



## Religion in Australia's foreign policy

### Lyn Allison

Senator Allison was one of the speakers at a symposium organised by Australian Institute of International Affairs, in conjunction with the Humanist Society of Victoria and the Australian Council for International Development, held in Melbourne on 27 September 2007. \*

In answering the questions put for this discussion,

1. *How important is the factor of religion in the making of foreign policy in Australia at the moment, and is there any indication that this might change in the near future?*
2. *Is the current situation desirable and, if not, what should be done to change it?*

I will focus on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sexual and reproductive health policy. The MDGs were established in 2000 through the UN by 189 countries setting targets of socio-economic and environmental progress to be achieved by 2015. This year was the halfway point and while progress has been made, it is nowhere near enough to meet the goals agreed to.

Religion is certainly a factor in the making of foreign policy in Australia at the moment and it is an influence that is both negative and positive. My criticism is largely in the area of population growth and sexual and reproductive health. In other areas of human rights and social justice – climate change, refugees, wars, human rights, Christians in other countries, fears of Muslim terrorists, Israel's security,

the death penalty, David Hicks, fair trade, poverty – the efforts of religion are important but arguably less influential. In government intervention to stop injustice, as it concerns Christians in other countries – Timor Leste, Aceh, West Papua – there are mixed results.

### **What is the current influence of religion on foreign policy process in Australia and which actors and issues are predominantly involved in this?**

The conservative Catholic influence is still very strong though now lacks its principal champion in the Senate – Brian Harradine. Emerging is the influence of the highly conservative Pentecostal and other religious groups, and MPs, for instance the Family First Party.

The issues for foreign policy are overseas aid funding for sexual and reproductive health, specifically family planning, especially abortion and contraception and the growth in world population.

The world's population stands at 6.5 billion – up from 2 billion in 1950 – and is set to rise to 8–10.5 billion by 2050. High fertility outpaces economic and development gains and stalls poverty reduction efforts. Thailand is an example of what happens when

development and family planning are taken seriously. 20 years ago the Philippines and Thailand were neck and neck, and the Philippines is now in spiralling poverty. Nothing has been done to address the contraceptive rates and the Philippines government does not provide family planning.

Catholic Timor has the highest fertility rate in the world at an average of 8 children to each family. It cannot feed, clothe, educate or employ all those children. Services are over-stretched and governments cannot address their citizens' needs. Until very recently all Australia's aid for Timor went to governance and security issues and none to health.

Population growth is now understood to be a major issue, particularly in the context of climate change. And of course Australia takes its cue from the US on this as on other issues, and the US is more massively influenced by its growing religious population. Since Cairo and the ICPD the US Government has made a massive shift away from its former position as a leader in the global drive for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), responding to pressure from the religious right and other social conservatives. President Bush has joined the Vatican and a few conservative governments to oppose a rights-based approach to human sexuality and reproduction.

The US cut off funds for family planning to groups that spoke out against restrictive abortion laws – the global gag rule – leaving people with only one choice, abstinence, condemning millions of women and men to STIs including HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and in many cases of the unsafe and illegal abortions the policy purports to prevent. Global spending on non-HIV/AIDS sexual and reproductive health was projected to have reached \$19 billion under ICPD but is closer to half that now at \$10 billion.

There has been a drastic decline in global funding for family planning in all population assistance, from 55% in 1995 to 9% in 2004. Australia's contributions to family planning have drastically declined over the past 10 years, increasing the numbers of unwanted pregnancies, rising rates of unsafe abortion, increased risks to the lives of women and children and high maternal deaths in our region.

The Catholic doctrine is the sanctity of human life and the belief that only God can create it or take it away. Not all Catholics agree, of course, including many in the parliament. The Parliamentary Group on Population & Development has sought to be more involved in the policy process – making a submission to the White Paper, taking delegations to Minister Downer, holding seminars, putting together recommendations and platforms attending international conferences, liaising with NZ and UK counterparts.

Amnesty International has felt the wrath of the Catholic Church following its approval of a new policy affirming the right to abortion under limited circumstances.

Domestically religion influences abortion and voluntary euthanasia. It affects contraception to a lesser extent,

although it's worth noting that no new contraceptive has been put on the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme in the life of the current government and family planning has been devolved to the states.

What is sadly less of an issue is foreign policy on war fighting, arms acquisition and the like. Australia's spending on defence has risen to \$22 billion a year and contracts have been signed for \$40 billion in war fighting machinery.

### **Has there been any discernible change of the role of religion in the making of foreign policy recently and is this a society or a government-based development?**

I think the influence of religion on sexual and reproductive health in foreign policy has lessened slightly in Australia although it is still very strong in both major parties and disproportionate to the views of the general public. The RU486 debate and vote demonstrated this. 46% of male senators voted against the bill to remove the veto over this alternative to surgical abortion. The 90% 'yes' vote from female senators carried the day.

The Parliamentary Group on Population & Development has become more pro-active and able to counter the religious push to some extent. It made a report in May 2007 following two round-table discussions in 2006, finding as follows:

- Compelling evidence exists that SRH is an issue too important to be left on the margins any longer. There is scope for it to become a core and integrated foundation for strengthening regional health systems and national development strategies including responses to HIV/AIDS.
- Universal access to family planning alone would reduce maternal deaths globally by 20–35% and child deaths by 20%.
- There are 19 million unsafe abortions worldwide every year. Unsafe abortion is responsible for 13% of all maternal deaths globally and fuels the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Sustainable development, strong civil society, a productive economy, regional security, social development and poverty alleviation all depend on securing better sexual and reproductive health outcomes in our region.
- The death of a mother increases by 3–10 times the chance that her children below the age of 10 will die within 2 years.
- In some countries in the Asia Pacific region one in every 10 girls dies before reaching the age of one, and one in every 50 women dies during pregnancy and delivery (in Australia fewer than 1 in 10,000 women dies giving birth).
- Some of these deaths could have been avoided with information about unsafe abortion and by supporting abortion in countries where it is legal, but both are currently prohibited by our Family Planning Guidelines – a legacy of Senator Brian Harradine which contravenes ICPD and CEDAW \* commitments.
- Excessive bureaucratic requirements on monitoring and reporting have meant women's reproductive health has been singled out for unjustifiable scrutiny.



### **Humanist Internet Discussion Group**

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It recommended

- abolition of the AusAID family planning guidelines and adoption of those developed by the World Health Organisation.;
- integrating SRH and HIV/AIDS programs;
- strengthening systems support for SRH and increasing the aid budget for SRH to 10%.

The UK Population & Development Committee Report in January 2007 noted the following:

- The removal of all reference to population growth and sexual and reproductive health was due to the influence of the Vatican.
- The goals will be difficult or impossible to achieve with current levels of population increase in the least developed countries.
- The majority of the growth will take place in the poorest countries, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.
- No country, other than a few oil-rich states, has risen from poverty whilst still having high fertility rates.
- High fertility rates give rise to civil conflict, because of pressure on limited land or water resources, mass migration and high rates of youth unemployment. Countries with high rates of conflict and violence are also the poorest.
- Poverty and population growth are closely related to increased migration. According to Stern, the effects of climate change in developing countries, when combined with population growth, will exert significant pressure on migration rates.
- If lower birth rates can be achieved, this can lead to lower dependency ratios and enable greater savings, investment and productivity per capita – as has happened in parts of East Asia.
- The MDGs are not attainable without greater focus on slowing population growth through making voluntary family planning universally accessible and empowering women.
- Among governments of the 50 least developed countries, 80% thought their population growth was too high and none felt it was too low.
- Between 125 and 200 million people would like to be able to control their fertility. Many live in extreme poverty.
- Only 10% of the required level of funding needed for family planning is being provided by developed countries.
- Largely because of political and religious pressures, together with lack of emphasis on the adverse impact of population increase on poverty alleviation, over the last 10–15 years family planning programs have stalled in many parts of the world.

They recommended

- 10% of aid allocated for population and reproductive health services;
- the availability of contraceptive supplies to be a priority;
- barriers to using family planning to be removed.

### Rights for women

Unless women can control their fertility they have little power over their lives. In my view and those of population and development groups worldwide, a woman's ability to

access contraception and to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and avoid the morbidity and mortality associated with unsafe abortion is her fundamental human right and a cornerstone of empowerment.

Access to safe abortion helps avoid neonatal death in subsequent pregnancies and deliveries. Access to safe abortion for adolescents reduces their morbidity and mortality from unwanted pregnancies or unsafe abortion. Access to safe abortion also means a reduction in child mortality for child mothers and their children, where girls are too young to safely sustain pregnancies.

### Conclusion

The UN has now approved a new target under MDG 5 – universal access to reproductive health care by 2015. But it would not have happened if narrow religious influence had not been confronted head-on.

Human rights organisations, like the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have now adopted official positions on abortion after years of refusing to take sides.

We need to talk openly about these issues; otherwise the consequences will be disastrous, particularly for women. □

\* Other speakers at the symposium included the Hon Greg Hunt, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Fiona McLeay, World Vision Australia and Paul O'Callaghan, Executive Director of Australian Council for International Development. Panel participants included academic and commentator Waleed Aly and *The Age* religion reporter, Barney Zwartz.

**Senator Lyn Allison**, Leader of Australian Democrats.

Love your enemies! Blessed are the peace-makers  
Do good to them that hate you! You shall not kill!  
Turn swords into plowshares!  
Love your neighbor as yourself!  
He who saves his life will lose it  
They that take the sword will perish by the sword  
Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves!  
Return not evil for evil! Make peace while you can!  
Turn the other cheek! Without justice there is no peace!



Christian influence on national foreign policies

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# Can I eat this?

## Some global considerations on the meat in the sandwich: The beginning of a rude tale at the end of a 'roo tail'...

Ingo Weber

Just before going to a peace trust dinner recently, I stumbled across an agricultural report published by the UN, followed soon afterwards by a picture of an Aboriginal man holding up a kangaroo tail. I had no idea just how these two very different perspectives would come together to tell me something about our world. Here it is then – see what you think of it.

### Global issues and the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) report

In 2006, unbeknown to many of us, the FAO released one of its largest international studies, which reported on the state of global agriculture. The implications of this report are important, as it is one of the first true global agricultural assessments ever done. Amongst many issues raised it identifies the massive environmental and climatic impact of cattle grazing and animal farming on our planet. According to the report the greenhouse-gas emission from global livestock is larger than that caused by all of the cars in the world put together. But what concerned me even more is the strong and direct implication that our activity of large-scale farm production significantly worsens many of the major global issues we have been trying to deal with for some time now: massive deforestations and loss of fertile soil, poverty, famines and lack of clean water, out-break of many infectious diseases also on a global scale (e.g. bird flu presently, the Peking flu and BSE being other ones), as well as our increased resistance to antibiotics (70% of our antibiotic usage is spent on farm animals). The intense farming techniques being employed result in much too crowded conditions for the animals. To keep costs down further, the most effective way to find cheap food for these cattle is by 'convincing' farmers and the poor in the under-developed world to grow cattle feed, rather than their native plant products which could be used to feed themselves. The major conclusion of this study however is that urgent action is needed now, as our planet's ecological system simply will no longer be able to sustain the current trend. It seems foolish to further increase our greenhouse gases and yet at the same time to cut down our forests in the quest for 'cheap' meat. We are in fact making more holes into the hull of our already sinking ship – unnecessarily! For more information on the report, go to FAO's homepage or visit: <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/index.html>.

### Implications for a modern society

It seems to me that our insistence on eating 'cheap' meat almost daily lies at the heart of some of our major global problems, and that this cheap meat in the supermarket is not so cheap after all but actually comes at a great cost to humans and their environment (not to mention the 'cost' the animals have to bear).

How then does this go down with my peace trust dinner, where no doubt many different meat dishes were to be on offer? And how do these reports work out with our christmas dinners, where again many pray and reflect upon

peace, food and water for everyone? Do we all have to become vegetarians then? No more christmas turkey?

I figure that in terms of meat consumption it is not about whether or not to eat meat, in the first instance, but rather *how often* we should eat meat. And how cheap should we expect it to be, considering the great many alternative foods available to us? (Meat production also requires much more energy, as well as releasing many more greenhouse gases and water than plant-based foods do, in order to give the same amount of nutrients and energy to a human being.)

To me it seems logical that, by reducing our meat consumption and buying more local and fair-traded products, we would be adhering to a lifestyle that is more coherent with our efforts for global justice and peace for everyone. It is not just a practical consideration but also a moral one, since the ideology about 'peace for everyone' means not just the absence of war or violence but also implies freedom from cruelty, the ability to produce enough local foods and having access to clean water. If our excessive meat-eating lifestyle, based on cheap meat, directly threatens the very basic living conditions for many of the poorest in this world, can we still consider ourselves to conform to our own moral values, hopes and aspiration for a peaceful and just world? If our meat-eating lifestyle further contributes to severe ecological disasters, can we claim to lead responsible lives or live by example?

