

Christianity, Islam & Atheism

**Reflections on Religion,
Society & Politics**

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1. Genesis

God, at the beginning of time, created heaven and earth. Earth was still an empty waste, but already over its waters, stirred the breath of God. Then God said, Let there be light; and the light began. God saw the light, and found it good, and he divided the spheres of light and darkness; the light he called Day and the darkness Night ... And God said, Let us make man, wearing our image and likeness; let us put him in command of the fishes in the sea, and all that flies through the air, and the cattle, and the whole earth, and all the creeping things that move on earth. So God made man in his own image, made him in the image of God.— *The Book of Genesis*¹

In a single blinding pulse a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity (*a point or region in space time in which gravitational forces cause matter to have an infinite density*) assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. The first lively second (a second that many cosmologists will devote careers to shaving into even finer wafers) produces gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast ... In three minutes, 98% of all matter there is or will ever be produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful too. And it is done in about the time it takes to make a sandwich. — *Bill Bryson*²

In both the Biblical and the modern scientific account³ it was seemingly from nothing that the universe we inhabit was created. In one version it took six days, in the other the time it takes 'to make a sandwich'. One version is beautiful in its simplicity and majesty of its prose. The other has a fearful beauty in its almost impersonal force but is prosaic in its telling. One version has been a generator of countless pieces of literature, art and theology, many of which are sublime artefacts of Western civilisation. The other has no such artistic pedigree but has influenced not only how we view the universe but also our view of how we evolved as a species. In one, the world is created by the breath of God; the other is hard to visualise in tranquillity and probably too

complex to fully apprehend.

No tolerance of disparate world views can give both versions a commonality of purpose. For one is a story devised in the Bronze Age (approx. 3600-1200 BCE), the latter is a modern and scientific explanation. In the Bronze Age facts were not collected, analysed, sanctified and collated like the contents of a filing cabinet. It was a world where creation myths were given a metaphysical aura of being the paramount explainer of the world; in ours it is science. The Bronze Age was a world of great complexity and sophistication but also one inhabited by gods, demons and unexplainable natural events. Ours is a more materialistic, sceptical and literal age.

Some religious believers, who were not disturbed by the advance of science, and who did not wish to lose their contact with the numinous and the unutterable, turned the Bible into metaphor. Genesis became an account of what happens when our human ego gets the better of us and we lose sight of our fallibility. Most of the current crop of atheist writers seem to disregard interpretation; in their binary world the story is simply untrue, and no attention is paid to its moral and cultural aspects. Radical social commentators acknowledge the moral in the tale and point out that the story has an enduringly dark aspect: the loss of Eden and our innocence, the latter being a lack of awareness of sexuality. Being banished from paradise we inherited the carnality of sex and its capriciousness — our desire for it and fear of it. In the eyes of the Church sex was something to be avoided and if that was not possible, confined to procreation in the marital bed. Intertwining this fear of sex was misogyny. This was because the devil in the guise of the serpent tempts Adam's partner Eve (born from the rib of Adam) first and then Eve tempts Adam; as a result we are exiled from paradise. The question then is not whether the tale is true (it is not) but what use is made of the tale. It is not simply a tale of man's hubris but the beginning of misogyny in Western discourse, the constricted role of women and the fear of human sexuality that was and still is one of the meta-narratives not only in Christendom but also amongst other religious groups in our secular world.

Being of the left, I consider that religious belief is a personal matter best explored in one's home, place of worship and community of fellow believers. The monograph will look critically at where religion intersects with, and in some cases wants to dominate, the public sphere.

The narrative that follows begins with an account of my journey away from any religious belief towards atheism and radical humanism, in particular my rejection of Roman Catholicism, the religion of my youth. I look back at key incidents in the cultural and political life in India and Australia that led to my eventual rejection of any form of religious practice and ideology. This, of course, was not at all unusual for

people of my class and political orientation in the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the problems in discussing Christianity is the question of where to start. There is a bewildering array of beliefs, taboos, cultures, injunctions and interpretations of the Bible. I limit myself by looking at a few instances where Christianity meets the public sphere, the most obvious being the child sex-abuse scandal so threatening to the Catholic Church's pastoral and moral credibility in the Western world. I do this by looking at the long history of the Church's attempt to enforce celibacy on its clergy, and link it to the view of sex and women's sexuality implicit, for example, in the Marian cult of the Virgin as seen in the theological and devotional practices of the Church. I argue (as others have done) that Cardinal George Pell, like Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, downgraded the importance of the scandal that was slowly engulfing the Catholic Church and that they did this because of the idealisation of celibacy. This sort of religious dogma, devoid of the human and material elements of society, has done enormous damage to the fabric of society.

I also look at two central personages of the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses. I reflect on their historical reality, on how they can be seen 'poetically' rather than literally and on their legacy as seen in the current political climate. I discuss the legacy of the Crucifixion and the historical Jesus. In doing so, the monograph considers the cancer at the heart of the 'passion play' — anti-semitism and its consequences.

The paper goes on to discuss the political ascension of the religious right in the United States of America, a phenomenon which coincided with Ronald Reagan's presidency; Reagan shared many of their views. I examine their combined advocacy of the free market and a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. I then link it to the lack of liberal and left alternatives at the grassroots levels, something that allows fundamentalism to develop and mutate.

The paper explores the paradox of the decline of Christianity in Australia and the growing influence of a conservative brand of Christianity which never questions the neo-liberal agenda of the two major bourgeois parties but has wanted to change the 'liberal' cultural tenor of our society to a more reactionary one. The Howard government courted evangelical churches like Hillsong and right-wing Christian parties like Family First. In return, groups like Family First spent money and energy attacking progressive issues and parties and eventually, given the nature of Senate preferences, reduced the political space given to progressive parties like the Greens. Compounding this is a loophole in our constitution which allows the government to fund non-state schools despite the separation of church and state.

The story of Islam, though rich and beautiful, is marked also by the violence and the tragedy engendered by theological schism. Add to this the fact that life for Muslims

in the West is not a pleasant one. Islam is affected by the majority community's dislike of its social and religious mores, the overt discrimination many Muslims endure, and the neo-colonial wars in many of their homelands. A number of New Atheists do little to mend the situation with their ignorant and bigoted statements.

One cannot discuss Islam without also discussing how imperialism has distorted both our view of Islam and the way Islam views the West. I look critically at areas where Islam intersects with secular culture. In doing so I have looked at the Egyptian-born Australian Dr Waleed Aly, his defence of Islam, his criticism of secular critics and his disapproval of radical Islam and the damage radicals are doing to their own community and the community at large.⁴ I will therefore discuss contentious issues such as the wearing of the hijab, the idealisation of the golden period of Islam and what can be learnt from it, the need to separate religion and the state, and whether radical Islam is a creature of modernity. I then see how imperialist stereotypes of Islam still infect our discourse, especially when commenting on the issues of the day. I conclude by arguing that radical humanists should not be shy of criticising religious practices which they find unpalatable and not be reticent in arguing for our way of organising, arguing and fighting for a cause, as it has worked and sometimes still can surprise the wider community as the Occupy movement did for a millisecond.

In the penultimate chapter I look critically at the New Atheists. Initially I was attracted to their commitment to rationalism and science, which came as a breath of fresh air after an eon of New Age chatter. I gradually became disillusioned, however, with what I perceived to be the shallowness of their arguments, in particular their inability to move beyond a rather shallow rationalism and the fact that science gives us a better understanding of the world and its origins than religion. Their arguments are undermined by their failure to concede that Christianity can offer guidance and teachings of worth. Nor are their arguments new: they were advanced with more cogency in an early era.

Karl Marx (1818-83) arrogantly though not inaccurately postulated the following nearly 160 years before Professor Dawkins:

For Germany *the criticism of religion* is in the main complete and the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism ... Man, who looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the *reflection* of himself, will no longer be disposed to find the *semblance* of himself, only an inhuman being, where he seeks and must seek his true reality.⁵

By this Marx meant that the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, Biblical criticism and left Hegelians like Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) had fatally undermined the factual, historical and, in some cases, the ethical basis of Christian belief. Professor Dawkins

and those like him are repeating the same hypothesis, but less incisively. But there is one important difference: Marx attempts to see why religion still reinvents itself in large parts of world and gives solace to the majority of humanity. In doing so he develops a much more nuanced discussion of religious belief. Marx felt no need to impose his atheism on others; most of his writings on religion show a writer trying to understand religious belief and its links to material culture. He reserves his most vehement language for critics of religion because of their shallow understanding of religion and its relationship with a secular state.⁶ Marx recognises the damage religion has done to people since time immemorial and yet he goes on to say:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.⁷

It may be that some, especially the poor and marginalised, need religion as an antidote to unbridled materialism. Some religious figures share the concerns of secular activists when they warn of the dangers posed by that same materialism, by unregulated capitalism, by lack of concern for the less well-off and by our fear of refugees. This religiously motivated moral concern receives no attention in the discourses of major New Atheists such as Professor Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Professor A.C. Grayling.

Professor Dawkins' 2006 book *The God Delusion* examines the basis of Christianity and postulates, in a conventionally rationalist way, that Charles Darwin's (1809-82) theory of evolution is a more credible explanation of the development of life in this universe than the one contained in the Bible.⁸ He is on shakier ground when he brings his arguments into the human arena of beliefs, culture and history. He claims that atheists can live full and fulfilling lives without the moral and spiritual compass of Christianity, an approach that even Darwin was wary of.

Darwin's theory concerns the functioning of nature, not that of human society and individuals. In nature there is no morality and ethics, unlike what we try and impose on society. Darwin warned that to replace the complex morality of Christianity requires of us as a species not to mimic the enthusiasm and certainty that religion engendered. It is in this light I critically examine Professor Dawkins' contentions about religion.

The monograph then considers one of the most popular figures in the New Atheist movement, the late Christopher Hitchens.

Christopher Hitchens contends that God is not great;⁹ whether this be true or not, he fails to prove his point. His book is riddled with errors which undermine the case for atheism, such as his assertion that Dr Martin Luther King (1929-68), the doyen of

the civil rights movement in the USA, was not really religious.

In contrast, Professor A.C. Grayling's defence of secular humanism is elegant and concise.¹⁰ This may be why he has irritated many mainstream social commentators; I explore this aspect. Nevertheless, I criticise his liberal humanism, arguing that it lacks a narrative, context and history. I point to the similar instrumental logic that was used in developing the new financial tools associated with the 'infallibility' of the free market (leading, it will be remembered, to a massive financial crisis).

I applaud the stance of Dawkins and his friends regarding science but not their idealisation of it. The issue is not whether science works. It does. The issue is for whom, a point which they never allow to enter their discourse. I then look critically at their contention that Stalin and Hitler were not products of the enlightenment. I then address the question of whether their lack of theological knowledge undermines their argument, as Professor Eagleton contends.¹¹

It is appropriate at this point to explain the meaning I attach to certain terms in this monograph.

A *humanist* is a person who places human beings in the centre of the drama of history.

The *Enlightenment* was a European intellectual movement that began in the 18th century, and was based on the advances that revolutionised the scientific, economic, political and ethical bases of society. It was premised on the importance of reason as a guide to understanding society. In doing so it challenged the role of religion. It bred many branches, among whom were the French Encyclopaedists, notably Voltaire and Diderot. In Great Britain it was more concerned with the economics of production and the study of economics (see the work of Scottish philosopher Adam Smith). The Enlightenment also influenced more radical thinkers and political activists.

Logos is a Greek term which could mean, depending on the context, word, speech or reason. Justin (100 CE-160 CE), an early Greek Christian theologian, considered John's opening sentences in his Gospel: 'At the beginning of time the Word already was: and God had the Word abiding within him, and the Word was God.'¹² These words reminded him that the Stoics had organised the whole of the reality of their day and called it *Logos* (Reason). From this premise Justin evolved the concept that Jesus was the incarnation of the Logos, meaning that the prophets of the Old Testament had foretold the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. It was the Christians, not the Jews, who had been able to decipher this message sent by God.¹³

Modernity is a form of thinking, of looking at the world and of organising society and one's life that is neither traditional or religious.

For me the world we inhabit has been created and developed by men and women

who should be able to determine their fate through reason, argument and a sense of justice and cultural plurality, based on, but not limited by the material circumstances facing them. Depending on the circumstances one can struggle to improve that reality but in doing so the ambiguity and fallibility of being human should be ever present, not the certainties of religious belief. ■



Clockwise from top left: Waleed Aly, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, A.C. Grayling, George Pell.

2. The Evolution of a Young Atheist

Progress in human affairs whether in science or in history or in society, has come mainly through the bold readiness of human beings not to confine themselves to seeking piecemeal improvements in the way things are done, but to present fundamental challenges in the name of reason to the current way of doing things and to the avowed or hidden assumptions on which it rests. — *E.H. Carr*¹⁴

India

The first time I saw a human being clubbed senseless was late 1963 or early 1964. It was a typical Calcutta day: the sun was fighting a losing battle with the smog, and the air shimmered with the fumes of tens of thousands of scooters, cars and trucks. I was on the roof of a flat belong to the parents of a friend, with a number of other mates. We were peering over the parapet at two groups of men marching and shouting slogans. They clashed, clothes were torn, sandals and shoes were used as weapons; then we heard the shrill sound of a whistle, and out of the side streets came hundreds of helmeted police armed with long steel-tipped sticks (lathis), with shields of bamboo. The anger of the crowd turned to terror, plaintive cries curdled the air, people were sitting on the road and pavements clutching their heads, others tried to run away and were chased and many were felled by a quick blow of the lathi. The others, dazed and wounded, were bundled into police vans. The street in this middle-class enclave was quiet again (by Calcutta standards); but there was blood on its footpaths, with the odd forlorn sandal and the remnants of torn garments.

What did all this 'sturm and drang' signify? Srinagar, capital of the disputed province of Kashmir, held the 'hair' of the Prophet Muhammad (Moi-e Muqqadas). It is housed in the Hazratbal Shrine (Majestic Place), on the left bank of the picturesque Dal Lake which gives Srinagar its charm and in summer a special grace. It is considered one of the holiest shrines of Islam in the sub-continent. In late 1963 the hair of the Prophet

mysteriously disappeared. This caused consternation across the country, consternation which spilled into downtown Calcutta over 2000 kilometres away. The prime minister of the day, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), appealed for calm on All India Radio, the country's national broadcaster. Shortly afterwards the relic mysteriously reappeared. Calm was restored.

Clashes between the Muslim minority and the Hindu majority, though infrequent, erupted for the most trivial of reasons. One I vividly remember was when a throng of Hindu devotees, chanting and sweating under the weight of the idols they were carrying to the Hooghly river for immersion, passed the Great Mosque of Calcutta just when prayers were being conducted: all hell broke loose. These incidents convinced me of the irrationality of religion.

Who were these people giving vent to their religious prejudice and why did it seem to me to be so irrational? They were the poor, the wretched and hungry. Muslims and Hindus lived cheek and jowl in the many slums (bustees) that littered the city and sometimes engulfed the more middle-class suburbs. They lived in makeshift dwellings built on the debris the better-off had discarded. They had intermittent electricity and paid rent to the criminal dons (many were also in perpetual debt to them) who ran these bustees. Their hovels were surrounded by and sometimes engulfed by rotting rubbish and excrement, invaded by mosquitoes, rats and other assorted vermin. These human beings, who mostly went to bed hungry, kept our houses clean, collected the garbage, disposed of our excreta, washed our clothes, made and mended our shoes, and propelled us on rickshaws the short distances we were too lazy to walk. Religious differences should have been the least of their worries.

I was educated during the flawed leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime-minister from 1947 till his death in 1964. Nehru was a committed secularist, and unlike many other modern South Asian leaders he did not drown in resentment of the 'other'. He was proud of India's rich and turbulent history and wanted India to modernise. During one of his many incarcerations by the British he wrote a wonderful primer on India's history, *The Discovery of India*.¹⁵ He was deeply sceptical of the claims of organised religion, a view he often expressed both publicly and privately.

Religion, as I saw it practiced and accepted even by thinking minds whether it was Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism or Christianity, did not attract me. It seemed to be closely associated with superstitious practices and dogmatic beliefs, and behind it lay a method of approach to life's problems which is certainly not that of science. There was an element of magic about it, an uncritical credulousness, a reliance on the supernatural.¹⁶

I cannot imagine a mainstream politician in any South Asian country making such a

statement now, yet it was this ethos which we imbibed.

One of the few gifts Nehru's India bequeathed to its citizens and the world was the country's militantly secular constitution, a flawed jewel of a document.¹⁷ In drafting it he was immeasurably helped by the foremost law officer of the day, Dr Ambedkar.¹⁸

It was seen by many Hindu members of parliament as a betrayal of the country's rich cultural and political history and too 'Western' in orientation. The constitution, though secular, granted religious freedom and did not privilege the majority community's religious preferences. It gave rights to minorities and the untouchables. It allowed the federal government the right to bring customary practices like inheritance and marriage into the domain of civil law.

At a personal level it helped my community (the Anglo-Indians), who were rightly seen as pillars of British imperialism, to integrate without too much rancour into newly independent India, a challenge which my parents reluctantly took up.¹⁹

The two titans of early post-independence India were Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel.²⁰ Nehru was urbane, secular and a radical social democrat. Patel was more homespun, a conservative who wanted to enshrine the rights of the majority community in the constitution and was blind to the plight of the untouchables and the minority communities. He argued strenuously that Muslims should be forced to prove their loyalty to India. Nehru and Patel clashed when Patel put P. Tandon,²¹ a protégé of his, into the influential position of president of the ruling Congress party. Nehru saw Tandon as a reactionary and orthodox Hindu who represented the communalist wing of the party. In the words of Guha, Tandon was a personification of political and social anachronisms, 'an anti-Muslim and pro-caste Hindu' who stood for the resurrection of a dead culture and a long extinct system of society.²²

Nehru's secular credentials were on display in his struggle to abolish Hindu customary law in the spheres of marriage, divorce, property rights and adoption and in his desire to outlaw polygamy, thus attacking the caste privileges inherent in these practices. The gates of unreason opened up. He was accused of going against the grain of Hindu civilisation and against the venerable tenets contained in the Dhrama Shastras.²³ He was sternly reproached for placating a minority of secular progressives. Nehru prevailed, showing that the tenets of religion were not beyond question and should be challenged by more modern concepts of rights and equality. If tradition was found wanting, the state should step in.²⁴

These examples made me from a young age question the relevance of organised religion in the modern era, a scepticism I took with me when my family migrated to Australia

A militant brand of Hinduism never went away. It persisted in the cultural, religious

and historical sphere, and found success at last when the currents of globalisation freed the country from the 'shackles' of Nehru's state-driven economy. A party with a strong sense of Hindu grievance gained power. Historical texts for secondary schools were made to emphasise identity and religion. Distinguished historians like Professor Romila Thapar, critics of the status quo like Arundhati Roy and influential artists like M.F. Hussain felt the wrath of this new militancy. Any criticism of India, any arguments as to the importance of Islam in Indian history and any book that did not glorify Hinduism were seen as unpatriotic and an attack on Hindu India. While this tamasha was mutating and growing I was already living in Australia.²⁵

Living in the '70s down under

I reluctantly migrated to Australia with my family in 1970, and discovered a country that was exuberant, secular and radical. I immediately felt at ease (with certain reservations) with its social and cultural mores. Australia was shaking itself from the long torpor of the Menzies years. The social commentator Craig McGregor reminds us of that earlier era:

[T]he Catholic Church dominated our morals, and abortion was illegal, illegitimate children were bastards, Aboriginal people were boongs, the pubs closed at six o'clock and judges condemned those who wanted a divorce as having 'barnyard morals' ... It was no place to transgress anything.²⁶

The shards of this repression were still festering and being preserved in the fetid holy waters of the Catholic school I attended in the 1970s. I was dimly aware of the sexual molestation being perpetrated by some of the brothers, though the consequences were not apparent to me at the time. One of the legacies of being taught in an all-male school run with the ethos of a medieval order was a crippling fear and ignorance of women, except as mothers or objects of adolescent lust. It was in a secular institution, the university, that my ignorance was gradually mended.

At school learning was achieved through rote and coercion, and I learnt with grudging reluctance of many of the seminal events in Asian, European and Australian history. It was only through the kindness and patience of a lay teacher in my senior year that I discovered my love for history and its abiding importance in making sense of the world we inhabit. I found, likewise, that constructing a mindless précis of an article in English Expression classes taught one nothing. It was only with the guidance of another lay teacher that I learnt (and am still learning) to distinguish slowly and painfully between what I thought I was reading (the voice in my inner ear) and what the author was actually writing, weighing competing arguments on their merits. Opinions are earned and refined over time and not given from on high — that is the moral of clear

thinking.

Fear of the modern and secular was characteristic of the clerical staff and was reflected in the ethos they sought to impose on us. Women's rights, socialism, abortion and other evils were regarded with abhorrence, though science, interestingly, was recognised as a good. When Dr Bertram Wainer was exposing the corruption of senior members of the police force and the acquiescence of sections of the political elite in the butchery of backyard abortions,²⁷ we were told that abortion was evil in any circumstances. When some of us questioned the merits of that argument we were castigated for our bad manners. When a student from the Democratic Labour Party²⁸ spoke to us on the evils and debauchery of campus life, it seemed that the Reds had got out from under our beds and were running rampant on the campus; sexual debauchery was rife (fuelled by the pill and 'abortion on demand'), drug taking was at epidemic proportions, irreligious discourse was universal and women were rejecting the joys of domestic bliss, amongst other unsavoury manifestations of secular decadence. We could not wait to get out of our cloistered, celibate masturbatory existence and dive into the decadence and transgressions on offer. Being educated in a Catholic institution changed me from being a reluctant and critical believer to being an agnostic.

There was a notable absence of any Catholic or Christian presence in the political discourse of the country, post-Mannix,²⁹ until the appearance of Cardinal George Pell in the 1980s. Religion seemed to enter public consciousness only in its cultic manifestations. At university, on the rare occasions I went to the library, I would be accosted by the smiling and slightly creepy faces of the Children of God. It seemed to me at the time that they had exchanged drugs for religion and were doped out on Christ. Occasionally my sleep would be interrupted by Jehovah's Witnesses hawking the *Watchtower* at my parents' door; It was one of my first experiences of the stubbornness of faith in the face of reason and facts. Scientology had also made its Australian appearance, the creation of sci-fi writer L. Ron Hubbard (1911-86). The courts took a dim view of these cults. There were court cases where the Witnesses' hostility to blood transfusion and the methods of Scientology were deemed illegal because they were incompatible with accepted scientific and psychological practices. In the 1970s religious exceptionalism was deemed as no defence for irrational and harmful practices, though the right of these cults to function as a religion was never questioned.³⁰

The word that encapsulates the seventies for me is liberation: liberation of women from the chains of patriarchy, of blacks from white colonialism; and gays liberating themselves out of the closet began banging on the doors of respectability and acceptance. The working class would, with our 'help', be liberated from the owners of capital and most of all the Vietnamese would be freed from the yoke of American imperialism.

These causes seemed innately secular and modern.³¹

This urge to transgress was most evident in the arts. Australian films were no longer seen as expressions of British colonialism; no longer did we have to endure the crudely made films of Ken G. Hall with their artificial ockerisms. We were entranced by the many fine Australian films on offer. *Wake in Fright* (1971) expressed the nightmare of mateship and its boozy masculine rituals. The enigmatic *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) dramatised our country's landscape and its innate rhythms and mysteries with our incomprehension of it. The sorry colonial history of the country's first inhabitants was brought to the screen in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978). The image of the shearer was modernised, though still with Homeric proportions, in the lovely but neglected film *Sunday too Far Away* (1975). Religion, its oppression and irrelevance, found its cinematic voice in Fred Schepisi's *The Devil's Playground* (1976). Schepisi brilliantly captured the latent violence and sometimes explicit misogyny of a Catholic school.

In the performing arts there was a burst of often vulgar energy from theatrical ensembles like the Pram Factory. They brought Australian stories back to the theatre, with all their attendant dramas, comedy, prejudices, inequities and absurdities.³² Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola* (1969) a play about the shenanigans at a country wedding, was hugely popular. Melbourne theatre fostered talents like Graeme 'Alvin Purple' Blundell, the protean Max Gilles and the prolific David Williamson. In mainstream theatre Webber and Rice gave us a version of Jesus Christ with the resurrection pleasantly absent.

In the fine arts Fred Williams and Russell Drysdale helped recent migrants like me to appreciate the beauty in Australia's landscape. Patrick White had just won the Nobel Prize for literature. For a while he was appreciated and read. White's novels, in particular the elemental *The Tree of Man* and the epic of white exploration *Voss*, became classics, to the chagrin of literary conservatives. White gave literary weight to Manning Clark's flawed multi-volume history of Australia, and Clark's court jester Humphrey McQueen deconstructed the official narrative of our country's history.³³

But if one single thing expressed the mood of the period it was music – Conservative Australia got a glimpse of the frustrations and yearning for a different way of living when the Beatles, with attendant hysteria, reached our shores in 1964. Gone (we thought) were the pop banalities of Col Joy and the Joy Boys, in came the hard blues-based rock of The Loved Ones and the melodic pop of the Easy Beats. Even mainstream teen idols like Russell Morris applied a harder edge to their melodies, with a drug-fuelled madness evident in *Real Thing* (1969). Dylan, the bard of my generation, parodied the incomprehension of the older generation with an incessant rock beat:

You walk into the room
 With your pencil in your hand
 You see someone naked
 And you say, 'Who is that man?'
 You try so hard
 But you don't understand
 Just what you'll say
 When you get home
 Because something is happening here
 But you don't know what it is
 Do you, Mister Jones?³⁴

All this yearning and anger found political expression in the first elected Labour government in 23 years and encapsulated by the slogan 'It's time'. It was led by the patrician, cultured and egotistical Gough Whitlam, who caught the mood of the nation. This is what he said at the launch of the Labour election campaign on December 2, 1972:

Men and women of Australia, the decision we will make for our country on December 2 is a choice between the past and the future, between the habits and fears of the past and the demands and opportunities of the future. There are moments in history when the whole fate and future of nations can be decided by a single decision. For Australia, this is such a time.³⁵

And unlike subsequent Labour governments he delivered. Within a blink of an eye we were out of Vietnam; China was recognised; no fault divorce was legislated; university education was made free; a free universal health care system was ushered in; the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane got sewerage; welfare was improved, women received (in theory) equal pay, housing was made more affordable, Aboriginal land rights were put on the political map, multiculturalism was ushered in, the arts were given generous grants, and there was a valiant, amateur and doomed attempt to 'buy back the farm' from foreign mineral interests.

