after surgery, 52% of prayed-for patients and 51% of non-prayed for patients suffered one or more complications, (*American Heart Journal*, vol 151, p 934).

A third group of patients received the same prayers as the first group, but were told they were being prayed for. Of these, 59% suffered complications – significantly more than the patients left unsure of whether they were receiving prayers.

The researchers have no explanation for this result, but Mitchell Krukoff at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, suggests that the burden of knowing they were being prayed for may have put added stress on these patients after surgery.

[*New Scientist*, 8 April 2006 p.6.]