**According to the report the greenhouse-gas emission from global livestock is larger than that caused by all of the cars in the world put together.**

### Thief or Slave? 'Us' vs. 'Them'

Here we pick up the 'roo tail'. Can we afford to be distracted by our busy lives from this global situation, as we continue to go shopping and out to dinners, as usual? By ignoring the costs and facts about meat production (as well as other products), are we any better than common thieves and criminals in today's global world? This might sound abstract, but the reports from the UN and others seem to be stating the obvious. Our lifestyle choices are actually taking away the essential and basic living conditions from others, who should have the same basic rights as we do. The difference between a thief and us is that we just do not see it happen in front of our eyes, but we let others (multinational companies including the oil companies) do the work for us

with every cheap product we buy from them. Or to put it another way, on one hand we have abandoned slave labour, while many nations (particularly in South America and Africa) and their farmers are still slaves to *our* demands and *our* economy. (The existence of sweatshops full of ethnic migrants provides a graphic example of this slave labour within our own world.) We might no longer have to invade other countries any more (except when the basis of our luxurious lifestyle is directly threatened – the oil supply) or keep slaves in our homes, but we still invade and ‘occupy’ them in an economic sense, and we still keep them as slaves – far away, out of mind and out of sight.

### **What is realistic within our global economy?**

#### **‘Us’ = ‘Them’**

Let’s face it: becoming a vegetarian and buying only fair-traded or local products is unlikely to ‘save the planet’ as such. Consider that each day when we deal with money or shares, be it at a bank or elsewhere, this money, our/your money, will be used on the global market for investment into big multinational companies, including food companies. Our market economy is based on debt, credit and numbers which don’t exist in real terms. It is all based on consumer confidence, and one thing is certain: as fuel prices rise and climate changes take hold, consumer confidence will plummet and the market will collapse. There is nothing wrong with that, and maybe it is a necessary part of a new evolving economy rising on top of our old outdated one. Just don’t be surprised if one day you find yourself without any real belongings, but numbers, which don’t mean anything any more.

There will not be a happy ending then, with all African or South American farmer families sitting happily under trees one day, waving to us whilst watching a sunrise, no matter how many fair-traded products we might buy. For we want our money to be worth something, our shares to grow and the products we buy to be cheap. Someone will have to pay for our wealth.

Our human population has now risen to 6.6 billion. There are too many of us then for all to go back to farms and grow or buy our own produce anyway. Indeed there would be no forests left at all on this planet and the global environmental costs would go up even more rapidly, as everyone drives around the countryside trying to find a patch of land to cultivate or buy. However this does raise another question about how many of us this planet can actually support and under what conditions. Is it fair that one billion people continue to live in absolute poverty (less than one dollar a day), as a result of exploitation through global trade and a lack of interest by us to provide them with the necessary health supports, equipment and infrastructure? Are donations by our governments and us really the answer for them, or would it be better perhaps to change our mindset in seeing this world as ‘us and them’? Or, worse, do we need to continue to see it as ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ as our free trade economy seems to suggest?

#### **Making our own decisions (but with conscience)**

So ultimately we can argue back and forth, but we have to make our own decisions on how we want to live and on how much meat we want to eat, for example. If you are happy with your lifestyle the way it is ... okay. But before you tick this one off, check in with yourself and make sure that you are informed about the choices you make. With increased possibilities also come increased responsibilities. Do you want to make decisions based on global information and on

your conscience, or do you rather let others make those decisions for you? Could it be enough if those who go to church reflect on our ‘sins’ and pray? But what exactly are our ‘sins’ then? How can our sins be confessed if we are not fully aware of them? Isn’t this whole idea about confession to wake up your conscience and ask yourself about what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’?

Our human values are based ultimately on what we believe in, but we act according to what we perceive. However, our perception can vary greatly. Or to put it simply, can you see beyond the supermarket’s price tag and consider the real costs of meat production in environmental and ethical terms?

In the light of what we already know from many global reports, I believe we need to wake up and act, as we still seem to be fast asleep in the shopping aisles most of the time. It is not about being right or wrong or having a heart or not, but simply about waking up to some necessary changes in our shopping behaviour and general lifestyle. Why have an alarm clock if we don’t use it. Why conduct studies and obtain information if we do not want to know and do not want to implement these changes accordingly?

#### **New global economy: can we achieve it?**

Many significant efforts have been made in trying to reduce human poverty and the occurrence of famine. Yet: whilst in numbers overall poverty in the world has improved significantly; it seems to be getting worse for the poorest nations, particularly in Africa and South America. Poverty in those places seems to be getting worse with more and more desperately poor people, despite some great efforts by many well-known artists, bands, politicians and others. As mentioned earlier, we might actually need a new global economic system. Not necessarily an easy task, but we need an economic system that is fairer and does not strive for, (a) continued and increasing population growth and consumption, and (b) exploitation of poorer nations simply because we can, as a result of ‘free global trade’ (this poverty incidentally leading to a spiralling rise in populations in the third world).

This complex change will not come about by voting at the ballot box as it is sometimes suggested. That would be much easier, of course, a bit like taking some tablet the doctor prescribed rather than changing our lifestyle for improved health. Similarly then our present set of conditions is best attacked at its roots. We need to vote with our shopping trolley and our forks at local level first, for we are the root cause of whatever our economic system has become. Explaining to others what we are doing might make more and more people change their consumer habits as well. Only then will the politicians dare to implement changes, thus creating an environment where our market and our high-tech industries can and will readily change into a fairer and more sustainable system for the future.

#### **The multinationals: is it really ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’?**

Multinational companies are no better or worse than we are, but they will only change their method of the cheapest possible food and goods production ‘at all costs’ when we create enough demand for them to do so. The large multinationals are the product of our own human nature in wanting everything right now, right here and as cheaply as possible. We created them and we will therefore only change them by changing our attitude towards our own lives. With such a large population on this planet we will not be able to do without them, anyway.

## The 'Others'

What about our attitudes towards the other beings (animals) we share this planet with? Many of us are of the opinion that our treatment towards animals somehow also reflects our own inner world. I wonder if there is some truth to this. Gandhi summed it up in the following way: 'The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals.'

Maybe the conscious lifestyle choices we make here today can make a difference, if only in order to help our conscience for tomorrow.

## Saving the planet?

Maybe we should focus less on trying to save the planet and more on how to discover our conscious beliefs and faith in a global humanity overall. The papers are full of doom and gloom, and eminent scientists, politicians and philosophers offer many opinions on how best to save the planet. But whether they believe in nuclear power, more prayers (or both), or planting trees, one single issue is mentioned by all of them: we must change our lifestyle, as we are already living beyond the means of sustainability. So maybe we should not try to change the world, nor try to save the planet. Maybe we should simply change our lifestyle? Shopping and going out to dinner provide great opportunities to remind ourselves of just how lucky we are, particularly when in the company of good friends and loved ones. However, let us also not forget then the opportunity this provides for developing a global conscience, by being able to see beyond the price tags of the supermarket shelves and restaurants. □

**Ingo Weber**, medical doctor and HSSA committee member.

## GREEN GROWTH

The economy will grow from:  
More research  
More education  
More renewable energy  
More books  
More health care  
More grow your own  
More D.I.Y.  
More bikes, More trains, More boats  
More public servants  
More Oz art  
More Oz theatre  
More music  
More community resources – halls, ovals, bush tracks, swimming pools, libraries, galleries, theatres.  
More diversity, More care, More thought.  
It's about More ideas and time: less about physical possessions  
It's about doing More and sitting Less  
It's about values – More about values – More values – lots More.  
Not Less, and absolutely  
Not 'No economic growth.'

**Ann Young**

# How to behave in the Last Days

## Val Yule

These Last Days may be the last days of living in ways we have been used to. This is possible, though not certain. Maybe the Last Days of the human race? Even that is possible. A climate change in ideas too?

**H**umans are thought to be the only animals that live in awareness of their personal last days, i.e. with the knowledge that they will die. Even living with that awareness, taking that knowledge into account in the way we live, the pragmatic response is to continue living as if we are going to continue living. John Donne kept his coffin in his bedroom and awareness of death shaped his life, but his life was full and productive.

The ways we adapt to awareness of our own mortality affect how we respond to foreknowledge of other deadly disasters. There have been imminent Last Days throughout history, and there is a ripe pile of fantasy as well, to show how others have responded to the imminence. John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* is a chilling example, along with the more recent blockbusters.

Most of the Last Days have been dooms that people could not avoid, times of plague, wars and natural disasters. Hundreds of thousands of times people in cities have watched invincible armies advancing to destroy them. Knowledge of their history is useful now.

The full range of past responses still appears in response to Climate Change – 'It won't happen,' 'Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,' 'It can't happen here,' 'Repent! Repent!', 'Flee away!' 'I can be on the make here,' 'Fight, never surrender,' 'Death with honour'.

There have always been prophets and sour mouths who blame coming disasters on human behaviour. Usually the victims must have offended the gods, who must be appeased, even with holocausts of sacrifice. Old Testament prophets blamed sins that required repentance and amends. Their prophecies are raging blends of anger at social injustice and turpitude, laments of woe, exulting calls for divine vengeance, and hopes for hope – that dry bones might live, that swords might be recycled, that showers of forgiveness might rain.

Last Days today are frequently blamed on human behaviour. Others deny it, and even deny the extent of the desolations that humans have been making of this Earth with waste, excesses, greed and military destruction.

## What do we do?

We can keep on doing what everyone else is doing, and face what happens when it happens. Where then is use of humanist reason and compassion for humankind?

Our actions and lack of action may not be bringing on climate change, rising winds, storms and seas, and enormous droughts and floods. But our behaviour is in any case devastating the world with wild-life extinctions, spreading desertification, dying seas, pollutions and unprecedented destruction of resources.

What is the power of one individual? There is plenty of evidence that what one person does may not matter one drop – or it may be crucial. ‘I won’t change unless they change first’ is a cop-out. It is a gamble worth taking individual responsibility, even if it will make not half a drop’s difference.

People in Australia are slowly being bent to changing their life-style, starting with water-saving tooth-cleaning. Suppose the threats of Last Days require extreme paring back of all excess, to what can be sustained with a reasonable degree of quality of life. Then we must look squarely at NSW Premier Iemma’s dilemma, ‘*What is the use of saving the planet if the economy is wrecked?*’

Individuals need to work out how the economy can adapt to survive. Survival has always required adaptation to changing circumstances.

### Personal lifestyle

Socially responsible living can be made a sort of game. It is possible for one person with a loved garden to have water bills for 22 litres a day in winter and fewer than 120 litres a day in summer. Electricity use can be halved, once we know the traps of standby lights, and how often ‘thrifty exercise’ can replace machines. We can be users rather than consumers, and buy for quality, mendability, renovatability and durability. We can appreciate what is familiar, and get our novelty kicks from ideas and extending knowledge of the world around us, rather than by trashing for the sake of newness. We can look at common practices with new eyes – how come it is taken for granted that a tonne of metal is OK to shift one small person from A to B?

We can climb out of the ruts of being entertained by horrors, and insist that the media publish no whingeings without discussing possible solutions. We can insist that all talk on topics such as ‘capping emissions’ include actual details of specific actions that can be attempted, beyond organising financial brokerages and bureaucracies and statistical goals.

### The economy is stupid, stupid

Even if individuals start behaving responsibly, the present economy cannot cope as it is now. Half of what is produced is wasted at some point before it need be, and our economy needs to produce to keep on growing. Stopping excess consumption by the affluent means bankruptcy for retailers and for producers of what is not really needed. Millions of present jobs and businesses collapse. Meanwhile elsewhere billions are poor, lacking even basics.

### Look at what jobs are really needed and how to pay for them

If all the jobs that need to be done were being done, there would be no unemployment. To limit and cope with the effects of climate change requires enormous investment of manpower, skills, education and training, new products, technology, research.

The minds of economists must consider Resources and their Future Cost along with Capital and Labour as a foundation of production. The ‘sustainable household’ which saves must become as significant as the market which supplies its demands. What people do beyond their regular employment is not be regarded as only the right to entertainment, but time for opportunity – because so much that is really important and innovatory is done in the corners of time.

### Morality in economics

Morality may turn out to be essential for a prosperous economy and polity not riven by destructive conflicts and competition. Humanists and secular ethics, as well as overlooked religious ethics, might find that when enormous wealth siphons into sinks of the affluent few, it engenders waste and breeds more greed rather than the enterprise and productive capital that is claimed to justify it. Money’s original purpose as a means for exchange of goods and services could apply to how banks operate. Wealth from financial manipulations and dealings in property might become a source of public shame not status, and possibly be moderated by ‘benevolence taxes’ that enabled the supertax payers to have a say in how these were spent – to be public spenders not just private ones.