But it was not to last. Whitlam's autocratic habits, introducing radical change through legislation instead of popular participation, the incompetence of some of his ministers, the sacking of many senior ministers, naivety in financial matters, an ill-advised cut in tariffs, recession, stagflation, a hostile and almost hysterical media — all these things allowed the conservatives to regroup under the cold and ruthless squatter Malcolm Fraser and the natural order was restored, or so it seemed. Even though Fraser did tinker with the changes the Whitlam government introduced, most of them remained intact. Fraser deepened the multicultural agenda and did not play the race

card when tens of thousands of boat people arrived on our shores fleeing the 'liberation' of the south of Vietnam by the communist north. In this he was ably helped (or so it seemed) by his treasurer, John Howard.

Religious fundamentalism rears its head

It took the election of the 'mild colonial boy,' Robert J. Hawke, and the abrasive Paul Keating, to the leadership of the Labor Party for things to change and swing back in favour of capital and conservatism. Suddenly doubts began to appear as to the wisdom of secular institutions and the legacy of the Enlightenment. Hawke and Keating (or is it the other way around) opened up the economy to international capital and finance. They deregulated government controls on prices and incomes, corporatised many public services and subjected the public sector to a private enterprise ethos. They unilaterally privatised strategic public assets like QANTAS and the Commonwealth Bank.

The principal figures of this economic revolution internationally were Thatcher and Reagan. Their enthusiasm infected many other governments, with social and cultural consequences.³⁶ At the same time, to the triumphant shrills of the free marketeers, the Soviet Union self-immolated. The left was no longer visible, trade union membership declined and the social democrats became devotees of the market.

By this time I had become an atheist, aghast at the destructive power of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism gave space to the most militant and fundamentalist forms of religion. This was the corollary to the neo-liberal adventure that is not much remarked upon in the mainstream media. Karen Armstrong:

One of the most startling developments of the late 20th century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly known as 'fundamentalism'. Its manifestation is sometimes shocking. Fundamentalists have gunned down worshippers in a mosque, have killed doctors and nurses who work in abortion clinics, have shot their presidents, and have even toppled a powerful government ...³⁷ ■

3. Christianity: An Atheist's Homily

At the beginning of time the Word already was; and God had the Word abiding within him, and the Word was God. He abode at the beginning of time, with God. It was through him that all things came into being, and without him came nothing that has come to be. In him there was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, a darkness which was not able to master it. — *The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ According to John* ³⁸

I don't know if there's a God. (And neither do you, and neither does Professor Dawkins, and neither does anybody. It isn't the kind of thing you can know. It isn't a knowable item.) But then, like every human being, I am not in the habit of entertaining only the emotions I can prove. I'd be an unrecognisable oddity if I did. Emotion can certainly be misleading: they can fool you into believing stuff that is definitely, demonstrably untrue. But emotions are also our indispensable tool for navigating, for feeling our way through, the much larger domain of stuff that isn't susceptible to proof or disproof, that isn't checkable against the physical universe. We dream, hope, wonder, sorrow, rage, grieve, delight, surmise, joke, detest; we form such unprovable conjectures as novels or clarinet concertos; we *imagine*. And religion is just part of that, in one sense. It's just one form of imagining, absolute functional, absolutely human-normal. — *Francis Spufford*³⁹

Introduction: The paradox that is Christianity

One of my clearest memories is being confirmed into the mysteries and majesty of the Catholic Church and receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion. I was dressed in pristine white and like dozens of others was sent without consent or comprehension into the bosom of the 'one true Church'. At the time I was preoccupied with kneeling down and reciting whatever they wanted me to say, while anticipating the food, the festivities and the chance to run around with my friends; the consequences of this

commitment only came later in life. Becoming an atheist and leaving the Church was not easy. Sexual guilt, the need for prayer, the fear of damnation (even when it made no intellectual and political sense), still compelled me to remain in the Church.

What made it easier was that on most issues — be it abortion, socialism, literature, philosophy — I was opposed to the Christian (especially the Catholic) version. In my twenties I took a perverse pleasure in arguing with those unfortunate souls who would come a knocking at my parents' door spreading the Good News. I enjoyed reading erudite atheists like Bertrand Russell who tore to pieces the proofs offered by significant theologians like St Augustine.⁴⁰

I was also coming across a different type of Christian activist. They were critical of the teachings of the Church, did not take the stories in the Bible as literal, made peace with the secular world, and had no desire to convert me or anybody else to their religious beliefs. In fact they were opposed to a religious presence in the public sphere. They were content to live as followers of a compassionate Christ with his emphasis on social justice and equality.

Paradoxically, I found much of the joy of travelling in visiting churches, temples and mosques. I have become fond of baroque composers like Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), whose major works are magnificent hymns to God. One cannot admire great works of art and architecture just for their form, use of colour or architectural innovation; behind the humanism and homoeroticism of Michelangelo⁴¹ there is a deep spiritual yearning. An outstanding example is the *Pietà* (1498-1499), showing Mary holding her son Jesus after he is brought down from the cross. Michelangelo humanises the scene while never losing sight of its religious dimension.

One of the works I am listening to while writing this is Bach's oratorio *Matthaus-Passion* (*St Matthew's Passion*) (1724). It is a musical masterpiece in anybody's culture. Its soaring melodies, counterpoint, musicality, the astute use of the human voice and the way the melody encircles key parts of the drama is not only masterful but also profoundly moving. Words and logic cannot convey the power of the music one surrenders, even though one is never convinced of the message. One cannot ignore the fact that for 1700 years the logos of the Bible motivated human beings to rise to great heights of poetry, art and literature.

None of this makes me a card carrying Christian, these sort of binary arguments I find morally exhausting. As an atheist I am critical of many aspects of Christian history and theology. How to balance the evil done in the name of Christianity with the beauty and love it has also engendered in human beings is beyond my remit. I am a human being, not an abacus.

The argument

Christianity houses many practices and sense of the numinous. While not wishing to attack people's personal beliefs, it is my intention to look at the less desirable influence of Christianity in the public and political sphere. This entails a critical examination of the myths of Abraham and Moses and the misrepresentation of Christ's life and death in the Gospels. I also look critically at the mishandling of the child sex abuse scandal and to its origin in Catholic concepts of celibacy and female sexuality. I examine the strange marriage of the American Christian Right with the free market, and return to Australia to examine the influence of a certain type of Christianity on the political discourse of the nation. I conclude by acknowledging the evolution of yet another type of Christianity that is more humane and progressive.

It ain't necessarily so —Part 1⁴²

I quickly became aware that the personages in the Bible were not historically and archeologically verifiable. Many key accounts were written decades or even centuries after the people in question supposedly lived. Does this then make the claims regarding them spurious? Not necessarily: it is the use made of these stories that is troubling. This is pertinent if we look at the two of the central patriarchal figures in the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham and Moses.

According to the Bible, Abraham was well in his nineties and childless when God revealed himself and made a covenant with him, stating that the nation of Israel would result from the issue of his loins. The God of Abraham was suspicious and harsh. During the many travails endured by Abraham to prove his belief and commitment to his God, he was forced to renounce and banish his 'illegitimate' son Ishmael and Hagar, Ishmael's mother, when his wife Sarah, after decades of barrenness, bore him a 'legitimate' son, Isaac. Later Abraham, following God's dictates, obediently went to sacrifice his son Isaac, until God intervened to stop it.⁴³

Cecil de Mille's pious and interminable cinema spectacle *The Ten Commandments* (1956) faithfully recreates the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. It took ten plagues, including the killing of all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, before the Pharaoh allowed them to go free. This is still celebrated as the Passover by the Jewish community. It took them 40 years to reach the 'promised land', in the course of which God bestowed the Commandments on Moses. Whilst waiting for the Commandments the Israelites reverted to their old gods and pagan habits, and on discovering this the Lord smote them. In the end it was Joshua (Moses being old and infirm) who led the Israelites to the conquest of the promised land.⁴⁴

Professor Dawkins, taking a literal and modern view of the Bible, quickly condemns

the God of the Old Testament, especially the sacrifice of Isaac. Dawkins see it as child abuse and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence, 'I was only obeying orders.'⁴⁵ We could remain similarly unconvinced by the jealous and homicidal God of Exodus, who smites those who do not believe in him.

Karen Armstrong would argue that this is a simplistic and fallacious reading. Since the dawn of time human beings have been seeking some meaning to their lives. Words have their limits: language has an inherent inadequacy.

There is always something left unsaid; something that remains inexpressible. Our speech makes us conscious of the transcendence that characterises human existence.⁴⁶ The Bible began life as 'oral proclamations' and writing them down allowed people to view them as sacred and they invested their hopes and fears and the sense of the transcendent. Whilst they contain the truth, it is not the truth in the modern and factual sense. This literalism came much later in the 19th century.

The Mosaic and Abrahamic texts came to be treated with ceremonial reverence as containers of meaning beyond the quotidian. They revealed to generation after generation a truth that had relevance to their religious lives. Human beings, regardless of their religious affiliations, have since time immemorial sought out *estasis* (a stepping outside) of their normal existence. Armstrong argues that if we read the Bible receptively and intuitively it will give us 'intimations of transcendence'. This method links texts that have no commonality, and by breaking down these barriers of textual difference one achieves an ecstatic *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is what devotees of the Qur'an and the Vedas also did with their 'paradoxical and multifarious scriptures'. A spiritual discipline is not an academic pursuit of evidence.⁴⁷

Armstrong gives us a much more nuanced and poetic way of reading and understanding of the Bible than Dawkins' 'vulgar' reading of the text. We cannot have complete empathy with the lives of people who lived nearly 3000 years ago, but the texts allow us the beginning of comprehension. But one can only empathise with a poetic reading of the scriptures to a degree. The Bible has political and legal implications which have unpleasant consequences in the modern world.

I visited the West Bank town of Hebron in occupied Palestine in 1979. Hebron is 19 kilometres from Jerusalem. It is where Abraham allegedly bought some land from the local community over 3000 years ago, and it is the site of his tomb, a place sacred to both the Jews and Muslims. The tomb is a squat and rather ugly building on a hill overlooking the city. Like many cities and towns in occupied Palestine, Hebron is a sprawling jungle of alleyways, lanes and streets with drab and dilapidated houses abutting on to the street. It is home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, hemmed in by an ever expanding Jewish state. A group of Jewish settlers decided to reoccupy

the area around the tomb by aggressively colonising local buildings nearby and intimidating and throwing out many of their inhabitants. The first thing one saw there was a couple of machine gun nests on the roof of the tomb, with dozens of armed, young and nervous soldiers roaming the streets. In the marketplace below the tomb settlers with submachine guns and pistols roamed with impunity. The tomb had been partitioned, with the Jews viewing one end of the tomb the Arabs the other. Since then things have gone from bad to worse. Murray Sayle:

In 1994 Dr Baruch Goldstein, a settler from Brooklyn USA, murdered 39 Muslims at prayer in the tomb with a submachine gun, before he was disarmed and killed by survivors. Today, a few hundred settlers, supported by gifts from America, live in Hebron, guarded by some 6000 Israeli conscript soldiers.⁴⁸

The existence of Abraham, in fact, is unconfirmed by either the historical or the archaeological record. Armstrong admits this and that accounts of Abraham were written hundreds of years later by people who wanted to ensure the adherence of the one true God by the people of the 'holy land'.⁴⁹ Even a sympathetic Biblical archaeologist like Professor Eric Cline, who reveres the Bible, admits that despite the many archaeological finds, 'there has not yet been any direct archaeological or extra Biblical evidence found to confirm or deny the existence of Abraham and his fellow patriarchs'.⁵⁰

We have here a creation myth that is doing much to poison the lives of those living in Hebron. Maybe, just maybe, if historians, archaeologists and anthropologists are allowed to tell us of their findings and their research is put on par with religious teaching and their pundits, it might lessen some of the righteous religious discourse that mars political communication between the Palestinians and Israelis. It might nullify to an extent the obsession many rich American fundamentalists Christians have in supporting this sort of vexatious activity as they feel that the 'end of days' is nigh.

Likewise there is no evidence, textual, historical or archaeological, that the Exodus took place. We are asked to believe that a horde of slaves (including 600,000 men in arms, according to the Bible) could cross without incident from Egypt into Canaan, the latter also having a considerable Egyptian military presence at the time. It has been estimated that the population of Egypt around 1200 BCE was about three and a half million. The well-organised Egyptian bureaucracy would surely have noted the exodus, but no such record has come to light. Textual analysis indicates that the Biblical account was written 600 years later in order to glorify the one true God and his hold on his chosen people and perpetuate the power of the ruling family at the time.⁵¹

So when one looks at the Judaeo-Christian basis to law and its remnants in the laws of blasphemy, marriage, its misogyny towards women and hatred of others not

of its faith and prohibitions it places on the lives of its adherents it might again be timely if experts in the field were allowed to point out that there is not a shred of historical and archaeological evidence to its Judaic-Christian origins to prop up their theological restrictions and prejudices. Maybe we can start treating these pronouncements as man-made to serve a particular historical and political purpose and therefore these pronouncements are neither divine or eternal and move on.

I do not think either of the disparate approaches of Armstrong and Dawkins to the Bible when it comes to the myths of Abraham and Moses is correct. It is not because the God that appears to Moses and Abraham is harsh and demanding (he is) or that a poetical reading of the whole Bible could place these stories in a broader theological context (they can) or that there is a mass hunger for spiritualism as Armstrong contends. I think religion provides solace and a bedrock in an uncertain world where the vagaries of modernity disrupt people's lives. Modernity does not provide anything concrete to replace the old certainties and can be full of ambiguity and angst. A perfect example is the science and solutions on global warming. The complexity of the argument and the disruption to our material lives if we want to counter man-made global warming maybe is just too much to bear for some of us. Religion and its iron clad certainties will only quieten down if the reasons for its irrationality disappear. One of the small ways we can contribute is to provide the truth as we know it and what we do not know with all its limitations in a civil way. What is done with this historical truth and how the conversation takes place is thankfully beyond the scope of this monograph.

It ain't necessarily so: Part 2

If the evidence for the Old Testament is fragmentary then the New Testament is more fragmentary still. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Jesus. In the words of Kline:

Archaeology has not been able to shed any direct light on the birth, life or death of Jesus. This is to say, there is not yet any archaeological evidence for the historical Jesus — or any of the apostles for that matter.⁵²

The Jesus of the Gospels is a shadow figure in a puppetry show — we get no direct insight into the man. We do not know what he looked like and his psychological make-up, he is only a religious cipher. What we have are inferences and some wonderful prose which tells us what the writers of the Gospels thought was important about Jesus as teacher, prophet, man and son of God. A.N. Wilson:

The Gospels are not history-books. They are narratives framed by communities of believers who entertained certain beliefs about Jesus which they took for granted — such as that he founded a 'Church' for Gentiles, that he rose from the dead, and will

come again to judge the earth; even in the case of the Fourth Gospel, though not in the case of the first three, that he was divine. The smallest details which might look to the modern leader like believable historical facts or incidentals turned out to have been fashioned by the evangelists because of their presuppositions about who Jesus was.⁵³

The historical records of the period, written in Latin and Greek, give us an idea of the turbulent world of Jesus and other Jews. We also have the Dead Sea Scrolls, which indirectly gives us an idea of the social milieu which produced a preacher like Jesus. Little of this conforms to the traditional image and story.

Unlike many atheists, I do not think that Christianity is fatally undermined by the contradictions and myths recorded by the writers of the first three gospels. Jesus's identification with sinners and his empathy for outcasts, his compassion for the sick and the poor,⁵⁴ the power of the Sermon on the Mount, the way he died, are powerful parables that challenge our materialist lives. It was the evergreen nature of some aspects of the gospels that attracted the radical poet and film maker Pier Paolo Pasolini. His poetic evocation of *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964), which gives us a humanist and Marxist Jesus, is a masterpiece of world cinema. Pasolini movingly brings to the fore Christ the preacher who regards everybody as equal in the eyes of God; wealth and the rituals of piety do not automatically grant you access to heaven.

But in the Pauline epistles and later Church doctrine the theological picture is muddled. Paul had no problem with the rich getting into heaven, tacitly supported the owning of slaves and from him we get our first overtly hostile view of gays.⁵⁵ We have two versions of Jesus. In one he is the social reformer, friend of the poor and the marginalised, and hostile to the acquisition of riches. In the other, the Pauline Hellenic version, he is not seen as hostile to the status quo and its inherent inequities; his teachings are compatible, therefore, with Roman imperialism, the brutal Spanish conquest of the Americas, and certain dictatorial regimes of more recent times, including that of Franco.

There is another moral stain which Christianity took too long to attempt to expunge, and even then its traces remained. This was anti-semitism, and it continues to detract from the beauty, poetry and drama of Christianity. We need, therefore, to look at what Biblical scholars have discovered about the historical Jesus and the Gospels.

Most of what we know about Jesus comes from the Gospels. They are a unique theological and pedagogical genre that teaches through narrative. They are not, as many evangelical Christians believe, an objective historical record of the life of Jesus, despite the many 'facts' contained therein. The Gospel writers started with a firm set of theological ideas about Christ and adapted the narrative to fit these constructs. The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are known as the Synoptic Gospels

because the narrative in each is the same. They are not contemporary accounts. Mark's gospel is the earliest; it was written in 60 CE in Rome, followed by that of Luke, written in Corinth in 80 CE, and that of Matthew, written in Antioch in 85 CE. The last gospel was written by somebody called John, with an emphasis on Christ as pre-existing god who took human form and revealed himself to the select few, a version which became the central tenet of Christianity; it appeared as late as 100 CE.⁵⁶ These dates are important because the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE, killing its inhabitants or dispersing them across the Levant and Europe. This lessened the influence of the Jewish followers of Jesus under the leadership of James, allowing Pauline Christianity to flourish.⁵⁷ Geza Vermes, one of the great scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the life of Jesus, has argued convincingly that Jesus was a Galilean hasid (holy man).

The conclusion arrived at so far is that once the Gospel report concerning his person and work is analysed, the secondary traits removed, and the essential features inserted into the context of contemporary political and religious history, Jesus of Nazareth takes on the eminently credible personality of a Galilean hasid.⁵⁸

This is crucial in understanding why Jesus was crucified and who ordered his execution. When Jesus was born, probably in 4 CE, Judea was a Roman colony, but rebellious and divided. There was tension between elite collaborators (like Herod and the high priests) and the anti-Roman Zealots.⁵⁹ The Romans violated the religious sensibilities and practices of the Jews, restricted their freedom and oppressed them with taxes. The great majority of Jews looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would deliver them from the yoke of the Romans and restore their theocratic state. In the words of Brandon:

It was in such an environment of alternating tension and violence, shot through with hatred for heathen Rome and its Jewish collaborators, and inflamed by apocalyptic hope, that Jesus lived through the formative years of his life and in which his mission was set.⁶⁰

Therefore none of the participants in the drama including Jesus, in their utterances and actions could be unaware of this central dialectic — the conflict between Israel being a colonial possession of Rome and the desire of many of the colonised for an independent theocratic Jewish state.

Jesus, like many a Galilean hasid before him, proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, performed miracles, and had contempt for the high priests appointed by the Roman governor. Jesus had two well-known zealots, Simon and Judas, amongst his select disciples. This alone would have made the Roman authorities suspicious. What Jesus directly felt about Roman control of his country can be inferred from his famous injunction to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. According to

many biblical scholars, Jesus certainly did not mean the separation of the state and religion. He intended a rebuke to those who gave to the heathen Roman occupiers the tribute and money belonging to Israel. The last straw for the Roman authorities was Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, a religiously symbolic animal, and being hailed by his followers and the masses as 'king of Israel'. This would have been seen by the Romans as a direct challenge to their rule.⁶¹

The trial of Christ, one of the great dramas of world literature, is riddled with inconsistencies. It beggars belief that an experienced and ruthless governor like Pontius Pilate, with the military might of Rome at his disposal, would dither, Hamlet-like, about the execution of one he would have perceived to be a zealot, an enemy of Rome. In addition, Israel at the time was seething with resentment and periodically erupting against the Romans. John's account is particularly erroneous on this aspect when he states that the Jews would have reported the governor's action to Caesar if he released Jesus instead of Barabbas, a leading zealot. It ignores the practical difficulties that such an action by a subject people against their imposed governor would encounter; and it assumes that the emperor would have accepted that report instead of the report of his own governor, whose ten years' tenure of office attested to the trust that was placed in him. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that Pilate would have been in far greater danger of being removed if the emperor learned that he had released Barabbas, a rebel leader recently involved in a serious insurrection.⁶² In this situation Pontius Pilate had supreme control: he had the legions, he had appointed the high priests to do Rome's bidding, and only he had the power to determine the fate of Jesus. Crucifixion was the method of execution favoured by the Romans for those who engaged in what they deemed as seditious behaviour. In the end, the winners write the history. Brandon:

The original form of Christianity was essentially a Messianic movement, intelligible only within the terms of contemporary Judaism ... But it was virtually wiped out when the Jerusalem Church perished in the Jewish catastrophe of AD 70. That Christianity did not disappear then, but survived to become a salvation religion, was due to the transforming genius of Paul. Though defeated in his own life time, Paul's interpretation of the death of Christ as a divinely planned event, transcending time and place, was rehabilitated after AD 70 and became the foundation doctrine of Catholic Christianity.⁶³

The legacy is twofold. We have the uplifting fable of God's only son in human form, who gives up his life for our sins. Its dark side was a virulent anti-semitism which affected all Christian traditions, be they Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. It is not surprising that Jews were confined to ghettos, were periodically forced to flee for their lives, endured numerous pogroms and were denounced as being the killers of the Saviour. The real killers, imperial Rome and its political elite,⁶⁴ were remembered

much more kindly by Holy Mother Church. Why does it matter? Let me cite a few examples from history.

On November 27, 1095 Pope Urban declared a holy war on the Muslims who had been rulers of the Holy Lands for 300 years. In his edict Pope Urban gave license to Crusaders to use the sword to smite all unbelievers. On their way to the Holy Land, swelling in numbers, the Crusaders marched down the Rhine valley massacring all the Jews they met. These Jews had lived in peace with their neighbours since Roman times.⁶⁵

A few years after the Reconquista of Spain, in March 1499, its Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, signed an edict of expulsion directed against Spain's remaining Jewish and Muslim population (i.e. those not already killed by the Inquisition or converted to Catholicism). Hundreds of thousands left Spain in the direst of circumstances. Many of these exiles brought their professional and mercantile expertise to Ottoman territories.⁶⁶ Having escaped Catholic Europe, many then faced Orthodox Christian prejudice. Philip Mansel, in his fine account of Ottoman Constantinople, says that, although the Muslim population was indifferent to the presence of the Jews, the Christians were not.

In certain Greek districts, if a Jew appeared during Holy Week boys would grease his beard with tar and set fire to it. Good Friday processions included a figure of Judas dressed in the costume of a local rabbi. Boys hurled dirt at it screaming — one Greek remembered — 'a litany of the coarsest abuse'. At every Christian house the procession stopped to be given money or Easter eggs. The former brought wood to burn 'Judas', the latter was to celebrate his death.⁶⁷

At around the same time, in the heart of Europe, the great reformer and the scourge of Latin Christianity, Dr Martin Luther (1483-1546) was helping to find salvation for many through the logos of the Bible. Luther was not seeking inner peace or spiritual enlightenment. He saw life as a constant battle against Satan. Luther was not a gentle reformer; he was 'a disturbed, angry and violent man'. He was also (in Armstrong's words) 'a rabid anti-semitic, a misogynist, was convulsed with loathing and horror of sexuality and believed that all rebellious peasants should be killed'.⁶⁸ In this were some of the makings, after several generations, of a vicious religious conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants in which millions lost their lives, a period known as the Thirty Years War (1618-48).

Anti-semitism was largely confined to Europe and to the Christian parts of the Levant. As we now know, it was a basis for later catastrophes; it meant that in an industrially and culturally advanced nation like Germany the Nazis were able to use sophisticated technological and bureaucratic means to eradicate between four and six

million people, mostly Jews, with a compliant population either looking on or looking the other way. The Catholic Church, like other major Christian denominations, remained largely silent and sometimes collaborative. In particular the behaviour of Pope Pius XII (1939-58) can be charitably described as cowardly and probably more realistically as criminal. It was not until 1965 that the Catholic Church declared that the Jews were not responsible for the death of Christ. Yet the erroneous parts of the New Testament in all its majestic prose and drama remains intact, I do not know how one can read this part of the Bible poetically; the ghastly historical consequences and ghosts are just too damn loud.

Running Pell-mell against secularism

Rome, the capital of the Papal States in the year 1592, was putting a new theological and political face to its congregation of believers and felt it had stemmed the tide of its mortal enemy, Protestantism. The reason the Church felt a measure of confidence is that it had reinvigorated the clergy, the liturgy and catechism and presented a more sombre religious and celibate face to the world. This was the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) that was the norm for my father. The Church was militantly conservative, totalitarian when it came to dissent and almost pathological in its aversion to secularism, socialism and modernity. In this closed world of incense, piety, mass going and political homilies from the pulpit, the priest was held in high esteem. His celibate aura, his almost magical ability to turn water into wine, his divine vocation and he being in many a village, hamlet or town the only one who could read and write with some proficiency gave him an authority that could not be questioned. It was his unquestioned power and holding the keys to the sacred in the eyes of the laity that allowed some clerics to abuse that sacred trust and molest children, for so long with impunity.