### Boredom and fear

Traditionally, the devil’s core problem was regarded as boredom. We too have built up enormous entertainment industries to avoid boredom. Psychological distresses of youth include expressed boredom.

Boredom is basically a lack of mental energy. Our greatest energy crisis is a crisis of our own energy. Humanists can be a bit intolerant of the weaknesses of other humans who do not manage without various psychological props. They need to offer other alternatives and inspiration, to galvanise independence of thinking and action.

Internationally the culture of the Western media must stop letting us all down. How can all the people of the world know enough to unite against the common climatic enemy of us all?

The unity needed is not just shared fear, but shreds of hope and courage, and the faith that good is not non-existent if superstition is wiped away. There is more amoral superstition to attack in the back pages of women’s magazines when compared to the encouragement of social responsibility in the major ancient scriptures. There still abide love, faith and hope. Even if our times turn out to be the worst of times, we can at least play a different sort of Olympic Games. □

Valerie Yule, illustrator, creative thinker, educational psychologist and HSV member.



# The Greening of Humanism

Only if men see themselves ... for what they are, quite alone, with no one to help them except their fellow-men, products of natural processes which are wholly indifferent to their survival, will they face their ecological problems in their full implications. \*

*Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, by John Passmore. (1974) p. 184.

## Roslyn Ives

Humanism had its origins in the human-centred philosophical and literary movement that swept across Western Europe during the late 14th to 16th centuries. The first humanists of the Renaissance period revelled in the newly discovered texts from much earlier Greek and Roman times. Stimulated by fresh ideas they produced a great outpouring of creative works, especially in the fields of art, literature and music. In celebrating human capabilities these first humanists were challenging religious authority but not religion itself.

The step away from religion, towards freethought and a greater reliance on reason, was taken later by the Enlightenment thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This non-religious strand of thought was given further support in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the work of Charles Darwin on the evolutionary origins of life forms. With freethought groups mushrooming around the world, delegates gathered in Amsterdam in 1952 to form the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Those attending were advocates of a human-based life stance as an ethical alternative to religion. After days of discussion they agreed to call it humanism.

In recent decades many humanists have been advocating a further step in the development of humanism, one that would widen the humanist circle of ethical concern to include other creatures and the environment. Such a broadening of humanism would do two things. Acknowledge that we are naturally evolved beings, totally dependent on nature for survival. And help us act more effectively on the environmental problems which threaten the existing pattern of life on Earth.

This logical next step in the development of humanism does not mean that human rights, social justice and personal freedom are any less important for humanists. Rather it means we widen our circle of concern to include action on such issues as global warming, over-use of resources and loss of biodiversity.

### Human interdependence with nature

Science tells us that we humans are naturally evolved beings, totally dependent on nature for survival. We need oxygen, given off by green plants as a by-product of photosynthesis. We need other life forms as food, for growth, repair and maintenance. We need shelter and clothing, provided by nature. We need freshwater, which is filtered and cleaned through healthy ecosystems. (Estimates have been made that this service, which nature does for free, would cost trillion of dollars to do by chemical means.) We also need our wastes and often dead bodies to be decomposed by other organisms, so that the matter they contain can be recycled for further use. Yet these are only the most obvious ways we are interdependent with nature.

Ecosystems, made up of a great diversity of interacting organisms, provide us with our biosphere home on planet Earth. When an ecosystem is healthy biologists refer to it as being in dynamic balance. In general, the greater the number of different species, the more stable an ecosystem will be, due to the multiplicity of interactions. If species disappear the number of interactions is reduced, causing population explosions or collapses, as the ecosystem becomes dysfunctional. Humans have destroyed many ecosystems by such actions as land clearing, over-fishing, releasing polluting wastes, transporting exotic species around the globe, and planting large acreages with a single species (monoculture) thereby attracting pests and the subsequent extensive use of poisonous pesticides.

Other important natural systems that make our planetary home liveable are the wind and ocean currents. Winds are generated by broad bands of heated and cooled air that move in great swirls across the globe, picking up and dropping moisture. Likewise massive bodies of warmed and cooled water form ocean currents. In interaction with the air currents they create local weather and the global climatic zones. And whether land is covered in ice or snow, sand or vegetation also affects weather patterns. So we can be fairly sure that some of the more recent extreme weather events around the world can be attributed to such human activities as global warming and the removal of forests. The complex interactive systems of the biosphere combine to create the living conditions for life on our planet. Over 40 years ago James Lovelock, a UK chemist, proposed the idea of the biosphere as a self-regulating super-organism that keeps global systems in balance. He called this the 'Gaia' hypothesis.

### The environmental crisis

The environmental crisis humans have caused is the result of us being too successful as a species, in terms of numbers, distribution and over-use of resources. This 'success', comes at a huge cost – environmental degradation – as we use a disproportionate amount of the planet's resources and produce far more waste than the Earth's systems can either dilute or decompose. Currently human use has transformed more than 50% of the land surface of the planet. We use more than 50% of the world's freshwater supplies. Our industrial, chemical, nuclear and organic wastes pollute land, water and air. Our high energy use has increased the CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere, from 280ppm 200 years ago to 380ppm in 2005, and still rising. The greenhouse effect of CO<sub>2</sub> and other gases is causing global warming and probably climate change, two problems currently taxing the resolve of our politicians.

As a consequence of altering, if not destroying, most of the planet's natural ecosystems, many species have been

made extinct or reduced to the status of endangered – except, for the handful of species we directly exploit for our needs. A few years ago the rate of species extinction was estimated at 20,000 per year, or 55 per day. While there is growing concern to save species from extinction, such measures are near useless alongside our continuing expansionary and exploitative practices.

In affecting nearly every part of the biosphere humans are headed for a series of environmental disasters. And intensifying our woes is an inclination to do too little, too late to counter the most obvious problems, despite archaeological and historical evidence showing the past to be littered with examples of highly developed civilizations collapsing due to human-caused environmental degradation. And even now we are confronted with increasingly severe floods, famines and cyclones we're still heading down the growth/consumerist path towards environmental catastrophes and societal disruption.

In theory we know what we need to do: curb population growth, cut back on greenhouse-gas emissions, control pollution, stop land-clearing and over-fishing, change our technologies, and most importantly protect what is left of the Earth's diverse ecosystems. Those of us with high energy and high consumer lifestyles need to live with less, while supporting actions that will help the redistribution of resources more equitable. In a nutshell, we need to live more simply and sustainably, if that is possible. However, the culturally established views of Man's place in the scheme of things and the ethics and values we have inherited, don't readily provide a framework to stem our assault on our environment, which is why adopting an environmentally sustainable life style is so difficult.

### **Place of nature in Western thinking**

Western cultural patterns, which are based on the notion that nature is a resource for human use, underlie most economies and much human behaviour across the globe. It's a view that sees nature as a vast renewable resource, free for the taking. In the past, when human numbers were small, at a time when communication and transport were slow and difficult, the Earth could reasonably be viewed as a vast cornucopia for our use. However, now with rapid communication and travel, the perceived size of the Earth is of a much smaller globe. We've seen the Earth from space. We *know* most resources are finite and that we are totally dependent on nature for our survival. So the fundamental drivers of global economics – growth and consumerism – which we in the West practise, and the peoples of the developing nations aspire to, can't continue. The reason is plain. It would take at least *four* planet Earths to enable all the current 6 billion plus population to live at a Western standard of living! And with the human population still growing and expected to peak nearer 9–10 billion, resource depletion is an even more pressing problem.

Until very recently, to ill-treat animals or clear-fell vegetation attracted only a modicum of moral outrage and minor legal penalties. Such acts were seen as infringements against the property rights of others, rather than unethical behaviour. And it is still morally acceptable to call in pest exterminators, use insecticides, hunt or fish for fun, drain shorelines, clear land of all vegetation, fill in swamps and dam back rivers. Until very recently these assaults on nature were seen, as Man triumphing over Nature and therefore not as matters of great concern. It is still only a minority of people, though numbers are increasing, who show a genuine ethic of care towards other

creatures in general. And even this can be highly selective. Often it's cats, dogs, whales and pandas that are valued; while worms, spiders and insects in general are not.

The willingness to exploit nature is thoroughly grounded in the dominant Greek and Judeo-Christian strand of Western thinking which both humanists and religionists have inherited. It is a view that was further entrenched in the 1600s when a mechanical view of nature came to dominate the philosophical thinking. This led onto the development of science and the technologies of industrialisation which gave rise to the high energy, consumerist life style now spreading across the globe. Humanist philosopher John Passmore sums this up as 'Man the despot.'

Writing in the early 1970s in *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, Passmore describes the predominant Western, christian attitude towards nature, as 'contemptuously exploitative, or one of arrogant dominance'. He noted that what mattered most to christians was man's relationship to god, while the rest of the living world was merely for human use. As expressed in *Genesis* 1.26,

And God said. Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Such passages have underpinned the dominant Western tradition of exploiting nature. And even though humanists and others have rejected religion and see the Bible as a human creation, they are still, to varying degrees, under the influence of the christian-based exploitative attitude towards nature. Until the last few decades it was rare to find any humanist writer or statement that included an expression of care and concern about the natural world.

### **Environmental ethics**

Even though we now know we are fully dependent upon nature, cultural views established thousands of years ago, which emphasised human dominance over nature, have led us to place a low priority on our animal needs and our similarity to other living things. Our huge numbers and resource-rich life styles are destroying the natural ecosystems that gave rise to and sustained our species for the thousands of years. What then can we do about this dilemma?

Just as we have developed a 'social conscience' leading us, at least in theory, to consider the welfare of all humanity, we now need an 'environmental conscience' to guide us towards caring about nature. Already this shift in ethical concern is under-way. Many ecologists and environmental ethicists argue the case for a less human-centred and a much more eco-centred or green way of life.

In the past few decades environmental or green ethics have become an established field of theological and philosophical concern. The recent growth in christian green ethics is underpinned by a belief that god's creation needs to be cared for, with humans playing an important stewardship role. Alternatively many religious people consider nature to be sacred and therefore to be valued. Neither of these approaches is likely to be suitable for humanists. Our ethics need to come out of reasoned thinking.

One useful framework that should be suitable for humanists comes from the ecologist Aldo Leopold. In the 1940s he suggested the need for a new ethic of conservation, and classed it as being the third in a series of historical stages, or widening circles:

- 1, ethics of individual relationships as set down in codes like the ten commandments;
- 2, duties to society, including human rights;
- 3, an ethic to deal with human relationships to the natural world.

In reference to this third circle, it is worth remembering that at least some people over the past few thousand years have enacted an ethic of care towards other life forms. These would generally have been rural people whose livelihood depended on the plants and animals they reared and cared for. It would have been common knowledge that well-treated animals were easier to handle and yielded more and better produce than ill-treated live stock. It was in part from this tradition that many modern-day 'back to nature', green movements have sprung. Such an ethic of care is not sentimental, but rather based on an inter-dependence of needs.

Another idea is an expansion of rights to include nature having rights. The concept of expanding rights has a solid historical tradition behind it, beginning with the rights of man movements associated with the American and French Revolutions, to later expansions of rights including the emancipation of slaves, political and legal rights for women, rights for gays, and the right of indigenous peoples to be recognised as a country's original inhabitants. More recently many nations around the world have enacted endangered species Acts. These Acts imply that at least the named species have the right to exist.

Care for the natural world can be underpinned by different levels of regard for other living things. An obvious one is the purely utilitarian position of conserving nature and wilderness areas, because they might contain organisms of future use to humans. Natural areas are conserved for our enjoyment, so we can go bush walking, hiking and camping in the great outdoors. Our natural surroundings have always been a source of beauty and aesthetic satisfaction which is a further argument in favour of conserving natural areas. Being able to walk a natural area revives our spirits and gives us a sense of our oneness with other life forms. Viewing nature as of value forms the basis of one aspect of an environmental ethic.

Among environmentalists are varying levels of regard for other organisms. Those who argue largely from human interest point of view are thought of as shallow ecologists, while those supporting intrinsic rights for organisms are deep ecologists. The central idea of deep ecology is the right of every form of life to function normally, in the ecosystem, or in the words of Norwegian Arne Naess (1972), 'the equal right to live and blossom'. A high regard for the right of all living organism to flourish does not mean that humans, as participants in an ecosystem, won't be involved in killing of some other species. Deep ecologists may still eat meat, but they will be careful only to kill for needs and raise and care for food animals in ways that allow them to flourish, even if only for a short time.

An ethic of care was expressed by the well-known humanitarian doctor and ethical thinker, Albert Schweitzer. Although raised a Christian he ended his days as a humanist. In 1923 Schweitzer wrote, the ethical person,  
 shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf  
 from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush  
 any insect as he walks. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From *The Rights of Nature*. Roderick Nash 1989 Primavera Press. Page 61

In these words Schweitzer expresses a deep ethic of care for nature. Knowing that all living things are part of inter-linked ecosystems, and that the health of the parts is measured by the well-being of the whole, then taking care to not inflict unnecessary damage becomes central to our way of behaving towards nature. Killing spiders and other small creatures should be avoided. Maintaining a garden that supports local wildlife, helping to preserve bushland, consuming locally grown food, recycling and living with less are just some ways to live more ethically green.

Another approach is that of animal liberationists who argue that other living beings especially sentient ones have rights to be treated respectfully. Schweitzer's reverence for life supports the notion that other living things have an intrinsic right to exist, independent of any value, pleasure they may be to us humans.

### Greening of Humanism

Over a period of nearly four decades the obvious need for an ethics of care towards nature, has been promoted by individual humanists. An early example is John Passmore in his insightful book, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. In one very telling passage (quoted in part at beginning) he gives a starkly states the need for a humanist, environmental conscience.

Only if men see themselves ... for what they are, quite alone, with no one to help them except their fellow-men, products of natural processes which are wholly indifferent to their survival, will they face their ecological problems in their full implications. Not by extension, but by the total rejection, of the concept of the sacred will they move towards that sombre realisation.

Further examples of humanists advocating the greening of humanism include Sibnarayan Ray in his article 'Humanism for the 21st Century' (*AH* Winter 1999), and Abe Solomon of the Indian Secular Society and long time IHEU Board member, who has produced a draft Declaration on Human Values. Article 10, *Humankind and Nature* reads:

Man being part of nature necessitates his living in harmony with it. Concern for all life and the quality of the environment ought to guide all human activities.

This statement expresses sentiments of fundamental importance. We are part of nature, and whatever else we may aspire to be we are biological beings. We must live in harmony with nature if our species, and others, are to have any quality of life in the future.

As an ethicist with a global reputation, built primarily on his ground-breaking book *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975, Peter Singer in his 2004 AHOY acceptance speech spoke of a widening of ethical concerns to include the welfare and well-being of other sentient species. Tim Flannery AHOY 2005 has long been writing and advocating a lighter ecological footprint in his books, *The Future Eaters* and *The Weather Makers*, which is an examination of global warming and climate change. Other Australian humanists who have been trying to raise humanist consciousness on a spectrum of environmental issues include Dick Clifford, Gerhard Weissmann, Valerie Yule and now in this issue of *AH* Ingo Weber.

However, despite concern for the environment expressed by many individual humanists, for humanist organisations green issues tends to be added-on rather than core issue. An example of this occurs in the one-page 2002 Amsterdam Declaration on Humanism, which includes only a single

phrase about the environment. It reads, 'and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world.' This, disappointingly, is not under the section on 'ethics', instead it appears as an afterthought in the section on 'personal liberty and social responsibility'.

### Conclusion

Humanism is an open-ended, continually developing life stance. It needs to be periodically renewed to take on board new and fresh ideas that will especially appeal to younger people. Humanists have rejected a god creator in favour of natural explanations. We understand ourselves as naturally evolved beings, totally dependent on other creatures and our planetary home for survival. It logically follows that we ought to also reject ideas from our religious inheritance that have caused us to behave in rapacious ways towards nature.

Widening our ethical circle of concern to include care for nature will give us good reasons to change aspects of our lifestyles and participate in actions that will help solve our many serious environmental problems. And if moderate religious people want to take similar actions on these environmental issues, we humanists should work with them. In these times of environmental crisis, blanket hostility towards religion would be misplaced. □

The IHEU minimal statement, expanded to include an 'environmental conscience'.

### Humanists & Humanism

Humanists try to lead ethical and responsible lives not reliant on supernatural influences. They believe it is possible to build a more civil, humane, democratic society using human capabilities, tempered by critical reason and a spirit of free enquiry. As products of natural processes Humanists recognise the importance of living in ways that preserve other life forms and sustain the Earth's resources for future generations. This open-ended, uncertain yet optimistic approach to living is called Humanism.

\* Passmore was writing before the more widespread use of gender neutral language. I would have preferred 'humans' and 'fellow-humans' in place of 'men' and 'fellow-men'.

**Rosslyn Ives**, former secondary school biology and science teacher and active humanist for many years.



An unsustainable ecosystem

# The battle for moral clarity

The challenge for the new Government is to balance urgent needs against stultifying consultation, writes **Bruce Grant**.

At the marble entrance to the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States is a bold inscription: 'And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.' On the mosaic floor of the entrance hall of the Victorian Parliament in Melbourne is a circular inscription you need to walk around to read: 'Where no counsel is, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.'

Both are from that hold-all of moral and political advice, the Bible. The CIA inscription is a smart version of *John* 8: 32. Perhaps the most emotional and ardent of the apostles, John avoids the homely parables and epigrams of Jesus, preferring the lofty metaphors of the I-Am style, the Truth, the Light, the Resurrection and the Life.

The Melbourne inscription comes from *Proverbs* 11: 14, written centuries before Jesus lived. *Proverbs* is full of patriarchal advice on how to live a long and happy life by working hard, making money and avoiding wine and red-lipped women. In my annotated Bible, it is grouped with kindly cynic Ecclesiastes and perplexed sufferer Job as 'wisdom literature'.

Both inscriptions are political aphorisms paraded as self-evident truths. In real life neither is useful on its own. Conviction gives energy to politics, which would otherwise be a compromise between contending interests, but can lead to arrogance. Consultation is a check on hubris but also an invitation to inaction.

Managing a healthy political system, especially a democracy, means finding a way between them, between moral clarity and tolerance, truth and reality, risk and safety. Policy and process go hand in hand.

For secular humanists such as myself, the past decade, under the influence of George Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard, has had too much *John*, not enough *Proverbs*. Bush, a born-again Christian and the most overtly evangelical, has said that God told him to strike at al-Qaeda, which he did, and then to strike at Saddam Hussein, which he did, and then to solve the problems of the Middle East, which he is in the process of doing.

'I base a lot of my foreign policy decisions on some things that I think are true. One, I believe that there's an Almighty. And, secondly, I believe that one of the great gifts of the Almighty is the desire in everyone's soul, regardless of what you look like or where you live, to be free.'

Blair's religiosity was, being English, more contained, but it was apparent in his rhetoric, which had, at times, the lift and lilt of metaphysical poetry. Since stepping down as prime minister, he has converted to Catholicism.

Howard, the most secular of the three, a believer rather in free market forces and, being Australian, less inclined to flights of fancy, was, however, surrounded by I-Am stylists such as Downer and Abbott and tried to emulate White

House rhetoric. He suffered the most humiliating political fate of I-Am hubris, a fall from grace.

Our local Sadducees say he was getting old and, rightly proud of material success, did not understand the needs of working families. If only he had not won the Senate, they say, he would have stayed humble. But our Zealots, Essenes and simple 'people of the land' murmur among themselves about the Pacific Solution for refugees, loss of civil liberty and collapse of trust, eloquently stated in the Whitlam-Fraser letter during the campaign (themselves reformed I-Amists). And our Pharisees are convinced that he did not understand the forces at work in the contemporary world, including religion, terror and climate change.

I am with the Pharisees. Iraq is Australia's most serious foreign policy blunder since Vietnam. The new Prime Minister and his team have the obligation not just to extricate Australia from Iraq but to show they understand the need to correct the predisposition that put the troops there in the first place.

We were asked to associate our endeavour with Gallipoli, Dunkirk and Kokoda, but our society is not at war. There is no sense of shared sacrifice. Profits soar, stock markets surge, taxes are reduced, unions campaign for better living conditions, libertarians (indeed liberals) fight for liberty, young people worry about education, jobs and getting their foot in the door of real estate. Wine flows and red-lipped women abound.

**'In reality, terrorism never ends. It has to be contained and managed, its resources countered, its sources neutralised.'**

The 'war on terror' is a misnomer, inviting ramped-up warrior rhetoric, false options of victory and defeat and staged presentations of missions accomplished. In reality, terrorism never ends. It has to be contained and managed, its resources countered, its sources neutralised. It is an irritant, not a threat to survival. Today, none of the major powers supports it. Invoking the ANZUS treaty, sending troops into 'combat', has diverted us from the main game, which is to expose terrorism's human credentials.

Australia has done this in co-operating on counter-terrorism with Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation and our neighbour. Intent on remaining a secular state, Indonesia has at least as much at stake as Australia in seeing that extremist forms of Islam do not become dominant in our region. Always important, Indonesia has become arguably Australia's most significant bilateral relationship in the age of terror.

Climate change is a new kind of foreign policy challenge, likely to become common in the 21st century. The traditions of national 'security' and 'interest', which have been worked to death in the 'war on terror', have to be revised to regain public confidence. Secrecy and demagoguery have no place in a campaign in which not only the Australian nation and people are involved, but the nations and peoples of the entire globe.

There will be no quick fix on climate change, but a change of political attitude is the starting point for

consultation with foreign governments and, within Australia, with the states, business, trade unions, non-government organisations and the public. The Australian people need to be taken into the Government's confidence. Australians are not notably disciplined, but experience with compulsory seatbelts, smoking restrictions and water rationing shows that we will accept regulation and deprivation when convinced we are sharing in a public good.

It is time to return to *Proverbs* 11: 14. And when our new Government looks over the horizon it sees, beyond Indonesia, a trio of powerful neighbours, Japan, China and India, who do not share the monotheistic beliefs of the children of Abraham, whether Jew, Christian or Muslim.

Our new Government has a lot to consult about.

Author and diplomat **Bruce Grant** has written widely on Australian political culture and foreign policy.

[*The Age* (Melbourne), 2 January 2008: page 11.]

## Water-wise

Have you ever had to remind your dear daughter,  
Not to throw out the baby with the bath water?  
Well, this quaint little saying in the days of old  
Was taken quite seriously and frequently told.

How could this happen, it sounds quite absurd,  
The silliest story I've ever heard.  
But in dirty black water there was always the fear,  
The smallest family member may not reappear.

In Victorian times for working-class folk,  
They used the same water to have a good soak,  
First the father, then mother and the kids in rotation,  
Once a month it became an important occasion.

The baby was last to be dunked in the scum,  
Overlooked in the murk and forgotten by Mum.  
But water was precious when fetched in a pail,  
And the reason we now have this sad little tale.

Now you might think this story a bit of a bore,  
When in this day and age we have water galore,  
But the way things are shaping, it might not be long,  
That we have to use water with a bit of a pong.

It's time the government should act with great haste,  
And realise it's our showers that cause the most waste.

With water restrictions, the future looks bleak,  
We should do like the Brits with a bath once a week.

Then at the same time we can wash all our undies,  
Avoiding more water in the laundry on Mondays.  
Then bail out the contents and water the shrubs,  
It will give them a drink and kill all the bugs.

**Tony Lee**

# The eternal life fallacy

Paul Murchison

The belief in an eternal life for the worthy is held in all religions. In the Christian and Moslem systems it is accessed immediately after death, with glorious rewards for the holy and the possibility of eternal torture for the remiss. Over the years the latter possibility has been watered down by some Christian denominations to the far more pleasant notion of extinction.

There are several pertinent questions that need answering relevant to the absurd notion of an afterlife. First, what is the point of living forever in a 'perfect world', devoid of any challenges and based on the whim of a cosmic dictator commonly known as god? Second, what are the bona fides of the dictator concerned? The believer holds that this 'god phenomenon' is perfectly just and entitled to behave as he/it chooses simply because it somehow created us. Third, there are presently 6.4 billion people on this planet; many babies are dying from AIDs; there is mass starvation in the third world, and military slaughter is endemic in many parts of the planet. Who, and how does god choose the inhabitants for his mansion in the sky? Fourth, even if we assume that there are subtle changes within the heavenly sphere (to break the monotony), where would it all end? Surely, the reaching of an impasse would negate god's alleged omnipotence or total power. Fifth, there is also the problem of identity? Unless some degree of personal identity was retained 'who' would be enjoying the heavenly bliss? Will the ninety-year-old arrival romp around like a five-year-old; conversely, will the five-year-old espouse the wisdom of the ninety-year-old? Perhaps there will be ordained a divinely chosen age, say thirty-five, in which case the five-year-old will miss much of her childhood, while on a positive note old chaps with prostate problems will be fine. Then again all may be merged in a murky ethereal state with the whole caboodle, filled with joy gazing on their maker, boisterously singing hymns and shouting hallelujahs!

Our eastern brethren claim to have resolved the problems of fair judgments, trials, and tribulations by introducing the really wild notions of re-incarnation and its component part karma. Here the soul inhabits a multitude of bodies in order to *learn* (again we must question the bona fides of the teacher) and eventually evolve to higher states of wisdom and decency. In other words old Jack up the road is simply a soul incubator and when Jack passes on it is his soul that continues to pursue truth and enlightenment; Jack, as a once personal entity, is left to push up daisies. We can see clearly here that it is this mysterious soul entity that is allegedly developing while the once knowing individual is now bereft of its former personality. This whole scenario becomes quite offensive when we consider the manner in which the soul (through its material incubators) develops its spiritual growth.