This was the world of the young George Pell in the Victoria of the 1950s and one he never rebelled against. At an early point he came under the spell of B.A. Santamaria and his Manichean world of good and evil:

As a teenager, probably in 1955, I first heard him talk to a packed cathedral hall in Ballarat on the menace of communism ... We felt we too belonged to the forces of good fighting the new faces of evil, as saints and heroes had done for thousands of years. He placed us in a grand tradition of worthy struggle and combat, where we felt we could do our bit. Some of us never completely lost this conviction.⁶⁹

This dualism of saints and sinners is too simple; as human beings we are fallible and deeply ambivalent. Our salient characteristic is our ambiguity, the contradictory impulses within our psyche such as piety and eroticism. The way we deal with this

helps make us human.

Behind this religious and righteous façade of saints and sinners was the central paradox which the Catholic Church and other branches of Christianity were never able to resolve — sex. Surrounding it was fear, sometimes verging on loathing of women which was entwined from the story of the Fall (the loss of the Garden of Eden) to the Virgin birth up to the present day.

Some of the more sophisticated prelates in history were well adapted in their personas of public piety and private licentiousness. So at the height of the revival of conservative Catholicism known as the Counter-Reformation (1545-1648), in 1592 into Rome strode Michelangelo Merisi (1571-1610), known to us as Caravaggio. He was a seasoned denizen of the demi-mode of his day, a brawler, lover, drunk, coward and murderer, gay by choice when not bi-sexual, the foremost painter of his day and the master of chiaroscuro. His religious work appealed both to his ecclesiastical patrons and the masses, for his saints, sinners and depictions of Jesus came from real life, the streets of Rome. He rejected the fashionable affectations of Mannerism and instead painted naturally, fluidly and beautifully. In the words of Robert Hughes: ‘Caravaggio was one of the hinges of art history: there was art before him and art after him and they were not the same.’⁷⁰

There was public art, as commissioned by the rich and powerful religious dynasties that ran Rome and the Papal States, and there were the private works which they also commissioned for their private and palatial villas. One of the most cultivated and powerful patrons, and protector of Caravaggio, was Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1577-1633). His family’s imposing and crumbling villa overlooks a large park named after the family in what is still a wealthy suburb of Rome. In the villa are a number of Caravaggios, painted, one assumes, for the Cardinal’s own delight. Two of these are startling in their homoerotic appeal, even in darkened rooms and covered with years of dust. *Boy with a Fruit (Il Fruttaiuolo)* painted in 1593, depicts a boy holding a bag of fruit with his shoulders exposed. The painter’s gaze (hence ours) is one of lust, to which the young man responds with a gaze both knowing and rueful. The other, painted in the same year, is entitled *The Little Bacchus (Il Bacchino Malato)* and shows us a street thug with muscular forearms, garlanded and holding a bunch of grapes, inviting the viewer to partake both of the fruit and him. I do not know what the sexual predilections of Cardinal Borghese may have been, but the homoeroticism of these works would have merited condemnation by a prelate versed in the Pauline epistles. This homoerotic sensibility is more explicit still in a painting commissioned by one of the bankers of the Vatican, the Marchese Giustiniani, entitled *Victorious Amor* and painted between 1601 and 1602. It depicts a sturdy, naked and smiling boy of 12 or 13,

with his private parts proudly on display.⁷¹

Fear of the female was from the very start a preoccupation of the leaders of the Church and some of its more prominent theologians. Banishment from the Garden of Eden showed that if man is given free will he is bound to misuse it. In misusing it he blames his partner Eve (born from a rib of Adam) for tempting him into sin. The basis of this catastrophe is the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge which God has forbidden them to eat. Eve, tempted by the serpent (the devil in disguise), tastes the fruit and convinces Adam to do likewise. Let me quote the appropriate verses from the Bible:

And the Lord God called to Adam; Where art thou? he asked. I heard thy voice, Adam said, in the garden, and I was afraid, because of my nakedness, so I hid myself. And the answer came, Why, who told thee of thy nakedness? Or hadst thou eaten of the tree whose fruit I forbade thee to eat? The woman said Adam, whom thou gavest me to my companion, she it was who offered me fruit from the tree, so I came to eat it.⁷²

Being ashamed of nakedness, blaming women and the excuse 'the devil made me do it' began with this fable and has tormented Christians ever since. Marina Warner:

Augustine ... defined the doctrine that each individual is born of original sin, a member of the *massa peccati* that is the human race, who has to be cleansed of his stain by baptism. But even after the sacrament, a man would still suffer the penalty of Adam's sin on earth, though redeemed from it in heaven. That penalty Augustine called concupiscence and its only antidote was the grace of God.⁷³

Concupiscence be damned (it was), salvation was on hand as the ever benevolent deity, our Lord God, was going to send his only Son to earth to save our mortal souls. The only catch being Christ could not be born out of carnality. It was decreed that he had been born from the womb of the Virgin Mary: the Immaculate Conception. Sexuality was an evil; virginity and celibacy were the better choice. Renunciation of sexuality became an obsession of theologians and church leaders of all Christian denominations. From this followed the witch hunts, the downgrading of women's vocational calling, the edict that they could not become priests, the idealisation of their domestic role and the passive female. There also followed great works of art, poetry and music, which hid their misogyny beneath aesthetic wonder.⁷⁴

The evolution of celibacy amongst the clergy was a long and tortuous affair. How could it not be, given what we know about human sexuality? As far as we can ascertain, the early Church fathers were married in the corporeal sense. The earliest evidence we have is that in 335 CE at the Council of Nicea (a city in northern Anatolia) a decree was passed that after ordination a priest should not marry. The basis of this injunction was the example of Christ himself, who was not married and hence chaste. In a theological sense the clergy were married to the Church. Reinforcing this injunction in

1123 CE, Pope Callixtus the second (1119 CE – 1124 CE) decreed that clerical marriages were invalid. For many centuries after the introduction of this mandatory requirement, Church leaders and others ignored it. Medieval Popes, cardinals and bishops conducted liaisons with women, producing progeny who might in their turn become cardinals and popes. Such liaisons were also common among priests. It was estimated that until the 15th century about half of the clergy had taken partners. The extravagance of the papacy and the rise of Protestantism forced the leadership of the Church to take a much more puritanical approach. Popes from the 15th century onwards, including John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, reinforced this edict on celibacy.⁷⁵ Yet despite this it is estimated that around 50% of the Catholic clergy in the USA engage in active sexual relationships.⁷⁶

Despite the sexual scandals engulfing the Catholic Church, diminishing numbers at church services, the spectacular decline in vocations and the abject failure of sexual abstinence, Cardinal Pell still insists on celibacy. In a homily to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the ordination of the class of 1985, when he was rector of Corpus Christi Seminary in Victoria, one looks in vain for any evidence of doubt or reflection regarding this contentious issue. He appeals to history, canon law, the triumph of the Counter Reformation, the proclamations of various popes and divine injunctions:

Benedict's emphasis is on Jesus's mission, on the fact He is sent by the Father, that He represents God's authority concretely in His person. Benedict hones in on the following formula given by St Augustine 'My doctrine is not my own but His who sent me.'⁷⁷

This is instrumental theology at its most myopic and anti-human. His homily shears the human element, empathy and history from the narrative. On reading this there has never been a crisis of celibacy in the priesthood, it is a storm in a teacup, creating by the Church's many critics. In reading Cardinal's Pell's writing one is left with the impression of a highly intelligent, well read (in Catholic theology), conservative man who is not prone to doubt and thus does not feel he has to persuade his flock of the soundness of his arguments as it is God's truth as revealed to the Church. Pronouncements are made regardless of their veracity in the material world we inhabit — the world must conform to the Church's theological constructs, not vice versa. Pell on the greatest moral challenge to the existence of the Catholic Church in Australia observed in 2010:

We have faced up to the scandal of sexual abuse, which has damaged our moral authority, but effective measures have been in place now for over a decade to help the victims. The worst has passed.⁷⁸

Let us now look at Pell's record pertaining to this issue. When stories of the sexual abuse of the clergy were becoming known in the late 1980s Pell did sign a protocol on

how the Church would deal with the matter but did not take part in the discussions. At the time he was too busy with his pastoral duties, which included extensive polemics against the forces of liberalism (i.e. modernism and secularism). In the letter column of the magazine *AD2000*, to which he is a conspicuous contributor, many writers accused victim groups like Broken Rites, which had appeared in response to the crisis, of vindictiveness and hatred. In Pell's own diocese, meanwhile, a number of priests (as in other dioceses) were active paedophiles. One of the more notorious offenders was Father Peter Searson. Marr:

Searson was a bad man. Complaints about him had been pouring in for years to the Catholic Education Office, to the vicars-general of the diocese and to Archbishop Little. A delegation of teachers came to complain to Pell about Searson in 1989. A second delegation met him in 1991. But Searson was left to abuse children for another six years.⁷⁹

Pell did not go into the schools or churches to find out the extent of the problem and eradicate it. He rejected the claim that there was culture of child abuse in Catholic institutions:

The great majority of paedophiles are married people. All literature suggests that celibacy is not directly related to paedophilia.⁸⁰

The issue would not go away, so in 1996 he set up a process, Melbourne Response, for dealing with child sexual abuse in the Church. It was headed by Peter O'Callaghan QC (his title was Independent Commissioner). Pell also did something that was welcome and unprecedented: he apologised on behalf of the Church to the victims of sexual abuse. From the onset Melbourne Response met with criticism, partly because of paltriness of the monetary compensation (capped at \$50,000), which was seen as inadequate for those who had endured a lifetime of depression, with consequent alcohol and drug abuse, because of what they suffered as a child. The QC was acting on behalf of the Church, his decisions were final, the terms agreed to were secret, and payment was made on the condition that no further claims would be made on the Church. There was, in contrast, nothing paltry about the luxurious new pilgrim centre in the heart of the Vatican, Domus Australia, for whose construction Pell found \$30 million.

In the welter of information on the issue of child abuse what gets forgotten is that the Catholic Church is one of richest institutions in the country. The Sydney Archdiocese of which Pell was till recently the head of, has assets of \$1.24 billion which has resulted in tens of millions dollars of income per year. In addition the Catholic Development Fund held \$810 million, including \$321 million in cash at the end of 2013.⁸¹ How the Church chooses to spend this money is the key moral question. It certainly has for a

long time preferred to spend large amounts of money in fighting claims and reducing payouts instead of helping victims of child abuse to recover their shattered lives. At the end of the day for all its fine critiques of unbridled capitalism it like any good capitalist reluctant till forced to share its largesse with its victims.

Meanwhile Pell was acting as he thought a prelate should. He introduced a new and conservative syllabus to Corpus Christi, an important Catholic seminary, resulting in all its teaching staff resigning in protest. He continued to fence with the real enemies of the apostolic mission, like Professor Peter Singer, 'King Herod's propaganda chief in Australia.' He railed against masturbation, drugs and pornography. He addressed homilies to his ever diminishing flock against Marxists, modernists, theological confusion, easy divorce and those 'progressive priests' who were undermining Church doctrine. He was also busy in the Vatican, in tandem with 'God's Rottweiler', the future Pope Benedict XVI, excommunicating radical priests and dissenting theologians and, as one of the prominent members of Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, reinforcing Catholic dogma.⁸² Yet the issue of child abuse would not go away. The reasons were simple: there were too many offenders and there was something within the organisation that attracted paedophiles. Professor Patrick Parkinson, a lawyer and expert on child protection, observed:

If you compare the statistics, I would say conservatively that there is six times as much abuse in the Catholic church as all the other churches combined ...

Even if we take into account the fact that the Catholic Church is the largest church, with a great deal of involvement in school, orphanages and children's homes, the levels of abuse in the Catholic Church are strikingly higher than in any other church.⁸³

Whilst His Eminence was fighting secular dragons, cases of sexual abuse multiplied, and public opinion was increasingly affected by the human debris of lost lives, by the cover-ups, the paltry compensation, the secrecy and unaccountability of the Church. What was apparent to the world, but not to Pell, was that the serpent was in the very bosom of the Church. The attitudes of the 1950s had lost all relevance except in the mind of the cardinal. The age was secular, and the power and prestige of the Church had diminished. Given the magnitude of the abuse, the Church was deserted by those elements of the state, such as the political establishment and the police force, which might once have lent support. Even Prime Minister Tony Abbott, a conservative and a Catholic, acknowledged that the matter had to be dealt with by a Royal Commission. Most tellingly, the Catholic laity, like 90% of the Australian public, supported this proposal. Bewildered, blustering, still not fully comprehending, Cardinal Pell was forced to comply with the dictates of secular institutions like parliament, public opinion and the judicial cut and thrust of a Royal Commission and muffle his theological

certainties.⁸⁴

The Australian Church's response was in many ways a mirror of what took place in Ireland and the USA. The denials, the moving of paedophile priests to other parishes, an inadequate response from the Vatican, then monetary compensation and in the Irish case an enquiry that exposed the extent of the abuse. The reluctance to deal with the situation leads all the way to the Vatican and the last pope, his holiness Benedict XVI.⁸⁵ Many of the offending priests were excellent fundraisers, pious men who had been praised for their pastoral care; they just had a penchant for sexually abusing children. When caught they were questioned by priests who were probably celibate and for whom sex, perhaps, was a theoretical construct. The offending clergy would have confessed, and might have been truly penitent at the time of confession. But in time the same demons took over, and those priests offended again. When confronted, they resorted to the Church's tenets on pastoral care. They were, they perversely claimed, only doing God's work.⁸⁶ The Church, if it wishes to survive, must clean its Augean Stables, the 'devil' lies within its bosom, not in the secular world.

Things are looking better with the ascension of Pope Francis. He seems a more compassionate and democratic pope and has shown admirable humility in discarding much of the panoply we associate with God's vicar. He has shown genuine concern for the poor and dispossessed and has criticised unregulated capitalism. He has also shown compassion for the plight of refugees. Unlike Pell, he is very aware of how much the sexual scandals have affected the standing of his Church.⁸⁷ But unless he deals realistically with the issue of celibacy, opens the files of the Vatican on paedophile priests, listens to and acts on the concerns of the laity, the Church in the Western world will die a slow death and his homilies on the poor and the dispossessed will carry little weight. He must deal with a failed 1700 year old tradition of celibacy and an even older Pauline tradition of misogyny, and with the power that conservative prelates like Cardinal Pell have always wielded in the Curia. I do not fancy his chances, but I wish him and those progressive souls who wish to remain in the Church luck.

The spectre of the religious right in 'God's own country'

The shift from an agrarian to an industrialised economy is difficult, especially if the catalyst is laissez-faire capitalism. Low wages, the exploitation of women and children in the workplace, squalid working conditions, the pollution of once pristine farmlands and the destruction of craft guilds, all these created an abiding unease in the societies that experienced the onset of modernity.⁸⁸ At the same time, long-held beliefs, especially religious certainties, were threatened by scientific, archaeological, philological and historical advances. In addition, there were horrifying wars like the Civil War in the

USA (1861-65), using the latest military technology and resulting in huge loss of life. All this made a number of the pious feel that they were experiencing the beginnings of the apocalypse. Many retreated into the logos of the Bible and being influenced, ironically, by the scientific revolution and its emphasis on facts, began to take the Bible literally. Popular evangelical movements appeared, especially in the USA, which were hostile to modernism and its supposed licentiousness, including homosexuality. They began to rewrite history, distorting science to make it comply with Biblical literalism and breaching the separation of church and state. But the inexorable advance of materialism, manifested in suburban values and the long postwar boom, muffled their message; they were greeted with ridicule in the media, amongst the intelligentsia and in the established churches. They became politically quiet, retreated to their churches, listened to their preachers and bided their time.

Their time came at end of the Keynesian economic boom in the late seventies and the ascendancy of right-wing politicians like Ronald Reagan (1911-2004). They began to organise politically within the bosom of the Republican Party and to make effective use of the media to attack the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion and to advocate that prayers in school be made mandatory. The two most prominent individuals in this revival were the late Jerry Falwell (1933-2007) and Pat Robertson (1930-). They established mega-churches, television and radio stations and universities. The Christian right was reborn.⁸⁹

Professor Grant Wacker sees the following characteristics of the Christian Right: a tendency to moral absolutes when it comes to sexual roles and the sanctity of unborn life; an uncompromising Bible-based morality; and an insistence that the country be run according to Judeo-Christian precepts.⁹⁰ Many of the Christian Right are fervent advocates of the free market and American exceptionalism, especially when it comes to the constitution. The latest manifestation of this disparate mixture of conservative religious beliefs, libertarian economic practices and reverence for the constitution is the Tea Party. Not all its members are evangelical Christians, but many are, particularly its leaders.⁹¹

One of the most prominent of those is Congresswoman Michele Bachman, a failed presidential candidate. She believes that global warming is a hoax, vaccination programs are a federal government plot and that one way of getting the country out of its economic malaise is to abolish the minimum wage. It currently stands at \$7:25 an hour — any lower, starvation beckons. This sort of nonsense is not confined to her; it is found among many Tea Party representatives in Congress and the Senate.⁹²

Many in the Christian right fervently believe the constitution of the USA is not a legal and secular document, but a 'covenant' based on divine principles. Glen Beck,

one of the most influential right-wing commentators, believes that there was a plot by the liberals to separate the constitution from God. Andrew Romano:

In Beck's view, progressives forsook the faithful Christian Founders and forced the country to adopt a slew of unconstitutional measures that triggered our long decline into Obama-era totalitarianism: the Federal Reserve system, Social Security, the graduated federal income tax. True patriots, according to Beck favour a pre-progressive vision of the United States.⁹³

Beck's view is frightening to the extent that it is shared by so many elected representatives of the world's most powerful empire.

One could point out that the constitution of the USA is a living political document. It has been amended a number of times and interpreted in the courts by fallible human beings with various agendas. It is not set in stone, and to suppose so is to be guilty of historical illiteracy. For a realistic explanation of American law, society and history I prefer to go to Howard Zinn.⁹⁴ And it is true that America has problems — the decline in educational standards, the puerile level of news commentary, a prurient fascination with celebrities, an obsession with personal fulfilment. This tends to offset admirable achievements in the sciences and the arts, technological innovation and the ability to absorb tens of millions into something called the 'American dream'.⁹⁵

The Tea Party has its own agenda. It wants to block government funding because (so it claims) government debt is currently too high and the Democrats are prone to overspend. They opposed modest tax relief to low and middle income earners and a moderate tax increase for the rich. They evinced an almost hysterical opposition to a flawed programme of accessible health care — the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). They say nothing about the fact that government debt is not the legacy of liberal financial profligacy but the result of the budgetary policies of their two Christian presidential heroes, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Both ruthlessly pruned spending on welfare but exponentially increased spending on defence: Reagan's war against the evil empire and Bush junior's war on terror. At the same time they gave generous tax cuts to the wealthy. All this left the budget trillions of dollars in deficit.⁹⁶ At the same time presidents from Reagan onwards exempted the financial sector from any scrutiny or regulation and let the free market decide — and it did resoundingly in 2007, requiring the government to bail the market out with hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayer's money. But none of this matters if you think a hasidic Jewish preacher 2000 years ago preached the message of the free market and conservative social values, and that the constitution of the country is a sacred document. This message appeals to the wider community, immersed as it is in a mass capitalist and narcissist culture, one which, paradoxically, is also decadently secular. Chris Hedges:

Mass culture is Peter Pan culture. It tells us that if we close our eyes, if we visualise what we want, if we have faith in ourselves, if we tell God that we believe in miracles, if we tap into our inner strength, if we grasp that we are truly exceptional, if we focus on happiness, our lives will be harmonious and complete. This cultural retreat into illusion whether peddled by positive psychologists, Hollywood or Christian preachers, is a form of magical thinking. It turns the destruction of our manufacturing base into an opportunity for growth. It turns alienation and anxiety into cheerful conformity. It turns a nation that wages illegal wars and administers offshore penal colonies where it openly practices torture into the greatest democracy on earth.⁹⁷

The recipients of this dream — ordinary working Americans — are easy to ridicule. The top 10% of Americans have, in the last 30 or more years, increased their wealth to Olympian heights. For every dollar the country earned in 2005, they got half, whilst the other 90% of the population had to scramble for the rest. The middle and working classes have seen a slow decline in income in real terms; if inflation is taken into account their average income is still what they would have earned in the late 1970s.⁹⁸ Many of them are pious Christians, see any government intervention and union activism as socialism and many vote Republican. Their lack of education and resultant poverty result in a poor diet and morbid obesity. They cannot afford health care and try to live with the minimum of medication, suffering diabetes, heart diseases and other ailments which kill them prematurely, yet many of them oppose Obamacare. It is easy to caricature them as ignorant, beer swigging, God-fearing patriots (I have); the reality is more complicated.

The late social commentator and journalist Joe Bageant (1946-2011) came from this class, escaped from it and returned to observe it in old age. He looks at 'his people' with a critical though affectionate eye. His affection is not tinged with nostalgia, nor does he wish to return to their political and religious values, though he does like to hunt and carry guns. He points out that people make their choices within the limits of their material reality. They leave school early, many are barely literate, they are ideologically spoon-fed by their pastors, and politically organised by Republicans and their civic leaders and employers (usually one and the same) in rust-bucket towns.

My people don't cite real facts. They recite what they have absorbed from the atmosphere.

Theirs is an intellectual life consisting of things that sound right, a blend of modern folk wisdom, cliché, talk radio, and Christian radio babble.⁹⁹

The left and the liberals have deserted them and there are no unions. It was, in fact, liberals like President Clinton who played a part in creating these rust buckets by allowing capital to move to low-wage countries. There are no progressive parties, human rights groups or civic-minded people to provide a counter to the right's

monopoly on their political vote and minds. May I remind Professor Dawkins and other New Atheists that we are not without guilt in this tragic farce.

The bunyip that is Christianity down under

I am not sure if we Australians, as a nation, have ever been relaxed and comfortable, given, for example, our irrational fear of refugees. I think it is true, however, that when it comes to Christianity a majority of its adherents down under are relaxed to the point of indifference. This was not always the case: until the 1970s Australia was marked by the division between Protestants and Catholics (particularly those of Irish extraction). For many Catholics religious dogma was paramount, and laws against abortion, together with restrictions on drinking times and divorce, were based on Christian concepts of morality, not on the secular concept of harm. But times changed: we became more secular and more avaricious for material goods. Prohibitions on divorce, drinking hours and abortion could no longer be justified on religious grounds. This trend to irreligiosity has continued, according to the data collected by the Bureau of Statistics. In 1986 73% of the population called themselves Christian and by 2006 this had dropped to 63%, whilst the percentage of those who are religious sceptics has gone up from 25% to 31% in the same period.¹⁰⁰ If one adds the fact that many who call themselves Christian are not active either in church attendance or in church activities, then Christianity is in decline. It is ironic, then, that our clamorous shopping culture is drowning the progressive and compassionate voices of the declining established churches on issues like refugees, unregulated capitalism and our moral obligation to help the needy. But that is not the whole story.

One of our enduring myths is that there is a complete separation of church and state in Australia. The only section of our federal constitution dealing with religion is Section 116. It states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.¹⁰¹

This clause does not preclude the states from making such laws. The High Court has interpreted this section broadly and flexibly. It has interpreted this law to allow the government to support religious and faith-based schools. There is nothing in the constitution to prevent religious institutions being tax free and exempt from hiring individuals that religious denominations deem to be against their beliefs, such as lesbians and gays. These special privileges are unfair and iniquitous and should be expunged from the law. This glaring inequality can be seen in the fact that the richest

schools, like Geelong Grammar, in the state of Victoria, are being given millions of dollars by the federal government while poorer state schools are starved of funds. Another worrying trend is the state funding of faith-based schools that oppose the tenets of modernity. They handicap their students with their hostility to evolution and other scientific insights that run contrary to their religious teaching. They breed in their students a sense of isolation and superiority towards those who do not share their faith. I think the state should provide a free, comprehensive secular education for all; if the religiously minded want something different which does not disadvantage their children, they should pay for it. The money should not come out of government coffers.

Like the rest of the world our political and economic elite were and are in thrall to a certain type of globalisation that opened countries to deregulation, reduced taxation for the rich and privatisation. An obsession with the bottom line and instant profitability resulted in more precarious employment for the many and vast wealth for the few. As both our bourgeois parties were devoted to globalisation, the electorate found it hard to differentiate between them. This became glaringly apparent during the 1993 election when both parties supported a deregulated economy, the only difference being that the Liberals under John Hewson had a more extreme economic program. The Liberals lost this unloseable election to the arch modernist and economic reformer Paul Keating.

John Howard and his supporters, watching on the sidelines, saw how they could get back into power and outmanoeuvre the Labor party. They would carry on with the 'reformist' economic agenda but would pursue a conservative social agenda on issues like multiculturalism, refugees, gays and history, not to mention the liberal intelligentsia who, in their eyes, were doing so much to destroy the Australia they cherished. Many, though not all, of these social conservatives based their moral and social outlook on the logos of the Bible and acted accordingly. A prominent group of them banded together in the Lyons Forum, backed by conservative capitalists like Hugh Morgan. Members included Nick Minchin, John Heron, Tony Abbott and Kevin Andrews. Over time the Liberal party was largely denuded of real liberals (i.e. wets). They were for a while especially effective in NSW. Issues like euthanasia and the telecast of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on our ABC suddenly became contentious issues, useful to mobilise a section of the electorate. Hostility to the gay High Court judge Michal Kirby became explicit, and was tolerated by the prime minister till the maverick Senator Bill Heffernan went too far. As prime minister, John Howard now spoke not to the whole nation but only to those marginal, usually conservative voters he felt would win him an election.¹⁰²

The effects of these policies were not hard to see, with progressive political parties

like the Greens being marginalised and demonised. Family First, a miniscule group made up of evangelical Christians, struck a preference deal with the Liberals and also benefited from Labor's preferences: they elected a senator in the 2004 elections with a tiny number of primary votes. According to Amanda Lohrey, the party spent \$600,000 mainly attacking the Greens, which perfectly suited Howard and allowed him for a while to control the Senate. More insidious was Howard's courting of the Exclusive Brethren, a secretive extremist Christian sect. Many of its patriarchs are businessmen who are virulently anti-union and they do not vote in elections. They donated generously to his election campaign and in return:

They are exempted from union right of-entry rules on the grounds of religious conviction, regardless of the views of their employees.¹⁰³

It is ironic that the Exclusive Brethren and Family First are not seen as extremist organisations, though other non-Christian groups are demonised.

More largesse to religious groups came with the government contracting out its social obligations to the community, like finding employment for the unemployed, with religious organisations like the Salvation Army getting the bulk of the money.

As the established churches influence and devotees dwindle, the evangelical branch of Christianity is increasing its membership. Their numbers, notoriety and political influence have been increasing. The Hillsong church which preaches the compatibility of Christian teaching with self-empowerment and wealth attracts devotees by the truckload in large barnlike prayer halls, where its pastors keep their congregations entranced with homilies of self-empowerment and middle of road rock anthems with a Christian message. Being good Christian capitalists they intersperse their sermons with singing, clapping and commercials for DVD and CDs. Hillsong provides religious solace, pastoral care, self-improvement and self-empowerment, if the devotees can afford the price this sort of salvation demands. Many of the faithful are young and middle class. Astute politicians like Howard are acutely aware that elections are won or lost in marginal seats and began to court this constituency.

Hillsong is run like a business with its 'user pays' approach to pastoral care and has an income estimated at \$50 million a year, it is exempt as a church from paying tax. It gets important government grants: \$315,000 for an indigenous development grant and \$610,968 to encourage indigenous entrepreneurship. Hillsong did not spend this money on employing or developing our country's first inhabitants.¹⁰⁴

We should be more active and less benign in exposing the scurrilous fact that there is no real separation of church and state and the shameless courting by some of our political elite of the evangelical vote. This is wedge politics at its worst.

Conclusion: What are we fighting against?

Much of what is in the Bible is not historically or archeologically verifiable and when it is, it does not match the grandeur that is in the Bible. The hypocrisy of many Christian denominations when it comes to celibacy and its latent misogyny needs to be exposed and I do not think enough is done to change and atone for the anti-semitic aspects of 'the passion play' in the Gospels. The fantasies, religious, social and economic, of the Christian Right in the USA need to be fought, not only by taking the debate up to them but also by developing political, labour and civic organisations in their heartlands, which is a much more difficult task. Whilst in Australia we are not plagued by the religious right to that extent, the fact that our most prominent religious figure Cardinal Pell was forced to capitulate to the forces of secularism, should not make us overly complacent. The religious right in Australia works in tandem with likeminded souls in the business and political fraternity to not only put their right-wing social and economic agenda into the mainstream but in some instances successfully to implement them, like school funding for religious schools. We need to counter this but in doing so we must not isolate issues like equality in marriage, school funding etc., from the wider assault the neo-liberals have mounted in this country.

I repeat, however, that it is historically fallacious to argue that Christianity is bad per se. That view reveals a historical shallowness and bigotry that is usually the domain of the religious right.

One of the seminal figures in Western thought and an influential one amongst progressive Catholics is Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466–1536), the Dutch renaissance humanist, scholar, priest, writer and social critic known to posterity as Erasmus. He lived in the era of religious intolerance between Catholics and Protestants. Erasmus, though a Catholic, was also a reformer. He never renounced his religious vocation, yet he never lost sight of the human aspect, something Cardinal Pell seems to have forgotten.

Another humanist who enriched Western discourse but never lost belief in God was Baruch Spinoza (1632-77). He began, nevertheless, to look at the Bible more critically, especially the historical conceptions of God, which he began to see as 'a tissue of meaningless mysteries'. He much preferred to acquire knowledge of God by scientific means. By this he meant that God was inherent and immanent in all things material. Armstrong:

To speak of God's activity in the world was simply a way of describing the mathematical and causal principles of existence. It was the absolute denial of transcendence.¹⁰⁵

A belief in a spiritual being without the comfort of the truth of the Bible and yet moved by some of its tropes combined with an acceptance of scientific advances and a radical

critique of our moral and social mores gives us an altogether different religious animal than the stereotype which the New Atheists are so accustomed to intellectually bashing.

Don Cupitt:

The view that religious belief consists in holding that a number of picturesque supernatural propositions are descriptively true is encouraged by the continuing grip on people's mind of a decadent and mystic dogmatic theology. In effect I am arguing that for the sake of clarity it should be discarded entirely, and replaced by the practice of religion — ethics and spirituality — and the philosophy of religion. Then religion can become itself again with a clear intellectual conscience at last.¹⁰⁶

Francis Spufford, in a magnificent and grumpy polemic in defence of being a Christian, gives us some idea in a practical sense of what Cupitt means. Spufford does not convince me with his rhetorical rhapsodies on his communion with Jesus.¹⁰⁷ Yet it did not irritate me as I thought it might. Mr Spufford is somebody I would like to talk to; I find his taste in politics, music and (possibly) literature appealing. It is good to be reminded that certain sections of the Anglican Church opposed Thatcher's neo-liberal experiment (something not true of all New Atheists), that the Anglican Church did in the end accept the views of Darwin and the fact that most Anglican priests live on stipends that are just above the poverty level. The Archbishop of Canterbury's salary is £72,000, much less than that of our secular leaders. Phillip Adams, whilst aware of the evil perpetrated by Christianity, observed:

Nevertheless, when concerned by the injustice meted out to refugees during the Howard era or the ongoing tragedies of indigenous life, I find common cause with priests and nuns. Though let it be said that these same priests and nuns are often highly unpopular with their church hierarches.¹⁰⁸

I think this is an important distinction, for there have always been compassionate Christians with a strong sense of social justice. Social activists with a Christian bent are found in the peace movement, supporting refugees, fighting for the rights of indigenous people around the world, and fighting for the poor. Many are strong supporters of the separation of church and state. Christian intellectuals like Chris Hedges write with clarity and wisdom on life in the 21st century.¹⁰⁹ There is good in Christianity; the issue for me is whether there enough to counter the bad. The jury is out, so let us choose our political comrades with generosity, civility and political goodwill. ■

4. Islam: Flowers & Thorns in the Garden

... Muslims have traditionally recognised that the Qur'an is the absolute Truth, but one's understanding and interpretation is not. This is why traditional Islamic jurists, when asked to respond to legal questions have always concluded their analysis 'and God knows best'. It is an acknowledgement that the ultimate answer to any question is not within their knowledge, but is only known to God. — *Waleed Aly*¹⁰

My religion is a conspiracy
My prayer meetings are a conspiracy
My lying quiet is a conspiracy
My attempt to wake up is a conspiracy
My desire to have friends is a conspiracy
It is no conspiracy
To make me a refugee
In the very country of my birth
It is no conspiracy
To poison the air I breathe
And the space I live in. — *Khadar Mohiuddin*¹¹

Setting the scene: It's imperialism stupid

I come from the northern part of India and one would have to be blind or plainly bigoted not to see how much Islam has enriched the country. Evidence of a highly confident and elegant civilisation is found in magnificent monuments like the imposing but surprisingly delicate Red Fort in Delhi, and the impeccable beauty of the Taj Mahal in Agra. The gardens introduced by Muslims into the parched urban landscape of the Deccan are still oases of calm and greenery amid the grey concrete and polluted haze of Indian cities. The majority of Muslims, who are Sufis, practise a gentle and

tolerant faith, so it is not surprising to see that shrines to Sufi saints have become centres of worship for members of other faiths. This was a hybrid culture, as evidenced by the development of Urdu, a language that has a Hindi base, Persian script and many Persian, Arabic and Turkish words. This culture produced some of the subcontinent's finest painters, poets, musicians and scholars. I always saw and still see Islam as an essential element in the rich cultural landscape to the country of my birth. I was surprised and irritated by the rancour displayed and felt towards Muslims when I revisited India in 2009. In the Western world, likewise, there has been an extraordinary growth in hostility towards Muslims, and in response some Muslims have taken a militant Islamic stand, something which is just as worrying.

This stereotypical attitude to Muslims should not be surprising. Much of what we know of Islam has been filtered through Western imperial ideology; the French and English controlled much of the globe in the 18th and 19th centuries, to be followed by the United States of America. This hegemonic cultural perspective on the 'East' has distorted the analysis of indigenous economic, political and cultural practices and resistance to foreign powers. No discussion of Islam or the 'war on terror' makes sense without an understanding of these distortions.

In Australia the dominant narrative about the exploration and 'discovery' of Terra Australis downplays, or leaves out, the imperial ambitions of the newcomers, their racism and their destruction of the country's indigenous society. Such prodigious feats of navigation and collection of data played a part in the colonial project. In 1798 the Egyptians were left in no doubt when they saw the future Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), landing on their shores with a 40,000 strong army, his aim being to challenge British imperial interests in India. His entourage included scientists, philosophers, artists, musicians, astronomers, architects and surveyors, the flower of the Enlightenment. He professed a great admiration for Islam and, in anticipation of George W. Bush, said he had come to liberate Egyptians from their autocratic masters.

The Egyptian army, consisting of the formidable Mamluk military caste under nominal Ottoman rule, were no match for the French artillery and military tactics and were subdued. But the local elite and clergy were sceptical of French cultural innovations; democracy and secularism had no appeal for them, and many of the cultured elite thought the French were barbarians. Many more viewed the French control of their country as a disaster. Inevitably the people revolted; the rebellion was brutally suppressed and the French showed deliberate disrespect to Islam. After bombing the fabled al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, French troops drank wine, urinated on the floor, tethered their horses to prayer niches and trampled Qur'ans under their boots.¹¹²

This cultural arrogance and duplicity was not new in Napoleon's day. The Orient

was seen in medieval times and maybe earlier as an area of fear and desire; sometimes these paradoxically intermingled. Edward Said:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilisation.¹¹³

Orientalism is a specifically Western study of the culture, society and religions of the East, and cannot be separated from the political control and economic dominance of Western powers (including the USA) over large parts of the non-European world. It is not, Said argues, a simple question of imperial subjection by the West or of the East passively allowing it to happen. It was the awareness of an unequal relationship which was then reflected in the scholarly texts, novels and art. For Said it is a 'will or intention to understand and in some cases manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different'.¹¹⁴

One consequence of this unequal relationship is that the East itself is seen as a source of disorder and disruption. This may require regime change through a coup d'état and the consecration of a pliable leader, or even direct military intervention. The complexities and moral implications of the situation are rarely aired. Credence is given to a version of reality espoused by Western statisticians, academics and military experts. Said:

These contemporary Orientalist attitudes flood the press and the popular mind. Arabs for example are thought as camel riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilisation.¹¹⁵

The response of the people being colonised was mixed. The first response was to autocratically modernise, a decision taken by local strongmen regardless of the cultural and economic impact on a largely peasant population; the second was to adopt a secular, nationalist and anti-colonial stance; the most persistent was a retreat to past glories combined with religious fundamentalism. These responses were common among Muslims, who were also influenced by Western scholarship on the Orient. It would have been difficult to avoid this: it was a vast, impressive body of scholarship and for many it was the first introduction they had to the historical glories of their civilisation. But some failed to detach themselves from the colonial and racial assumptions in the narrative, with disastrous consequences.¹¹⁶

The British defeated the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and blockaded the French army, forcing it to withdraw from Egypt. This created a power vacuum,

reflected in fighting amongst the representatives of the Ottoman Empire in Egypt. In the confusion, a young Albanian officer called Muhammad Ali (1761-1849) seized power. Ali immediately saw the danger besetting his country from the West. He thought the best way for Egypt to preserve its independence was to modernise, and applied this principle to the army, navy, judiciary and the organs of the state. Ali also began a program of industrialisation, and spent huge amounts on armaments and other accessories of a thoroughly modern state. But he and his less talented progeny lacked the financial means to sustain this, leaving them vulnerable to Western political and economic control.

Ali was an autocratic ruler and his program was imposed on an increasingly exploited peasantry in a predominantly agricultural economy. Modernisation by an increasingly corrupt elite beholden to foreign advisers and countries left the majority of the population poorer and disenchanting, and prone to respond to the appeals of tradition. The middle class that was created was mostly composed of government bureaucrats. Armstrong:

The whole experience of modernisation was crucially different in the Middle East: it was not one of empowerment, autonomy, and innovation, as it had been in Europe, but a process of deprivation, dependence, and patchy imperfect imitation.¹¹⁷

By the 1880s the British had effectively annexed the country and the king became a puppet in their hands.¹¹⁸

The rise of Nasserism in the early 1950s, the overthrow of the monarchy, the taking back of the Suez Canal, the resultant successful war with France, Britain and Israel and the rise of pan-Arabism in the 1950s were the peaks of secularism in the Middle East. For a while it reflected the pulse of the Egyptian nation, its anti-Western rhetoric was not founded on the language or practices of Islam but on socialism and sometimes communism. Nasser became increasingly autocratic and jailed many of his political opponents, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of the secularist pan-Arabic adventures also came to nought. The secular nationalism of Nasser and others was opposed by the USA and their loyal ally in the region, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Then came the 1967 war, and in the words of Professor Aijaz Ahmad:

When Israel destroyed Nasser's forces in 1967, it also defeated Nasserism as the dominant secular-nationalist, authoritarian-socialist current in the Arab world, and thereby changed drastically the balance of forces between a defeated, traumatized Egypt — at the centre of urbane, Mediterranean Islam — and the oil-rich monarchical, Wahhabi-puritanical, desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁹

The legitimacy of secular nationalism was further undermined by the deeply corrupt

Mubarak regime, with huge amounts of aid (\$US1.3 billion a year) provided to the Egyptian military by the USA.

The Saudi Arabians (we do need cheap oil) now took a more prominent political, cultural and religious role. They provided money and educational facilities to Pakistan and rural Egypt, gifts accompanied by political influence and inseparable from their austere, fundamentalist version of Islam; a new phenomenon, according to many commentators in the history of Islam. It offered to people whose lives were marked by poverty and insecurity a certainty that modernity and secularism never could. It assured them that in the struggle of life God was on your side and that your opponents would fail, for they were not religious, or not religious in the true sense of the word. Many middle-class Muslims, tired of corrupt and venal secular regimes, also turned to God. For a time some of these radical religious groups served our geopolitical and economic interests, as in Afghanistan in the 1980s. When their usefulness was over they were dropped. Western forays into Iraq and elsewhere gave the fundamentalists political ammunition, and the story came to a climax on September 11, 2001.¹²⁰

The argument I will be making

The Arab Spring (and the Syrian civil war in particular) has a history deeply marked by the familiar characteristics of authoritarianism, nationalism, secularism, the conflict between moderate and fundamentalist tendencies and a proliferation of Islamic formations (not just Shi'a and Sunni). These phenomena are complex and the historical and political contours are murky, so I have limited myself to the contentions of Dr Waleed Aly, an erudite explainer of Islam in Australia. In doing so I will only look at areas where the contentions of Islam are in the public and political arena. On the validity of Islam as a religion I have nothing to say, considering it to be a personal matter. I will conclude the discussion with an examination of imperialism and post-colonialism in their modern manifestations, including their effect on Islam. Whilst not contesting the validity of the left's analysis of imperialism, with which I largely agree, I will be looking at the way that analysis remains silent on some aspects of Islam, a silence which I find politically unpalatable.

Dr Waleed Aly: Defender, explainer & occasional critic of Islam

Dr Waleed Aly plays the role of explainer, chider and defender and sometimes he simply expresses exasperation at the infantile level of the debate on Islam and the West. His writings on Islam are a useful aid in the discussion of the fractious issues of secularism versus religion, the hysteria engendered by the wearing of the hijab, the

enduring relevance of the classical period of Islam (around 950 CE to 1258 CE), and the debate on whether the current generation of radical Islamic groups are modern radical organisations or are at heart Islamic. These issues curdle and sour the debate between the adherents of Islam and the supporters of secularism and atheism.

I am not sure whether the description by Ray Cassin of Dr Waleed Aly as a Renaissance man really does him justice.¹²¹ He is an academic at Monash University, a radio star (he currently has a gig on Radio National), a standup comic, raconteur and television host, an excellent musician and sportsperson and a published author. He has a degree in engineering and was a practicing lawyer. He is also a devoted family man and an avid Richmond club supporter. If that is not enough, he has one of the finest set of cheekbones and stubble this side of Clint Eastwood. Even his critics are aware of his formidable intelligence and charm. This is what John P Perkins, a rationalist and atheist critic of Dr Aly and Islam, had to say: 'He is an erudite, intelligent, articulate, charming and likeable person. He is a product of multicultural Australia that we can be all proud of.'¹²²

Dr Aly is a crucial ballast of sanity in the nasty and seemingly never ending debate we have to endure about Islam. A debate where facts, reason, balance, empathy and civility seemed to be absent in certain sections of the media and in the attitudes of a large proportion of the population. Islam is for them an alien and frightening incubus which should be forcefully aborted from the body politic. This rage can erupt into violence, as it did at Cronulla in Sydney 2005, where anybody who was not white was targeted. It was whipped up by racists using text messages, encouraged by Alan Jones, our best paid and most prominent radio star. Even the prime minister of the day excused the malcontents when he was asked to comment.¹²³

It was all about the fear of Islam, the ignorance of it and the loathing of it.

Even critics who want to engage in an honest and civilised discourse expose their prejudice when it comes to a discussion of Islam. Vickie Janson, a Christian critic of Dr Aly, starts her conversation with him in her book on Islam with these 'civil' words: 'As a non-Muslim westerner, I have consciously endeavoured to understand Islamic concepts and extended hospitality to Muslim people ...'.¹²⁴ Reading her book one is saddened by the fact that Janson is not interested in understanding Islam or Dr Aly. There is not even a sliver that a good God-fearing Christian of Janson's ilk can find to endorse or even admire. The paucity of her critique and her supposed good mannered demeanour borders on the ridiculous. She sees Sharia compliance on food, hospitality, education and finance in Australia as being pernicious and overwhelming. In particular she sees she sees the food industry as being halal(ised). In this vein Janson contends:

People may democratically oppose another mosque because it is not viewed as a place

of worship but rather a place advocating an unconstitutional alternative to democracy.¹²⁵ We may add to this the abuse, both verbal and physical, against women wearing the hijab; the rage against refugees, many of whom are of the Islamic faith; the lopsided reportage of unmanned drone attacks and opposition to foreign (i.e. Western) occupation or support of authoritarian governments in the Levant and Afghanistan; the targeting by the intelligence services of people mostly of the Islamic faith, and the Orwellian legislation introduced to convict them of ‘terrorism’. What is not reported is the continual low-level harassment of Muslims by the police and intelligence forces, making them feel besieged and fostering the militancy and stridency of the few.¹²⁶

So it was not surprising that a rancid anti-Muslim film released on the internet resulted in a near riot in Sydney in 2012.¹²⁷ The rage of the oppressed reinforces the prejudice against them. In the 1960s, when black Americans rioted after years of economic exclusion and police brutality, pundits said ‘we told you so’. At such times, public intellectuals like Dr Aly are vital in articulating both the feelings of oppressed (including the silent majority of Muslims in Australia) and the unease and bewilderment of the rest of us. Writing about the protest against the film, Aly says:

This is the behaviour of a drunkenly humiliated people: swinging wildly with the hope of landing a blow, any blow, somewhere anywhere. There’s nothing strategic or calculated about this. It doesn’t matter that they are the film’s most effective publicists. It doesn’t matter that they protest using offensive slogans and signs, while protesting against people’s right to offend. It doesn’t matter that they object to insulting people on the basis of religion while declaring that Christians have no morals. This is baffling only until you realise these protesters are not truly protesting to make a point. The protest is the point.

It feels good. It feels powerful. This is why people yell pointlessly or punch walls when frustrated. It’s not instrumental. It doesn’t achieve anything directly. But it is catharsis. Outrage and aggression is an intoxicating prospect for the powerless.¹²⁸

It was in this vein, as explainer of Islam and its culture, as a bridge builder between communities, and as a stern critic of bigots inside and outside Islam, that Aly wrote five years earlier, in 2007, a powerful, articulate and heartfelt polemic (*People Like Us: How Arrogance is dividing Islam and the West*) which he hoped might overcome the ‘verbal ocean of nonsense’ disfiguring the discourse between the West and Islam.¹²⁹

The public conversations that surround Islam and the West often reveal little more than a deep inability of each to comprehend the other; a world of much mutual stereotyping and consequent ignorance. Ignorance can, with will and effort, be cured. More intractably problematic is the fact that so many of the voices in this sermonising — for it is rarely a dialogue — merely talk across each other. Often they proceed from

a different set of assumptions that are not explicitly stated or acknowledged.¹³⁰

The book, if read by the wider community, would certainly allay some of the fears many have of Islam. It is a good read, pithily written with a wonderful mixture of passion, anger, humour and logic. He brings a measure of sanity and balance to contentious issues like the Danish cartoons and brings some clarity to the controversy about the meaning of the word *jihad*, a term debased and unmoored from its origins.¹³¹

There are, however, a number of issues that I feel must be examined critically from a humanist and atheist perspective, issues marked by assumptions that (I hasten to add) Dr Aly does not share.

The hullabaloo surrounding the hijab

It is with great reluctance that I am writing about the wearing of the hijab. It is a contentious issue, characterised by incomprehension, prejudice and fear. The harem and the sexual allure of the veil, combined with the skimpy garments devised by Hollywood designers, have been a movie and television staple for as long as I can remember, from Valentino's *The Sheik* in the 1920s to *I dream of Jeannie* in the 1960s. The stock villain is swarthy and intent on having his way with a woman who is beautiful, virginal and white. The most conspicuous recent offender in terms of representation is James Cameron's *True Lies* (1996). The film incorporates every possible cliché of the Arab male, who is defeated in the end by American hardware and Arnold Schwarzenegger's pectorals. On the news these negative archetypes are reinforced with relentless banality — failed states, terrorist activities and misogynist practices against women. The wider narrative and the consequences of neo-colonialism are almost never mentioned. Little wonder that sections of the wider community react irrationally to refugees and to the most visible symbol of Islam, the hijab.

Media reports on laws passed in France, Belgium and Italy in order to ban the wearing the burqa and niqab (both of which cover the face apart from the eyes), and on the counter protests, gave us a largely male perspective, usually that of a well-heeled, white, middle-class politician. Not mentioned was the fact that only a small minority of Islamic women wear these garments. Whilst the 'idealist' argument of the secularists in favour of the separation of church and state gets oxygen in the media, the point of view of people exercising their religious freedom (one of the cardinal rights in a secular state) is either dismissed or ignored.¹³²

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2004 reported on numerous incidents of abuse suffered by women in Australia who wear the hijab. The incidents make depressing reading. The most common are being spat on and having bottles, eggs and rocks thrown at them from moving cars. People have

set their dogs on them; they have been punched; attempts have been made to run them down; their hijabs have been forcibly pulled off; hijab wearers have been threatened with rape. In a few instances this resulted in them being hospitalised. Just as disturbing and ominous, many witnesses to these assaults just watched and did nothing.¹³³ None of this seems to have been extensively reported in the mainstream media. If it had been it might have disturbed the dominant narrative. We continue to have instead the diatribes of politicians like Bronwyn Bishop (the current speaker in Federal Parliament) and Senator Cori Bernardi, with their contention that there is a 'clash of civilisations' and that Muslims are 'un-Australian'.¹³⁴ The voice of the women who wear the hijab has largely been absent:

She is not a person with interests, aspirations, struggles and feelings. She is a concept.¹³⁵ Randa Abdel-Fattah lawyer, human rights activist and writer, wrote a wonderful piece on why she decided to wear the hijab and the consequences of that decision, entitled 'Living in a material world'.¹³⁶ As a teenager her friends wore the hijab for a variety of reasons, sometimes part-time, sometimes to impress people and sometimes when they were having a bad hair day. Her parents were surprised when she decided to wear it full-time. She immediately noticed people staring at her and being called 'a nappy head, a tea towel head, a wog'.¹³⁷ For working women who wear the hijab, the glass ceiling becomes a 'triple-reinforced concrete ceiling with booby traps and electric fencing'.¹³⁸

For Abdel-Fattah and countless other Muslim women in Australia the hijab is not a sign of oppression, but a personal commitment to their faith, like other overt cultural and religious signifiers. The Sikh turban or Jewish skull cap are two that come to mind. Given the attitudes to Islam in Australia it also becomes a sign of defiance and resistance: a courageous act. For an Australian Muslim it means 'you will often sit alone, in the silence of your hurt and fury, and wonder why it so difficult for Islam, a religion followed by 1.3 billion people, all of whom cannot be uncivilised, unintelligent, immoral, unthinking dupes, to be treated with the same respect'.¹³⁹

Aly explores the wider issues which Abdel-Fattah's article does not canvas, being a personal memoir. The wider issue of feminist discourse in its Western guise and misogyny in Islam also need to be discussed. Aly is right in pointing out there is a double standard involved in the use of the well-documented evidence of the Taliban's oppression of women when justifying the invasion of Afghanistan and at the same time ignoring the equally unimpressive record of our Afghan allies. But the core issue still remains, for Islam, like other organised religions, has a sorry history when it comes to the treatment of women.

Even the origins of the wearing of the veil are open to controversy and a myriad of

interpretations. The Prophet ordered his wives to wear a distinctive form of clothing known as the jilbab, so they could avoid harassment. According to Armstrong, the controversial Sura 33 in the Qur'an that enjoins women to wear the veil was only meant for the Prophet's wives who were subjected to harassment because of the hostility of believers in the old religion. This was taken by male theologians three centuries after the Prophet's death as a universal injunction.¹⁴⁰ In the Byzantine Empire (330 CE–1453 CE), which the Ottomans overthrew, women were segregated, rarely seen in public and when they ventured outdoors were veiled. Women were also given only a rudimentary education. These practices, it seems, were incorporated into Islam.¹⁴¹

Whilst not dwelling on these issues Dr Aly is eloquent in his criticism of conservative clerics and their reactionary view of women.¹⁴² I applaud his stand, but a return to scripture is ultimately futile when it comes to rights. Rights for me are non-negotiable; they should be based on the material circumstances of society and be immune to the influence of religion. For me as a humanist it is a matter of personal choice; prejudice against the veil and outlawing it are wrong. The actions of the French parliament in the name of secularism are wrong and must be condemned and opposed.¹⁴³

Aly and others should also condemn not only reactionary Islamic preachers but also the edicts on the compulsory wearing of the veil (enforced by the police and the judiciary) in countries as 'illiberal' as Iran and in parts of the somewhat 'liberal' Indonesia. Though I myself would strenuously oppose the compulsory banning of the niqab, I cannot but feel it is an uncomfortable piece of clothing which creates unnecessary barriers between the wearer and the wider community. At the same time I note that Muslim men do not face the same strict restrictions when it comes to apparel.