In Hinduism there are four major *varnas* or castes, along with thousands of minor groups known as *jati*. The spiritual leaders are known as Brahmins and it is held that they are born into that caste as a result of good deeds in past lives and are thus held in the highest regard. In the lowest ranking, in fact outside the caste system, we have the Dalits or untouchables, designated by their devious pasts to be born into the most retrograde families and circumstances in order to atone for their past sins. Gandhi was instrumental in trying to offset this obvious injustice. Unfortunately such culturally ingrained traditions, dating back thousands of years, are very hard to shift.

It is easy to see that such draconian religious notions can, and do, create great social and economic injustices, and the fact that India and its enemy Pakistan possess nuclear weapons is disconcerting to say the least. It is also disturbing, at a more personal basis, to consider that where one is born is the criterion for how one is treated and that the maltreatment of low and out caste Hindus can be fobbed off as just punishment for some previous incarnation that arguably could have taken place thousands of years ago.

In summing up, truth, justice and decency are hard enough to find, if not maintain at a secular level. I trust that my brief considerations will indicate the profound difficulties entailed in attempting to transcend our earthly bounds for the erratic and groundless ideas formulated from a boundless and largely unknowable infinity. □

**Paul Murchison**, HSV member with an interest in religion and the occult.

## Humorist Column

Staking out a notoriously bad street for drunk drivers, a policeman watched from his car as a guy lurched through the pub door, tripped on the curb and stumbled into a car, falling asleep on the front seat.

One by one, the drivers of the other cars drove off. Finally, the sleeper woke up, started his car and began to leave. The cop pulled him over and administered a breathalyzer test. When the results showed a zero blood-alcohol level, the puzzled policemen asked him how that was possible. 'Easy,' came the reply. 'Tonight was my turn to be the decoy.'

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A soldier hurrying along the road meets a nun.

'Please Sister, may I hide under your skirt for a few moments,' he asks, 'I'll explain later.'

Without saying anything, the nun agrees.

Moments later, two military Policemen come running along the road. They stop and ask the nun if she has seen a soldier running away.

She replies pointing, 'Yes, he went that way.'

After the MPs disappear down the road, the soldier crawls out from under the nun's skirt and says, 'I can't thank you enough, Sister. You see I don't want to go to Iraq.'

The nun replies that she fully understands his fear.

The soldier then adds, 'I hope you don't think me rude, but you have a beautiful pair of legs.'

The nun replies, 'Thank you, but had you looked a little higher you would have found a beautiful pair of balls. I don't want to go to Iraq either.'

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The census taker told the mayor of a country town that there was something wrong with the population figures. 'For the last ten years the population has been the same 2,058.'

'Yeah, that's right', said the mayor, 'it's always been 2,058.'

'But surely someone has a baby every so often?'

'Sure', replied the mayor. 'And every time it happens some bloke has to leave town.'

# In brief

## Going green with GM crops

BIOFUELS (fuel derived from plants) have been suggested as one answer to global warming due an increase in such gases as CO<sub>2</sub> from transport fuel emissions.

Unfortunately data shows that farming contributes more to global warming (14.9%) than all emissions from the world's cars, trains, ships and planes put together (13.5%). And the biggest contributor from farming is not the carbon dioxide output, but nitrous oxide (an extremely potent greenhouse gas) from use of nitrogen fertiliser. Nitrous oxide leaking from soils where nitrogen fertiliser has been applied contributes 6% to global greenhouse emissions. The other major component of greenhouse-gas emission from farming is methane from livestock and manure (5.1%) and rice paddies (1.5%), with 2.3% from other sources bringing the amount up to 14.9%.

Since the dawn of modern agriculture and use of nitrogen fertiliser, the level of nitrous oxide in the atmosphere has risen by 18%. And the process for manufacturing nitrogen fertiliser releases a lot of carbon dioxide (1% of total global emissions).

One solution to the nitrous oxide release is to use genetically modified (GM) crops that require little or no nitrogen fertiliser. Other options being pursued are GM drought and salt-tolerant plant varieties.

**Peter Aldhous**, *Genes for greens*. *NS*, 5 Jan. 08, p.28–31

## Different language, different world view

Anyone familiar with different languages knows that some ideas and concepts are difficult to translate as they can only be properly expressed in their language of origin. This fact about language has implications for physicists who are finding it hard to take the final step towards producing a successful grand unified theory.

David Peat suggests that part of the answer was hinted at by the great physicist Niels Bohr, when he wrote: It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out about nature. Physics concerns what we can *say* about nature. By this Bohr meant the language we use makes a difference to how we see the world. This can be illustrated by the different meanings Heisenberg and Bohr gave to quantum mechanics. While Heisenberg argued that 'the meaning of quantum theory is in the equations,' Bohr pointed out that physicists still have to stand around the blackboard and discuss them in German, French or English. Whatever the language, each contain deep assumptions about space, time and causality.

The American quantum theorist David Bohm has embraced Bohr's views on language, believing that at the root of the problems physicists are having with trying to produce a grand unified theory is the structure of the languages we speak. European languages perfectly mirror the classical world of Newtonian physics. When we say 'the cat chases the mouse' we are dealing with well-defined objects (nouns), which are connected via verbs. Likewise, classical physics deals with objects that are well located in space and time, which interact via forces and fields. But if

the world doesn't work the way our language does, advances are inevitably hindered.

Bohm pointed out that quantum effects are much more process-based, so to describe them accurately requires a process-based language rich in verbs, and in which nouns play only a secondary role. In 1992 a group of physicists met with some Native American elders – all speakers of the Algonquian family of languages. These languages have a wide variety of verb forms, and lack the notion of dividing the world into categories of objects, such as 'fish', 'trees' or 'birds'.

The world of the Algonquian speakers is of flux and change, of objects emerging and folding back into the flux of the world. There is not the same sense of fixed identity – even a person's name will change during their life. They believe that objects will vanish into this flux unless renewed by periodic rituals or the pipe smoked at sunrise in the sun dance ceremony of the Lakota and Blackfoot.

In discussion with the elders, the physicists were struck by the way Native American thinking seemed in harmony with the reality quantum theory was revealing. In the early decades of the 20th century, the emphasis was on elementary particles, but the focus later shifted towards the notion of fundamental symmetries and symmetry breaking. Bohm himself viewed the particles as closer to processes than objects.

Physics as we know it is about equations and quantitative measurements. But what these numbers and symbols really mean is a different, more subtle matter. In interpreting the equations it needs to be remembered the limitations language places on how we can think about the world. The study of other types of languages opens us up to other world-views, to complementary ways of speaking about the cosmos. Being open that way might give physics the inspiration to leap forward.

**David Peat**, *Trapped in a world view*. *NS* 5 Jan. 08, p. 42-43

## Germs keep you healthy

As strange as it sounds, epidemiologists are uncovering unexpected links between our exposure to dirt and germs, and our risk of cancer later in life. Children who attend day-care in their first few months are much less likely to develop leukaemia than those who stay at home. Such findings point towards a possibility that one way to avoid dying of cancer may be a hefty dose of germs.

Researchers have been debating the 'hygiene hypothesis' for years, but it is typically discussed as an explanation for the rising incidence of allergies and asthma in developed countries, not cancer. The idea is that our immune systems evolved to conduct a ceaseless war on pathogens, parasites and other microbes, but modern lifestyles mean we face fewer threats. This throws our immune systems out of kilter, making them prone to overreact to certain stimuli like pollen and peanuts.

Now some researchers are starting to wonder whether the higher incidence of certain cancers in affluent populations might also have something to do with sanitised, infection-free living. If they're right, the implications are huge.

**Jessica Marshall**, *Filthy healthy*, *NS* 12 Jan. 08. p. 34–37

Extracted by Rosslyn Ives

**In brief** is a new section in the *AH*. In it we hope to bring readers a digest of ideas from *New Scientist* (*NS*).

# Simple Respect

## Rudi Anders

It seems to me simple respect can do more for humanity and the Earth than any ideology or religion.

It is rare for people to change their world-view. Creating a better world only by persuading other people to come to your point of view is a slow process and not enough. Even if a large majority of people came to one view they would soon divide into factions. We will have to learn to live with people of many convictions. Every person on this Earth is a member of a minority, like it or not.

I don't think it is easy to have respect for all people. From childhood most of us are led to believe that what our family believes is rational. Our customs, such as food habits, are normal to us; any other people are not quite as sensible as we are. People who don't support a football team are not normal. I remind myself that my customs look strange to other people. Since it is difficult to respect people from another culture, it is easier to ignore that they live in poverty. When I was a boy in the Netherlands, during WWII, most people were happy to see planes flying over to drop bombs on Germany.

If you belong to another religion you can't possibly be as good as people from my religion. In the USA, Atheists are ranked below Muslims. The media reports that American lives must be protected; as if other people matter less. I don't think Americans are any worse than the rest of us. Of course, if you are American you can't be as good as an Australian. Someone of another class, or of less education, is not to be taken as seriously as someone at my level. That is the common mentality worldwide.

Communication tends to be one way, we are ready to tell anyone what we believe, but less keen to listen. If lack of respect makes us callous, egocentric, poor communicators, less compassionate and less able to resolve conflict, what is the solution?

Awestruck by an article on physics, I noticed my attitude was not consistent. In it I read that since the beginning our universe has been evolving increasingly complex matter, and stirring it all up. Stars much larger than our sun cooked complex molecules, exploded, and scattered that matter to places like our solar system. Common rocks and dirt are the amazing result of that process. I am left with a feeling of respect for common dirt, but there is so much more: light, sound, colour, lightning, wind and tiny atoms that consist of complex forces. Nature didn't stop there; life evolved and keeps evolving. Humans arrived. The meanest, most miserable human being is made of star-dust. If I respect dirt, I must respect each and every human being.

Strangely, people don't appreciate life. We destroy trees that took centuries to grow. We squash a fly without a thought; a common fly can walk on the ceiling and it has a brain. A moment's thought helps me to respect even things that are a nuisance, such as mosquitoes and weeds.

I am not saying that killing is always wrong; predation is necessary in a balanced ecosystem. It is killing with indifference that I find ugly. With respect for life, we would be more thoughtful and gentle, and do less harm. The next insect we squash or spray can do things we can't do. Before we became sophisticated, hunter-gatherers paid respect to

any animal they killed for food. Now we poison, burn, harpoon, blast (with remote control if possible) plants, animals and people without much thought.

Mind, I think, is the result of the processes of the physical brain, somewhat like a river is the result of rain and mountains. I find it easy to respect the brain of a spider. How can I not respect a retarded or deluded person? The average human brain is capable of the incredibly complex process of speech, and awareness of itself – matter being aware of itself!

Yet, in some of my more self-aware moments, I catch myself despising or looking down on people because they have beliefs or ideas that I don't agree with. Logically, if I respect a rock, I can't despise a human being.

War is possible because there is little respect for the lives of the enemy. When there is respect, hating and killing become more difficult. Without respect there is no compassion. Sick people like criminals and despots can be respected but must they be prevented from doing harm. I believe that to be a freethinker means to respect everyone, and follow no-one, not even other freethinkers.

The idea of bringing peace and prosperity by converting everyone to one's own particular world-view is a main cause of tension, fear and war. I think honest, fearless but friendly discussion is beneficial and fun. Just tolerance of other people's beliefs and ideas is not enough, genuine respect and compassion are needed and not too difficult when realizing what a miracle a human being is.

There is the difficult problem of dogmatic individuals who don't have respect for members of other groups, and use discrimination, violence and subjugation. To have no respect for dogmatic people does nothing to solve the problem. To show respect without being subservient can only help to build their self-esteem, so that they have less need to try to prove their superiority.

To resolve conflict there is the option of fighting the good fight for the cause with righteous passion. While that option is exhilarating, it doesn't usually work. Smart, witty remarks do nothing to help the other side understand and respect you, as they will stop them listening to you. Guns are even less likely to bring harmony. Open dialogue can be much more productive; both sides might learn.

War can divide people for hundreds of years. War brutalises both sides. Attack of any kind usually doesn't go to plan, and the conflict drags on for many years at great cost to both sides.

Dictators have terrible effects on populations, as in Burma. If the dictator is resisted with force, he or she will have an excuse to use more force, which brutalises the soldiers. I think it is more practical to try to make friends with the thousands of people who work for the dictator.

It seems to me that nationalism, and any groups that require loyalty, have at their root the fear, 'I am not good enough', so 'I join some group for reassurance.' Paradoxically, the attempt to find self-respect and security by joining groups leads to more *insecurity*. Ultimately there are no groups of people, but only insecure individuals leaning on each other. Fear and insecurity lead to aggression, which leads to more insecurity. Only genuine respect and compassion for all people can break that cycle. At least it is worth a try.