Aly is scathing concerning Western feminists, as their discourse smacks to him of colonial imperialism. It echoes a broader historical polemic between the Muslim world and the West in which Western prescriptions for Muslim reform were often perceived as egocentric and hypocritical: 'Feminism and imperialism seemed to have some kind of undisclosed memorandum of understanding.'¹⁴⁴

I dislike these simple binary oppositions. There are many different political opinions current amongst feminists as there are within Islam. Some feminists are certainly pro-imperialist and Zionist, many others are not. In Pakistan there are human rights organisations and women's groups who are aware of the sorry state of women in Pakistan, especially in rural areas. The statistics in terms of health, education and employment for women are appalling and many women activists (quite a few of whom are not in opposition to their western sisters) are lobbying, fighting and providing shelters for women who have been battered, raped and burnt. If asked, many would

find Aly's theoretical formulations unhelpful.¹⁴⁵ Like their sisters in the West, they are fighting for gender equality in societies that are entrenched in patriarchy and awash in misogyny. They are building alliances, lobbying governments, protesting and writing about the inferior status of women in their societies. Islam, like Christianity and even liberalism, has a lot to answer for when it comes to misogyny. For a humanist, rights are universal and cannot be tailored to meet the demands of religion, custom or tradition. If harm is done it must be exposed and rectified.

The gold standard

The stand-up comic Aamer Rahman asked his audience the question: 'What did the Muslims invent? Boring things like maths, science and numbers.'¹⁴⁶ There was a golden period of Islam, known as the classical period, when art, architecture, science, philosophy, religious dissertation and jurisprudence flowered, and which lasted around 300 years till 1258 CE. The jewel of the period was Moorish Spain. Whilst this is not a major element in Dr Aly's argument, it stands in opposition to the views both of Islamic radicals and Islam's critics and also provides for Aly a central motif in the revival (for want of a better word) of Islam. The motto for his book comes from the classical scholars of that period:

If there is any good to be found in this book, it comes from God. Whatever ill in it comes from me.¹⁴⁷

Aly acknowledges that since the colonial period and the mid-Ottoman period, Islamic discourse has been in decline. Robust scholarship reliant on logic, arguments and reason has been replaced by what he terms 'rote-learned regurgitation' of the texts. This, in turn, fails to bring these texts to life for the current generation. He therefore argues that the cure for Islam's malaise is to look again at the rich intellectual heritage of the classical period. This does not mean a wholesale revival of older ways of thought or of their idealisation. Properly done, however, this could 'encourage and pursue a classical Islamic response to the challenges of modernity.'¹⁴⁸

Aly acknowledges that with the intellectual gold there will also be dross. We must also remember that it was a period when the rise and decline of empires was much more common and that government patronage could be a problem. Given the intellectual breadth of classical Islamic discourse and its many manifestations, Aly argues that these constraints should not trouble us today.

A contemporary example cited by Aly is the classically trained Islamic theologian and political scholar Zaid Shakir, who draws heavily on the discourses of the classical period in his discussions of international relations. In doing so he furthers Islamic theories on war and international relations. Such intellectual activity is a first step to

providing a theological counter to the radicals and could eventually demolish their controversial legacy:

More crucially it would reiterate ethical structures, and command principled restraint.

The radical reliance on vengeance must then be unequivocally rejected: traditional Muslims do not derive their morality from the transgressions of others.¹⁴⁹

Aly does not give his readers any real idea of the importance of the classical period, not only for Islam but also for the world, including its vital role in the reinvigoration of Western civilisation. This golden age occurred mostly under the Abbasid dynasty, who claimed direct descent from the Prophet. During this period the Arab world was the most advanced civilisation on earth, to judge by achievements in governance, the treatment of minorities, science, art, architecture, philosophy, theology and jurisprudence. While Europe was still recuperating from the fall of Rome, Islamic scholars were collating and building upon the knowledge of India, Persia and the classical world. European scholars discovered in Islam not only their own classical heritage but also the innovations of Islam itself. One of the centres of this brilliant multicultural civilisation of Jews, Muslims and Christians was Cordoba in Spain, ruled by another dynasty. Much of this heritage was destroyed by Catholic Castilian Spain; many of Cordoba's multicultural citizenry were forced to flee or convert.

What is left is breathtaking: the Mezquita (the great Mosque), in the heart of the old city of Cordoba, surely one of the most graceful buildings of Europe. The exterior does not give you any idea of what lies within. Even though a church was built in the heart of the mosque, enough remains to give an idea of what was lost. On entering one encounters a forest of columns linked by arches, giving the building a tilting lightness. Fragments of delicate Islamic calligraphy can still be discerned. Even though the space is vast, one never feels cowed unlike the totalitarian church built inside its bowels. Everything in the church overwhelms and wants to pummel us, from the Romanesque architecture to the massive rococo altars, remind us of our insignificance in the cosmos. The mosque in contrast makes one feel human because it allows the spectator room to breathe and contemplate and find his or her way into the structure.

According to Karen Armstrong, some of the more influential Islamic jurists of this period wanted to construct precise legal principles to build a just society based on the Qur'an. Unfortunately the Qur'an has very little in it that could be construed as legislation, and what there was had been designed for a much simpler society, not an empire. Some of the jurists therefore took a historical approach, collecting sayings (hadiths) which illustrated how the Prophet and his followers would have behaved in certain situations; these they treated as a guide. There was one important caveat: none of their discourses were to contradict the dictates of the caliph.¹⁵⁰

This was not surprising, as the caliph, like other rulers of the time, was a despot. Discourses on politics, law and theology were largely adapted to the smooth running of the government and the survival of the dynasty. It was through religious law that the caliph preserved the status quo. The struggle between popes and secular rulers, a feature of Europe at the time, was not repeated here: the ulama (legal scholars) were not a unified body like the Church and clashes with the ruler were rare; when they did occur, it was not on the debilitating European scale.¹⁵¹

The Abbasid dynasty was autocratic, with the caliph supported by a nobility who owed their prosperity to him. The empire was largely agricultural, with an emerging middle class based in the cities and towns. The majority of population were peasants who lived a precarious life. With the growth of the empire and its solidification, defence costs and the increasingly luxurious lifestyle of the caliph and court strained the coffers of the state. Taxation based on agricultural output is fragile; a drought can bring all to ruin. The persistent forays of the Crusaders, the unstable revenue base and the needs of the court led to a stifling of middle class entrepreneurship and a more conservative scholarly discourse. Power remained with the few, and those few were a wealthy elite. Maxime Rodinson:

Islam offers no originality in this regard. Like every body of moral and religious doctrines it can do no more than it can: at best, limit, among a certain number of the rich and the powerful, the tendency to abuse the power and wealth they possess ... Familiarity with Islamic history suggests only that Islam's capacity is of the same order of magnitude as that of its rival ideologies, in other words a very weak one.¹⁵²

Like any other feudal empire the Abbasid dynasty's spending on welfare, health, education and the alleviation of poverty was miniscule compared to the money expended on war and the court. The awe engendered by such civilisations is tempered by knowledge of the price paid by ordinary people for their magnificence.¹⁵³ Islam, like Christianity, cannot only claim the glory and wonders of their civilisations, but also must acknowledge the squalor these empires engendered. On this point Aly is silent.

The Mongol raids and their sack of Bagdad delivered the final blow to the empire. They looted all the great centres of Islamic learning and civilisation. It was therefore not simply the conflict between faith and reason (as Perkins simplistically argues) that caused the decay of Islamic theological thinking. A much more complex series of events lead to the decline, with the flux of temporal power playing a part.¹⁵⁴ The compromises made by classical Islamic jurists to survive in the classical period must tarnish or at least take the gloss off their fine discourses.

Any attempt to recover for ourselves the fruits of any 'golden age' is problematic. It is of its nature a brittle, strange, never entirely recoverable inheritance, especially

where religious belief is concerned. The tropes and ideas of a feudal agrarian world may have little application to a modern, industrialised society. The greatest Islamic empire was the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), which lasted over 600 years and, like the magnificent Mughal Empire (1526-1857) in India, developed sophisticated approaches to governance, taxation, religious diversity, architecture, but not the innovative theological thinking of an earlier era. Neither of these great Islamic empires could fully exploit the intellectual, scientific and theological possibilities of Islam. How could it be done in our modern secular era? The other problem is that we live in a much more complex world, with competing identities, religious affiliations, political opinions and bodies of knowledge, than in the day of the Prophet, nearly 1400 years ago. The question is not the relevance of Qur'an (it is still relevant) but its centrality to the understanding of politics and the governing of society as they now exist. On this question Aly is silent.

Radical Islamists: Jacobins & Leninists or just plain old religious fanatics?

What irritates Dr Aly no end is the 'great political shibboleth that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are medieval'.¹⁵⁵ At heart they are modern and Western. They are radical in the modern sense of the word and have little connection with Islam, especially the classical age. They have more in common with illiberal products of the Enlightenment, like Nazism. Their modernity is shown by their use of the latest technology and in the pivotal role of the mass media in their political program. Their ideological debt to Western radical groups is found in their use of violence and commitment to a vanguard party. The other difference is that in traditional Islam classical scholars were distinguished by their 'introspection' while radical Muslim groups are 'conspiratorial'. According to the radicals there is a worldwide conspiracy against Islam, to humiliate it and take its adherents' land and resources. Aly approvingly quotes John Gray, who sees the rejection of reason as a very modern concept. This he links to the approach radical Muslim groups take to sacred texts of Islam, which they interpret in a literal way. This is profoundly anti-cultural and untraditional.¹⁵⁶

The rigid form of Islam promoted by radical groups runs counter to the history of Islam, which has a rich history of blending into and enriching national cultures, as happened in India. The idea of suicide bombers is also new, a tactic learnt from the Tamil Tigers and only used since the 1980s. Dr Aly contends that flying planes into the World Trade Centre and similar terror tactics are the traits the radicals share with Marx, Lenin, Mao and Bakunin. Like them they use killing and terror to create a utopian state.¹⁵⁷

Professor Richard Pape, in his ground-breaking study of suicide terrorism from 1980 to 2003, backs up some of Dr Aly's contentions. He sees suicide terrorism as a response to foreign occupation, a tactic in what is seen by its participants as a national liberation struggle. The aim of these radical groups is not religious but a strategy of coercion to force the state they are arraigned against to change its policy towards the people these groups hope to liberate. There is a religious element in the struggle (though not a core one), as both parties belong to different faiths. Pape:

Examination of al-Qaeda's pool of suicide terrorists — the 71 individuals who actually killed themselves on missions for al-Qaeda from 1995 to 2003 — shows that the presence of American military forces for combat operations on homeland territory of the suicide terrorists is stronger than Islamic fundamentalism in predicting whether individuals from that country will become al-Qaeda suicide terrorists. ... Al-Qaeda suicide terrorists are 10 times more likely to come from Muslim countries where there is an American military presence for combat operations than from other Muslim countries.¹⁵⁸

One of the case studies he looks at is the rise of Hezbollah (Party of God) in Lebanon. It did not exist until the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hezbollah from the onset offered firm resistance to what they perceived as an invasion of their country and the subsequent death and destruction wrought by the Israeli military machine, and did so successfully. One of their weapons was the suicide bomber. Pape looks at the background, motivations and testimonials of the suicide bombers and finds the majority of them were secular and came from a variety of political tendencies, including liberal, socialist and communist. Their overarching desire was to rid Lebanon of the invading Israeli army and the puppet state that had been set up to run southern Lebanon.¹⁵⁹ Pape's study makes sober reading and in my view shows that our desire for cheap resources, unfettered markets and our unquestioned right to introduce 'democracy', CNN and Coca Cola creates a counter-reaction amongst those who supposedly benefit from our largesse but in reality are being ripped off and killed. In the process we are also propping up authoritarian and corrupt leaders in the Middle-East.

Nevertheless, when discussing the Taliban and al-Qaeda we are seeing profoundly anti-modern political formations. Their cadres might use anti-colonialism to justify their actions, but the leadership and ideology of these groups is certainly not. Fundamentalists of their ilk might astutely use the accoutrements of modernity, be it in communications or political party formations, but at heart they live in the past where their idea of religion (no matter how historically inaccurate) takes precedence, be it in the sphere of science, governance, democracy, or the rights of women. Their motivation is not anti-colonial, which is a modern concept, but the establishment of an

idealised caliphate, which they want to impose by force. They do not wish to build a mass popular base, agitate for their demands and force the other side to the negotiating table. They have only two political weapons — violence and theology. Armed with these they hope to bring down the vast and complex military and industrial apparatus of the USA. Instead, their violent and futile actions offer the perfect excuse to Western states to increase surveillance and repression on their more progressive citizens, reducing our democratic space. Most national liberation movements since 1945 do not, for all their supposed limitations and violence, display these feudal tendencies.

Radical Islam's pronouncements are drenched in the language of religious fervour, as seen in those of the late Osama bin Laden. This is how he portrayed the USA's role in the Levant:

The Arabian Peninsula has never ... been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations For seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorising its neighbours, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighbouring Muslim peoples ... We issue the following fatwa to all Muslims. The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies — civilian and military — is the individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslims.¹⁶⁰

Terms like 'crusade', emphasising the importance of the sacred like the al-Aqsa mosque, metaphors like 'locusts', the injunction to kill all Americans, the religious term fatwa, the appeal to all 'true' Muslims and leaving out a substantial minority of the local inhabitants — Shi'as, Christians and secularists — do not reflect the way Leninists would portray or conduct the struggle for national liberation. This is not the place to evaluate the virtues and flaws of Leninism, except to say that Leninists would consider the economic and social circumstances of the situation and the class implications, calling on all progressive elements in society (including Muslims) to join the struggle. They would link up the struggles with others around the world. In fact many a Leninist (an endangered species) would have joined the anti-war coalitions around the world including in the belly of the empire, would fight for the rights and give succour to the victims of the struggle and welcome refugees escaping the mayhem not only in Muslim Iraq and Afghanistan but also refugees from Lanka and West Papua. Lenin's insights into the nature of imperialism, capitalism, democratic centralism and the rights of nations for self-determination are absent from the make-up of al-Qaeda.¹⁶¹ Chalk

and cheese Dr Aly. Even if one looks at the development, limitations and decline of communist parties in the Levant one looks in vain to see the language, essential religiosity and political program of a caliphate — it is absent.¹⁶²

I accept Dr Aly's contention that the manifestations of radical Islam are new in the history of Islam, but to attribute these to modernity in the sense of secularism or Leninism is wrong. Something in the words, rituals, order and morality of religious belief and what they see as material reality around them moves them to not only rhetorical religious flights but also fuels their political programs and actions. It is up to Dr Aly to explain and fight against these tendencies in Islam instead of side stepping the question. Secular institutions are central to the fight, not religious or essentialist ones. I speak from personal experience. I am in my small way against the imperial ambitions of the USA, not only in the middle-east but across the globe, including the Antipodes. I also see the manifestations of its military might and vandalism across the globe as scandalous. Agitating against globalisation (not wholly an American phenomenon) and being aghast at the treatment of Muslims in Australia does not mean I will resort to the logos of the Bible or some imaginary golden past. I will like countless other activists, look at the material circumstances of the world around me and when energy and anger motivates me I will sometimes join the broad coalition of forces (mainly secular but not exclusively) of progressive people, organisations and parties who are agitating and fighting the good fight, something Dr Aly is bewildered by.

Save our religious souls from secularism

In his quarterly essay on conservatism in Australia Aly approvingly quotes Andrew Kenny of the *Spectator* on what they both see as the absurd labelling of left and right, which Aly describes as being 'unthinkingly used to frame our discussion on politics'. Here is a quotation from Kenny which Aly admires:

Consider Fidel Castro. He persecutes homosexuals, crushes trade unions, forbids democratic elections, executes opponents and criminals, is a billionaire in a country of very poor people and has decreed that a member of his family should succeed him in power. Is Castro left-wing or right-wing? Explain your answer.¹⁶³

Aly argues that this division into left and right is intellectually impoverished and is concerned simply with winners and losers, with barracking for your team, and not with ideas. This has resulted in the conservatives losing their way by adopting the more radical ideas of free marketers on economics and social policy.¹⁶⁴

No wonder Dr Aly finds that the dispute about Islam and secularism simply makes no sense: it is indeed deeply incoherent.¹⁶⁵ He sees the division between secularism and religion as being historically a Western discourse, an article of faith not

open to negotiation. He argues that in the West there are different degrees of secularism; some nations offer concessions to religious bodies, others, like France and Mexico, are militantly secular. So what sort of secularism are we discussing? In Europe there was a dominant church that over time came into conflict with temporal authorities. Given 'church-led persecutions and religious strife', the West had to eventually separate church and state. But to blame religion for all the sins committed in its name can be a mistake; those in power commit the crimes.

Look, I also object to the political agenda of the religious right in the United States. I see a lot of hatred and backwardness in it, and as a Muslim, I probably see more of it directed at me than most. But the fact is my objection to this lobby has nothing to do with its religiosity. If they renamed themselves Atheists for Family Values, I would be equally troubled. I have a problem with what I consider to be bad policy.¹⁶⁶

Not being a secularist, he thinks it unfair that he cannot espouse his views in the public arena without encountering 'missionary atheists' like the late Pamela Bone, who have a 'fanatical hostility towards religion'. Aly argues that in Islam this schism between church and state never happened. There is no such thing as an organised church in Islam. There is no intermediary between God and humanity. The culture that developed was not a theocracy; Islamic jurists often developed their discourses independently of governments. What developed was a hybrid, not a true theocracy. Nor should it be forgotten that many countries with a Muslim majority are ruled by autocratic and corrupt secular rulers who are propped up by Western governments. When asked, as they were in Egypt and Iran, the vast majority of Muslims want freedom of speech to be constitutionally enshrined. Aly says that, unlike the West, this leads to a desire to have a government 'bound by the strictures of religion', like those past Islamic regimes which were beacons of progressive thought and governance in a sea of unreason.¹⁶⁷

At the outset let me state that I disagree profoundly with the contention that there is no such thing as a left or right in the political arena and that these are different appellations for the same set of policies. This is profoundly ahistorical. It might make some sense if one looks at the policies of the two major bourgeois parties in Australia on the issues of refugees and economic policy, though there is some difference with regard to taxation, rights of workers, the welfare state, the desirability of government intervention and climate change. But it is clear from the example of the Greens and other progressive parties that there is a strong alternative view as to how politics can be organised, the type of economy and society we wish to live in and the culture that informs the discourse.¹⁶⁸ Any discussion of Cuban history and Castro that leaves out Yankee imperialism and their illegal cultural and economic embargo on Cuba is flawed from the outset. It is also grotesque and false to claim that Fidel Castro, for all his

political sins (and there are many), is a billionaire. The implication that his repression is all there is to his political and social program, and that he does not generate widespread support and affection not only amongst the Cuban people but also across the world is erroneous. Now to Dr Aly's main contentions.

Giving credence to Islamic critics of secularism is the current crisis in Egypt. A corrupt and mostly secular military dictatorship supported and partially financed by aid from the USA was toppled by a broad coalition of progressive forces, both secular and religious. An election was held and the Muslim Brotherhood won a clear majority. They ruled in a heavy-handed way and rapidly produced an Islamic constitution. This led to large demonstrations from secular forces, and the military used this instability to stage a coup. In the words of Jonathan Steele:

First they decapitated the movement, putting the country's elected president and dozens of his colleagues in prison. Then they silenced its voice by closing its radio and television stations. Next they stormed into mosques and massacred hundreds of grassroots supporters as they protested in the street. Now they plan to eliminate the movement by declaring it illegal and making it a crime to belong.¹⁶⁹

A large number of liberals and secularists who bravely opposed the undemocratic actions of the elected government now pretend there has been no coup; many of its leaders have joined the new government created by the military. This has led many Islamic commentators to doubt the commitment of the West and Egyptian secularists to democracy, saying that they have double standards when it comes to Islam. Islamic writers like Dr Dzulkefly question the West's commitment to democracy by asking why the majority of Muslims in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco should not also want recognition of Islam's 'intrinsic role' in the governance of their respective countries.¹⁷⁰

My criticisms of the creep of theocracy into state institutions and practices should in no way be read as supporting the coup in Egypt. Egypt is predominantly Islamic but a substantial minority, around 10%, are Coptic Christians; they have been attacked, sometimes killed, and their churches burnt because their religion is seen by some to be alien to that of the majority. This is historically myopic; Islam came as a conquering force to Egypt in 642 CE to a predominately Christian and Hellenic country that was happy to see its unpopular Byzantium rulers overthrown. Over time many Egyptians converted for various motives, including a desire to avoid the tax levied on non-Muslims; they became assimilated Muslims (mawalis). A substantial group did not. These Christians have much older antecedents than Arab Egyptians and also have rights.¹⁷¹ A much larger group of Egyptians, including trade unionists, civil rights activists, Coptic Christians, Muslims and religious sceptics, see belief as a private matter and want it kept out of the public sphere. None of this was reflected in the

hastily drafted and unilaterally devised constitution. No avenues were offered for compromise and dialogue, and this played into the hands of the generals.

Those wanting to construct rigid identities, be they Muslim, Hindu or Christian, fail to understand that one can have multiple personas. Identity might be coloured by material circumstances, language, culture, friends, political and sporting affiliations and one's working life. The violent birth of Bangladesh from the Pakistan Federation occurred in spite of a shared religious heritage, since 'language, literature and politics were more important'.¹⁷²

Let me repeat the point about feudal empires: the role of the ulama in Islamic empires, like the clergy in Christian Europe, the brahmin priesthood in Hindu India and the Buddhist sangha in Lanka, was to sing the praises of the rulers and justify their edicts. Tariq Ali, an admirer of the classical period in Islam as it pertained to Moorish Spain, was aware of its limitations:

Interestingly enough, while all existing texts of classical Greece and Rome were translated into Arabic during the eighth and ninth centuries and while Islamic schools of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and medicine flourished in Cordoba, Palermo and Baghdad, the one genuine innovation of the Greeks — the idea of democracy — did not travel. The caliph was both the spiritual and temporal ruler, and any notion of an assembly of equals would have been seen as a godless challenge to Allah's vice-regent.¹⁷³

Democratic Islam, like democratic Christianity, has historically been an oxymoron.

I do not know why Dr Aly contends that he can separate the political movement for family values from a particular type of militant Christianity. The latter's religious conservatism colours their attitude to same-sex marriages, abortion, euthanasia and the decadence incarnated in militant secularists. The Family First party in Australia was created and largely supported by the more fundamentalist wings of Christianity.¹⁷⁴ Humanists have a much more nuanced and affirmative role when it comes to same-sex marriage, abortion and euthanasia, because their beliefs are not based on the Bible, the Ten Commandments and the idea of sin, but on evidence, reason and human empathy.¹⁷⁵

The rise of secularism in Europe is much more complex and untidy than Dr Aly contends. There was certainly periodic conflict between the feudal dynasties of Europe and the Church. There were many reasons for it, two of the most important being doctrinal matters and the possession of political power (the pope being also a temporal ruler). In most instances the monarchs won, like the kings of France. They did not like the power or the edicts of the pope, and created a rival papacy in Avignon which lasted from 1309 CE to 1378 CE. Henry the VIII (1497 CE-1547 CE), enraged that he could

not get his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled, made adherence to Catholicism illegal and created the Anglican Church with himself as the titular head. At no stage in these dramas were the importance of and the need for Christian belief challenged. Kings, like popes, realised the importance of religion to the legitimacy of their power. The demand for the separation of church and state arose from the bourgeois revolutions in France and the United States of America. The modern secular state did not emerge from the struggle between kings and popes. The disputes of the clergy and nobility played a part, but more important was the struggle of individuals and the masses against the undemocratic elites of their day: this widened the base for secularism. Religious authorities, like the hereditary elite, were opposed to modern ideas which undermined the divinely ordained social order.¹⁷⁶

Atheists too can be intolerant and stupidly argumentative; they can be notably ignorant when it comes to religion and absurd in their deification of secularism. One must condemn the bigotry that some of them display towards Islam. There is, nevertheless, one overwhelming reason why one should support a secular state and the firm separation of church and state: a modern bourgeois secular state grants freedom of religion, not freedom to ban religion. In a modern bourgeois state an individual's rights depend on laws enacted, whilst a feudal religious state is based on privilege. In the words of Karl Marx:

Incompatibility between religion and the rights of man is to such a degree absent that on the contrary, a man's right to be religious, in any way he chooses to practice his own particular religion is expressly included among the rights of man. The privilege of faith is the universal right of man.¹⁷⁷

This is a core difference: the state should be neutral on religious matters. Atheists like Professor A.C. Grayling, whom Aly decries because he is no fan of religious beliefs and institutions, nevertheless strongly oppose the extra powers given to the security forces in their 'war against terror'. He is scathing with regard to those ideological warriors against Islam who want to throw out the rule book. Grayling does not want to ban religion, merely to contest its adherents' beliefs in public forums, books and articles. He wants to quieten the militancy of the few; if they cause harm to others then the relevant statutes should be used against them.¹⁷⁸

Islamic states as diverse as the economically vibrant Malaysia, tottering ones like Pakistan and closed ones such as Iran are illiberal when it comes to the rights of others to follow their religious or non-religious inclinations; in Pakistan the harassment of Christians, Shi'as and the Ahmadi sect has become commonplace. Pakistan's toxic blasphemy law is being regularly abused. Most of the cases brought to court have no religious basis but are used to settle neighbourhood disputes on fractious issues like

land. If one of the charged is not a Sunni the litigant's case becomes even stronger. In Iran there is overt discrimination against non-Muslims, in particular those whose faiths are Zoroastrian and Baha'i. In Malaysia and Pakistan it is illegal for Muslims to renounce their beliefs and convert to another religion. This aversion to religious diversity has reached absurd levels, as seen in Malaysia's ban on the use of the word Allah by anybody who is not a Muslim.¹⁷⁹

In Saudi Arabia and in certain sections of the legal system in Pakistan sharia law is practiced. Saudi Arabia has an opaque legal system, in which punishments for even the more trivial offenses are harsh and the rights of women are severely curtailed, infantilising them in the eyes of the law. A new law has been passed, it is true, to deal with widespread violence and sexual abuse against women, including domestic help. This is a positive development but one wonders how the victims can report the violence when they are not allowed to drive and must ask the main perpetrators of the violence (i.e. the men of the household) to drive them to the nearest police station.¹⁸⁰

Where is the justice in giving one religious group primacy in a pluralist society? In religions like Islam and Christianity, crimes are not based on the harm one does to another but on the Biblical concept of sin or, in the case of the Qur'an, on what is prohibited and allowed. This makes criminalisation problematic. Prohibitions on being gay, definitions of what constitutes modesty, and the question of prohibited foods reflect a tyranny of the majority. Would it not be better to base laws on evidence, precedent and likely harm? Dr Aly does not discuss these issues in his book. I am pessimistic as to how a dialogue can be initiated, given the current tenor of the debate and the attitudes of states that claim to be Islamic. I hope I am wrong.

The reinvention of imperialism

At the start of this chapter I gave a thumbnail sketch of the relationship between the West (including the USA) and the Middle East, especially Egypt. The West has created the dominant tropes on how we view the Levant. Secularism and democracy have been largely a shadow play to prop up our economic and strategic interests. The rise of nationalism was ultimately thwarted for many reasons, the most obvious being corruption, autocratic rulers and their inability to provide a decent standard of living for most of their citizens. This lopsided development affected the political and cultural response of many people to the developments in their countries. Some find a solution in a golden past; others prefer a militant theocratic state with a caliph as supreme leader; some respond violently and irrationally to what they see as an immediate and overwhelming provocation.

Left-wing commentators like Professor Deepa Kumar argue that an understanding

of the history of this relationship and of USA's central role in the Middle-East is essential in understanding this tragedy. Only if the role of the West is reduced can some balance be reached.¹⁸¹ I largely concur with Professor's Kumar's thesis.

Islamaphobia is rife in the fourth estate, which then trickles down to us as 'common sense'. Much of the commentary on Islam is nonsense and prejudice masquerading as understanding. Muslims, it seems, have an unique psychological makeup which makes them unable to live in harmony with the rest of humanity. An egregious example of such 'commentary' is supplied by an academic whose expertise is in the field of business: Professor Tunku Varadarajan. He modifies the term 'going postal' (an American term meaning somebody who, because of a grievance, loses control and shoots his co-workers and himself) to 'going Muslim'. Varadarajan contends that it is easy for a Muslim to discard the camouflage of tolerance and coldly and calmly shoot those perceived as unbelievers.

Muslims may be more extreme because their religion is founded on bellicose conquest, a contempt for infidels and an obligation for piety that is more extensive than in other schemes.¹⁸²

This is an historically illiterate view. Islamic empires were brutal and despotic but no more so than Christian ones. There were no large-scale massacres of Christians or Jews. The impost on them was not the imperative to convert but to pay taxes which in many cases was excessive. When Christian armies took Jerusalem in 1099 they spent days hacking Jews and Muslims to death. There is little precedent in Islam for terrorist activities until the latter part of the 20th century (the age of regime change and globalisation) but these myths get recycled in our opinionated era when everybody it seems is an expert.

Another tendency is to blame the victim. Dr Ameer Ali an ex-adviser to the Howard government on Muslim Affairs, gives us his 'unique take' on the situation of Muslims in Lanka. In the recent past a section of the Buddhist clergy and their followers beat up a number of Muslims at a mosque and wanted to ban their businesses and curtail their religious practices. Dr Ali spent the majority of his interview in *Ceylon Today* castigating the victims on their new found militancy. Dr Ameer Ali: 'The Muslim community in this country has to decide whether they want to be Muslims of Sri Lanka or Muslims in Sri Lanka'.¹⁸³ Like him, I am perturbed about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in sections of the Muslim population in Lanka. But this does not give a right to the religious majority to assault Muslims and question their right to be Lankan citizens, and on this vital question Dr Ali has little to say.

It is not possible to go past the debacle that is Iraq: an invasion made on false premises (though most Iraqis were glad to see the back of the despotic Saddam Hussein),

with over 400,000 people dead, the overwhelming majority of them civilians. Iraq's constitution and parliament were redesigned by Western experts in a way that reinforced religious and ethnic divisions. The mayhem unleashed by the Americans and the British allowed al-Qaeda to gain a foothold, which they violently exploited. All this in the name of democracy, but really for the oil.¹⁸⁴

But there is more, including aspects seldom aired in leftist and liberal circles. It is with some reluctance that I shall examine them here.

A defence of sorts of radical humanism

The crimes of the world cannot all be attributed to American imperialism and its allies, Britain and Australia. The conflagrations in Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya were not directly caused by Western intervention.¹⁸⁵ The same can be said for the civil war in Lanka, uprisings in Kashmir, Assam and elsewhere in India, and rebellions initiated by Maoists and some tribal groups. They are local causes: a larger role was played by a corrupt, exploitative and unaccountable political and business elite and by grievances linked to identity and religion. Nor are Europe and the USA the only global economic players. China, Brazil and India are becoming key players in the exploitation of resources, which entails buying off politicians in developing countries. When countries like Sri Lanka or China say that the West has no moral right to blame them for human rights abuses because of its tainted past, this is simply an attempt by them to avoid accepting their own moral responsibility. When an Islamist regime commits crimes against its citizens it is not enough to blame the USA; attention should also be given to the political formations and the individuals involved. Failure to do so would not give due justice to the victims of the violence and the inhabitants of Iraq. That is the issue, the rest is noise.

I think it is important to have solidarity with communities and nationalities that are being discriminated against, but it should not be unqualified. We should, after more than 60 years of the anti-colonial struggle, be capable of analysing the post-colonial situation without uncritical acceptance of some of its political tendencies. I spent a number of years researching the post-independence history (1948 onwards) of Sri Lanka. The more I researched the subject the more critical I became of the Tamil Tigers. I support the right of the Tamil people to self-determination, acknowledge the discrimination they have suffered and are still suffering, and unreservedly condemn the overwhelming and relentless violence of the Sri Lankan state. This did not give the Tamil Tigers the right to eliminate their Tamil political opponents, make promiscuous use of suicide bombers, recruit under-age soldiers and refuse to countenance any meaningful alliance with progressive elements of the majority community. Likewise,

the support given by the USA to the Shah of Iran's brutal regime in no way justifies the ruthless and extra-judicial murder of the moderate Muslims and secular supporters who took part in the 1979 revolution and the creation of an anti-democratic theocratic state by the Shi'a clergy.

In this light we can be critical of many of those who want to enlarge the political role of their particular religion, be it in the form of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or Judaism. Many religious groups have negative attitudes towards those who they perceive as, non-believers like gays and feminists. Many oppose the theory of evolution, use wanton violence to achieve their political aims, target religious minorities, dismiss many key scientific concepts, oppose vaccinations and the use of contraceptives, etcetera. We on the left should be more forthright in condemning this medieval mindset. For the left should not be ashamed of their political and philosophical traditions. Tariq Ali:

[T]he Enlightenment attacked religion — Christianity mainly — for two reasons: that it was a set of ideological delusions and it was a system of institutional oppression, with immense powers of persecution and intolerance. Why, then, should I abstain from religious criticism?¹⁸⁶

I repeat: Why should Islam be exempt from this political and historical criticism? The oppressed need not express their resentment in religious terms. Another way is available.

The Vietnamese suffered immeasurably more than any Islamic country at the hands of the USA: close to three million were killed. In the Americas, countries like Cuba, Chile, Argentina and Brazil also suffered from North American machinations. This did not result in their embarking on terror campaigns in the United States or seeking religious solutions to their oppression. Despite the unhappy lot of Muslims in the West, in many ways their lives are freer than they would be in the Gulf states, especially in Saudi Arabia. Construction workers and domestic servants, regardless of their religion, are treated there as personal chattels. The West, I hasten to add, is not the paragon of liberty or equality it thinks it is, but is secular and so has developed more pluralist and multicultural societies.

It may be that Islam needs revitalisation, but this will not simply come from within or from the idealisation of the past. The Western tradition, despite the crimes committed in its name, does have much to offer, including the idea of a secular state. It was in the West that such progressive organisations as trade unions and parties on the left first developed. People around the world have learned from these experiences and in some cases the students have surpassed their teachers. International solidarity is crucial but should not be unconditional. Those who have been oppressed by Western Imperialism can themselves oppress others on national, racial or religious grounds

and deny the rights of women and gays. Where governments or movements in the Third World violate democratic rights we in the left should criticise them. We should support workers' rights and religious freedom everywhere; Islam should not be exempt from this.

Conclusion

Like Christians, the great majority of Muslims in Australia and around the world take a pragmatic view of their religion and their relationship with the state they happen to reside in. In Australia, Muslims belong to diverse political parties, football codes and clubs and largely keep their religious practices in the private sphere of the home, community and mosque. Feridun Urak, a friend of mine who is a practicing Muslim, has strong political and cultural views which owe more to secularism than to religion. We occasionally have passionate political and philosophical discussions, but they are never about Islam; they are about secular and mostly political issues. He sees any manifestation of the religious in the public sphere as retrograde. Feridun is like countless others in countries as politically diverse as Turkey, Egypt and Iran, who have been agitating for a more secular and democratic state.¹⁸⁷

Many Australians forget this, and Muslims are demonised because of the actions of a militant few who do not represent the views of the majority. We cannot look at Islam without looking at the history of colonialism and how this has corrupted our view of the 'other', in this case the adherents of Islam. At the same time this should not offer an excuse to those who wish to bring their particular brand of religion back into public institutions, impose a medieval mindset on issues like sexuality, democracy, secularism and statecraft. How this dialectic between the progressive voices of reason and religious fundamentalism is played out is anybody's guess. Let's give our support to the secular and progressive voices in the drama, not the medievalists. In doing so, let's not forget our political and activist traditions. ■

5. Atheism: Its Attendant Joys & Sobrieties

It (i.e. the book) is intended to raise consciousness — raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled. — *Richard Dawkins*¹⁸⁸

Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not faith. We do not solely rely upon science and reason, because they are necessary rather than sufficient factors but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things but what we respect is free inquiry, openmindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. — *Christopher Hitchens*¹⁸⁹

Increased liberty of thought and expression has allowed those who do not hold religious views to express their criticism openly, and religion's traditional armour of privilege and respect has accordingly rusted away, increasingly exposing it to challenge.

Religious individuals and institutions feel under pressure because of this, and sometimes accuse their critics of militancy. Their critics reply when religion occupied a dominant position in society, it dealt with its critics much more harshly than today's critics now deal with religion ... Today's critics of religion generally restrict themselves to hurling arguments rather than stones at the religious. — *A.C. Grayling*¹⁹⁰

Enthusiasm & scepticism

Coming from the sub-continent, I was supposed to be immersed in the culture and religion of India, which in the mind of many white middle-class seekers of spiritual wisdom was a highly idealised version of Hinduism. Not being a devotee I found that in many instances their enthusiasm for Hinduism was shallow and had more to do with their own psychological pathologies than the complex, obtuse, rigid and sober realities of a Hindu devotee. They seemed more interested in some mythological feudal India where kings and priests ruled the roost, built wonderful temples, presided

over literary and religious masterpieces and the peasants and merchants were in awe of the wonder that was India. It was no use pointing out the complexities of history (nothing is static), the relationship in the sub-continent between feudalism, caste, kingship and religion. They just wanted the 'user friendly' version pedalled by the many gurus that infest the religious landscape of India. These devotees never seem to see the all pervasive poverty, the iniquitous caste system, the smell of the filth and open sewers that Indians had to endure each day. The transaction seem clear to me, the West wanted the spirituality lost in the pursuit of affluence and the East, still religious, wanted the affluence of the West.

Reinforcing my distaste was the seeming rebirth of New Age 'intellectual' chatter in the 1980s and 1990s. I could not enter a bookshop and not encounter rows and rows of books on the miracles of crystals, the joys of sitting under a pyramid (a new age version of a dunny one metaphorically presumes), self-help manuals to escape one's physical limitations, grief, boring jobs, dead-end relationships and pursue like a gadfly the joys of perpetual happiness. Promiscuous use was made of words of wisdom and comfort from the sages of bygone days: Jung, Buddha, Plato, Gandhi. In doing so these gurus of our modern age sought to airbrush the complexities and paradoxes of our lives, and make life a series of simple hurdles with well-used aphorisms as a guide and mantra for our existence.

Then Professor Dawkins wrote a book arguing the necessity of atheism and the chattering classes (including me I hasten to add) were divided in their damnation or fulsome praise. The book when I first read it seemed a necessary tonic to the dribble of new age beliefs and an important refutation of religious fundamentalism in all its hydra-like manifestations. That was not the view of many of the critics who could not accept or maybe even tolerate and engage with an atheist who explicitly dared to question the theological and ethical edifices of religion and proudly defended the joys of unbelief and the secular life.

To my delight, it pushed many a therapy/religious 'how to' book off the best seller lists and got people thinking and arguing about religion, the secular state and the illegality of religious belief — and that cannot be a bad thing. Suddenly there was an avalanche of books from prominent academics like A.C. Grayling and professional provocateurs like Christopher Hitchens arguing the case for atheism. On the opposite side Professors Terry Eagleton¹⁹¹ and John Gray¹⁹² who shared many of the secular credentials and beliefs of Dawkins and Co., felt the need to attempt to dissect their arguments to shreds and in doing so expressed an overt dislike to their arguments. I could not understand their overt hostility or enjoy (especially Eagleton's) flights of rhetorical venom.

Then I attended the World Atheist Conference in April 2012 at the World Trade Centre in Melbourne. The place was packed with many young people with the odd sprinkling of the middle-aged and the elderly. The attendees seemed to me to be mainly middle-class, tertiary educated folks who were comfortable with the mores of globalisation, as evidenced by the plethora of the latest electronic devices on display. Speakers like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Ayaan Hirsi Ali were given rock star receptions. Yet many of the speeches seemed to be a bit intellectually and historically undercooked. I remember listening to a panel on the increasing and deeply troubling rise of faith-based schools being funded by the federal government. On the panel was a representative from the Anglican school system who agreed that there should be a sharp distinction between church and state and the need to teach science including Darwinism, being ignored when she suggested an alliance between progressive people to confront this vexatious issue. This not only stuck me as being rude but also tone deaf to the very principles of pluralism we, as atheists, repeatedly espouse.

The speeches with the notable exceptions of Professors Singer and Grayling, seemed devoid of any political heft and were full of simple binary arguments with us (i.e. atheists) being the good guys and all the religious believers being irrational and reactionary with nary an avenue opened for dialogue. Whilst it was important for us to feel sad at the untimely and heroic way Christopher Hitchens died, his deification as a champion of rational inquiry at the conference left a bitter taste in my mouth. For the eulogy airbrushed his move to the right to become cheer leader of the immoral, bloody and tragic Iraqi invasion.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's bravery in the face of naked bigotry from sections of the Islamic community needs to be supported and politically applauded. If one needed a reminder, outside the centre a number of Islamic protestors wanted to persecute her for being an 'infidel'. Just because she is an atheist it does not mean I agree with her political views. Ali's speech on the Arab spring had a few pertinent points like the fact that many authoritarian Middle Eastern states use the Palestinian issue as a cloak to cover their repression, while never doing anything concrete about the plight of Palestinians. Tendentious is her blanket comment that the Arab spring only benefitted the religious fundamentalists. Ali constantly criticised 'Western middle-class liberals', while downplaying Israel's pivotal role in the plight of the Palestinians, and failing to mention Jewish religious fundamentalism or Israel's nuclear weapons. Then the penny dropped: she is a scholar of the American Enterprise Institute, a cheerleader of global capitalism which blames most of the ills of society not on religion or the inequity of the market system but on Western radical and liberal thinkers. Leaving the conference I began to think that even though I shared many of the values of Dawkins and Co. on humanism,

reason and science, there were many aspects of their arguments I found deeply troubling and simplistic.

The argument

It is in this light I will look critically at Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*,¹⁹³ Christopher Hitchens provocatively titled *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*¹⁹⁴ and A.C. Grayling's *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism*.¹⁹⁵ I find Professor Dawkins' use of Charles Darwin on our religious impulses and the search for happiness and leading a fulfilling life limiting and ultimately unhelpful to the thesis he wishes to espouse. Christopher Hitchens' book is riddled with errors and untenable assertions which undermines the case for atheism. Professor Grayling's book is well written and his articulation of liberal humanism is well worth exploring. Maybe because his book is the most reasonable and mainstream it has ironically attracted much criticism from liberal critics. I look at three book reviews of Professor Grayling's book. I then go on to criticise his liberal humanism as lacking a narrative, context and history. Then I explore and critique Dawkins' views on science, which does work, unlike miracles, new age chants and pseudo-science. Yet science never seems to be at the service of the many, only of the few, an issue which Professor Dawkins has never discussed. I then look critically at their denial of the secular make-up of two of the 20th century's greatest monsters — Stalin and Hitler. As an aside and to flavour the intellectual stew I debate whether their being 'theological illiterates', as proposed by Professor Eagleton, dents their arguments against the existence of a deity.

Darwin's mastiff

In reading Dawkins' polemic, the scholar and television personality seem to merge — austere, patrician, curious about the universe, immensely erudite and an overweening imperiousness when it comes to those he wishes to criticise. His book reflects these contradictory qualities. Dawkins argues that science, and in particular natural selection, are superior to any religious explanation about God. Atheism is a much more psychologically sound and healthy premise to base one's life on. Lastly he is excoriating on those who brainwash young children to their particular religious beliefs. They should be educated to make their own minds up, not uncritically accept their parent's precepts. He sees religious indoctrination in some faith-based schools as child abuse. Dawkins surveys the many strands of religion, be it monotheism, polytheism and even agnosticism, and puts them under his relentless logical gaze and finds them wanting.¹⁹⁶

He demolishes most of the arguments that have been presented over time on the existence of God. He ranges far and wide from the Bible, personal religious epiphanies, Thomas Aquinas's causal explanation of a deity to Pascal's complex wager, and applies cold logic to them all.¹⁹⁷ To get a flavour of this logic — Christian propagandists of the one true God, who use the Bible as the proof of God's existence, never seem to raise questions like: who are the authors of these texts; the why, for whom and when were they written; what agenda did they have; and can we fully understand 2000 years later what they actually meant. Scholars since the 19th century had repeatedly pointed out that the gospels are not a guide to the history of their time and the gospels were written well after the death of Christ. What we have are copies of copies by monks who had their own religious agendas.¹⁹⁸ He does a similar hatchet job in the following chapter which he entitles 'Why there is no God' and explains why.¹⁹⁹

Dawkins gives us his unique take on why religion evolved across all cultures. He goes to Darwin for an explanation. He argues that religion is a by-product of something that was important for the survival of the human race. These are memes which carry this information across generations and history. Memes act as a carrier for transmitting cultural ideas, symbols and practices. This is done through writing, speech gestures and rituals. It seems that religious faith is a misfiring of these human impulses and activities. Memes are replicators of cultural practices. It can be linked to the field of evolutionary biology.²⁰⁰

Dawkins then goes on to argue that we do not need to be religious to be good, we have altruistic genes that have developed through evolution which give us the ability as sentient beings to recognise the needs of others and thus limiting our urges to hurt others, leading us towards a more liberal secular civilisation. Religion on the other hand is anti-scientific, and can be fanatical and bigoted, a pertinent example being its hostility to gays. He sees the religious teaching of children in faith-based schools funded by the state as mental abuse. He ends by advocating that the religious impulse would be better served by philosophy and science.²⁰¹

Dawkins central thesis can be stated thus:

I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it including us.* This book will advocate an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*²⁰² [Dawkins' italics]

God is a 'pernicious' delusion.²⁰³

Natural Selection is the champion crane of all time. It has lifted life from primeval simplicity to the dizzy heights of complexity, beauty and apparent design that dazzle

us today.²⁰⁴

Darwinism and evolution are central planks for understanding the natural world. The evidence, though incomplete and sometimes fragmentary, is overwhelming, and Professor Dawkins is spot-on in pointing out that science gives a much more coherent and factual explanation of the world than does the Bible and its many theologians and apologists. My problem arises when Darwin's methods and procedures are put in the human arena.

Darwin's age was not only the age of explorations, scientific discoveries and imperialism, it was also an era where the rising middle class and the landed aristocracy had a deep fear that those below them would bring the house down as they did across the channel in France during its revolutionary period. This fear was eloquently presented by the Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) in *An Essay in the Principles of Population*. He argued that the growth in population will be checked either by famine or disease unless society adopts institutional checks like celibacy, marrying later in life and birth control. If these checks are not in place, population (he means the working class and peasants) will increase beyond the capacity of a society's ability to feed them.²⁰⁵ Darwin read Malthus and his ideas began to percolate into his studies of the natural world. Darwin observed there is a perpetual struggle in nature. Natural selection was the mechanism in which some species prospered in the fight for scarce resources whilst others declined.²⁰⁶ It did not take long for these scientific insights to be brought into the political and social sphere.

It was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) the Victorian sociologist and philosopher, not Darwin, who coined the much maligned phrase 'survival of the fittest'. He was not talking about flora and fauna but the survival of the finest and fittest homo-sapiens in the competitive world of the so called free market. Spencer:

... I am simply carrying out the views of Mr Darwin in the application to the human race ... all (members of the race) being subject to the 'increasing difficulty of getting a living ...' there is an average advance under the pressure, since 'only those who do advance under it eventually survive'; and ... they must be the select of their generation.²⁰⁷

Spencer in his day reached a large audience. In his popularity he was like Alan Jones and Andrew Bolt wrapped in one, his books sold in the hundreds of thousands and his lectures were pop star events. He was extremely popular in the United States of America (USA) especially with the 'robber barons' of industry. He provided a rational argument in which the rich could justify not only their wealth but their superiority. Guilt was no longer felt, it was through their superior intellect and talent that the elite became rich and it was their right not only to flaunt it but also to enjoy it — Protestant thrift be damned. It followed that the rich were entitled to their wealth. The role of

government was to enhance wealth, not to tax it. To help the poor, especially the ‘undeserving’ ones, would be disastrous to the gene pool. During the Victorian era one of the great wealth generators in the USA was in the running and construction of railroads. How did the elite of our genetic pool do this? The most energetic and successful did this through larceny. This larceny took two forms; the robbery of customers and manipulating the stock of companies. The heavy weight champion was Cornelius Vanderbilt.²⁰⁸ This sense of unlimited entitlement has become one of the dominant mantras across our globe and is increasingly dominating our airwaves. Gina Rinehart’s public musing on the rights of the rich and their desire for low taxation and cheap labour is a contemporary manifestation of this ethos. One assumes her enormous wealth (\$A19 billion and rising) in digging up and exporting the ‘common wealth’ of the nation is the apogee of natural selection and her success is the transmission of Dawkins’ memes from her father Lang Hancock to her and her fractious progeny.

Maybe that is why Darwin urged caution:

... it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly an effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men’s minds, which follows from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science.²⁰⁹

I do not wholly agree with Darwin’s injunction but his ‘quietist’ approach is an interesting alternative to his disciple Dawkins’ enthusiasms. With God out of the equation (according to Darwin) we are left with man and nature. Nature is wonderful and glorious to behold and is bountiful in its fertility but it has no discernible end and morality. Unlike nature we are moral beings yet how can we take nature seriously if there is no justice within its ambit? To deal with this we require patience and a sense of history for we need to develop forms of knowledge and enquiry that meet our needs as individuals and society’s. To do so we need to be vigilant so that we not develop the language/tropes and certainties of religion. Philips:

For Darwin the whole notion of co-operation or collaboration — anything akin to altruism — beyond a certain point was a version of the disabling perfectionism called Christianity that flew in the face of evidence.²¹⁰

According to Darwin, this intellectual balancing act is difficult and maybe an impossible task. For: ‘Lives dominated by impossible ideals — complete honesty, absolute knowledge, perfect happiness, eternal love — are lives experienced as continual failure.’²¹¹ That should not deter us, he goes on to argue, for our capacity to survive disaster and loss is a fact. We have, like other species, a capacity to survive and prosper. Even though there is the continual danger that a non-transcendent life is one without

compensation or justification. Darwin was a 'realistic optimist' to the fact that we can recognise that our religious beliefs are false. This requires us to not only familiarise ourselves with our surroundings like other flora and fauna but we also have the additional ability to reason ourselves out of this existential dilemma. To do this we have to, as a species, accept our mortality, moderate our certainties and fear of death.²¹² For Darwin the issue is not one of the joys of a full rounded bourgeois atheist life but one that is sober and intellectually cautious where the urge for certainty and survival must be tempered by our intellect, understanding of the world and innate ego. That is all we can hope for.

From Darwin's perspective we cannot replace the 'happy clappy' certainty expressed by certain Christian sects with an atheist one based on certainty and self-righteousness. A world without the illusion and certainties of God is a tough and sober one. So it is not surprising that sometimes we can be ironic about the whole exercise and like Julian Barnes state: 'I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.'²¹³ Irony and doubt are part of our equation as human beings. Something that is totally absent in Professor Dawkins' book.