**Rudi Anders**, writer and HSV member.

## BOOK NEWS

### *A Measure of All Things: the story of man and measurement*

by Ian Whitelaw

Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007.

166 pp.; illustrations, index.

ISBN 978 174175 1819. \$29.95.

Reviewer: **Nigel Sinnott**

**D**espite coming from England, where there have been a number of anti-metric ‘martyrs’, I have for almost all my life been an ardent champion of the metric system. I saw old imperial measurements as feudal chains and relics, full of irrational, time-wasting complexities, from which today’s children needed to be delivered by modern metric puritans doing battle with the lazy, selfish, contemptible conservatives, who were fighting a rearguard action on behalf of these abominations and anachronisms.

My views softened a little when, in 1992, I went to live in Alexandra, rural Victoria. I soon became interested in the local history, and this included Taungurong place-names, old pastoral runs, forests and the timber industry, dams and bulk water storage (Lake Eildon), and mining for precious metals. I became intrigued about timber tramway gauges; I needed to covert chains to metres, super(ficial) feet and cords to cubic metres, acre-feet to megalitres; and I developed a respect bordering on veneration for nineteenth-century rural surveyors. I wanted to know why gold was weighed in troy measurements and potatoes in avoirdupois ones (and if there was a connecting unit). And why were carats a measure of purity for gold but a measure of weight for gemstones? Also, even in ‘rational’, modern measurements, magic numbers – like 7, 12 and 60 – crop up, which go back to the dawn of agriculture in the Middle East thousands of years ago.

When I first heard about Ian Whitelaw’s *A Measure of All Things*, I realised that the book was likely to be a ‘must have’ for me. It certainly was!

Near the front of the book was a quotation from the sort of red-necked paleface I love to hate: ‘Metric is definitely communist. One monetary system, one language, one weight and measurement system, one world – all communist! We know the West was won by the inch, foot yard and mile.’ – Dean Krakel, director of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame (p. 9).

Bring me my bow of burning gold! Bring me my metric scalping knife! Who is going to tell this blustering buffoon that the United States has decimal currency, and the coins have had metric weights since 1873? The ‘nickel’ or 5-cent coin weighs 5 grams precisely.

In this book I soon found explanations for a number of riddles to which I had only partial answers. And I discovered that I had underestimated the extent to which today’s sensible, accurate measurements have only a thin veneer of surface rationality: below still lurk the magic numbers of the Akkadians, Sumerians, Greeks and Egyptians.

What stunned me most were revelations about light and astronomy in this, the space age. Now the speed of light is

known today with considerable accuracy. So how long is a light year, the distance covered by a photon travelling through a vacuum in one year? A light-second presents no problem, but ‘definitions of how many seconds there are in a year vary and there is no single agreed “reference year”.’

This, I thought, *had* to be out of date, and was bound to have been ‘sorted’ by now. So I confidently checked the internet. Among the first of the options I spotted was the astrological (yes, *astrological*) definition of a light year. I winced with horror! Then I discovered that the International Astronomical Union (IAU) recommends that the light year be 9.46 million million kilometres, based on a Julian year of 31,557,600 seconds (365.25 days of 86,400 seconds). Wait a minute! Isn’t the Julian calendar used only by a few living fossils in the Orthodox Church nowadays; and aren’t the rest of us using the Gregorian calendar? Yes, but the IAU prefers the Julian year for light years. Don’t put your daughter into space, Mrs Worthington!

To return to the book. Metric warriors like me have managed to banish the fuddy-duddy Fahrenheit system of measuring temperature (except in hillbilly backwaters like the United States). Instead we have °C, and we all know that Celsius and Centigrade mean the same thing. No? No. At standard atmospheric pressure water boils at 100 degrees Centigrade, but at 99.975 degrees Celsius.

Then there is the squeaky clean, orderly world of computing. How many bytes in a megabyte? A million? No: 1,048,576! It’s enough to drive a decimal saint to drink. That’s all right, because Ian Whitelaw lists every champagne bottle name and capacity (pp. 56 – 57).

One of the few criticisms I have of this book is that it uses a lot of greyish blue ink, which makes a rather small size of type harder to read. Plain, no-nonsense black type would have been far better.

Although he is a Canadian, Ian Whitelaw has discovered an unofficial Australian unit called the ‘sydharb’ (p. 55), referring to a penal settlement near Botany Bay and allegedly coined by some drongoes called the Australian Water Association. One sydharb is ‘the equivalent of approximately 500 gigitalitres’, or what I would call 500,000 megalitres. One wee word of caution, cobbers: don’t even *think* of mentioning sydharbs anywhere near Lake Eildon, Victoria, unless youse want to cop some serious ridicule! (One lakeil = 3,389,000 megalitres.)

In the epilogue, Ian Whitelaw writes:

At any point in human history, the units in use are a reflection of the way the people who use them see and understand the world. They are not merely a means of recording the details of the objects and phenomena around us: they are an integral part of knowledge itself. The complexity and coherence of modern units of measurement are themselves a measure of our understanding of the way the universe works.

I am not sure if I should laugh or cry! You do not need to be barking mad to be interested in metrology, or the study of measurement, but it may help. And measurements are fascinating and intriguing – like the colourful and often irrational minds we share the world with. □

*Ceremonies & Celebrations: Vows,  
Tributes and Readings*  
by Dally Messenger  
Lothian Books, South Melbourne 1999. \$27.00.

Reviewer: **Rosslyn Ives**

If you are planning a wedding, funeral or other ceremony, *Ceremonies & Celebrations* is the book for you. This highly useful resource is the fourth, enlarged edition of a book first published in 1978 under the title, *Cultural Celebrations in Australia*. The author, Dally Messenger, is a passionate advocate of the value of ceremonies for special occasions. He was one of the first civil celebrants to be appointed under the instigator of the legislation, the then Attorney-General, Mr Justice Lionel Murphy, and has been active in organising and instructing civil celebrants. Messenger has therefore had years of experience in designing and conducting ceremonies.

This book contains sample ceremonies, details on how to organise a celebration or ceremony, suggested readings and music to include, and advice on how to write your own ceremony for that special occasion.

The first third of the book, Part I, deals with marriage ceremonies. It begins with what couples need to do in order to organise a civil celebrant for a wedding. Included are several complete sample ceremonies with wording for vows, readings and music, all of which could be readily modified to suit a couple's preference. One chapter covers alternative weddings suitable for couples with previous relationships or irregular in-law arrangements. The final chapter, Traditions and Symbols, deals with the origins and history of various marriage traditions. It covers engagement and wedding rings, wearing white, throwing rice or confetti, and bucks' party, among other customs.

Part II covers the need and value of ceremonies for significant points in a person's life. These include name-giving and significant birthdays or milestones (30, 40 & 60), along with many less used ceremonies such as coming of age, career transitions, graduation, divorce and name change.

Part III covers funerals or celebration of life ceremonies. Messenger has provided sample ceremonies that cover a range of causes of death and ages of the deceased person. All include possible tribute wordings, appropriate readings and a selection of music.

My overall assessment is that *Ceremonies & Celebrations* is an essential resource, for civil celebrants especially, for the guidance it gives and the sample ceremonies suitable for a wide range of special occasions. For the rest of us, this book would be highly valuable for those occasions when we are involved in either planning or participating in a ceremony. The most useful material being the wide ranging, inspirational poetry, prose and song lyrics Messenger has chosen to include. These are a handy resource as well as ideas for alternative choices. □

Available from bookshops and also from Celebrant Centre (03 9419 0460) or e-mail [celebrants@netspace.net.au](mailto:celebrants@netspace.net.au). Postage charge of \$7.90.

*Who is this God?*

by Paul Murchison  
Zeus Publications 2007. \$19.95  
(PO Box 2556, Burleigh MDC Qld 4220)

Reviewer: **Ken Wright**

The aim of this book is to convert both theists and atheists to agnosticism. The author thus addresses himself to two distinct audiences. Much of the book is occupied by the demolition of arguments purporting to prove the existence of God as that term is understood by Christians, Jews or Muslims. On the assumption that most readers of *AH* are closer to atheism than to theism, this review will concentrate on the chapters designed to broaden the outlook of atheists.

Paul Murchison is a very open-minded seeker after truth. The following sentence from his Introduction encapsulates the nature of his quest: 'Does an entity or force that can somehow be labelled God indeed exist and if so do we possess the intelligence and terminology to come to any meaningful grips with such a concept?'

In the first seven chapters, I found nothing that an atheist would quarrel with. So I turned with great anticipation to Chapter 8, entitled The Atheists. On what issues does Murchison differ from them?

First, he claims that atheists spend too much time refuting absurd claims made by particular religions, whilst ignoring 'the fact that religion can serve some important societal and spiritual needs.' It is possible 'that there may exist an innate and emotive need for religion and that hardline atheism flies in the face of our very nature.' And second, 'A major problem with atheism is its myopic approach towards anything that transcends accrued or accruing secular knowledge ... By limiting herself to her secular life span the atheist is short changing herself.'

Chapter 9 asks why God allows his creatures to endure so much pain and suffering. Clearly the facts are inconsistent with an all-good, all-powerful God. The author suggests that 'perhaps there is no "Full Capacity God"', implying that whatever God does exist is not omnipotent.

Chapter 11 considers the problem of determinism and free will. If God has created creatures with free will, knowing that they will misuse that freedom, he cannot escape responsibility for the evil things they do. The author then makes a somewhat strange point: 'The arguments I have posited utilize a secular logic and logic is a very handy tool with which to deal with secular problems. ... With God and religions, we are dealing in such depth that may render logic less than helpful, but only in some areas.' In particular, emotion is 'an area that greatly antagonizes conventional logic.'

The author asserts 'that logic is fallible and that emotion tends to overlap logic and present us with very different (perhaps more important) needs. Here, I believe, the gate is left ajar for the more open and hoping, spiritual individuals such as agnostics and even some theists and polytheistic thinkers.'

Chapter 12, headed Emotion, ranges far beyond that topic. It discusses telepathy, telekinesis, the apparent success of some psychics in predicting the future, and the ability of *idiots savants* to perform amazing feats of mental arithmetic. All these phenomena are regarded as indications of latent powers within the human race. 'It would seem we

are torn between the worlds of logic and emotion – never the twain shall meet. It is a shame that much of our thinking is polarised by these two states of mind, and who knows what other as-yet-undiscovered ideas (once fantasies) await their place in an ever-evolving cosmos.’

In Chapter 15, the attack on atheism is resumed: ‘the atheist sees truth within the arbitrary domain of the general scientific concepts held in his particular area. He is locked within the ambit of science and all else is remote, impossible and unworthy.’

In Chapter 16, the author recounts some events that occurred during a year which he spent with a very unconventional Christian church. These events have led him to write that ‘most of us have experiences such as déjà vu and the like and usually fob them off as coincidences. It is difficult however to assume that all of these occurrences are simply happenstance. It is, I feel, suggestive of paranormal forces, which may be suggestive of a Higher Being and perhaps of an afterlife.’

The final chapter offers a conclusion somewhat reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s belief in an ‘enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness.’ The author writes: ‘The only proposition I feel that I can entertain is the possibility of an evolving never-to-end development of knowledge, which would contain an ethical aspect. An ever-evolving force of goodness could never stop by virtue of its vivifying force. ‘Perfection’ as an end would mean the end of that force.’

In terms of editorial support, the author has not been well served by his publisher. The book is full of infelicities and minor errors, the most amusing being a reference to ‘Sir Thomas Aquinas’! □

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## *Off My Shoulders* by Vicky Potempa

Reviewer: **Dick Clifford**

**V**icky, well known member of the NSW Humanist Society, is the author of a very good book, *Off My Shoulders*. It is the story of her life, it is well written, the sort of book you can’t put down. It goes into great detail from her early life in Suez, her immigration to Sydney, her employment, house building, marriage, translating letters for migrants, being politically active in the Labor party, the Humanists, Women’s Lib, Vietnam protests, prison visiting, the CRC (Civic Rehabilitation Committee) and all the time she is trying to put right the problems of her own family members due to greed, ignorance and poverty, not to mention the war and the Depression. Women should read this book as it shows how they can take charge of their lives and not rely on men.

Men should read this book so they can have a better understanding of what can go wrong in childbirth, and the importance of helping rather than looking after Number One. This book is a fine example of what it means to be a Humanist, how ordinary people with a few talents can live a good humanistic life, without having to believe in powers up above. The book also has very good photographs and will be of great interest to migrants.

The book costs \$40 including postage, cheque made out to Humanist Society of NSW. Send to Humanist House, 10 Shepherd St, Chippendale NSW 2008. □

## *The purple economy: supernatural charities, tax and the state*

by Max Wallace

Australian National Secular Association, Elsternwick, 2007, xii + 275 pp. pb. ISBN 978-0-646-48277-4.