Rereading Professor Dawkins' book, one is struck with the fact that even though it is well written it is long, over 400 pages, whilst Bertrand Russell 80 years ago did the same exercise in beautiful, simple and concise prose of less than 70 pages. He also, unlike Dawkins, allowed Christianity some grace before arguing cogently about its irrelevance.²¹⁴ Dawkins unrelenting hostility to religion and even those who are agnostic, underpinned and driven by an unrelenting biological and evolutionary Darwinism undermines his thesis. For unlike Russell he cannot, within the ideological framework of his book allow that at any time in history, religion was an advantage to the human race. He tries to wriggle out of this by his concept of memes and how they transmit ideology. This concept, though helpful in describing social phenomena, is in the end a binary tool. It cannot explain how ideas change and mutate as society develops. For example it cannot explain why I rejected my father's Catholicism and became an atheist.

I am not arguing that we atheists cannot live fulfilling lives. We can live a life full of all the joys and sorrows that humanism and reason brings. As humanists we need to make sense of the world without the theological, religious cloth of certainty and faith. We can fight for a just world but — and it is a big but — we cannot airbrush sorrow, poverty, injustice, racism and heartache. All we can do is argue, struggle, and cajole to make the incidence of it less in the world all the while being aware we are fallible. In doing so, love, joy, humour, irony, the beauty of art and music are just as important in giving the consolations we need. All this and more is in Julian Barnes reticent memoir:

Nothing to be Afraid Of,²¹⁵ a wonderful screed written in his emotionally laconic, ironic, sad, critical and crystalline prose which should give those shrill critics of atheism something to think about after their evening vespers.

The atheist delusions of Christopher Hitchens

The late Christopher Hitchens belonged to that talented and somewhat overpraised group of English writers: Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Bruce Chatwin, Martin Amis and James Fenton; he was the only one who did not try his hand at fiction or poetry. Nevertheless he has always written like an angel, his combative prose, his arguments for clarity and logic was and is still an inspiration for many. His essays and interjections on public issues, like bringing the deification of Mother Theresa back to earth, prosecuting Henry Kissinger as a war criminal, exposing the illiberalism and political immorality of President Clinton and his administration and support for the rights of the Palestinians and Kurds was appreciated and were mostly gems of prose.²¹⁶ Then September 11, 2001 happened and for Hitchens this accelerated his move to the right and a renunciation of his left-wing beliefs and alliances and collaborations with writers and social activists like Edward Said.²¹⁷ Notwithstanding that, I started reading his polemic against religion' (*God is not Great*) with anticipation.²¹⁸ On the front cover there was an ominous endorsement from the Elvis Presley of atheists, Richard Dawkins. He states: 'If you are a religious apologist invited to debate with Christopher Hitchens, decline.'²¹⁹

The book is a more entertaining read than Dawkins in which Hitchens boldly sets out his objections to religion:

There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.

Being an omnipresent and supremely rational being, he informs us that he worked that out before his voice broke!²²⁰ He prosecutes the case against religion with a mixture of personal stories, historical examples and a superficial analysis of religious texts. Hitchens' legendary charm, bon vivant nature and beautiful turn of phrase cannot disguise the fact that the book is sloppily written, has errors and his generalisations are not tenable.

In his opening salvo Hitchens argues that religion will remain entrenched as long we cannot overcome our 'primitive' fears and our dread of mortality. In the next chapter entitled 'Religion Kills' he hypothetically asks the question whether it is safe at

night in an unfamiliar city, to encounter a group of men coming from a prayer meeting — would he feel safe or fearful? He would feel the latter given his experience in a number of cities (he sticks with the cities beginning with the letter B) — Beirut, Bombay, Bagdad, Belgrade and Bethlehem. He also discusses the aftermath of September 11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the negative role of religion and its adherents in the ensuing debate.²²¹

He then digresses and speculates on the prohibition on the eating of pork. He makes the point that the prohibition of pork in Semitic religions might be because of the prohibition of human sacrifice given the similarity in the texture and taste of pork and human flesh!²²²

He reminds us that religion is injurious for our health. He provides the apt examples on the opposition of some Muslims to the polio vaccine and the Catholic Church's medieval response to the HIV epidemic in Africa. He informs us that many Catholic and most Christian fundamentalists and some Muslim groups see the AIDs epidemic as God's punishment for our sexual transgressions especially those who are actively gay. Their opposition to medical measures that have proven worth can only be attributed, he argues, to the fact that these breakthroughs undermine their authority.²²³

Hitchens states that the exponential increase of our knowledge compared to what was available in Thomas Aquinas's time means that faith in a deity and mankind's theological constructs cannot stand up to the powers of reason and evidence. That is why many Christian groups do not wholly rely on faith to support their theology but also base it on evidence. He argues that Abrahamic religions do a good job in making their adherents feel guilty and at the same time convincing the faithful that their God cares for them. This could have played some role in prolonging the life of religion which now cannot withstand human reason and scientific knowledge as a counter narrative. He then looks at the inconsistencies and violence inherent in the Old Testament and the historical fallibility of the writers of the New Testament. He rightly castigates Mel Gibson's version of Catholicism as evidenced by his blood soaked and masochistic Christ which he put on film. It laid the blame for the death of Jesus squarely on the Jews.²²⁴ He goes on to simplistically argue that the Qur'an was fabricated by its founder and that it borrowed most of its tenets from Jewish and Christian texts.²²⁵

He looks at how miracles are concocted and uses his own personal experience with Mother Theresa as an example. He illuminates the bizarre beginnings of Mormonism and its founder Joseph Smith as an example of how religion's beginnings are corrupt. He then reminds us that religions have a finite life and provides the example of millenarianism and the strange rise and fall of the sect started by Sabbatai Sevi (1626-76) which I will discuss in more detail later. He argues that non-religious people

behave righteously as well. Unlike Dawkins he ploughs in and in a few pages (nine pages), confidently dismisses Hinduism and Buddhism.²²⁶

Religion can be construed as child abuse if we take into account: circumcision, genital mutilation and fear of sex and the banning of its great consoler, masturbation. He then goes on to cursorily dismiss Stalin's and Hitler's crimes, which are commonly depicted as blights on humanism and atheism, and goes on to argue that religion played a key role in these events. He reminds us that the poster boys of humanism and secularism — Paine, Spinoza, Voltaire and Darwin — had fought bravely against the deleterious effect of religion and for the values of the enlightenment. He then goes on to boldly state that we no longer need religion and that science and reason will be more important intellectual props to our lives. This will lead to greater freedom and the progress of civilisation. Nothing less than a new enlightenment is beckoning us²²⁷

He gives a wonderful example of the irrationality of religious belief. Hitchens was with a group of Tamil devotees of Sai Baba helping them (one assumes) in their mission to provide help after the devastating 2004 Tsunami Sri Lanka. Before the journey they did the necessary puja for a safe journey. It did not work. They had an accident in Sinhala village, a situation made stickier by the fact they are Tamils. Hitchens with his upper middle-class accent, British press credentials and 'off white Graham Green suit', convinced the local constabulary that they should be allowed to proceed, much to the relief of his travelling companions. Hitchens:

... they telephoned their cult headquarters to announce that Sai Baba himself was with us in the temporary shape of my own person. From then on, I was treated with reverence, and not allowed to carry anything or fetch my own food.²²⁸

These small joys are overwhelmed by his ego, and his desire to hit too many religious institutions (he is always an omnipresent presenter of facts and narrative) fatally weakens his argument. He was baptised an Anglican, was for a while for marriage purposes a nominal Greek Orthodox adherent, and later Jewish (he had acquired a Jewish wife by then) and this according to him, allows him some personal insight into their mores and crimes which are many and complex. He dismisses their attraction in less than a page.²²⁹ If this is what Richard Dawkins admires and thinks will tear to shreds any arguments put by religious groups and individuals, all I can do is ironically cry — God help us.

Let us take one of his examples — Bombay and religious sectarianism.²³⁰ It is India's richest (around 40% of its GDP is produced there) and poorest city where billionaires, millionaires, film stars and the middle class live cheek by jowl in a sea of slums. This disparity has increased religious tensions that have periodically flared between an ascendant and implacable Hinduism and an increasingly besieged Muslim

minority. But what is happening in Bombay is not just religious bigotry. There is a much bigger story which Hitchens leaves out. India is in throes of a massive social and economic change resulting in tens of thousands of rural people moving daily to the cities. In India, employment for the vast majority is precarious, casual and sometimes dangerous, and remuneration, if an individual is lucky, is a shade above penury. This has resulted in a backlash against these so called 'economic refugees' where Hindu right-wing groups like the Shiv Sena are demanding that all 'non-locals' be driven out. So when a resident of Maharashtra (the state of which Bombay is the capital) wants to expel migrants from Tamil Nadu and Mysore who happened to be Hindus how does one construe that as a religious issue? The answer is an emphatic no. It is an issue of economics, the role of the state, justice and tolerance — largely secular not religious.

Similarly to argue that the Irish struggle can be solely attributed to religion just distorts the whole issue.²³¹ It is true that if we look at the sayings of Ian Paisley and others from the Democratic Unionist Party their language is drenched in Protestant fundamentalism and the pope is equated with the devil. For all the sectarianism, terror and hope the Irish Republican Army (IRA) unleashed, it was never about just being Catholic, in fact the Irish Catholic clerical hierarchy was opposed to their methods and aims. The issues were and are about imperialism, anti-colonialism, social justice and nationalism. The history of Ireland's anti-imperialist struggle and the reclaiming of its Celtic heritage involved many Protestant voices and activists. The folk songs of the struggle — simple, tuneful, beautiful and moving — were about the struggle to escape the yoke of imperialism, not about religion and were sung lustfully by many people from a non-Irish background, like me. As Edward Said (a nominal Christian) reminded us, like the Irish: 'Palestine was a liberation ideal. We saw it as integral unit within the liberation movements of the Third World — secular democratic, revolutionary.'²³² Religion certainly plays a negative role, but is not the only culprit and sometimes not the main one. If Hitchens had brought in the Thirty Year War (1618-48), waged in Europe between the Protestants and Catholics, a bloodbath of epic proportions in which religion did play a central role, then he would have been on surer ground.

His ignorance of the impact of religion becomes embarrassing when he tries to downplay the late Dr Martin Luther King's Christianity in his social activism and politics. Hitchens:

... the examples King gave us from the books of Moses were, fortunately for all of us, metaphors and allegories. His most imperative preaching was that of non-violence. In his version of the story, there are no savage punishments and genocide bloodlettings. Nor are the cruel commandments about the stoning of children and the burning of

witches.²³³

He concludes his argument by stating: 'In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then was he a Christian.'²³⁴ Hitchens is like the religious fundamentalists he and Dawkins so eloquently rubbish for their shoddy facts and reasoning. The facts do not support his arguments. Martin Bauml Duberman in his magnificent biography of Paul Robeson (a more appropriate secular example than Dr King) points out that Robeson, because of his communist background and non-religious credo, was admired by his community for his talent, courage and social activism but never wholly seen as being one of them,²³⁵ unlike Dr King. The majority of African-Americans rightly or wrongly saw their oppression and liberation deeply intertwined within the logos of the Bible. Dr King was able to soak this mythical longing for salvation and freedom with the cadences bolted into the narrative of the Bible and give it a political slant of liberation and empowerment. His inspiration of non-violence came from Gandhi and Tolstoy, who got it from the New Testament — in particular the Sermon on the Mount and the injunction to love your neighbour like yourself, which most religious institutions only give lip service to. The religious imperative to the civil rights movement is all over Mavis Staples' (who was a family friend of Dr King) album *We'll Never Turn Back*. On the back cover of her CD she explicitly states: 'Like many in the civil rights movement, The Staple Singers drew on the spirituality and strength of the church to gain social justice and try to achieve equal rights.'²³⁶

In his chapter on how religion ends, Hitchens discusses the strange rise and fall of the messianic Sabbatai Sevi who was a Sephardic Rabbi and cabalist who claimed to be the Messiah and would lead faithful back to the Holy land. In the end it all came to nought because the Ottoman authorities who were the colonial power at the time became concerned with his popularity and forced him to recant. Sevi lived out rest of his days as a Muslim, much to dismay to his many disciples. A minority of them also converted, others carried on his Judaic teaching.²³⁷ The absurdity of religious belief needs to be pointed out, which Hitchens gleefully does, but that is not the whole story. For Jews living in the 17th century Christendom had to endure: the rabid anti-semitism, regular pogroms and laws on where they could live and what professions they could work in, effectively walled them in fetid ghettos where escape to the wider world and hope for a better life was almost non-existent, especially in Eastern Europe. A life of non-belief was impossible in these circumstances: being ostracised would have resulted, as escape from the ghetto was impossible. Religion provided the drug to make it all palatable. Armstrong on why Sevi struck a chord:

After centuries of persecution, exile and humiliation there was hope. All over the world Jews had experienced an inner freedom and liberation that seemed similar to the

ecstasy that the Kabbalists had experienced for a few moments ... Now this experience of salvation was no longer simply the preserve of a privileged few but seemed common property. For the first time, Jews felt that their lives had value; redemption was no longer a vague hope for the future but was real and full of meaning in the present.²³⁸

There is a secular critique to be made of Hinduism and Buddhism and some of its current unsavoury manifestations in the current revival of Hinduism²³⁹ and the bigotry of some Theravada monks towards non-Buddhists in Lanka and Burma. A critique would require an explanation on the origins of these religions, testing their claims of universality and their unchanging verities and their distortions and reaction to imperialism and modernity, but that would take more than the nine pages that Hitchens condescends to grant them. It is beyond the scope of this monograph and I wish that he had not tried, as it does harm to the struggle rationalists and secularists are making in countries like India.²⁴⁰

The philosophers' atheist

Anthony Clifford Grayling is the philosophers' philosopher; his donnish appearance, his cool and dry analytical style is a welcome contrast to the fire and bombast of the late Christopher Hitchens. His appearances on radio and television, whilst not having the pop star appeal of a Hitchens or Dawkins, are the model of civility and rationality in a sea of sound bites and political rancour. The only sign of his vanity is his wonderful and magnificently coiffured pageboy locks which frame his owlish glasses. He is an assiduous writer of books, articles and essays — around 30 books are listed in his latest opus.²⁴¹ His most recent is written in clear and accessible prose; he states his premises and argues for its merits. Grayling, like Bertrand Russell wants to subject religious belief to the rigours of logic and reason, which he does admirably in his new book. He is sceptical of theories that try to provide a universal explanation for history, culture, belief and why some of us like the pageboy look and others Kojak, which, according to Grayling, in the end explains nothing.²⁴²

Grayling's main premise:

In my view the argument against religion is an argument for the liberation of the human mind, and the possibility of at last formulating an ethical outlook that all humankind can share, thus providing a basis for a much more integrated peaceful world.²⁴³

Fair enough. He divides his polemic into two parts; the first contains his lucid demolishing of arguments in favour of God and the second, why humanism is the better alternative. As both Dawkins and Hitchens have covered most of the arguments against religious belief, I will not rehash them here, except to state that his expositions are clearer and

his targets are more focused. The more important part of the book is his wonderfully concise explanation and defence of humanism and his contention that it provides an altogether better alternative for living one's life than religious theology.

With the minimum of fanfare he premises the religious and atheist debate on three questions. Firstly, the theism versus atheism debate is about what exists and does not exist; secondly the debate about the role (how big or negligible) the religious voice should have in the political and public arena of a state; and thirdly the source and content of our moralities. Does this come from God or is it a reflection of our material realities and our relationships as human beings.²⁴⁴ The theists, Grayling argues, are running around articulating their particular God driven view of the world, whilst the atheists are not playing the game and view all their claims to supernatural authenticity as equally fallacious. Atheists do not want to ban religion (this is a crucial point) but want to limit its influence on the secular state. They should not be given any more credence and space than other civil rights or non-government agencies. Their privileged status, like constitutional links to the state, taxation perks and the right for them not to recruit gays and lesbians for example, and state funding of their educational institutions, should be stopped. Also, atheists do not want to ban or burn people to the stake, they just want to argue with them and contest their transcendental claims. In fact a secular state would make the lives of many religious groups and minorities much safer, unlike theological states. The charge of atheist bigotry is therefore a spurious one.²⁴⁵

Grayling defines humanism as the ethical outlook of an individual who works out his or her way through life. This requires us to live 'thoughtfully' and appreciate the commonalities we have as human beings and the wide differences. We should make choices based on tolerance and respect for other human beings. Modern science, a humanist construct, is based on argument, evidence and facts that can be verified and tested, unlike religious belief which is based on ritual, prayer and faith. Grayling unambiguously states:

... it is undeniable that the two centuries that succeeded the 18th century saw immense advances in science, technology, education and literacy, accountable systems of government, the rule of law and regimes of human rights; and these are achievements of the Enlightenment.²⁴⁶

He starts a philosophical journey beginning with the Greeks to the ground-breaking (his view) 18th century philosophers like Hume, Mandeville and Immanuel Kant. He also brings in 20th century philosophers like Russell and Camus. These philosophers were concerned with morality and action and the moral nature of an individual's actions. Meaning and morality should not be given from on high as religion chooses to do but should be argued about, observed and lived as it shapes our lives. Grayling

poses the question of suicide — if one does not want to commit suicide then it should not be based on the idea that it is a sin but on the fact that there are reasons why one should not — love, family, waiting for the end of *Game of Thrones* etc. Within that existential ambit, we find the meaning for our individual lives.²⁴⁷

The absence of human rights or abuse of it, are one of the main moral issues we as individuals and communities have to face in the 21st century. He points out that the United Nations declaration of Human Rights should be the norm and be legally enforceable and not be diluted to meet the needs of religious groups and states. The charter is a perfect exemplar of a humanist document.²⁴⁸ The charter insists that we are all born free, equal and with dignity. There should be no discrimination based on colour, religion, political opinion and sex. No one should be held in slavery or servitude and be tortured or denied liberty and all should be equal before the law.²⁴⁹ A wonderful humanist document but the issue is how it can be enforced.

The difference between humanists and those holding religious views is best exemplified by their differing attitudes towards gays, drugs and sex in general. The religious impulse is to ban and marginalise people based on their religious views. Humanists try to understand the reasons, for example, why some drugs are freely used and other are banned. In the end though, regardless of one's personal preferences on these issues, the only constraint should be — 'what we choose to do must not harm others'. There is plenty of justification for regulating drugs in the way we regulate drinking, but none for forbidding them.²⁵⁰

Liberal moralists largely support abortion and euthanasia and conservatives do not. On the other hand liberals are largely opposed to killings necessitated by war and capital punishment while conservatives seem to be largely untroubled by it. Why the difference? Take the debate about euthanasia: the conservative argument that the right may be abused is not a sufficient reason for banning it. Any right can be abused, human beings are fallible but we have within our remit to minimise the abuse. The potential for abuse must be balanced with the right of the terminally ill to die with dignity and not experience extreme pain and be drugged, which causes distress not only to the patient but also his or her loved ones. Compassion should win out, not some outmoded religious edict.²⁵¹

Grayling argues that laws on blasphemy violate freedom of expression and without it civil liberties is a hollow concept. Why? For blasphemy to exist somebody has to take offence at a statement or action. It is a conflict between perceptions that can be subjective, and based on culture and tradition. This is based on faith and is not the proper domain of the law. In practice these laws become instruments of control and censorship, not one of religious freedom, as exemplified by Pakistan's blasphemy laws.²⁵²

Grayling concludes with a ringing endorsement of humanism because it is our best defence against falsehood and helps us expose and combat (not ban) concepts like tarot cards, astrology, palm reading and other charlatan acts. Grayling:

For humanism premises the value of things human, without the assistance of illusions about anything supposedly beyond this world and its realities. Humanism's desire to learn from the past, its exhortation to courage in the present and espousal for hope in the future, are about real things, real people, real human need and possibility and fate of the fragile world we share. It is about human life; it requires no belief in the afterlife.²⁵³

Right on.

The irrationality of some liberal critics when it comes to atheism

As this is the best written and most cogently argued book and also the most civil of the three I am discussing, it is interesting to see the reaction of critics of the book, which if it was not an atheist text would have had, I feel, a better reception. These range from the grudging, to outright hostility and sheer condescending. Morag Fraser in her fair(ish) review, whilst taking him to task for not including a wider group of thinkers, applauds the overall thrust of the argument for humanism without explaining how one can be both a Christian and a humanist. I am sure one can, but as a Christian it is beholden on her to make the argument. For the central core of Grayling's argument is that unbelief and scepticism of a deity are inseparable from the humanist impulse.²⁵⁴

Tom Payne in the *Telegraph* is just plain bitchy. He starts his polemic with:

People are debating whether or not *Life of Pi*, book or film, can make you believe in God. The novel didn't have that effect on me. A.C. Grayling's book came much closer: his 'case for humanism' made me begin to long for faith. Or at least to long for longing for it.²⁵⁵

He makes snide remarks about Grayling's support for a more tolerant view on sexual preferences and drugs, which he clearly does not agree with. Instead of telling us why, he just says it is a ramble. It is not; if there is a criticism, it is too short — 16 pages for such a contentious issue. Also, instead of tackling the central planks of his arguments on the need for atheism and the rationality of humanism, he picks Grayling up on small sections of his argument on theology. If you do not believe in a God as there is no damn evidence for it, why the hell do we need to digress on their 'idealised' discussions and musing on them Mr Payne???? Again the central premises of Grayling's arguments are sidestepped.²⁵⁶

The one that irritated me the most was by Bryan Appleyard in the *New Statesman*.²⁵⁷ His dismissive and condescending tone hides a number of untenable assertions. An

argument can be constructed that Dawkins is a militant atheist (Hitchens certainly is), not Grayling. He has always argued for the right of the freedom to practice one's religion, he just wants a firm separation between church and state. Unlike Dawkins, his exposition of humanism is not happy and clappy as Appleyard contends, he does not blank out sorrow, pain and the abuse of human rights in his essays on humanism; all he is arguing is that humanism can offer a better way in coping with issues like human right abuses. On the one hand Appleyard applauds Grayling on the lucidity of his arguments on humanism, but then chides him for not being lethal enough, thus missing the point Grayling wants to put across: an explanation, in a simple and concise way of what humanism is to a wide readership, which he has admirably done. He is not writing a book full of theory and footnotes for superior intellects like Mr Appleyard. Lastly Mr Appleyard, like many critics of the Enlightenment wants to box it in the West and portray it as a very small sect. That is plainly bullshit. I come from Asia, I was and am seeped in a love-hate relationship with the Enlightenment, and so were many Third World leaders, activists and thinkers. Rationality, reason, questioning of received wisdom, making up one's own mind on issues and making a stand is what the enlightenment is about. Hundreds of thousands of people — maybe millions — across the globe, in city squares in Australia, Turkey, Brazil, Chile, across the Levant and Europe are doing this at this very moment. Autocratic governments are being called to account and the received wisdom on how to do politics and run an economy is being questioned and found wanting. Is this not humanism, Mr Appleyard, in praxis? It is humanism at its most moving and frightening as we do not know which way it is heading or how sustainable it is.

Critique of Grayling's liberal atheism/humanism

The lacuna in Grayling's thesis is a lack of narrative, context and history, resulting in his idealisation of liberalism with humanism at the expense of its other trends. By not anchoring his argument to material reality, his rhetoric becomes increasing idealised, like the arguments used by advocates of neo-classical economic theory.

The latter are also secular, liberal and devotees of reason and logic. In the 'real world' of free marketeers everything and everyone magically reaches a perfect equilibrium of producers, consumers, sellers and buyers. It is the perfect allocator of the world's resources be it capital, labour, goods and services. If this equilibrium is marred it is because of factors extraneous to the market, like governments or greedy workers and their pesky trade unions. In the world we live in this has resulted in an unregulated financial sector that is prone to monopoly and greed and short-term gain. In the end the market did shudder to an equilibrium which resulted in the

greatest economic down turn since the 1929 Great Depression. Reason, rational action and the virtues of the Enlightenment have to be grounded in material reality, otherwise they float in their own little bubble of unreality.

Grayling's book was written after the catastrophe of the General Financial Crisis (GFC) — yet it gets nary a mention as it does not fit into his simple binary argument — religion versus humanism. There was a bigger question hanging over us than mere religious belief and unbelief. Bob Ellis: 'In September, October, November and December of 2008 one-third of American money vanished.' Ellis goes on to add: 'At the same time 40% of the world's money vanished.'²⁵⁸

This hit countries that are liberal and secular, theocracies, first world, second, the mythical third, radical, authoritarian, despotic, military juntas and Icelandic — no one was immune. The mantra of the free market is pedalled all over the globe — individualism, freedom and consumerism is packaged seamlessly and yet in the workplace and in the political arena (maybe not in the cultural sphere) we live in a world of increasing conformism. Information is supposed to be free flowing and we are drowning in a sea of the banal and the prurient. Yet in the public and corporate spheres, information is secret and those individuals and organisations who expose the shenanigans, criminality and duplicity of our elites are hounded and portrayed as criminals. We talk about the new shining jobs in high tech and finance — except for the privileged few, the jobs actually being created are precarious, low end boring jobs in hospitality and call centres. This is done in the closed world of our elites in, the language and reasoning processes of managerialism which claims rationality and science as its ideological props.²⁵⁹

John Lanchester, in his sobering book on the GFC, shows us how this instrumentalist reasoning devoid of a social context can lead.²⁶⁰ He demystifies financial products like swaps, derivatives, collateral debt from mortgages amongst other financial fetishes. Mathematicians were employed to create the perfect models and tables to manage debt, risk and the bottom line which worked fine within the confines of the brilliant assumptions and formulae they developed — but which became increasingly separated from the real world (whatever that entity is) and eventually led to the financial sector being brought to the brink of collapse, with taxpayers across the globe bailing their banks out by hundreds, or is it thousands, of billions of dollars.²⁶¹

The perfect example of this irrational rational madness was Iceland, an island of 300,000 people, with no natural resources except Bjork, thermal energy and fish stocks. It was quite a genial place where the majority of the inhabitants made a decent if cold living. Suddenly like Cyprus it became a hub of deregulated banking, enthusiastically spruiked by its major politicians and business elite. It became one giant Ponzi scheme.

The banking sector grew to be 12 times bigger than the rest of the economy. Credit was cheap and people borrowed money and took out multiple mortgages to buy land and build houses which of course had no relation to their ability to pay, the real value of the properties and the ability of banks to absorb the non-payment of loans. Iceland was the poster boy for this new deregulated financial system. Then the financial crisis hit and every man, woman and child in Iceland owed \$A216,218.20c, while the banking sector was bailed out.²⁶² Rationalism needs to be grounded in the world we live in, not moored free and rarefied into an a priori theoretical construct.

I am not arguing that Grayling and his form of liberal humanism are the only culprits; what I am certainly saying is that reason, secularism et al need a narrative and context in which a conversation can take place on its undoubted merits. It is therefore beholden on those who argue for rationality, humanism and secularism and its benefits to be honest also on its limitations. This should not give any succour to the religious. Whilst some religious leaders have at times criticised rapacious capitalism they have not removed their considerable assets from the financial apparatus that has caused so much misery or led a concerted struggle against it.

Now to deal with three themes that run through all three texts: the issue of evil in the form of Stalin and Hitler and their links to secularism, science and the scientific method, and Dawkins and Co.'s supposed theological illiteracy.

On Stalin & Hitler

Hitchens states that those who raise the spectre of secular tyranny eliminate the connivance of the Christian churches with Nazism. On communist totalitarian regimes he acknowledges that they are atheist. Hitchens points to the fact that in places like Russia the church was tied up intimately with the organs of the state and hence, as in Spain and France, there had to be a period of anti-clericalism. Lenin and Trotsky felt that the illusions of religion had to be tackled and their vast properties and wealth needed to be confiscated. He points out that many a party functionary was a devout communist but had inner reservations about their belief in atheism and retained some doubt and Christian belief. He then recounts his trip to North Korea and his overwhelming feeling that what he was witnessing was a religious totalitarian state with the idealisation of the leader and strict ideological orthodoxy.²⁶³

Hitchens is being disingenuous and tries to hide it by firing all his rhetorical bullets, both blank and ones filled with lead, hoping some of them hit their targets. It is certainly true that anti-semitism in Europe exists because Christians blamed the Jews for the death of their Saviour. The Catholic Church only rescinded that pernicious idea in 1965. It is also true that the churches, especially the Catholic one, had too close

a relationship with the fascists and the Nazis. But that is not the whole picture. The horrible history of eugenics is tied up with science and imperialism, and progressive individuals like G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells were enthusiastic advocates of this pernicious idea. Also Hitler's insistence on 'living space' for the German race was an imperialist and secular idea. Germany under Hitler was a major industrial and secular state with a well-developed judiciary and bureaucracy which Hitler used to create a one-party state and to devise and implement the final solution concerning the Jews, gays, communists, social democrats and gypsies amongst others.

Hitler only arose in an extremely turbulent economic and political time in the lives of the German people. Secularism and science played their parts in the rise of Hitler and played a major role in his downfall. That is the real story which Hitchens and Co. fail to mention. It took 12 years to overthrow Hitler. It took 1500 years for a real challenge to be mounted against the Roman Catholic Church. I am not sure that is a point against religion; if it is, so be it.

Again, enormous social dislocation in Russia led to the rise of the Bolsheviks — with millions of soldiers being killed at the front in the First World War and widespread food shortages. This diminished the support for the social democratic government of Kerensky which resulted in the Bolsheviks seizing power and consolidating it. This caused panic amongst the governments of USA, Britain and France. After the war ended they immediately sent soldiers and logistics to support defenders of the old order (a mixture of capitalist and semi-feudal relations) in their fight against the new. Their brutality against the rebellious workers and peasants engendered a backlash from the Soviets. By the end of it, the Soviet Union was an economic mess and Lenin was dead, allowing Stalin to manipulate his way into power with the resultant mass killings, deportations and gulags.

The Russian Orthodox Church was intimately tied to the old order and had vast landholdings which were confiscated; state subsidies were ended. In the Stalin period many a worshipper and cleric was liquated or sent to prison or exile and many a church was blown up, stripped and turned into tractor museums for the edification of that mythical construct, the Soviet proletariat. The Soviet state was secular and atheist and when Stalin adopted his forced collectivisation program that had the effect of starving millions of peasants he did it on material grounds with nary a religious thought in his paranoid mind.²⁶⁴ Again it took 70-odd years for the system to mysteriously collapse.

We have to be honest — they are secular monsters, admittedly created by complex and extreme historical, economic and political factors. No point in hiding it in a welter of bluff and simple statements. The Enlightenment is and was a broad and disparate

intellectual movement. He or she who is without their monsters raise their hands, but the issue is to what degree have they poisoned the system? I have no answer, but the fact invites reflection.

‘Science works’ — but for whom?²⁶⁵

Out of the three, Richard Dawkins is the most qualified, being an eminent evolutionary biologist, to expound on matters scientific and his book is replete with the language of science. In fact he even brings Darwinism into the arena of sociology and culture. At a recent conference he had some terse words to an audience member who had the temerity to question the efficacy of the scientific method in his presence. His response:

‘How do we justify it? Because it works,’ Dawkins replied. ‘It works. Planes fly. Cars drive, computers compute. If you base medicine on science, you cure people. If they base design on planes they fly. If they base design of rockets on science they reach the moon.’²⁶⁶

So true — the scientific method is based on stating a hypothesis, testing it by deductive and inductive reasoning, empirical data and getting it peer reviewed, publishing the results and if over time the hypothesis does not stand up to critical scrutiny discarding it. Religion does not have that flexibility. Belief is not questioned and vast edifices of words, arguments and logic go in propping unexamined theses. Science at its edges is also not wholly immune to the joys of irrational certainty. A day does not go by without some scientific cure for obesity, baldness, halitosis and acne.

Certain fields of science like modern physics, with its concepts of particles, the Higgs boson, dark matter, the uncertainty principle, black holes and expanding universe, are complex in their reasoning and mathematical formulae, resulting in a great gap of comprehension between its practitioners and lay people like me. I recently reread Stephen Hawkins’ *A Brief History of Time*, a perennial bestseller on the new science, for this monograph, and I have to admit that by the time I got to the section on black holes I felt my will to live fading. When he attempted to put all the concepts of physics in a giant unified theory he lost me.²⁶⁷ The point I am making is not that science works, it does, but there is an increasing gap between the knowledge held by scientists and laypeople’s ability to keep up with it. As Professor Becker observed, holes in space, atomic physics tend to validate for non-scientists that behind the world of what we perceive there is a hidden one which can have mystical overtones.²⁶⁸ This allows some religious thinkers to put God between the gaps.. Professor Paul Davies is a past master of this. He even corralled the well-known, self-proclaimed atheist Philip Adams into discussing this and other questions brought forth from these new concepts. Paul Davies in response to Philip Adams:

Augustine had two brilliant insights into the nature of time. One of them is that we all know what time is until somebody asks us, and then we're lost for words. That is very good, I think! The other is the idea that the universe itself came into being with time. The way Augustine expressed it was that 'the world was made with time and not in time'. He recognised that time itself is part of the physical universe. And so if the physical universe was going to be created by God then God had better create time, too.

I might say that Augustine arrived at this conclusion on theological rather than physical grounds. He was partly responding to the old problem concerning what God was doing before she created the universe. The standard answer was, 'Busy creating hell for the likes of you!' So Augustine came up with this notion that time itself must have begun with the physical world; there was no infinite duration in which God deliberated but desisted from creating the universe. However, it wasn't until Einstein's theory of relativity that the concept of time being part of the physical universe, and therefore originating with the physical universe, was placed on a firm scientific footing. So although the idea is admittedly very hard to wrap your imagination around, it's actually 1500 years old. Augustine was already there in the fifth century with the concept.²⁶⁹

These concepts bring a much more complex concept of God into the picture, which Dawkins and friends have not tackled, making the simply binary division of science versus religion a much more nuanced and complex issue. To counter this (I am not sure it needs to be countered) and to unpick the above, requires more than a mere endorsement of science; a descent from the clouds of higher science into the arena of us mere mortals is essential, not just platitudes. We need more physicists like Lawrence Krauss and Brian Clarke to explain things and less mantras on how science works leaving us bewildered on how it does.

It was the anti-Hegelian Karl Popper who popularised the idea of presenting a hypothesis and testing it with logic and evidence. E.H. Carr likens it to a public servant who implements the policies of the government in power but who never questions the reason and purpose of the exercise.²⁷⁰ A vital exercise I guess if you are a public servant but the subordination of science to the prevailing hegemony of the elite is something Dawkins and Co. never seem to question. The question of who benefits, and who controls the funding for research are for me vital questions. The question that needs to be posed is not whether science works, but should we as a society be spending billions of dollars on armaments and cosmetic research; should it not be spent on programs to alleviate poverty, disease, pestilence and pollution?

Hilary and Steven Rose point to the fundamental shifts in research in science, from the previous relatively open systems of research where scientific papers and research were freely available, to the more restricted, corporatised and patent-obsessed era we

are in now, which can cripple research. This coincided with the contraction of the state, reduced funding for universities and the need to prove the economic value of one's research being paramount. Funds are diverted to what can earn the most money, which in the medical field is to offer cures for the ailments for the rich, whilst vital illness for the great majority (i.e. the poor) get sidelined or are not even contemplated. Governments are also co-opted to put in hundreds of millions of dollars and pounds of public money into private research institutions. Like the vast and untenable bio research projects in the United Kingdom and Iceland where the gene pool of the populations are too complex and varied for the quick answers and returns that medical entrepreneurs hoped to make.

The Roses point to the fact the so-called benefits spruiked about gene and stem cell research and neurosciences have not been forthcoming, which can turn many people off science. It does not mean they will not happen; there will be benefits, but given the complexity and contradictory nature of the data, precision and the magic of a quick fix will not be on the agenda any time soon. Money and science are uneasy bedfellows which results in the commodification of science, especially in the biosciences. The emphasis is on profits and short-term gains. Instead of looking for science to provide miracle cures, maybe a lot of the ailments we suffer from in the First World require us to exercise more, eat healthier food and a create a less polluted atmosphere.²⁷¹ So the key question then is not whether science works, as it resoundingly does, the more apt questions are: for whom; who controls it; and what uses are made of it. Dawkins and Co. are silent on these important issues.

On theology & the existence of God

Lastly (thank God I hear you exclaim) Professor Terry Eagleton, in his rather splenetic review of Dawkins' book, accuses him amongst other sins of being a theological illiterate — a charge many other critics of the New Atheists make. He likens it to somebody holding forth on biology if the only source of knowledge is the *Book on British Birds*. Eagleton:

What one wonders, are Dawkins views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus? Has he read Eriugena on subjectivity, Rahner on grace or Moltmann on hope? Has he even heard of them? Or does he imagine like a bumptious young barrister that you can defeat the opposition while being complacently ignorant of its toughest case?²⁷²

The question is why Dawkins needs to go into such detail, in order to prosecute his case for atheism??? Eagleton is moved by the tropes in the Bible and in particular the morality play in the New Testament and feels they have much to say about vital

questions like: 'death, suffering, love, self-dispossession and the like ...'²⁷³ Dawkins does not. I think Eagleton is being supremely unfair.

Karen Armstrong's book *A History of God* is a painstaking, meticulous account of religious thinkers over the ages. Reading it one is sometimes moved by the individuals, other times appalled by the differing constructs of the one true God. One of the more difficult and turgid parts of the book was her admirable, or is it brave, digression on the theological arguments of the Holy Trinity and how the personas of God the Father, God the Son and Holy Spirit were three separate entities and one God at the same time. It was a vital issue for the Orthodox Church and resulted in many arguments and digressions. Intertwining the discussion was the differing views on what the term theory meant in the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. Theory in the East meant contemplation while for the Western Church it meant a rational hypothesis that could be logically demonstrated.²⁷⁴ What does this theological argument on the manifestations of God, no matter how clever and complex it is, have to do Dawkins' rational argument about the existence or non-existence of a deity?

Knowledge of the theological evolution of the Holy Trinity can probably give flavour to Eagleton's argument; it is not essential to Dawkins thesis. Dawkins case is based on science, logic and reason, not theology. He contends that religion is an illusion, is man-made and that it has had a negative effect on the life of humans, and the solaces that Eagleton craves can be found in the secular world if Eagleton cares to look.

Conclusion

Where Dawkins and Co. fail and fail miserably is that they cannot explain, given the logic and evidence they produce against religion, why it persists. Their unnecessarily narrow parameters exclude a discussion of this vital issue, and their completely negative take on religion (it poisons everything) also undermines their argument.

They are excellent in demolishing arguments on the existence of God and the important fact that science provides a better explanation on how the universe was formed and how we evolved out of the primeval slime. Grayling points out that secular liberal humanism is much more nuanced, compassionate and attuned to human rights, the need to die in dignity etcetera, than many of our religious institutions are.

Even though the points they make against religion and in support of secularism and humanism need to be made and are not made often enough, their failure to engage with society in concrete terms instead of as an abstraction weakens their arguments. In their idealised concept of the individual as a self-actualising, classless and almost omnipresent being, who in their eyes is not a product of society, he or she

is some sort of ahistorical being extremely well versed in logic and science but showing no awareness of history and culture. This idealised creature, unlike the rest of us mere mortals, has no ideological prejudices. He or she is a highly rational being that can clearly and concisely see through the hypocrisy of religion, but never through the limitations of the society we exist in, making them blind to how religion and the present system interact with each other.

So issues on the development of capitalism, and the rise of religious reaction, the link between certain sects of Christianity and capitalism through their idealisation of that liberal invention the free market, is not remarked on, only their reactionary mindset. And worst of all, their deification of the liberal secular state makes them blind to fact that the most serious disasters we currently face, as individuals and as society are not religious, for example the collapse of our financial system, a fair distribution of the economic cake, a sustainable economic system and global warming. To acknowledge this they would have to bring complexity into their binary discourses and to distinguish between the reactionary Christianity of Cardinal Pell, the middle-of-the-road and faintly progressive Christianity of Pope Francis and those brave, and sometimes lonely, radical activists that belong to many a Christian denomination. At the same time it would force them to also look critically at the role of science (not the concept but who determines its parameters), the instrumental logic as harnessed by financial capital, and the illogical workings of the so-called free market. ■

6. Conclusion

We do not know where we are going. We only know that history has brought us to this point and — if readers share the argument of this book — why. However one thing is plain. If humanity is to have a recognisable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past and the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness. — *Eric Hobsbawn*²⁷⁵

The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally after countless succession of rebuffs it succeeds. This is one of the few points of which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but in itself a point of no small importance. — *Sigmund Freud*²⁷⁶

We have not yet fallen into ‘darkness’ but we are on the cusp of it. Many Australians are immersed in a deep intellectual and political ennui. Even though the global financial sector nearly collapsed and we face the price of untrammelled growth in the form of rising temperatures and the resultant dislocation of hundreds of millions of people, the loss of large amounts of arable land and a liveable and sustainable eco-system, change is not forthcoming from our business and political elites. The voting trends of the country and the policies offered by the two major parties means we are in for more of the same disastrous policies — a deregulated economy, an energy policy based on coal and unlimited and unsustainable growth. It is a failure of the country’s intellect, imagination and courage.

What has this got to do with a monograph on the joys and scepticism of belief and unbelief, I hear you exclaim? Everything — for many of the religious it means going back to the past and looking at scriptural and theological injunctions and coming up with solutions to our current malaise. For some in the Christian religious right, our current malaise results from our moral laxity like our tolerance of gays. Many an obnoxious statement was made that AIDS was God’s punishment for being a homosexual. For many of the Christians in the Tea Party man-made climate change is

a hoax and there is nothing wrong with our financial system: if only those bothersome liberals and socialists would stop meddling in the theological perfection of the free market and the God-inspired constitution of the good old USA, equilibrium and spiritual harmony will be restored to the nation. Meanwhile the poor, the working class and many in the middle class are reduced to penury in the world's largest economy. Intertwining this unpalatable religious stew is a group of Biblical fundamentalists who believe the apocalypse as predicated in John's Gospel is near. Numinous with this insight many of the richer American are giving it a helping hand in the Middle-East. They are doing this in conjunction with right-wing Jewish settlers who are aggressively colonising East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The injunctions for these settlers come from the Torah which states that greater Israel (Judea and Samaria) were given to them by Yahweh and thus not open to negotiation. In Australia his eminence Cardinal George Pell is sceptical of man-made climate change. Pell:

I am a believer in the Catholic understanding of faith and morals. I reserve my leaps of faith for religion: e.g. the Incarnation and the Redemption.

I am certainly sceptical about extravagant claims of impending man-made climatic catastrophes, because the evidence is insufficient.²⁷⁷

Pell is more concerned with defending the conservative orthodoxy of the Catholic Church and its transcendental spiritual verities than in engaging in the way we live.

Islam has been buffeted, humiliated and its adherents in the West are discriminated against. Compounding this unpalatable stew, Western military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has been an unmitigated disaster. Our support for autocratic leaders in the Levant, and the *carte blanche* we seem to give the Israeli state, stir the pot even more. For religious radicals the solution is to create a theocratic state and expel all foreigners (i.e. infidels) and ensure all unbelievers follow the dictates of the majority religion. Their reading of their holy text and its commentaries makes them either supportive or indifferent to the current world economic system and man-made climate change. Identity politics linked to the sacred has little time for the material and the present. If only we can relive a golden period in the past then all our troubles can be solved is the lament of many a modern day Emir and his flock.

For Dr Waleed Aly there is no such thing as left and right, only good policy or bad policy.²⁷⁸ Maybe that is why he thinks Islam can be revitalised by judiciously going back to the past when Islam was at its peak as a civilisation. In this rarefied world, ideology, class, economic and strategic interests play second fiddle. What counts is what is the most 'rational' within the confines of the status quo. Aly fails to ask: good policy for whom?

Maybe the Liberal's policy on climate change is the best and rational policy for the

coal industry, it maximises their profits and ensures we are still addicted to cheap fuel and can live in our cavernous energy hungry homes with two or more cars smugly parked in our garages. Bad policy, if you think alternative and less polluting energy sources, coupled with an economic system not based on continual high rates of growth, is the panacea. To discuss this properly we need a concrete debate on the history of economic development (the recent past), our current model of deregulated and untrammelled growth (the present) and the type of society we want to live in (the future). Weaved into the debate is the material circumstances of our life that we live (whatever that is). Then we can differentiate between the different ideologies and resultant disparate policies; make informed choices on the type of society we want to live in and the struggle to achieve it. Political commentators like Dr Aly are silent on these salient points.

For the New Atheists the present is paramount if we are to live fruitful lives in the future. The past for many of them does not contain anything much of value beyond the 18th century, any further it becomes a world dominated by superstition and untruths. The basis of their arguments lies in the scientific advances and insights made in the last 300 years which in their eyes has advanced our lifestyles and knowledge and understanding of the world unmeasurably. This myopic and patrician view of the world is blind and sometimes deaf to those who have not got on board the train of material progress. For the New Atheists many of these nameless individuals are immersed in an unpalatable stew of superstition and unreason. Logic and unbelief can free them if only they will listen and they can become just like us, addicted to growth and our limited form of democracy. How they can, and how feasible it is given that our wealth is based on non-renewable resources, illogical financial tools, and a capricious market, and the fact that we are in a collision course to a man-made climate catastrophe, is never ventilated.

Many of the New Atheists would argue that I am being unfair and that they are in their own way trying to quieten the voices of unreason that is drowning out rational discourse. True to a limited extent — the only caveat being they are also part of the cacophony of unreason. Neither the life we call existence or history is made up of clean binary oppositions made of us (the ideal) and the other (people with no discerning qualities). Life is too messy for this, as the aged bard Leonard Cohen points out — clarity to a degree is available, but it can be opaque — ‘Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That is how the light gets in’.²⁷⁹

In this electronic age of ours the printed and written word does not have the gravitas it used to have and we have democratised opinion and expertise. I admit I am uneasy in this Babel of electronic democracy, though not hostile to it. I think it is fine

and dandy that many have found a voice and can express it without the censure of the state; admirable and brave that many people immerse themselves in the many cultures, cuisines and political discourses the age of globalisation offers the better off of the world, without understanding the social and economic forces that formed these opinions. The issue is how one can intellectually sieve the offal from the edible, given the plethora of intellectual tendencies that in many cases are: uncivil, factually erroneous and sometimes verges on bigotry?

In researching this monograph, I was privileged to delve into this Tower of Babel both electronically and in conversation, and what perturbed me greatly was the promiscuous and in many cases erroneous use of facts, science, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics and history. On a subject as complex and controversial as belief and unbelief, limitations based on facts, evidence and the contours of history are for me essential and yet I found on all sides of the debate a certain nonchalance to the above intellectual constraints. On this issue I side with Tony Judd wholeheartedly who stated:

[I] have little tolerance for 'self-expression' as a substitute for clarity; regard effort as a poor substitute for achievement; treat my discipline as dependent in the first instance upon facts, not 'theory'.²⁸⁰

Claims made on behalf of religions, identity or nationalism and for that matter on their essentialism, historical provenance, spirituality and temporal authority cannot be made beyond the known facts, incomplete as they are. Facts for me are not the contents of a filing cabinet, broken up, quantified and ossified, they need a narrative that takes into account culture and ideology and then maybe we can speculate by theory and political praxis. In writing this monograph I found the lifetime study by Geza Vermes, and his tentative conclusions that he developed about the period in which a hasidic preacher called Jesus lived and died, a reliable guide; the archaeological discoveries made in Israel post-1967 on the history of the Jewish people in reference to what is in the Torah illuminating. In the same light, I found Maxime Rodinson's impeccable research on the history of Islam scholarly, nuanced and devoid of ideological rancour. So the simplistic binary approaches taken both by the New Atheists (that religion is bad) and by those of a certain religious bent (that religion is timeless and divine) are both unhelpful.

A secular state with a strict separation of state and religion, with all its joys and failings, allows for this sort of research and debate to take place with a minimum of rancour. Of course the more democratic and equitable a secular state is, the more civil the debate.

I think it is important to be up front on what we know to be the truth and what we

do not know; to do this I think we need to listen more carefully to intellectuals who have spent a lifetime studying a particular field of knowledge, and give them more credence than the cacophony of amateur and electronic experts and religious pundits. Maybe it might quieten the intolerance that mars the debate on belief and unbelief — at least it is a start.

In addition it must be remembered that a person's religious belief, scepticism or non-belief should not be the cardinal basis for debate. As this monograph has argued, these simply binary arguments are unhelpful. There are many people (not enough sadly) that are religious, and who are struggling against the bigotry of the religious and fighting for the rights of women and workers, giving succour to refugees, supporting policies to reduce man-made climate change and helping to organise against the imperial reach of the United States of America. At the same time many New Atheists have distinguished themselves by their ignorance on religious precepts and sometimes display bigotry towards those who are of the Islamic faith. Also they seem blind to the effects that our current global economic and political system is having on people's material lives and the ecology of planet. In the end it is what we bring to the struggle to live in a more just and economically sustainable planet that counts, not one's religious belief which as far as I am concerned is a personal matter. ■

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Notes

- 1 The Book of Genesis, Verses 1 to 5 and 26, *The Holy Bible*, p. 1.
- 2 Bryson, Bill, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, p. 28.
- 3 That is, the Big Bang theory.
- 4 Aly, Waleed, *People Like Us: How Arrogance is Dividing Islam and the West*.
- 5 Marx, Karl, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction', in Marx & Engels, *On Religion*, p. 38.
- 6 See, for example, his attack on Bruno Bauer's atheism in Marx, Karl, 'On the Jewish Question'
- 7 *Op. cit.*, Marx, Karl, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction', p. 39.
- 8 Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*.
- 9 Hitchens, Christopher, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.
- 10 Grayling, A.C., *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism*.
- 11 See Eagleton, Terry, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*
- 12 'The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ According to John', *The Holy Bible*, p. 86.
- 13 Armstrong, Karen, *The Bible: The Biography*, pp. 103 & 104.
- 14 Carr, E.H., *What is History?*, p. 155.
- 15 Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Nehru, p. 13.
- 17 Its main flaw was that it allowed the central government the right to impose martial law on 'unruly' provinces, a right which it used freely instead of negotiating with the people on whom martial law was being imposed. Nonetheless its separation of religion and state is still there even though politically that barrier has been breached more than once.
- 18 Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) came from the lowest of low castes: he was an untouchable. Overcoming seemingly insurmountable prejudice, both cultural and social, he got doctorates in law, economics and political science from Columbia University (America) and the London School of Economics. He was a tireless political campaigner and agitator in print, in parliament, at public meetings and when organising his community.

In disgust at how his community was treated by the majority community, he and many thousands of his followers converted to Buddhism.

- 19 See Wadhwa, Kamlesh Kumar, *Minority Safeguards in India*.
- 20 Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950), a barrister who did his studies and articles in London. He was deputy prime-minister and is credited with successfully integrating the princely states into the Indian Union.
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Michael Cooke's book starts with his political journey away from any form of religious belief towards atheism and radical humanism. In looking at religion, he limits himself to critically looking at where religion intersects and in some cases wants to dominate the secular sphere.

In regard to Christianity the book restricts itself to analysing the stories in the Bible in relation to the two patriarchs Abraham and Moses and the anti-Semitic aspects of the passion play; the decline of Christianity in Australia and the corresponding rise of a conservative religious cabal who are strong advocates of the free market, who want to change the cultural tenor of the country to a more reactionary one; and the rise and rise of Christianity in the land of the brave and free.

In the chapter on Islam, Cooke discusses how imperialism and the discrimination against its adherents has distorted how it is viewed in the West and the way Islam sees the West. In doing so the book explores amongst others the contentious issues of the separation of religion and the state; whether radical Islamists are Leninist and Jacobins in disguise as Dr Waleed Aly contends or they're just religious reactionaries.

Cooke is particularly sceptical of the new crop of atheists, in particular Richard Dawkins, A.J. Grayling and the late Christopher Hitchens. The book looks particularly at their shallow rationalism, deification of the advances made in the last 300 years, especially in science and their blanking out any discussion, except in a negative sense of anything before that. In doing so, writers like Grayling deify liberal humanism. In this vein the book argues that any discussion of religion and science must be anchored in the material reality of the times and not be an ahistorical idealisation of it.

Resistance books