Reviewer: **S. N. Stuart**

**T**his is a polemic directed against church privilege, once considered a divine right but utterly anachronistic in the modern world. All secularists will welcome this documentation of a compromising collaboration between christian church and state — ‘two sides of the same coin’ – which is discriminatory, unjust and anti-democratic. Exposing some of the wealth and power of the churches, the author focuses particularly on their tax exemptions which nonreligious taxpayers subsidize unwittingly. The book fills out Wallace’s arguments previously expressed in *AH No. 77* (autumn 2005) and *Separating church and state. Keeping God out of government* (ANSA Conference, Hawksburn, 2006).

He demolishes the lazy opinion that Australia is constitutionally a secular nation, with no established religion. Indeed all religious bodies are equal before the law, but they enjoy priority over ordinary nonreligious bodies. They are tax-exempt and (he implies) also exempt from lodging audited accounts. So they are unaccountable; the foregone tax has been estimated as many billions a year. The Catholic Church and Uniting Church have expanded, largely on government funding, to be the biggest private employers in Australia. Government funds to Catholic schools amounted to \$12.6 billion in 2004, and 90% of the teachers were paid by the taxpayers. The profit-making businesses of the churches now exceed their charitable activities, yet they retain their traditional privilege.

The striking phrase, ‘supernatural charities’, is explained because, legally speaking, all religions in Australia are charities with a supernatural belief. Wallace argues for setting up a Charities Commission, as in New Zealand, and for striking out the advancement of religion from the grounds for charitable status. The business arms of churches and charities with deductible gift recipient status would then become accountable.

The political question is, of course, what is the public good? Government has the vital power to tax, and government authority in a democracy should not bow to any sectional interest. Wallace is impressed by the French solution, constitutionally forbidding the government to subsidize a religion. It may be some time before the Australian public come to see religion as a private matter and so to support that kind of clause in our constitution. Meanwhile, it is good to see a Humanist broach the question in this stirring book. □

### **Correction**

The review of *A History of the End of the World* in the last *AH No. 88*, was made illogical by the transposition of a passage from column two to column one of page 24.

To read the correct sequence, put a box round paragraphs two and three of column two, which begin, ‘Fast forward some 250 years,’ and end, ‘ahead of all the other sa’, and read this section inserted before the last line of fourth paragraph, column one which begins, ‘ints and martyrs.’

**Editor**

## *Bad Hair Days* by Pamela Bone

Melbourne University Publishing, 2007. \$32.95

Reviewer: **Rosslyn Ives**

In *Bad Hair Days* Pamela Bone tells the story of her falling ill while in Chad, being diagnosed with bone cancer and the ups and downs of two years of treatment. The book is in part an 'illness narrative', but as the author has included many of her musings on life, it is much more.

After many years as a journalist for *The Age* in Melbourne, Bone has developed a keen eye for what is going on in the world, both locally and across the globe. She has a finely honed sense of which issues to inform people about and which are just puffed-up 'news' items.

The book beautifully expresses the valuable support family and friends give, and the kindness of strangers in times of need. Bone's approach to her illness and the myriad of other matters she writes about are all life-affirming and an uplifting experience to read about. One of her strongly held views, repeated several times, is that this life is all there is and death is its end.

Bone says of herself, 'I'm a humanist, which means I believe humans are capable of creating good societies by themselves, without divine guidance. Therefore, to sustain that belief I need to be able to believe in the goodness of people.' (pp. 93-4) She is adamant that the church and state should be separate, that religion should be kept out of politics, and that assisted suicide should be legalised.

The book is very well written in an easy-to-read, engaging style. It reveals the methods of a successful and well-regarded columnist and editorial writer. A further humanising quality of her writing is her knack of citing characters and themes from novels to make pertinent points. Although Bone's approach is not academic, she can use research findings to make telling points.

*Bad Hair Days* is informative, for example her one-page account of bone cancer is clear and succinct. It is also a book peppered with humour, such as when she relates losing hair and trying to wear a wig. Highly recommended. □

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## From 'pro-life' to anti-life

**A. C. Grayling**

If the promise implicit in recent work on reprogramming adult skin cells into pluripotent stem cells is realised, the chief gain will be greater simplicity, safety and straightforwardness in stem cell research and its eventual therapeutic applications. That is welcome news. But press coverage has predictably focused on the claim that this approach avoids the ethical objections over the use of embryos, objections raised mainly by those who sympathise with the so-called 'pro-life' agenda.

It is not often remarked that 'pro-life' objections are themselves arguably unethical, nor that they are inconsistent with what the pro-lifers' beliefs should make them infer from what happens elsewhere in nature.

To start with the first point: stem cell research is aimed at alleviating many diseases, including Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injury, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hearing and vision loss, and muscular dystrophy. The suffering and disability that could be diminished in people who actually (as opposed to potentially) exist, with their relationships, responsibilities, hopes, jobs and interests in full flow, is enormous – and genuinely pro-life.

If the adult skin cell work proves to be a dead end, and it turns out that only embryonic stem cells will do, the need will return to challenge the objectors' insistence that it is more ethical to privilege 30 cells in a blastocyst over the needs of ill, disabled or dying children and adults.

The blastocysts in question come from IVF procedures with the informed consent of donors, for whom they are surplus to requirements. It is not clear whether all objectors believe these blastocysts should not exist in the first place, which would entail opposition to fertility treatment for couples who profoundly desire children. But the thought that these endeavours, so positive in themselves, might have the additional benefit of leading to clinical applications, should strike unprejudiced minds as an obvious good.

Then add to this the fact that nature is remarkably profligate in reproductive terms. Of the billions of eggs laid by fish, only about 0.5 per cent hatch. Humans are not much less lavish. Every year hundreds of billions of spermatozoa die before reaching an ovum, and billions of ova are expelled unfertilized in menstrual cycles. More than half of fertilised ova do not result in pregnancy. An estimated quarter of all pregnancies spontaneously terminate before the sixth week; and, overall, about one in five pregnancies spontaneously terminate before 20 weeks.

And until the advent of modern medicine, which is the result of research and intervention (of which stem cell work is a continuation), stillbirths and infant mortality further dramatically reduced the number of conceptions that reached adulthood.

Objectors to embryonic stem cell research ignore this context, which is one reason why they can take the ethically perverse step of putting blastocysts higher up their scale of moral concerns than people suffering now. People are precious; the profligate cellular sources that sometimes result in people are not people.

In opposing on doctrinaire grounds medical advances aimed at aiding suffering, objectors to embryonic stem cell research are being positively unethical. The argument against them is not that the good ends of stem cell research justify any means. Rather, it is that the good ends, the circumstances in which blastocysts become available, and the facts of nature jointly enter into a weighting of the interests at stake. To anyone without prior commitment to a view that makes small clusters of cells more important than people, it is perfectly obvious where the greater weight lies. [*New Scientist*, 22/29 Dec. 2007, p. 76.]



# From International Journals

**‘The War on Human Rights: News from the Battlefield’, by Roy W. Brown** (IHEU representative at UN Geneva, and past-president IHEU). *International Humanist News*, Nov. 2007

Formation of the new Human Rights Council in 2006 has increased the sense of battle. Its membership largely with Islamic States and their supporters with strange alliances, e.g. India and Pakistan, China and Cuba supporting theocracies like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Further new rules and procedures will limit Special Rapporteurs in exercising independent criticism. In particular, a draft resolution supposed to be on apostasy from EU mentioned ‘Islamophobia, Christianophobia and Anti-Semitism’ but omitted non-believers and apostates [the latter being in urgent need of protection]. Brown’s attempts to correct the matter were unsuccessful on grounds that NGO unable to do this and the 14 member states supporting the resolution failed to act to rectify the situation. Resolution to be represented March 2008. In Brown’s opinion, Islamic States on Human Rights Council are attempting to equate criticism of religion with racism.

Texts addressing this issue to the UN Human Rights Council included:

- 1. Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression [From IHEU].** While maintaining that freedom of expression and religion are basic rights, criticism of human rights abuses carried out in name of religion must not be stifled. Recent UN resolutions not defining ‘defamation of religion’ – a major danger.
- 2. Islamophobia [From IHEU].** Here Brown expresses the need to defend democratic rights and not cave in to Islamic extremism but rightly he does not condone hostility to Muslims.
- 3. Defamation of Religion [World Population Foundation].** This statement by the Foundation refers to the difficulties imposed on the work of the Foundation in promoting human rights in Africa by limiting criticism of religion, and accuses the UN Human Rights Council of defending religions against the human rights of people.

**‘Violence against Women: Introduction,’ by Diana Brown.** *International Humanist News*, Aug. 2007

Although now nearly 60 years since proclamation of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed now by all UN member states except Saudi Arabia, in many countries women are denied human rights and are victims of abuse. According to a UN report, ‘Violence kills and disables as many women between 15 and 45 as cancer,’ with disastrous effects on women’s health and on society. Rape, including wartime rape, and female genital mutilation are rife. In some Islamic countries rape victims are horribly punished by being stoned to death. Child marriage and honour killings are other violations. In India, some women are murdered for having insufficient dowries, and female babies abandoned and, although it is illegal, some widows are forced to die with their husbands. This issue contains heart-rending articles by women about these horrible forms of abuse, which, as Humanists, we must work to have stopped.

**‘Council of Europe backs the Secular State’.** *International Humanist News*, Aug. 2007

IHEU played a major role in negotiations resulting in the adoption by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe strongly supporting the separation of religion and state on 29 June 2007. The Assembly insisted that religious leaders must acknowledge the precedence of human rights over religious principle and called for Humanist leaders to be included in political consultations with religious representatives.

Further, in a second landmark, *Recommendation on Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech*, the Council firmly concludes that blasphemy, as an insult to religion, should not be deemed a political offence. [For full text, see <http://www.iheu.org/node/2750>.]

In the conclusion of her address to IHEU General Assembly in Torino, Sonja Eggerickx, noted that the Brussels Declaration was launched to avoid any reference to a god or religion in the European Constitution and was a success although all were not happy with it. She defended IHEU’s right to speak out to defend views of European humanists, atheists, freethinkers and others. She also considers human rights abuses in Darfur, Baghdad and other places to be a humanist concern.

**‘Fighting for the Rights of the Non-Religious,’ by Diana Brown,** *International Humanist News*, Nov. 2007

An account of the annual meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on democratic institutions and human rights, September 2007, at which the non-religious were represented only by the European Humanist Federation (EHF) and BHA, while religious organisations were well represented and are portraying themselves as victims, calling for the imposition of the blasphemy laws, equating secularism with immorality and tyrants like Hitler and Pol Pot and coining terms like Islamophobia and Christianophobia to indicate their victimisation.

**‘The Privileged Position of the Churches in Europe,’ by David Pollock** (Pres. European Humanist Federation). *International Humanist News*, Nov. 2007.

An analysis of the financial and other privileges given to European churches, largely Christian, and denied to the non-religious. The allocation of taxes paid by all citizens to churches and schools and the allocation of 26 Upper House seats in Britain to the C. of E. bishops is another example of discrimination; similarly, in the European Union the Churches enjoy many privileges.

In defence of freedom of speech and blasphemy, he concluded,

Religion is generally hugely privileged in our communities. It is often worthy of respect – but human rights belong to individuals, not to institutions or religions, and attempts to extend human rights to religion itself and to religious institutions are a false and dangerous development that is to be resisted.

**'Traditional Treatment of Women,' by Sonja Eggerickx, IHEU President.**

*International Humanist News, Aug. 2007*

Outlines the inferior status accorded to women in texts from major religions. The article concludes that 'From these religious traditions evolved laws.' The Universal Declaration of Human Rights must cease to be mainly one of men's rights but of *all* human beings, so that women's lives are considered equal to those of men.

**'UK Gays Win Rights against Opposition by Churches,' by Keith Porteous Wood, Exec Director National Secular Society.**

*International Humanist News, Aug. 2007.*

Regulations have come into effect to ban discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of goods, facilities and services, premises, and education throughout the whole of the UK.

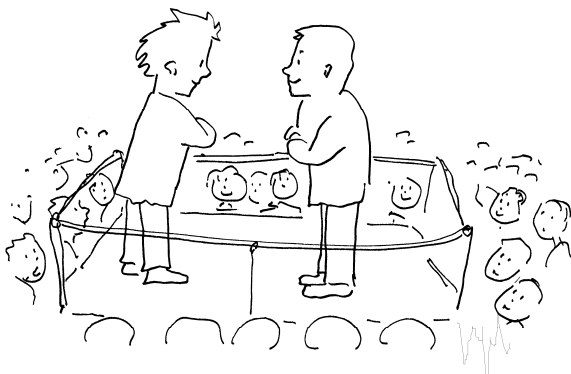
This was a major victory for the human rights of same sex couples, won after bitter opposition from the churches who used dubious tactics like misleading ads, picketing, and even threats to refuse providing charity for gays. Furious debates occurred in the Upper House with the C. of E. Bishops. The majority of the cabinet remained committed to reform.

**'How Reason Opens Doors, Literally,' by Babu Gogineni, International Director IHEU.**

*International Humanist News, Aug. 2007.*

A touching account of help given by Babu Gogineni and a local humanist organisation [Parivartana] to a Dalit colony, who had left their homes on the advice of a local geomancer who attributed some deaths to the land being elevated in the wrong places and inauspicious and haunted by ghosts. Medical and other workers found no serious health problems and the local police called on the humanists for help. A successful visit was made employing individual and group counselling, as well as conjurers to demonstrate how charlatans deceived people with tricks not supernatural forces. Speeches by the Humanist team were televised and the visit had a satisfactory outcome.

Compiled by **Mary Bergin**, CAHS Secretary



"Now for round two of this respectful debate"

# Great news for IHEU

Received by mail on 28 Nov 2007

IHEU is the beneficiary of an estate of about 2.6 million US Dollars. The gift (legacy) to IHEU was a big surprise as IHEU did not know the deceased individual in California. The wonderful news is that this gift secures IHEU's long term future. The capital sum is secured, and IHEU can put the interest income to excellent use. Suggestions for the use of the interest income are as follows:

- Help IHEU member organizations who have difficulty in paying membership Dues. Invest in securing the future of IHEU member organizations.
- Reform the voting structure in IHEU, giving votes to associate members.
- Enable people from India and Africa and a Youth representative to serve on the IHEU Executive Committee (EC) by paying all their expenses. The EC should be expanded from 6 people to 10. Places should be reserved on the EC for 2 people from India, 1 person from Africa, and 1 Youth representative (IHEYO).
- Fund the Humanist Schools in Africa.
- Additional funding for IHEU-Appignani Bioethics Center in New York City.
- Help create a Humanist Centre in the highly successful and much valued MN Roy Centre in Mumbai.
- Donations to the much admired WIN project in Mumbai.
- Scholarships for delegates from India and Africa to attend the IHEU General Assembly, Congress and other events.
- Fund activities for supporters.

## About IHEU

IHEU, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, was formed in 1952, when representatives from Humanist, Unitarian, Rationalist, and other freethought groups from Europe, North America and India met in Amsterdam.

IHEU is governed by a General Assembly elected by delegates from member organisations.

It produces the *International Humanist News* and runs regular conferences, some regional with an international Congress every two-three years. Next World Congress will be held in Washington DC, USA 6-8 June 2008. These are great events to attend where you can meet with likeminded people from around the world, and learn of their views and activities.

For more information about IHEU, its activities and coming events, visit [www.iheu.org](http://www.iheu.org)

### CAHS Convention 2008

Sydney  
2-4 May

Hosted by Humanist Society of New South Wales  
All welcome.

More details as the year unfolds.



# HUMANIST SOCIETY NEWS

## CAHS

LETTERS WERE sent to all sitting MPs and Senators (226 letters) to implement an AGM 07 resolution (No. 2, HSNSW) asking that all sitting members declare their position on the issue of the separation of religion and state. Thanks to Dr Max Wallace for assisting with the letter and questionnaire.

Questions put to MPs were:

(1) Do you believe there is a constitutional separation of church and state in Australia? (2) Should there be a constitutional separation of church and state in Australia? Or (3) Do you support Australia remaining a Constitutional Monarchy without a formalised separation of church and state?

The Proceedings of the 2006 Conference on Separation of Church and State had already been sent to MPs by conference organisers.

Replies were received from 21 parliamentarians – Labor: 9, Coalition: 9, Democrats: 1, Family First: 1, Independent: 1. Co-ordinated responses were received from Brian Loughnane, Federal Campaign Director for the Coalition, and from the Survey Co-ordinator for the Greens. In addition a message of support was received from the office of the late Senator Peter Andren (Independent, now dec.).

- Labor responses, with one exception, were virtually identical and indicated re question 1 that section 116 meant that we have separation of church and state, and re question 2 that s116 was a guarantee of this separation and of personal freedoms. Labor responses disagreed with the 'supposition' on which Q.3 was based but indicated that Labor policy was to reintroduce the republican issue. The Independent Labor response considered there should be a separation, but under the Howard government this had become blurred and that the Constitutional Monarchy should not remain.

- The formal co-ordinated Coalition response expressed satisfaction with the status quo and s116 and stated no religious group would be incorporated into government although freedom to lobby would be encouraged. However, neither it nor the individual responses specifically and clearly addressed the three survey questions in the way the Labor answers did.

- The co-ordinated response from the Greens re Q.1 answered Yes, 'The parliament is the central authority of representative and responsible government' but it could be said that it did not address the question asked. Re Q. 2, Yes. Re Q.3 No, 'the Australian Greens support Australia becoming a republic with an Australian head of state.'

- Lyn Allison representing the Australian Democrats was in agreement with the suppositions behind each question, answering No to Q.1 and to Q.2 that there should be a constitutional separation of church and state in Australia. To Q.3 'Australian Democrats oppose Australia remaining a constitutional monarchy without a formalised separation of church and state.'

- Senator Fielding's reply was merely a referral to the party's web-site.

In October a reply was received from then Attorney General, Philip Ruddock, re our letter on the Rights of the Terminally Ill to choose Voluntary Euthanasia (NT). It indicated there would be no support for a medical practitioner assisting in the termination of a person's life, although withholding or withdrawal of treatment in some circumstances may be appropriate.

At the time of writing, voting for AHOY 2008 is complete and steps are being taken to contact the chosen nominee. We look forward to meeting our interstate colleagues in Sydney and again thank the HSNSW for hosting the 2008 Convention.

**Mary Bergin**, CAHS Secretary

## New South Wales

VICTOR BIEN has scanned a copy of 'The Happy Human' booklet, which I've been updating. Rather than being a document which articulates a defence against Christians, I plan to have it articulate our position for non-believers, including reference to Islam and recent events.

In Sydney I attended a pro-choice rally, organised by the Sydney group 'Reproductive Freedoms', to counter and delay a procession organised by the 'Helpers of God's Precious Infants'. A local chapter of this group emerges from a Catholic Church in Annandale and proceeds to the local abortion clinic where they do their best to make patients feel uncomfortable.

John Dillon of our Blue Mountains Group has complained to the Advertising Standards Board about an advertisement for AXA Insurance portraying atheists unfavourably; the ad has since been retracted, but it's worth being aware of the existence of this board in case any similar advertisements appear.

Planning for Darwin Day continues. We hope to have speakers on Australian megafauna and the evolution of hominids.

We're attending to the updating of our Constitution (Rules), with an expanded outline of objectives drawing from IHEU material. We are also revising the membership form. During committee discussion, I found people were relaxed with a statement of minimum humanism along the lines of 'rejection of the supernatural and a non-theistic view of the world,' with support for additional endorsement of equality and human rights over and above the minimum statement. We may hold an afternoon talk on this subject.

**John August**, HSNSW President

## Queensland

SINCE THE last edition of *AH* we have had a change of Federal Government, which we trust will create an improved political climate for the continuing endeavour of HSQ (currently by appealing to the Special Rapporteur at the UN) to introduce the Study of Humanism into state schools as an alternative to RI, a provision that we fundamentally oppose. Hopefully a Federal Labor Government will be more socially inclusive and fairer than the previous Coalition Government in relation to our efforts to gain equal access to public schools alongside the religions.

HSQ is now preparing for the 2008 AGM which will take place on 24 February at our usual venue, the Albion Peace

Centre, Brisbane, when we will be electing a new Committee. This being so, it is timely to extend a very special 'thank you' to all the members of the current Committee, whose responsibilities throughout the year have been consistently time consuming and often laborious and difficult. Without an active Committee the work of the Society would cease.

In looking back over 2007, thanks must go to enthusiastic members who have supported the regular Open Forums and prompted so many lively discussions and stimulating ideas; and also to the many members and friends who attended the annual end-of-year lunch, another successful and cheerful occasion.

It remains for me to encourage all members to attend the AGM, for we are sure that, with their active support and cooperation, much can be achieved.

Wishing you all a very Happy New Year!

**Zelda Bailey**, HSQ President

## South Australia

CITIZENS and Humanists, the world over, are coming to the realization that we are biological animals, dependent on good atmosphere, water, equable temperature, etc. if we are to survive. We need to realize that there are limits to growth, and present consumption of coal and oil causes CO<sub>2</sub> to rise to excessive levels with no hope of recovery.

The December *Humanist Post* included Dick Clifford's 'Sustainable Solutions' which points out that our problems are not only global warming, but also overpopulation, peak oil and the need for reform of the financial system. The main remedies are to stop burning coal and oil and use alternative energy on a worldwide basis.

While previous pamphlets of this type have been sent to MPs and Senators, this pamphlet is to be sent to many people including industry leaders, university professors, CSIRO and government departments, and Humanist Societies throughout the world. It is the hope that these wider groupings will be able to bring more effective pressure on government policies, which at present seems to be only interested in protecting traditional industry.

The pamphlet is available on the web at <http://www.users.on.net/rmc/sustainablesolutions.htm>

To back this up the December meeting was on 'Climate Change – Science and Solutions'. The speaker was Andrew Dickson, an Al Gore Climate Change Messenger. He is an excellent, authoritative speaker with a good set of photos.

On 1 January 2008, we held our usual New Years Day Party, this year at the home of Tom Goodwin. Much nibbles were munched, many drinks drunk, and there was no shortage of topics to talk about.

**Dick Clifford**, HSSA Vice President

## Victoria

OUR AGM was held on 22 November 2007 with a good attendance. Committee and Executive remain much the same Stephen Stuart (President), Alan McPhate (Vice-president), Mary Bergin (Secretary) and David Fotheringham (Treasurer). Linda Nash did not stand for re-election and we thanked her for her work during the year, especially as Social Secretary and as a delegate to the CAHS Convention. The AGM was followed by a panel discussion on 'What Humanism means to me,' with contributions from Harry Gardner, Halina Strnad, Nigel Sinnott and Gideon Polya. This discussion generated great interest.

*Australian Humanist* No. 89 Autumn 08

Our public lecture in October was to feature Tamas Pataki, author of *Against Religion*. However due to illness he was unable to attend. We were very grateful to Ian Robinson, RSA president, who delivered a lecture comparing Pataki's emphasis on the psychological basis of religion with Dawkins's philosophical approach.

The HSV Committee has decided to follow the recommendation of IHEU and its former president Roy Brown to donate \$5,000 to the Swiss-based International Foundation for Population and Development's 'Women of India Network (WIN) Project' from our project fund. The WIN project operates in the slum areas of Mumbai and aims to improve the health and quality of life for women and children through regular visits of health workers.

Unfortunately our application to Australia Post for a Charles Darwin stamp was unsuccessful. We will celebrate Darwin Day on 12 February 2008.

Harry Gardner's Humanist Ethical Education Programme is progressing very well.

HSV is addressing the issue of the 'religion' question on the 2011 Census and will prepare a submission to meet the ABS closing date of 31/03/08.

Rosslyn Ives in the October *VH* editorial argued that it is essential that Humanism incorporates environmentalism into its world-view. Stephen Stuart in the December *VH* editorial, as at the HSV AGM, addressed the issue of a brief definition of Humanism. Humanism he stated balances on the three supporting pillars of reason, experiment and compassion. He then quoted from the seven basic ideas of IHEU's Amsterdam Declaration to expand his definition.

Our end of year function was held at our new committee and discussion meeting venue in East Hawthorn. We enjoyed food, drinks, jokes and a social get-together with entertainment led by Stephen & Jennie Stuart and John Russell & Rosaria Palmese.

**Mary Bergin**, HSV Secretary

## Western Australia

IT HAS been an exciting time for the HSWA. There is a sense that 2008 will be a year of great change for our organisation as we continue to share our message with the community. This is coupled with a new enthusiastic approach to increase our member base by establishing a presence at Evolution day and during Science week.

We are also expanding our viral efforts over the internet to attract younger people to join the Humanists. There are high hopes for the new plans regarding our website, which we hope will become a pleasant and informative stopping point for curious browsers and members alike. Steve Cross has also been liaising with some proposed atheist university groups whose members will hopefully become valued partners to our existing organization. As the new university year begins there are also plans to attend their 'Orientation Days' with stalls about the Humanist Society.

Our members meetings continue to keep participants involved and provoke interesting discussions among members. A thankyou to Mike and Eva Palmer who hosted our Summer Solstice celebration 'Solstifest' on December 22, giving our members a chance to share food and opinions with each other. Our next members meeting will be held on February 10 as a celebration of Darwin Day, officially two days after, and we look forward to seeing everyone there.

**Clifford Nock**, HSWA committee member